



the

Hunter

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

L. J. SHEN

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To Yamina Kirky and Nina Delfs. Thank you for being
absolutely fabulous.

*Boston's debauched elite is going up in flames, and it's the
Fitzpatrick family that set it on fire.*

Hunter

I didn't mean to star in a sex tape, okay?

It was just one of those unexplainable things. Like
Stonehenge, *Police Academy 2*, and morning glory clouds.

It just *happened*.

Now my ball-busting father is sentencing me to six months of
celibacy, sobriety, and morbid boredom under the roof of
Boston's nerdiest girl alive, Sailor Brennan.

The virginal archer is supposed to babysit my ass while I learn
to take my place in Royal Pipelines, my family's oil company.

Little does she know, that's not the only pipe I'll be laying...

Sailor

I didn't want this gig, okay?

But the deal was too sweet to walk away from.

I needed the public endorsement; Hunter needed a nanny.

Besides, what's six months in the grand scheme of things?

It's not like I'm in danger of falling in love with the
appallingly gorgeous, charismatic gazillionaire who happens
to be one of Boston's most eligible bachelors.

No. I will remain immune to Hunter Fitzpatrick's charm.

Even at the cost of losing everything I have.

Even at the cost of burning down his kingdom.

“I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in
this world, a beautiful little fool.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, [*The Great Gatsby*](#)

In this book, she isn’t.

Playlist

“A Little Party Never Killed Nobody”—Fergie

“The Quiet Things That No One Ever Knows”—Brand New

“Kill and Run”—Sia

“Truly, Madly, Deeply”—Savage Garden

“One Armed Scissor”—At The Drive-in

“When You Were Young”—The Killers

“Lullaby”—The Cure

Prologue

Once upon a time there was a magic castle in which everything wilted but the soul of one boy.

He was six when she met him.

The girl had arrived with her mother to prepare a festive meal for his family. She roamed the hallways, gliding over the marble floors of his mansion on socked feet. She was five—far too young to appreciate the grand arches and courtyards of roses. She slid back and forth, occupying herself until her mother was done, while thunder cracked outside.

It was the kind of winter Bostonians talked about for years afterward, unyielding and persistent. The dark sky shot needles of hail down on the castle, the ice banging over the curved windows angrily. The girl slid toward one of the Gothic windows, pressing her hand against the cold glass.

She was surprised to see a small shadow lying on a sunbed by the pool, out in the rain. A *boy*. He lay very still, letting the downpour hit him without resistance. He simply took it, accepting the punishing lashes of hail on his skin.

Panicked, the girl began to pound the window. What if he was injured? Unconscious? *Dead*? Did she even know what death meant? She heard about it sometimes, when her parents thought she wasn't listening.

She banged the glass harder. His head turned slowly her way—lazily, almost like she was of no importance.

His gray-blues met her light greens.

“Come in!” she shouted, looking left and right to find a door handle.

He shook his head.

“Please!” she cried.

“They’re sending me away.” She read his moving lips, but couldn’t hear him. “I’m leaving.”

“Where? Where are you going?” she called.

But he just turned around, angling his face toward the sky, welcoming the whiplash of the hail.

His eyes were open, she noticed. She followed his gaze, looking up at the black velvet of the night. There was no moon. No sun. The earth seemed so terribly lonely without one of them to watch over it.

The girl wondered what would happen if the sun kissed the moon.

She had no idea she’d find an answer to that question one day.

Or that the person to give it to her would be that very lonely boy.

One



Hunter

Present

“Time to wake up, Captain McCrabson,” my friend/angel on my shoulder, Knight Cole, announced. The tip of his Margiela sneaker nudged my back.

Based on the hard surface underneath my aching muscles, I gathered I’d crashed on the floor again. And by the sticky feeling in my groin, followed by the breeze rolling through my neatly trimmed pubes, I knew I’d shoved my cock into holes I shouldn’t have the night before, and I was gloriously naked.

I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut and rolling over on top of another warm, naked body. *Tits*. I felt tits. Nice, plump, and natural. Without opening my eyes, I brought a nipple into my mouth, suckling on it idly.

“Want some coffee with your milk?” Knight wondered aloud.

My hand descended its way along the chick’s stomach, down to her holy grail. She was wet and hot, arching her back, her thighs quivering with need. I began to rub her swollen clit, prepping her. My cock yawned its way into a semi, just as another body pressed against me from behind.

Jackpot.

“Taking your coffee with milk is like going down on a woman with a condom on your tongue. The Italians would exile you for less,” I murmured, eyes still closed, my lips against this girl’s skin.

“Thanks for the imagery,” Vaughn Spencer, my *other* good friend, quipped flatly.

“Pay no heed to me, old sport.” My available hand patted the flesh behind me, curling the other chick’s leg over my waist. *Where are my condoms?* Why were Knight and Vaughn offering me coffee and conversation instead of a rubber? They should be fired and replaced with wingmen who’d actually help me score. Not that I had any trouble in that department. “Just throw me a rubber before you leave, will ya?”

“Give your cock a timeout and wake the fuck up.” A muddy boot found its way to the side of my head, threatening to squash my skull.

Vaughn, AKA the devil on my shoulder.

On anyone’s shoulder, really.

I had a love-hate relationship with the motherfucker.

Love, because he was, after all, one of my best friends.

Hate, because he was, despite the abovementioned title, a cunt of gargantuan proportions.

My eyes popped open. The rest of my body signaled my brain that this orgy might die prematurely. Grains of sand and dirt from his boot dusted my temple. I felt my nostrils flaring, my pulse spiking up.

The girl in front of me, Alice, grinned sleepily as she curved her back, plastering her breasts to my chest encouragingly. *Shit*. I was still fingering her. It was hard not to when she made all those delicious noises. I removed my hand from her pussy reluctantly. The girl behind me, at least, had the decency to stop humping my leg like a guinea pig that had just discovered its genitals.

“Get your filthy-ass boot away from my face,” I hissed through clenched teeth, “before I snap your spine and use it as a

scarf.”

Both Vaughn and I knew this was an idle threat. My manicured hands weren't big on violence. In fact, I wouldn't hurt an ant if it killed my entire immediate family. I mean, I would be mad. *Livid*. And I'd sue for emotional distress, for sure. But get my hands dirty? Nah.

It wasn't fear of fighting that stopped me but the sheer indolence that came with my aristocratic upbringing. As the son of Gerald Fitzpatrick, owner and CEO of Royal Pipelines, the biggest oil and gas company in the United States, I rarely needed to rise to the level of taking care of my own shit. The Fitzpatrick family was the fourth richest in the entire US of A, and that made me a lazy, self-entitled asswipe.

“You and another dudebro tag-teamed five chicks yesterday.” Vaughn kept his foot on my temple.

This violent act was probably the highlight of his week. Why he couldn't find the simple joys of life in booze, women, and overpriced clothes from aging rappers was beyond me. He made everything seem so fucking complicated.

“I did?” My eyebrows shot to my forehead, genuine surprise tinged with pride filling my chest. “Are the Guinness people on their way here? Will they bring *actual* Guinness? I find stout to be far superior to lager.”

“Smash his skull. He deserves it,” Knight groaned above my head.

That was rich coming from him. He had a history with booze that could rival Lord Byron and Benjamin Franklin at an all-you-can-drink Koh Samui bar. Now that he had a girlfriend, I worried that if they were ever to conceive, she'd give birth to a bottle of tequila and two tickets to Coachella.

“I also answer to *God and Damn, Hunter You're So Big*,” I mumbled, briefly considering a quick nap under Vaughn's boot.

Hey, it wasn't like he'd shifted any real weight onto it.

The two girls unglued themselves from me. They were now making background noise, picking up their clothes, getting dressed. I checked my surroundings for the first time since

opening my eyes. I was in Vaughn's living room, judging by the plush, crème upholstery, dripping chandeliers, and 8k-a-piece brass lamps.

The carpet felt sticky, and the blinds were torn. Daddy and Mommy Spencer would be glad to get rid of their asshole spawn, who was flying out to England for an internship soon.

“You fucked up big time.” Knight hoisted me out from under Vaughn's boot, hurling me on the sofa and throwing a quilt over my now-impressive, raging hard-on.

He didn't look directly at me as he spoke, like it was *my* fault I'd been blessed with a physique fit for constant nudity and an eight-inch dick.

“All I heard was the word *fuck*, and I'm definitely game for that.” I patted the table next to the couch, found a pack of cigarettes that wasn't mine and a lighter, and lit one, puffing smoke upward. I only smoked occasionally, but couldn't pass up the opportunity to look like an asshole when it presented itself. “Why'd you cockblock me?” I squinted, pointing the cigarette between Vaughn and Knight, who stood in front of me, hands on hips, full-fledged and shit.

“There was a leak.” Vaughn's icicle eyes tapered with displeasure.

I waved him off with the cigarette. “That's just a natural discharge designed to tell you the female body is ready for mating. You'd know that if you fucked women who were alive. Is this about your parents' carpets? Because I'll send Syllie the bill.”

Syllie—Sylvester Lewis—was my father's right hand and COO back in Boston. He did solids for me on the reg. His job, among others, was to keep me alive and out of trouble, which meant he was basically set up for failure. I didn't call him often, but when I did, it was because I needed to bail out of something heinous I'd gotten myself into.

My parents hated when I gave them bad press.

So far, Syllie had helped me pay fines, avoid a DUI charge, and discreetly deal with a nasty case of the crabs.

“A leak on social media, you moron,” Knight clarified, leaning down to flick the back of my head.

It wasn't like my friends to be serious or worried. I sat up and secured the quilt around my narrow waist, resting my chin on my knuckles thoughtfully.

“I'm listening.”

(I wasn't. I was thinking about who I wanted to fuck tonight.)

Maybe Arabella.

No, *definitely* Arabella. She was the hottest piece of ass that was still single in town.

“Recap.” Knight clapped his hands once. “Yesterday, after Vaughn's internship party, we came back here to kick it. You had an orgy with five girls on the main floor. At some point, some other guy butted in—pun intended—but mostly, it was you doing the fucking. It wasn't in the media room, so phones weren't confiscated. Vaughn and I were upstairs and couldn't save you from your moronic self.” He turned to Vaughn, jerking his chin for him to finish the story.

Vaughn crossed his arms over his chest and took it from there. “To make a long, excruciatingly gross story short, about a dozen people filmed the entire thing with their phones. Some uploaded it on YouTube, some to Twitter, some to Snapchat. Those were taken down, as far as we know. But the ones on the porn sites? Those are still available. And let's just say what you lack in academic achievements, you make up for as an adult entertainer.”

As soon as Vaughn finished his sentence, Knight handed me his phone, the browser open on said sex video. (Why did people call them tapes? That was so fucking eighties.) I hit play. It was the most popular site on the internet, actually. It was also free, which, I'd heard through rumors on the street, was something middle-class people were fond of.

The video already had 1.2 million views and an 89-percent customer satisfaction rate.

Damn.

The tags on the video included: #FratParty #Orgy #Hotsluts #Cheerleaders #Billionaire #Anal #Oral #69 #Creampie #TagTeam #BestFriendsEx

And all I could think was, *I managed all those things in the span of twenty minutes with one dick? Im-fucking-pressive.*

I was dead-ass serious. Were the Guinness people coming for me, or what?

The title of the porn video was “Polo Billionaire Prince Fucks Five Chicks.”

The prince part was dope. It had a noble ring to it. Polo wasn't my passion, but I still played it to please my never-pleased father. All the rest seemed solid as well, other than the frat party part. And since all of us were of legal age (I knew all the chicks in the video), I guessed it would be a bitch to take down.

I watched as three fellow recent high school graduates—Alice, Stacey, and Sophia—giggled into the camera and strutted their way to me, asses dangling, high heels on full display. I was on the couch, getting sucked by a chick named Kylie while another one, Bianca, was circling my nipple with her pierced tongue. I was wearing an open varsity jacket with no shirt, my jeans rolled down to my shins. The camera zoomed out, and the person shooting the video and I pounded it. He lowered the camera to show that he was fucking Kylie from behind while she was sucking me off. He came on her lower back, stepping back and tucking in his semi. After five minutes of acrobatics, I somehow managed to get my hands, mouth, and dick on all five of the girls combined.

The video was almost twenty minutes long, and—in my humble opinion—hot as sin. I looked up from it when I was done, handing Knight his phone back. There was a beat of silence as my friends waited for me to process the information they'd pummeled into my hungover brain.

“Who was the other dude?” I yawned.

“Brian something.” Knight scrunched his nose.

“Branson,” Vaughn completed.

“Brian Branson?” I blinked. *Unfortunate name.* “Wow. His parents hate him more than mine hate me.”

“Not after the pile of porn shit you left at their doorstep this morning,” Knight commented helpfully.

I hadn’t even heard of Brian Branson before today, but I’d shared a sexual encounter with him. Which I guessed was something I could say about the majority of people in Todos Santos. I slapped my thigh, moving on with the plan.

“So, are we heading to Benny’s for breakfast or...?”

“You idiot.” Knight white-knuckled his phone, resisting the urge to hurl it at me. “You’re in deep trouble. Stacee, Kylie, and Bianca are pressing charges against you. They’re already at the police station. We just got the text.”

That explained why Alice and Sophia were the only ones here this morning.

“For what? I wasn’t the one doing the filming. If anything, I’m as much a victim as they are.” I stubbed the half-finished cigarette on its pack to put it out, smoke skulking from my mouth as I spoke. “Besides, they can hardly claim it wasn’t consensual. I mean...” I motioned with my hand to Knight’s phone. In the video, Stacee let me pull out of her, peel off the condom, and jizz all over her face. She’d licked the hot, white cum from her cheek and giggled in delight while Kylie sucked my cock so hard she almost swallowed it. Not to mention Bianca, who did all the work while we did a reverse cowgirl with Kylie sitting on my face, bouncing it like I was a trampoline.

“You’re as stupid as a rock, and sadly, just about as endearing,” Vaughn said gravely, turning around and lifting shit up, looking for something. “You’re an heir to a multi-million-dollar company. They don’t need a reason to want to sue you. You sneeze on them? They’ll say you gave them the swine flu. You hug them? They’ll claim you broke their bones. You fuck them...” Vaughn trailed off, finding what he was looking for on one of his lamps—my jeans—and throwing them in my direction.

I caught them in the air.

“Now get dressed. I’m going to have to refurnish the entire fucking house after your STD-fest yesterday. I need to bleach the walls.”

“I need to bleach my *eyes*,” Knight added.

“I need to *Men in Black* my brain,” Vaughn shot back.

Knight picked up an imaginary remote and clicked it in Vaughn’s direction.

“And *Home Alone* your life to avoid any more public orgies,” Knight offered.

Har-har-ing dryly, I stuffed my legs into my jeans. I still hadn’t fully comprehended what was happening. I expected, as with everything else, that Syllie would get me out of it. If not him, then my aunt and uncle, Jean and Michael Brady. (Yes, they were the Brady bunch, and yes, I found that endlessly amusing, seeing as my parents had sent me to them in hopes that they’d be able to cram into me some of the manners and upper-class demeanor the private schools they’d enrolled me in couldn’t.)

Point was, someone always got me out of trouble, and that someone was, unfailingly, *not* me. Getting out of trouble myself seemed like tedious business, and don’t get me started on the potential paperwork.

However, lesson learned. From now on, I would pay attention to where I conducted my mass orgies. One could only be so reckless. It was time to be more careful. And while I was on the subject, perhaps I should limit myself to three girls at a time.

I stood up, buckling my Louboutin spiked-leather belt, and turned to Knight.

“Okay. I think I’m ready for that coffee now.”

Knight smacked the back of my head. *Again.*

“You’re not getting it, are you?” His brow wrinkled. “Tell me who to call. Do you know your lawyer’s name?”

“Damn, son. Why so serious? You need a shot of dirty Sprite.”

Also known as codeine. Also known as Knight's version of water, before he got clean. I knew I was a jerkface for mentioning his substance-abuse problem, but he let it slide. Plus, he had his shit together now. He and Vaughn got to go study what they wanted, choose what they wanted to do with their lives. My ass was going back to Boston to study at Harvard, majoring in business, economics, and all the stuff that made a man want to hurl himself off a skyscraper. Don't ask me how I got into Harvard. Da probably donated enough money to feed the entire state of Massachusetts for a decade to make that happen. I wouldn't trust me to write a grocery list, let alone an essay.

I also wasn't looking forward to the forced internship at Royal Pipelines during the summers.

"Your dad? Your mom? Your brother? Sister? Who should I call? The Bradys, maybe?" Knight waved his hand back and forth in front of my face.

I opened my mouth, and there was a knock on the door. Vaughn went to answer. A second later, three policemen came in. I swear one of them flexed his biceps. They were hella high on the power trip. The burliest one, whose face reminded me of a constipated baboon with cropped coppery hair, recited my Miranda rights as he grabbed my hands and handcuffed me.

"Hunter Ernest Vincent Fitzpatrick, you are under arrest for sexual harassment, statutory rape, and obstruction of justice. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer..." The police officer stopped, letting out a grotesque snort. The other three burst into hysterical laughter.

Yeah, yeah, I'm loaded. *Hilarious.*

"If...if..." he tried again, throwing his head back and laughing with such mirth, you'd think he was the one swimming in it. "If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you at the government's expense," he finally finished, wiping a happy tear from the corner of his eye.

I stared at him with a clenched jaw, feeling a stir of anger coursing through my veins for the first time since I woke up. I didn't rape or harass these girls. Or *any* girls. It was a setup.

The officer reached for his pocket and took out a fifty-dollar bill, slapping it into the open palm of the cop next to him.

“Dang, I really couldn't say it with a straight face, Mo.”

They'd bet on my arrest. *Sweet*. The handcuffs felt cold and tight around my wrists, and bit into my flesh unnecessarily. I was obviously in no danger of escaping or pouncing over the female cop standing there, in all her balding patches, post-acne scars, and three missing teeth glory.

Knight and Vaughn appeared next to me.

“Hey, assholes, do you mind not justifying every police brutality stigma alive?” Vaughn asked. “As for you—” He jerked his chin toward me. “—I'm calling my dad. He's in Virginia with my mom, but he'll fly in, if need be.”

Knight asked again, “Who should I call, man? Talk to me.”

The answer was Jean and Michael, of course. At this point, they felt more like my parents than the ones who'd sent me away from Boston as soon as I was out of diapers. The officers began pushing me toward the door.

Vaughn came after us, hissing to me, “Don't tell them anything, you hear me?”

I nodded. “Tell Knight not to call my da.”

“What?”

They shoved my back in the police car's direction.

“Just not Da,” I managed to howl before my head was ducked into the back seat. “Anyone but Da!”

Knight gave me two thumbs up, nodding from the doorway.

“No problem, dude. I'll call your dad!”

“I said *not* to call my father,” I yelled as the back door of the police car slammed in my face.

Knight didn't hear me.

Fuck.



“The statutory rape charge is the one I was most concerned about, but it turned out to be bullshit. All six of you are over eighteen. The police hadn’t even had the common sense to check IDs when they filed the report, which means not only are they going to drop this charge, but we can also slap the boys in blue on the wrist—always a good form of damage control.”

Baron “Vicious” Spencer, Vaughn’s father, sat across from me in my uncle and aunt’s stuffy attic, flipping through the thick pages of my case. The attic was the shape of the roof. I had to crouch on my seat like Arnold Schwarzenegger in a Barbie dollhouse to accommodate my height.

Twenty-four hours had passed since my arrest, and I had yet to take a shower, a dump, or beat my meat to decompress. Although Baron was a lawyer by trade, he didn’t practice criminal law. But it was my understanding that sometimes he helped relatives and close friends with legal shit. It was also my understanding that he charged \$5,000 an hour to justify his reputation as a world-class cunt. He needed the money like Kylie Jenner needed more lips. The first thing he told me was that he was going to overbill me.

“Just to get a taste of being fucked. One cannot live his whole life only doing the fucking,” he’d explained point-blank when he entered the house an hour ago, after Jean and Michael bailed me out of jail.

I took a sip of my bottled beer, tugging at my leather necklace cord with the wooden Dala. “And the other charges?”

“The sexual harassment will be a hard sell, seeing as the girls seemed lucid, active, and present. The obstruction of justice charge is due to the fact that Mr. Cole had confiscated Bianca’s phone. According to Miss Evans, the order came from you. Fortunately for you, at the time she entered the media room and party with the rest of students who’d had their phones confiscated, your dick was already softer than marshmallow and you were passed out on the floor, long after the orgy. There are several witnesses to attest to that time discrepancy. In other

words, your incompetence saved you.” He glanced up from the pile of documents, his arctic blue eyes dropping the room temperature by ten degrees.

“Always happy to be a loser. Sláinte.” I toasted the air, taking another sip of the lager.

Baron had the same ink black hair as his son, identical glacial eyes, and the hunger to be successful, powerful, and capable. I wondered what it felt like to be a Spencer—adept, driven, motivated. *Talented*.

I had not so far been any of those things. I had money, yes—more than I could ever spend—and the looks to match. But other than those superficial features, I was nothing. An empty jar. My father had warned me that the day people would call me out on my frivolity was near. I believed him.

Which was why I dreaded going back to Boston and starting college—moving back with my family. Not doing so hadn’t been an option. Royal Pipelines had passed through six Fitzpatrick generations thus far.

Needless to say, I was interested in running a business a little less than I was interested in another public orgy, followed by a mini-vacation in a jail cell. But here was the reality of things: my older brother, Cillian, was set to become the CEO of Royal Pipelines the minute Da kicked the bucket, and I was going to be COO.

“When’s the trial?” I sucked my teeth.

“Never.” Baron closed my file, linking his fingers together over the desk. “A trial would be public, messy, time-consuming, and above all—very bad press. The ladies—and I use the term fucking loosely—aren’t keen on hashing out the details of the mass orgy on the stand, either. I came up with a generous settlement package for each of them. They and their families are content to strike a deal. The packages include a two-million-dollar compensation check and a full ride through college. Your father and brother are pleased that the matter is settled.”

I didn’t for one second think my father’s eagerness to take the deal had anything to do with me. It was the headlines that worried him. As for Cillian, if he had his way, I’d be on a leash,

locked in the basement of my parents' estate, Avebury Court Manor.

I sat back, playing with the good-luck horse on my neck.

“Why are we signing a deal? I didn't do shit. You said so yourself. They have no case.”

“That notwithstanding, even taking this to trial would put a stain on you and your family and piss off Royal Pipelines' shareholders.”

“So I need to cave because my daddy runs a big-ass shop?” I scowled.

“In a nutshell, yes.”

“No,” I countered flatly.

Baron checked his phone as he spoke, completely unconcerned by my refusal. “If we take this to a jury, there's no way of knowing how they'd react. A white, male billionaire in the middle of a whale-sized sex scandal is not, in fact, the most empathetic creature known to mankind.”

“I didn't rape them,” I seethed. “I didn't even hit on them. They came to *me*.”

Baron stood up, gathering the documents into his leather briefcase. He seemed to be done with the conversation and his client's rage.

“Better a crook than a fool. Taking the deal and having them sign an NDA is the clever thing to do. Whenever you feel your precious ego needs a hand job, log on to that porn site and remind yourself that whoever ends up putting a ring on those women will always know you as the guy who fucked them half-dead and still managed to make them come.”

“I need a stronger drink.” I shook my head.

“What you need is a good spanking.”

I put the beer bottle to my lips again, sighing. “Fuck, you're right. A kinky lay is just what the doctor ordered. But this time I'll make sure it's in a secluded bedroom.”

Baron threw me a condescending frown and walked to the door. I knew I should thank him for everything he'd done for

me, but I wasn't in the mood for niceties. Also, the check Da would sign was going to buy him another yacht.

“Oh, and Hunter?” Baron asked when he reached the door.

I looked up from behind the desk.

“Yeah?”

“Good luck with your next meeting. You'll need it.”

Two



Hunter

“A disgrace!” Da spat, his saliva spluttering over the desk between us. His pasty, Irish-freckled face was purple as he towered over me in the same attic office Baron had exited minutes ago.

The Bradys had the kind of house Gerald Fitzpatrick deemed homely and quaint, if not completely lackluster. Back in Boston, he’d knocked down an entire row of brownstones in Beacon Hill and built a mansion better suited for the extended royal family and every person they’d ever said hi to. Avebury Court Manor boasted twenty bedrooms, fifteen bathrooms, an indoor pool, a tennis court, and a heated driveway—because why not be a douchebag when you can afford to be?

The mansion was architecturally inspired by Mont Saint-Michel, a looming castle on a French island—heavy on the arches, statues, and wide spaces. Truthfully, I’d take the old-fashioned Brady townhouse over that nouveau riche marbled monster any day of the fucking century.

“You stupid, embarrassing fool. You...you...goddamn...” He stopped, curling his fists tight to brace himself for the ringing scream that followed. “*Epic disappointment!*” He hurled the desk between us. It hit my knees with a bone-chilling thump.

I pressed my mouth harder, ignoring the raw pain, my face still impassive.

It was hella tempting to curl into myself and resurface after his verbal lashing was over, but I forced myself to jerk my chin up and brave it. My sister and brother were both perfect in their own, overachieving ways, which made me my parents' favorite source of complaint.

“Thank God you haven't fathered any bastards.” Da looked heavenward, making the sign of the cross, as if God was in charge of my obsessive condom usage. I got no damn credit for anything these days.

“Night's still young,” I clipped.

He shot me a dirty look, pointing at me with his stubby finger.

“Your little fling just cost me six million dollars in hush-money—more, if the others decide to jump on the bandwagon and sue. You think it's funny? I'm done with you.” He shook his fist skyward, pacing back and forth in the small room. “I *want* to be done with you. Your mother, bless her heart, has a soft spot for you. Perhaps because you're the middle child.”

Or maybe because she dumped me in a boarding school in England when I was six and tossed me around the globe when I got kicked out, never considering raising me herself.

“I, however, see you clearly for who you are, and I have news for you. You may be going to college in Boston, but Harvard is off the table. You will go to evening classes, as commoners do. And you are certainly not coming to live in my house.” His finger now dipped to his chest for emphasis.

My father towered to nearly six feet and one inch, a tad shorter than me, and was arranged in round bulks of meat. Years of indulgence had made his body soft and his personality hardened. A white shock of hair fell over his forehead, but his brows were dark and thick.

My mother, in contrast, was light and dainty, both in personality and looks.

“Boo-fucking-hoo.” I rolled my eyes provocatively. The edges of my ears turned hot, and I hated that. “Heard Boston’s got an apartment or two to offer. I’ll be glad to stay out of your way.”

As for Harvard, I didn’t think an idiot like me would survive it, anyway. I’d probably fail at finding the classes, let alone deciphering the lectures. It was just as well.

“With what money, pray tell, are you planning to rent any of those apartments?” A vein popped on his forehead. I could practically see it slithering under his skin. “Not mine, I regret to inform you.”

I stared at him wordlessly, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You’ve never finished anything in your life, Hunter.”

False. I finished analogies, beers, and orgasms on a daily basis. But even my dumb ass knew better than to point it out.

“You’re packing your things and leaving here immediately,” he continued, delivering his instructions in a cold, practiced manner that told me he’d decided what to do with me before his private plane touched Californian soil.

“Bet.” I smirked.

“No time to bid your friends goodbye,” he snapped.

My head darted up. Being popular was a lonely business, but I actually liked my friends here. “It’ll take me an hour.”

“I don’t care if it’ll take you a minute. And *then*,” he proceeded, his voice ricocheting off the walls like cartoon bullets chasing after a villain’s ass, “you’re going to do a six-month stint to prove to me you are not the pile of sexually transmitted diseases and bad decisions I see you as.”

“You’re asking me to go to rehab?” I choked on my morning beer.

“No. I spoke with your uncle and aunt, and they don’t think your problem is drug or alcohol abuse. Your problem is commitment and finding a sense of purpose. Taking responsibility.”

It was curious to hear about my problems from someone who'd seen me twice a year for the duration of a week or less for the past decade and a half.

“What’s it gonna be, then?” I heard myself asking.

I had this game I played with myself, since I was my only steady companion in life. I changed places and crews so often, I had to find something to anchor me. The game consisted of choosing a daily song that defined my mood. Today, it was clearly “Gimme Shelter” by The Rolling Stones. Because shit, I could use a hideaway right about now.

“You’re going to be working for me, supporting yourself while attending college, and living in an apartment in the Oval Building, where my staff can monitor your whereabouts and progress.”

My family owned the Oval Building, a high-rise that was supposed to look like an elegant lipstick tube, but in reality resembled an uncircumcised, angry cock. I’d have warned Da if he’d ever consulted me about it.

He lowered himself to catch my gaze, his fingers spread on the chipped oak desk between us. “And you’re going to be sober as a judge and celibate as a nun.”

And bored as fuck. Yeah, no thank you.

“For six months? You gotta be kidding me.” I stood up, throwing my hands in the air. My head bumped against the ceiling. I didn’t even care. He might as well kill me now. What was life without pussy and a stiff drink? Just a sequence of events nobody wanted to participate in, that’s what.

“This is non-negotiable.” My father tried to unfurl his spine and straighten to his full height, but failed. The low-ceilinged room somehow grew hotter and smaller by the second. Beads of sweat gathered at my temples. I noticed Da was sweating like a pig in his suit.

“Ain’t happening.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Then you can kiss your inheritance goodbye.” He smiled breezily, tearing a piece of paper from his breast pocket and shoving it in my face.

“I anticipated your reaction, and your mother—out of concern for you, of course—has graciously allowed me to legally remove you from our will, seeing as you have very little desire to fit into the Fitzpatrick family business and honor its values.”

I snatched the paper from his fingers, unfolding it with unsteady hands. Bastard wasn't bullshitting. It had the stamp from the law office he kept on retainer and everything. The wrinkled paper, although still unsigned, noted that I was not to inherit a penny of the Fitzpatrick fortune unless the six-month agreement was executed to my father's full satisfaction.

I looked back up, feeling something hot and uncomfortable spreading in my chest.

“You can't do that,” I hissed.

“What, save you from yourself? I *am* doing that,” he announced, spreading his arms. “Agree to my terms, and you can have half my kingdom, Hunter. Continue to let me, your mother, and yourself down, and you have no place in our family.”

I never have. Which was why the money meant so much to me. I wasn't going to be robbed of that, too.

“Fine,” I spat. “Whatever. Put me in your dick-shaped building. I'll stay out of trouble, and I won't drink or fuck for six months.”

“Of course you won't,” my father said, yanking the piece of paper back and folding it tidily before tucking it into his breast pocket. “Because you'll have a roommate to make sure you're on the straight and narrow. Always accounted for.”

I threw my head back, laughing bitterly. “I'm not sharing an apartment with Cillian. He probably performs satanic rituals involving puppy blood and baby tears on the daily.”

My older brother was the definition of a cunt. He had that holier-than-thou, wunderkind attitude that had made me give up on being anything other than the family jester. Catching up with his many conquests, both academically and career-wise, seemed futile. He was the golden child, the wild promise, the ruthless emperor everyone looked up to.

Da shook his head. “Please, like *mo órga* would reduce himself to living under the same roof with you.” *Mo órga* translated, quite literally, to *golden child* in Gaelic.

Real subtle, Pops.

“My bad. I forgot he needs to take off his human costume after a long day and relax by himself. Who, then?”

“Well, that person is yet to be approached. You will have to convince her to agree to this. If she says no, the entire plan crumbles. But your mother and I have found the most perfect candidate.”

She. He said she. That meant she was female. That also meant I could fuck her behind his back. No matter her age and looks, I was willing to do it if it meant dipping my dick into something that wasn't my own hand.

“Who?” I gritted out, knowing he was enjoying the exchange, having me at his mercy.

“Sailor Brennan.”

Yeah, never mind. Ain't touching that with a condomed ten-foot pole.

Why? Let's count:

1. Sailor was a goody two-shoes. Straight-up, straight-A, boring-good kind of girl.
2. She was a tomboy, and possibly a lesbian (not that I had any issues with that), and an archer (something I *did* have an issue with, because it meant she could kill me with little effort).
3. She was Troy Brennan's daughter, and Troy Brennan was a person you didn't want to make an enemy out of. He was Boston's underworld's fixer, the guy the upper society of the city had on retainer to do the dirty work for them.
4. The few times I'd met Sailor, she'd seemed annoyingly resistant to my charms (as I said, lesbian).

“Kinda out there, don't you think?” I feigned boredom, itching to haul ass to the Southern Hemisphere and escape my verdict.

“Better the plan being out there than your penis driven into holes it has no business being in,” my father deadpanned, taking a handkerchief from his front pocket and dabbing his sweaty hands with it, focusing on the clover-green fabric.

“Six months to live and play house with a complete stranger—that’s unorthodox, Da. Some would go as far as saying prosaically medieval.”

“You were just caught having sex with five young women on top of your friend’s antique Italian furniture—which, by the way, we still have to pay for and will be deducted from your salary. You’re too far from the realms of orthodox to be concerned about your reputation.”

“What about Sailor’s reputation?”

“She has none—a clean slate. And no one is insane enough to talk badly of her, considering who her dad is.”

He is sending me to live with a girl whose father is a cold-blooded murderer. Me. With my unfiltered, filthy mouth.

“What makes you think Sailor would agree to this?” I squinted at him.

I’d met Sailor Brennan maybe three or four times in my life. Her parents had restaurants all over Boston. Her mother was a chef and had cooked for a few events my mother hosted a while back. The entire time, Sailor messed with her phone or looked at my sister curiously (more proof of the lesbian theory).

I barely remembered the chick. What I did recall was carrot hair that looked about as soft as blistered feet, more freckles than a face, and the body of a malnourished, five-year-old boy.

“I have my reasons, but she will take some persuading.”

“So, how do you see this going down? I go to her and just say, yo, let’s move in together?”

I didn’t want to lose my inheritance because my dick had the social life of the entire Kardashian clan. Living with a geek and six months of celibacy weren’t going to kill me.

Probably.

Only time would tell, honestly.

“Do whatever you see fit to make sure Sailor says yes.” Da shrugged. “I’ll throw you a hook, but you’ll be doing the fishing. Not Syllie—who, by the way, I’ve ordered never to help you again. No more screwing around. If you want something, you need to chase it. It’s your job to make Sailor cooperate. You’re on your own now, Hunter. If you fail to show me you’re the man I need you to be in the next six months, you’re out. And Sailor is just the type of person to keep you in check.”

Three



Sailor

Dear God,

I know I talk to you periodically, mainly asking for favors, but I swear this is the last time.

...

Fine. It's probably not the last time, but hear me out anyway, okay?

Please give me a signal that my Olympic dream is not a bust.

Make it rain.

Have a pigeon poop on me.

Anything.

It's the only thing I care about. The only thing I truly want.

Yours,

*—Sailor Brennan (P.S. I totally gave up chocolate and salty snacks for Lent, so if you look me up and see a list of my family's sins, particularly my dad's and brother's, just remember **I'm** cool, all right? P.P.S. I pray for them, too.)*

I drew an imaginary line between myself and the target, squinting under the pounding sun, sweat casing my forehead.

Using three fingers to hold my arrow and string, I raised the bow toward the target, my inner elbow parallel to the ground. I could practically feel my pupils dilating as I focused, a tingle of excitement shooting up my spine. I released the arrow, watching as it spun in the air, missing the bull's-eye by mere millimeters.

I lowered my bow, wiping my brow.

“Sailor,” my trainer, Junsu, clipped in a cutting tone. He approached from the shaded visiting area of the archery range, his hands clasped behind his back. “You have a visitor.”

I removed my bracer and leather tab, turning around and dumping them into the open duffel bag behind me.

“Visitor?” I grabbed a bottle of water from the plastic chair, squeezing its contents into my mouth. “Who would visit me?”

The question was not meant to sound as pathetic as it came out. Lots of people could visit me. My parents, for instance. Mom often dropped food off for me at reception, knowing I always forget to feed myself. I also had friends—Persephone (Persy) and Emmabelle (Belle) Penrose, namely. They both spent a good amount of time trying to drag me to social events I didn't want to attend. But everybody knew I wasn't big on visitors while I was training. Never mind the fact that I was *always* training.

“A boy.” Junsu's mouth twisted around the last word. His Korean accent, touched with an unexplained British twang, rang with accusation. “A tall, blond boy.”

Junsu was short and sinewy and didn't look a day over thirty, though considering his prime years in the Olympics were thirty years ago, he was no doubt pushing fifty. His hair was raven black, his tan skin wrinkle-free. He wore tight, simple clothes of expensive fabrics. They always looked neatly ironed.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” I shook my head, my Merida DunBroch-style mane whooshing around my face.

I scooped up my duffel and looped my bow over my shoulder as I started walking from the outdoor range back to the archery club. Junsu must've misheard. That guy was probably looking for someone else.

“Can I come half an hour early tomorrow, so you can help me tune my bow? I think I need a new string.”

Junsu gave me a slight nod, his face still troubled. “The boy,” he pressed, stroking his chin, “is he—how you say?—your boy-friend?”

He put a hyphen between the words *boy* and *friend*, knowing dang well what the answer was. I’d postponed college (and life in general) to be laser-focused on archery. More specifically: the Olympics that would take place a year from now. Boys were strictly off the menu this year. A stab at the Olympics was a once-or twice-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

College could wait. I could enroll next year, after I won my gold medal.

Boys? They were so off my radar, I wasn’t even sure I *possessed* said radar.

I’d had the pleasure of growing up next to two men, two strong men who taught me everything there is to know about the gender: they were wild, violent, and real time-suckers. I had no place for them.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about, Junsu.” I blew out air as we waltzed through the narrow hallway of the archery club. It was filled with pictures of past and current archers who’d brought pride and medals to this club. I inhaled the addictive scent of sweat, leather equipment, and faint powder. “But whoever it is, he is no one to me.” I stopped, scratching above my eyebrow as I tried to make sense of this. “Maybe it’s Dorian Sanchez. He went to school with me and has been begging me to talk to my mom about giving him a job.”

Dorian was blond and tall-ish, the only person in my class other than me not to secure entrance to a good college. He’d bought a food truck senior year and sold it before graduation, so I knew he needed money.

Yup. It had to be Dorian.

“Well...” Junsu gestured with his open palm toward the front door. “The boy is loitering outside. I shall be most appreciative if he does not do that again. This is not a *Tinder*.” He spat out the word.

Stifling a chuckle by biting my lower lip, I nodded seriously. “I’ll try to invite all my hookups straight home in the future.”

“Not funny,” he said sternly, his eyes widening.

“Yes, it is.” I breezed toward the entrance, a spring in my step as I twisted my head to wink at my Olympic trainer. “Because we both know it’s bull—”

“No cussing!” He waved his index at me. “Is right shoulder still bothersome?”

“Yes.” I shrugged. “It’s kind of killing me, actually.”

My right shoulder had been bothering me for weeks, but every time I visited my physical therapist, I pretended it was okay so he’d let me train. Junsu was very strict about missing practice time, and whenever I complained, he gave me a soldier-through-it look.

My trainer nodded. “It is natural. Tomorrow, Sailor.”

“Tomorrow.”

I poured myself toward the parking lot, making my way to my sensible white Golf GTI. Boston was insufferably hot in the summer, the dark colonial and federalist buildings always a few degrees away from melting into a puddle on the concrete. The archery club was located on a quiet side street by the West End, far enough from my parents’ apartment downtown that the congested daily commute cost me fifty minutes to and from.

I discarded my equipment in the trunk and pushed my AirPods into my ears. I was humming “Kill and Run” by Sia when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned around, surprised, even though Junsu had given me a heads-up. An unfamiliar face looked back at mine.

A stunning, miss-a-beat-or-five face, to be exact.

Definitely not Dorian Sanchez.

“Sailor Brennan?” the man—*not* boy—asked flatly, his eyes raking me head to toe like I was a call girl he’d just opened his door for and discovered was not up to his standards.

I felt my body stiffening in defense and shook my head, ridding myself of the weird hold his looks had on me.

“Yeah.” I reared my head back so I could take more of him in, and also because I couldn’t tell if the need to head-butt him would arise. This guy was a complete stranger, after all. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Hunter Fitzpatrick.” He pointed at himself, his smirk a perfect, well-practiced half-moon with the right amount of teeth-to-dimple ratio.

I blinked at him, waiting for further explanation. “And...?” I frowned when it became obvious his statement was also meant to serve as some sort of clarification.

His eyes inched wider in surprise, but he soon arranged his features back into a flaccid expression and cleared his throat.

“Can we talk somewhere?”

“We *are* talking somewhere.” I took my AirPods out, dropping them into my front pocket. “Right here. And if you don’t tell me what it’s about, I’m afraid I’ll have to turn around, get into my car, and drive away.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to block your way out of here, if you do that.” He dragged his fingers through his tresses, each golden hair submitting to the movement, like a gust of wind swiping a wheat field.

Spoiled brat. I stared at him with a mixture of irritation and confusion.

“Then,” I said carefully, “I’m afraid I’ll have to run you over. So let’s spare you the hospital visit and me the inconvenience. Can you tell me why you’re here? You’re getting me in trouble.”

“What the fuck?”

“My trainer thought you were a hookup or something.”

“JFC, back it up all the way.” He snorted a lewd laugh, *actually* abbreviating Jesus effing Christ. He shot another glance at my nonexistent breasts.

I wore a snug, long-sleeved shirt and yoga pants, paired with an old pair of sneakers I probably should have replaced three years ago. Despite my best efforts, I felt myself blushing at his dismissal. I knew what I looked like, and I wasn’t a perfect ten.

I was scrawny, with red, tangled hair cascading all the way down to my butt, and a dusting of freckles everywhere the sun touched. On a scale of one to ten, I was a six on a generous day. Hunter was a perfect million.

“I wanted to run an idea by you.” He leaned a hip over the open trunk of my car.

Everything about him was lazy and indulgent. He was the opposite of my brother and dad. He loved himself and was hyperaware of his good looks. It turned me off.

Not that I was turned on in the first place.

“About?” I shifted from foot to foot. My nerves were tattered, frayed at the seams. Boys never spoke to me, and when they did, they didn’t look like *him*.

“Us.”

“You just said there is no us. And I’d like to reinforce that statement.” I yanked my car keys from my duffel bag, slammed the trunk shut, and rounded my car. He tailed me, his movements tiger-smooth, especially for a guy his size. He was very tall and very lean, and—most annoying of all—smelled very, *very* nice. A mixture of clean laundry, cinnamon, and corrupted male.

“Whoa, hold the phone. You really don’t have any idea who I am?” He touched my shoulder to stop me from entering the car as I opened the driver’s door.

I looked at his hand with an arched brow. He withdrew it immediately.

“No touching,” I said.

“Kay. So? You don’t?” He searched my face, his brows leveling with his hairline.

I shook my head. “Not even the faintest clue. My condolences to your ego.”

“H-u-n-t-e-r F-i-t-z-p-a-t-r-i-c-k,” he drawled slowly, treating me no different than a first grader practicing her letters. “You know, of Royal Pipelines.”

“If this is a sexual innuendo, I am going to have to knee you in the balls,” I said matter-of-factly. I did not, however, feel half as calm as I pretended to be. His mere presence rattled something deep in my stomach, and I felt nauseous with excitement.

“Don’t objectify me, lady.” He ripped a VLTN beanie from the back pocket of his designer jeans, slapping it on his head and covering his eyes with a sulk.

That thing cost four hundred bucks. I knew because I’d gotten something similar for Belle’s birthday. But that was a joint gift where her sister, parents, and cousin had also chipped in. Who on Earth was this guy?

“I come from the fourth richest family in the country.” He pouted, peeking through the edge of the beanie now, looking ridiculously yet adorably infantile.

“Good for you. Are there any more meaningless details about your life you’d like to share before I depart? Favorite color? Maybe the age when you lost your first baby tooth?” I *hmm-ed*.

But now that he’d said his name again, the penny dropped, and I understood why he was surprised I didn’t recognize him—mainly because everybody else in this city did.

Hunter Fitzpatrick was unfairly, undeniably, irrefutably stunning. Shockingly so. In a way that made me resent him simply because men that handsome aren’t trustworthy.

Let me amend—men in *general* aren’t trustworthy. The pretty ones were extra mean, though. That was a lesson I’d learned in high school that wasn’t in the syllabus.

Rumor around Boston was, Hunter’s parents had sent him to Todos Santos, California, four years ago after he got kicked out of a British school, hoping to clean up his act by settling him with his Bible-studying uncle and aunt, or at the very least keep him away from the East Coast press. The latter hounded the Fitzpatrick family, and Hunter specifically, seeing as he had the notable ability to act like an idiot. In fact, I remembered one particular headline referring to him as “The Great Ghastly,”

after one of his pool parties back west ended up with two people breaking their limbs trying to jump from the roof into his pool.

Even from California, the rogue Fitzpatrick had managed to make headlines. According to the gossip mill, his sexual conquests were currently in the triple digits, and if angels got their wings every time he had a fling, heaven would be so severely overpopulated, they'd have to start building new, up-and-coming sections in hell.

Hunter's hair was muddy gold, curling in angelic twists around his ears, temples, and the nape of his neck, enhancing his heart-stopping beauty. His eyes were narrow, almost slanted, and brilliantly light, a mixture of gray and powder blue with flecks of gold, and his high cheekbones, square jaw, and pouty lips gave him the elegance of a surly, spoiled prince. His nose was straight and narrow, his eyebrows thick and masculine, and he had that healthy, glowing tan of a man who got to see the better parts of the world.

Hunter's body was discussed just as much as his antics. He'd played polo while he studied in the UK, and continued doing so privately after he got kicked out and moved to California. He was lean, muscular, and freakishly tall for a polo player. According to the rumors, he had enviable abs and a member the size of the Eiffel Tower.

In short, he screamed trouble, and not the kind I had time for.

"I have a proposition for you." He tipped his nose up.

God, he was so arrogant I wanted to throw up on his Fear of God Jungle sneakers (\$995, Emmabelle had once told me—at this point, he was a theft victim begging to be targeted).

"The answer is no."

"That's an untextured way of thinking. You haven't even heard it yet."

I raised my palm, smiling politely. "Based on your reputation alone, combined with the fact that we've been standing here for ten minutes and you still haven't gotten to the point, I can deduce we are not a good match. For *anything*."

“I need you to live with me for six months. But, like, in a sick-ass apartment downtown. Super rad shit.”

He completely ignored my rejection. Furthermore, he talked like he was doing *me* a favor. True, my parents were not on any list of the richest people in the country, continent, or outer space, but they did very well for themselves. In fact, I’d grown up in luxury. But like Mom, I rejected the idea that money equaled happiness. I found that oftentimes, the opposite was true.

“Oh,” I said cheerfully. “Well, in that case, the answer is still *no*.”

“Wait! I have something you want.” He had the audacity to close the driver’s door behind me, bracing his arms on either side of my shoulders, caging me in.

I stared at him, bewildered. Was he high or something? “*What?*” I spat, wishing someone would come out of the club, see us, and shoot an arrow through his skull. Another part of me—a teeny, tiny part—enjoyed the attention this fine male specimen was providing me. I made a mental note to drown that part of me in the bathtub when I got home.

“My da says if you agree to this deal, he’s willing to sponsor you all the way to the Olympics. Said he’ll make you a household name across America, and Boston’s sweetheart. I’m talking commercials, hooking you up with the best sports agent in America, get you a book deal. You’ll be famous, baby.” He offered me another one of his toothy-dimpled smirks.

“I don’t want any of those things. I just want to do what I love.”

“That’s cute, but I know Lana Alder from New Mexico is breathing down your neck in the archery department and might take your place on the squad. And she’s got beauty campaigns and movie deals coming out of her ass, so you might want to reconsider that big, fat rejection.”

“You did your homework,” I said sullenly. Lana was a sore subject for me. Her name alone made my skin crawl.

“First and last time.” He wiggled his brows.

I bit the tip of my thumbnail. He was right. My main competition was Alder, and she, unfortunately, was as gorgeous as she was talented. She was coming to Boston in five months so we could train together with Junsu, and had already secured more media coverage in my hometown than I'd had the entire year.

I shook my head. "No."

"You sure? Same crib, separate rooms. My parents just want you to watch over me."

"Why?" My eyes flared in annoyance. "Why me? Why not a willing girl? I'm sure there are lots to choose from."

"That's exactly why. You're *unwilling*. They said you wouldn't be persuaded or seduced—incorruptible. You have good character and know the meaning of responsibility."

"Ehm, thank you."

"Dear God, woman, that *wasn't* a compliment." He laughed.

I frowned. "Well, sorry to disappoint your parents, but the answer is still no."

"Seriously?" He groaned when I swatted his arms away from me, opening the door again and slipping into my car before I could consider his crazy idea. "My da knows your da and gave him the skinny on things. Apparently, he is super into the idea. Ask him. Da can make your career. If you care so much about archery, do yourself a favor and bite the bullet, man."

"My dad is influential, too," I said, not quite believing the words leaving my mouth. Was battiness contagious?

"Your dad can influence the body count in Boston, but he is hardly a public figure. *My* old man, however, donated millions to build a new stadium for the Patriots. You need connections, Sailor. Let me help."

I started my car with the door still open, fully tucked in, gripping the steering wheel and feeling my fingers going numb around it.

"You just have to make sure I'm sober and celibate. That's it."

I looked up at him, aghast. “Like, be your nanny?”

He shrugged. “I’m fully potty-trained, sleep through the night—sometimes well past the morning and afternoon—and can make a mean-ass omelet.”

“Can you stop using the word *ass* as an adjective, verb, adverb, and noun?” I half-asked, half-wondered.

“I’ll stop saying the word *ass* if you agree to my once-in-a-lifetime offer.” He pressed the button to lower my window so we could continue our conversation a second before I slammed the door in his face. Good instincts.

“This is crazy,” I mumbled.

“I’m going to take that as a yes.” He slapped my window frame, grinning.

Junsu would kill me if he ever learned of the deal. He said archery was a respectable art, not a Disney Channel special that required me to do press junkets—not that he was ever going to know about it. As far as he was concerned, that qualified as cutting corners. But I was falling behind the curve and knew Lana Alder could crush my Olympic dream—and take great pleasure in it, too.

Anyway, Dad would kill Hunter Fitzpatrick if he gave me trouble. And Sam, my brother, would get rid of the body. That was the beauty of coming from a mobster family.

It seemed like a no-brainer. I needed a big endorser to push me. That’s what everyone except Junsu kept telling me. My problem wasn’t lack of skill or talent, but that I was shy and too much of a wallflower to bring attention to myself.

Still, I said nothing.

Hunter bent his knees, pressing his palms together. “Help a dude out, old sport. I promise I’m not an asshole. I mean, I wouldn’t go as far as calling myself a good guy, but I’m harmless. My inheritance is on the line here. I just want both of us to survive this bitch of a time. I swear.”

He seemed genuine. Besides, how hard could this be? He was a willing participant in this weird deal. Plus, I’d been wanting to move out of my parents’ house for a while. They’d

been bugging me about my love life—or lack of it—for a long time.

“How big is this apartment?” I groaned, feeling my resolution slipping through my fingers.

“Three bedrooms, about twenty-five-hundred square feet. Skyscraper. Walking distance from here. You can use the spare bedroom for your equipment.”

“Wow,” I blurted. That beat the studio apartments I’d been looking at to escape Mom and Dad’s constant put-yourself-out-there nagging.

“Also, there will be a private chef. I was just kidding about the omelet; I can barely open a can of alphabet pasta. And you can bring your friends and Bumble dates or whatever over. I’m an excellent wingman, Sailor. I will hand you a condom and call for an Uber to kick them out when it’s all done so you can shower and take a shit without playing hostess.”

“You’re gross.”

“Why? I’ll order them the deluxe service through my app. I’ll even risk my rating—which is four point nine eight, just saying—because that’s who I am as a person: an altruistic, stand-up guy.”

“Didn’t you do community service for public indecency recently after running down a street completely naked?” I frowned, recalling the article.

He waved me off. “That was a year ago. I’m a changed man.”

I was making a mistake. I knew that *as* I was making the decision. But my drive to succeed won the battle.

“What’s the drawback?” I narrowed my eyes. “If you need babysitting, there must be a reason for that.”

“Impulse control,” he said.

“Meaning?”

“Specifically speaking, I don’t have any. Just think of me, like, as Bambi: cute AF but super stupid and in total need of supervision.”

He just said *aay-eff*. Plus, he willingly labeled himself stupid. I felt kind of sad for him, before I remembered who he was.

“A few ground rules.” I sat back in the driver’s seat, my car still running.

Hunter’s diamond-sharp eyes twinkled at my surrender. “*Anything.*”

“One, as you said, we’ll have totally separate bedrooms.”

“So separate they’ll barely be in the same zip code.”

“Two, no drugs, drinks, or girls in the apartment. I’m not going to cut corners for you, and I’m not bribable, in case you’re planning on pulling any funny business.”

“No funny business.” He parked his elbows on the edge of my open window, shoving half his body inside and ignoring my personal space, not unlike an eager Labrador. “What else?”

“No hitting on me.”

“Done,” he said much too quickly, raising his palm in a Boy Scout swear. “Sized me up pretty quickly, huh?”

“Your reputation precedes you.”

“So does a certain organ.”

I lifted a hand in warning. “See? Exactly what I mean. You’re going to have to cut the BS, because dealing with your potty mouth is above this sitter’s pay grade.”

“Fine. No sexual innuendos. Can I tell Da it’s on?”

Everything was moving way too fast. I didn’t even fully grasp that Hunter was here, much less what I was agreeing to. But something told me he was the sign I’d been begging for earlier today. This airheaded, rakish boy was my good-luck charm. He was going to bring me to Tallinn Olympics next year.

Besides, Persy and Belle were going to have orgasmic seizures when they heard I’d be rooming with *the* Hunter Fitzpatrick.

And it wasn’t like I was breaking my no-boy rule until after the Olympics.

Hunter was a boy, but he wasn't a good fit for me. I was in no danger of falling in love with him, of losing focus.

He grabbed my hand and shook it comically. I noticed his palm was softer than mine. Probably the only thing about him that wasn't tarnished.

"Can I have one rule, too?" he asked.

"No," I said flatly, then sighed. "Fine, what?"

"Don't Google me."

"Why?" And why was he *still* shaking my hand? And why, why, *why* wasn't I withdrawing mine?

"Just because."

Easy peasy, I told myself. *Just like living with a really beautiful, useless picture.*

Four



As it happened, it was not just like living with a really beautiful, useless picture.

More like living with a Tasmanian devil, judging by the first five minutes of our so-called “roomance” (roommate-romance, as my mother, Sparrow, cheerfully—and *creepily*—put it).

A week after Hunter had cornered me outside the archery club, I officially moved into his West End apartment. Mom and Persy helped me with my suitcases and boxes. Belle had wanted to come, but she had “a thing.” Knowing my friend, that thing was attached to a man she was going to eat alive and discard after a few weeks of fun. The minute the three of us tumbled out of the private elevator and took in the apartment, we dropped whatever we were holding, our mouths slacking in unison.

At first glance, it was everything I’d expected it to be: scarcely and tastefully furnished, floor-to-ceiling windows, new kitchen appliances, not to mention a bird’s-eye view of Boston that made me fall in love with my hometown all over again. The colors were navy and deep burgundy, giving the place a rich-yet-trendy vibe.

However, on second look, the place looked like every raccoon in North America had raided it. Hunter’s clothes adorned most of the furniture—the couch, on top of the TV,

coffee table, floor, even in the sink—and there were open takeout containers everywhere, including on *top* of the garbage can.

The modern, gray-accented open-plan kitchen was a whole new level of mess. Everything looked sticky. Food cans were open and dripping. I even saw a trail of ants marching their way from the floor up to an open jar of chipotle sauce on the kitchen island.

“Well,” Persy chirped cheerfully. “He said there’s a cook, so for sure there’s going to be a housekeeper, too. Besides, you have him by the balls. You can threaten him to keep the place tidy, or else you’re moving back with your parents. Right, Mrs. Brennan?” She placed a cardboard box on the sliver of open space on the coffee table, planting her hands on her hips.

“Actually, no. We’re making Sailor’s room a sex dungeon.” Mom gathered her red hair into a topknot with one hand, wheeling my suitcase to the hallway in the other.

I shot her a death glare. “*Mom*. Super, deeply gross.”

She laughed with her entire face. It made my heart squeeze. “We *are* planning to turn it into a second office. My paperwork is getting out of control, and there’s no point moving into a bigger condo.”

“Why not make Sam’s room a second office? He hasn’t been living at home for years.”

“Because I don’t worry about his social life,” Mom answered frankly. “And so, he is welcome to come back whenever he wishes.”

“Which would be never.” I scoffed. Sam was a notorious Bostonian bachelor with a taste for partying, Warren Beatty-style.

“My point exactly,” she concluded.

Great. Now I didn’t have a place to run back to if *when* this thing imploded. By the looks of this apartment, it already had.

I had no doubt my parents’ decision to convert my childhood room into a home office was to keep me here. They loved me dearly, but had begged me to be more social. If it were

up to me, I'd be shooting targets and lazing around with the Penrose sisters until the end of time.

"You know what?" I turned around, facing both of them, trying to appear more upbeat than I actually was. In reality, I'd almost popped an artery. It had taken Hunter exactly ten seconds to piss me off. "I'm going to tidy up myself, arrange things the way I want them to be—set the tone for the next six months."

In the week between the time Hunter propositioned me in the parking lot and now, our fathers had met numerous times to negotiate the terms of this insane, legally binding agreement. Mom and I had met Gerald and Jane Fitzpatrick so we could all sign the contract. Gerald was cold as a fish and Jane nice, but reserved. Hunter was absent from those meetings, and I had a feeling it was because Gerald was either worried he'd say something embarrassing, or because he didn't want Hunter to feel like he had control over the situation.

"You sure?" Mom frowned at me. "We don't mind staying, and you could use the extra help."

"Positive, Mom." I was already pushing them out the door. I knew they weren't going to cooperate if I told them my plan.

Mom wasn't hard to get rid of. She understood my independent streak and my need to do things my way, because I took after her in that department. Persy was another story. She was a do-gooder, innocent and agreeable to a fault. I sometimes wondered what drew me to my best friend, who was the same age as me, eighteen. We were polar opposites in both appearance and personality. She had long, wavy hair the color of sand, huge blue eyes, and the soft, traditional beauty of a rose in bloom. She was attending college like her parents wanted her to, and didn't have one rebellious bone in her body.

I was wild, driven, and tunnel-visioned. I hid my scrawny body in ill-fitting clothes, loose tops, boy-sneakers, and jeans. Whereas Persephone, named after the Greek goddess who'd been stolen by Hades to live and rule the underworld with him, was quiet but confident, I was insecure to the bone. I loved Persy to death because we both possessed the two qualities I cared about the most: we were innately loyal and stayed away from the rumor mill.

In fact, that's how we'd become friends. When I started elementary school, gossip about my father ran through the hallways like the Mississippi River. Troy Brennan was Boston's infamous "fixer," and it was said he had a substantial amount of blood on his hands. In spite of that, Persy and her older sister, Belle, sought me out and made sure I had someone to play with at recess and sit with in the cafeteria.

Belle was everything Persy and I weren't: a nymph, a fallen goddess. Cunning and adventurous with a vicious tongue. Street smart and daring. The two of them by my side meant I wasn't bullied, picked on, or harassed during my school years.

"Are you sure?" Persy screwed up her little nose.

"Yes." I pushed her through the door. "Go!"

I spent the next three hours tidying the apartment up as best as I could, unpacking, putting things away in my room, and using the spare room to arrange my archery equipment, as per my agreement with Hunter. We hadn't even exchanged phone numbers, but a deal was a deal.

As night rolled in, I collapsed onto the opulent, satin-upholstered sofa and groaned, my hair matted on my forehead. Two, perfect circles of sweat graced my shirt under the armpits, hardly an aphrodisiac.

I'd begun to drift off, despite my best efforts, when the doors to the private elevator of our penthouse floor slid open and Hunter walked in, carrying a few shopping bags.

"Yo, roomie, what's shaking?" He jerked his chin in my direction, swaggering into the depths of the living room. He took the two steps down from the landing to the living area, discarded his bags on the coffee table, and sat on its edge, planting his elbows on his knees. His scent drifted into my nose: fabric softener and rich-boy musk that made my mouth water, no matter how much I hated him.

I peeked under my lashes, preparing myself for his gut-punching beauty. If I thought a week away from him would subdue his impact on me, I was sorely mistaken. His gray-blue eyes looked like winter stones, glimmering playfully, his cheeks ruddy from the evening wind, his lips swollen and full, and his

tawny blond curls a perfect mess. Everything about him was male, sharp, and muscular.

“Got you a present.” He threw something into my hands.

A small envelope. When I opened it, I saw a Target gift card. Yes, the actual store. I rolled my eyes and smiled tiredly. “Thanks.”

“I like what you did with the place.” He looked around, picking up one of my feet from the coffee table and removing my holey sneaker. I watched in horror as he let the dirty shoe drop to the floor, took my socked foot, and began to dig his thumbs into it. At first, I tried to yank my foot away, but after hours of working—and years of training in general—my muscles were tense and rigid. The massage felt too deliciously good not to accept.

“What the hell are you doing?” I scowled, watching him put my foot atop his muscular thigh and massage it thoroughly. His thigh was so hard, I wondered what the rest of his body felt like.

STD. It feels like catching an STD, you moron.

There was no denying he was good with his hands, and I wondered how many girls had fallen for this trap.

“None,” he said, reading my thoughts as he smirked at me knowingly.

“W-what?” I stammered, hating myself for becoming an inarticulate mess.

His father shouldn’t have put all his trust in me. If he could see me with Hunter right now, he’d know how helpless I was—not that I was going to go lax on his son, but I was definitely not bulletproof to his charm.

“You’re wondering how many times I’ve done this as foreplay. The answer is never. I’m doing it because you look like crap and need a break, and because you cleaned our apartment even though the housekeepers arrive tomorrow.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling stupid but too exhausted to get riled up about it. “You really know how to compliment a girl.” I was tired of hearing how unattractive I was to this guy. Besides,

everything he did—even the glorious massage—was braided in mockery, like he didn't take anything seriously, ever.

“Would you like to be complimented?” He popped an eyebrow, digging his fingers deeper into my heel.

My eyes rolled in their sockets, and I let out a groan as the delicious pain unknotted my muscles. “I really don't care.” I dropped my head to the back of the sofa, closing my eyes. “Where were you, anyway?” Now was a good time to start investigating him and show authority.

“Shopping.”

“With who?”

“My sister, Aisling.”

Funnily enough, I remembered his sister. His brother, too. I must've deleted Hunter permanently from my mind because he was a boy my age, gorgeous, and about as unattainable as planet Mars. Those things somehow made him an automatic enemy in my eyes.

“You're going to love her. She's appalled by everything male and fun, just like you.”

“I resent that statement.”

“You resent everything.”

Biting my tongue to keep from lashing out at him—solely because I knew I'd already gotten my vengeance for the day—I changed the subject.

“How do I know you weren't out and about with some other girl?” I opened my eyes. He blew air through his cheeks, hiking his long, strong fingers from my foot to my ankle, kneading it in circles.

“For one thing, you'd know if I'd had sex, because I'd be rocking the after-orgasm glow.”

“I can't believe I'm humoring this, but what does your after-orgasm glow look like?”

“I'm afraid I can't fake it.” He winked, removing my leg from his thigh and returning it to the table gently. My heart missed one lonely beat at the loss of his touch before Hunter

took my other foot and gave it the same treatment, removing my banged-up sneaker and massaging it heel to toes. “You’ll have to give me an orgasm to find out.”

“Hard pass,” I said.

He regarded me with amusement, trekking his fingers up my ankle. Silence engulfed us. Finally, he said, “Who’s gonna take care of Hunter Jr., then?”

“Your hand?” I suggested. “Or an apple pie, if you’re into cultural clichés.”

I wasn’t so hot on talking sex with Hunter—or with anyone at all, for that matter—but I didn’t want him to see how flustered I was, and he was obviously testing me. Belle and Persy would die if they heard I’d talked sex with the sex king himself. The minute I told them about my agreement with Hunter, they’d bombarded me with every piece of newsworthy gossip I’d somehow missed about my new roommate. Belle also mentioned something about wanting to ride him like a stolen bike.

“How about we strike a deal—if I play the doting saint all week and stay out of your way, I can sneak in a few fucks with a rando? I’ll have to bring her home because Da has people following me—I’ve already seen them around—but you can always help a bro out and tell the building staff they’re your friends.”

My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, the blood in my veins heating with anger. “*What?*”

“Oh. ’Kay.” He lifted his palms. “Not a few fucks. Just the one. Twenty minutes. But this is my final offer.”

“No,” I said.

“Fine. Ten minutes. And I’ll make sure she keeps her voice down. Now *that’s* my final offer.”

He was going to be a terrible businessman.

“That’s not how final offers work, and the answer is still no.”

“What?” His smile dropped. “Why not?”

“I told you, I’m taking this agreement with your dad seriously.” I stood up.

It wasn’t a good idea to let him touch me while we were negotiating. It bothered me that, just like with all the other girls, his touch disarmed me of my logic. I gathered said logic back into my arms like shattered, miniscule pieces of what used to be a solid statue, trying to rearrange my thoughts.

Hunter got up, too, towering over me. My head reached his lower pecs. I had to crane my neck to meet his gaze.

“Word?” He changed his tune from pleasant to deadly serious. “You’re going to cockblock me for real?”

At least now I knew what had inspired the massage and the Target gift card.

“It’s not like I’m going to tell Da you’re sneaking chicks up for me. It’ll be our dirty little secret.”

“I don’t want any secrets with you.” I threw my hands in the air, exploding. “I don’t want *anything* with you, period. Your dad is right to follow you. You’re willing to toss your future away for sex.”

“I’m not supposed to choose.” He tousled his hair, the color of forged bronze. “Why do you have to be a narc? And while we’re on the subject, why are you weird? Why archery and not, say, Zumba? What the hell is wrong with you? You’re making everything harder.”

“By being honest?” I laughed hysterically, advancing toward my room.

He chased after me, again, his steps long and feral, making my heart leap to my throat, thumping its way farther up. I couldn’t remember the last time my pulse had pounded so quickly. Hunter jumped ahead of me and blocked my way to the hallway, resting his elbows on either side of the arched passage.

“Insecurity doesn’t look good on you, kid.” He smirked, taunting.

I felt the blush creeping up from my neck to the top of my head and knew my eyes were shimmering with humiliation and rage.

“You ugly, ugly kid. Are you a boy or a girl? Oh, never mind. I’ll take what’s yours, anyway”—the words that chased me to the end of world.

He reminded me of *her*.

He was the male version of *her*.

Of the girl who wanted to break me, so I’d vowed to break her first.

I wanted to throttle Hunter. He’d been so sure I was going to let him do whatever he wanted when he cornered me in the parking lot. He knew if he slept with another girl outside the apartment, his father would catch him. I was his only chance, and I wasn’t cooperating.

“Fuck you.” I bared my teeth.

“A few more weeks like this, and I’ll actually consider it, Carrot Top.” He thrust his face in mine menacingly. “What is it that you want? Money? Power? I can hook you up with one of my high-profile friends. Just say it, Sailor. Spit it out and you’ll have the paparazzi monitoring your every move. You’ll be the new Serena Williams. Everyone has a price.”

I shook my head. “Not me.”

“That’s fake news. You’re here, meaning you were already bought by my father. Now, what can I do to up my bid and switch your loyalties from him to me?”

Drop dead, I wanted to scream. Only that wasn’t true. If he dropped dead right here and now, I wouldn’t switch loyalties. I would, however, dance atop his corpse while thanking God for saving me from six months of torture.

Knowing our first encounters together were going to dictate the rest of our relationship, I yanked him by the collar of his shirt, bringing him closer to my face so we were nose to nose. I could breathe in his mouth. Cinnamon gum, mint, and a dirty, carnal kiss I would never let happen.

If he was shocked by my antics, his face didn’t show it.

“Listen to me carefully, Hunter Fitzpatrick. I may seem like an insecure, average-looking geek to you. And you know what? That’s who I am. I own it. But make no mistake, this insecure

geek comes from a long line of people you do not want to screw with, and their savagery rubbed off on me as well. I will not hesitate to pierce your pretty, spoiled-prince heart with one of my pointy arrows. But you're right. I do have a price. My success is my price. Beating Lana Alder at this game is my price. You have *nothing* to offer me in that department. You will be celibate, sober, and congenial. We will attend our family functions, play house, and be whatever our parents want us to be. And then we'll part ways and never speak to each other again. Am I clear?"

Rather than answering me, he shook off my touch, turned around, and stalked down the hall to his room. He threw his door open and slammed it behind his back. I waited in the hallway with my arms crossed, knowing the real explosion was seconds away.

Hunter was right. He did cave to his impulses and react thoughtlessly.

"Three," I whispered, holding three fingers in the air. "Two, one." I curled them one by one, my eyes trained on his closed door. Every fiber in my body shook with adrenaline, fear, and amusement.

"*Showtime.*" I snapped my fingers.

Hunter burst from his room, his cheeks flushed, his eyes darkened. Two full moons.

"The *fuuuuuuuuuuck!*"

He drew the letter U to oblivion and back. His hands were filled with junk: the open tin cans still leaking suspicious sauces, his dirty clothes, a pair of designer shoes, and a joystick. "You dumped all the garbage in my room. Are you crazy?"

"Nice *This is Sparta* moment. All of this belongs to you." I sloped my chin up, my voice stern. "Thought you'd appreciate getting it back, since it was thrown all over our mutual space."

He stared at me in shock, like I was a wild, battered animal he had to tame, a rodent vandalizing this expensive penthouse. "You're insane."

I smiled sweetly. "Been called worse."

“Now I get it.” He dropped the garbage to the floor, pointing at me. “You’re my punishment for what I did. He chose the craziest bitch in Boston to set me straight, the old bastard.”

Maybe Hunter was right. Maybe his father had heard just how much of an unbearable, career-centered party pooper I was. Although technically, I couldn’t be called a party pooper, since I never attended any.

“Make sure you keep the place tidy, Hunter. With or without housekeepers, I don’t want to live in filth, not even for one hour. Have a good night, *roomie*,” I finished, walking into my room and slamming the door in his face.

1-0, away team.

Five



Hunter

The important thing to remember was, my balls weren't going to fall off.

I'd Googled it a few times (twenty-three times, if we're being specific here) to be on the safe side. It was confirmed: I could live for six months without having sexual intercourse and still survive. *Physically*. My mind was another matter. If I was going to lose it in the process, I was going to tear Sailor Brennan limb from limb, then sew her back together into a sex doll.

The spitfire, copper-haired banshee said we weren't going to talk to each other after our six months were up, but she was wrong for assuming she could get rid of me that easily. I was already fantasizing about killing her in various positions, landscapes, and with different weapons once this was over. Cue to:

Me strangling Sailor against a Sicilian sunset.

Me slitting Sailor's throat while we wore matching swimsuits in the Bahamas.

Me pushing Sailor off an aerial tramway on a picturesque Aspen vacation.

Sometimes in the fantasies she was asleep, but more often than not she was wide awake and fully conscious, witnessing her demise.

I'd spent the night on the couch because I didn't want to sleep in my garbage-filled room, and there was no way I was cleaning up the mess she'd left there.

Look, maybe I wasn't completely innocent. In the time before Sailor inhabited this place, I might have thrown myself a pity party and dirtied up my new apartment to make shit uncomfortable for her, too. But she didn't have to make a big deal about it.

I slept in nothing but my boxer briefs. When I woke up with a hard-on like a supersized German sausage—the kind that makes you wrestle with your own dick during your morning pee—I hoped she'd caught a glimpse of it before she scurried along to her boring day of shooting objects and skipping off into the sunset, holding hands with her hymen.

That's right, Sailor. You aren't the only asshole under this roof with a deadly weapon.

Which brought me to my next point—*who the fuck does that?* Just took shots at nothing? She didn't hunt or do anything productive with her talent, just aimed at useless targets. Why was this an Olympic sport? Archery was checkers for anal people.

“Sir, we're here,” my driver murmured from the front seat.

My first day working for Da and Cillian. *And* I needed to somehow pass my college exams this year. I was going to split community college in the evenings and work during the day fifty-fifty. I wasn't a math genius, but even I knew that left zero time for having a life. Da had really ridden my ass this time around, bided his time while I was having fun in California before he shoved a ten-inch dildo up my rectum. I was feeling sore and tender even before he got the goddamn tip in.

We were on day two of one hundred and eighty-two, but who the fuck was counting?

(Answer: me. I was counting.)

I stumbled out of the executive car and shouldered through the human traffic of downtown Boston, dragging my feet into Royal Pipeline's crazy-tall, chrome skyscraper that ninety-five percent of Bostonians actively hated so much, there had been frequent demonstrations outside when they started building. The monster had ruined the city's skyline, but it was who was inside it that had personally ruined my life.

The best thing about the day, other than not spending it with Sailor Goddamn Brennan, was that I got to wear a Brioni suit. Wearing suits was my favorite. I didn't even pretend to need an occasion. I went to parties, the movies, and restaurants looking like Jay Gatsby.

I spent half an hour with security getting my name tag, electronic card, and a ton of other bullshit, then proceeded up to the eighth floor, where my father's office was.

I skulked over to main reception and approached a pretty receptionist with eyes so vacant she could pass as a life-sized Barbie.

Bet she can bend her knees, though.

"Sup. Hunter Fitzpatrick's in the house." I parked an elbow on her counter. "Where's my office?"

Two severe-looking men behind me snorted to each other, shook their heads, and walked away. The blonde stared at me with a mix of horror and reluctance. Maybe I was giving her aggressive vibes because I hadn't had my dick sucked in almost two weeks.

"E-e-electronic card?" she stuttered, almost flinching. I was persona non grata inside these glass walls, which led me to believe I wasn't seeing the entire picture. Why was she scared?

I flashed her the card I'd received when I entered the building, letting it snap back into my front blazer's pocket after she scanned it.

"F-f-follow me."

With the ginger steps of a lab mouse, she led me past the main area of the office space, which had gold-and-black marble flooring, floor-to-ceiling windows, and long desks occupied by

MacBooks, hot-ass secretaries, personal assistants, and mail boys running busily from corner to corner.

Enveloping the room were fishbowl-like offices. The biggest one belonged to Da, followed by Cillian's (second biggest), and Syllie's (third biggest). Blondie led me to an ancient-looking oak desk that appeared to have been dragged from Dr. Frankenstein's basement, complete with a phone and a computer monitor from the eighties. You know, the brick-like thing that resembles a medieval weapon. The makeshift station was glued to my father's glass wall.

"The fuck is this shit?" I inquired through a tight, gentlemanly smile.

"T-t-that's your work area. R-r-right outside your father's office, so he can overlook your p-p-progress." She said the entire sentence like it had been rehearsed a thousand times over.

I turned to stare at her, frowning. So *that's* why she was scared. She thought I was going to kill the messenger. In truth, I would maybe choke her while letting her jerk me off in the communal restrooms if she was into that kind of stuff. As I've said, I'm not a violent man.

She cleared her throat, straightening her spine.

"Y-y-your father said if you have an issue, you should take it up with HR and t-t-then—"

Instead of waiting for her finish the sentence sometime next year, I saw myself into my father's office, flinging the glass door open and stepping in briskly, a pleasant smile on my face. Blondie ran after me, stuttering her apologies to Da, Syllie, and Cillian. Both men sat in front of Da at his desk, hunched over a blueprint.

I waved Blondie off. "Show's over, sweetheart. You can go back to watching *The Masked Singer* under your desk, thinking nobody knows what you're doing. It's been real."

I wanted to slam the door in her face for effect, but it was one of those fancy, slow-moving doors, so we all stood there for eight seconds, watching it anticlimactically slithering its way shut. Behind the glass, I could see shock and horror on her face.

I turned around to my father, opening my arms with a fake smile. “*Athair*,” I said. *Father* in Gaelic. “So happy to see you. And by happy, I mean why would you continue pushing me when you’ve already taken everything?”

I didn’t care that Cillian and Syllie were there. Syllie was practically family, and Cillian *was* family. Regretfully, that is.

Current mood song: “Greek Tragedy” by The Wombats.

“*Ceann beag*, I see celibacy is eating at both your brains and manners.” Cillian arched an eyebrow a shade darker than mine.

Everything about the fucker was darker than me—soul included. I’ve always thought it ironic that *Cillian* and *villain* contain so many of the same letters.

“He never had brains to begin with, so don’t waste your time worrying about them being eaten.” My father returned to frowning at the document spread on the desk, blueprints of the new refinery everybody was talking about downstairs. He pushed his reading glasses up the bridge of his nose, his Sharpie hovering over the paper. “What’s the matter now, *ceann beag*?” he asked.

Ceann beag meant *little one* in Gaelic, which would have been endearing if it weren’t for the fact that I *wasn’t* the baby of the family. That was Aisling. I was the middle child. Way I saw it, I simply got the smallest chunk of my father’s heart out of us three.

“Is your roommate not to your taste?” A hint of a smirk tugged at the side of my father’s mouth as he made notes with a red Sharpie all over the blueprint.

I didn’t take the bait. He was waiting to hear how much I hated straight-laced, ball-busting Sailor. Which, granted, I did, but why give him the satisfaction?

“Sailor? She is grand. Fucking hot, too. Shame I’m celibate these days,” I tooted, draping a shoulder over one of his glass walls. I knew it was the ultimate taunt. If my father was under the impression that I was fucking Sailor while I was *not* fucking Sailor, and Sailor denied it vehemently—which she would—Da would have to continue honoring his deal with both of us.

Troy Brennan, Sailor's da, supposedly gave the Grim Reaper a run for his money. That meant Sailor was going to walk away with all that was promised to her, and I with all that was promised to me. Even my father wasn't dumb enough to poke a guy like Brennan with the insinuation that I'd screwed his baby girl.

I hadn't had the displeasure of meeting Brennan yet, so it was easy to use his daughter as a pawn.

My father's face fell as he tore his eyes from the blueprint, scanning me.

"If everything is grand and dandy, why are you here, in my office, *uninvited?*"

I pointed at my station outside his door. "A dog bed would have been more fitting."

"Perhaps, but not in sync with the general design," Da finished, putting his Sharpie between his teeth and clamping on it with a smile.

"Am I also to get the catering scraps after the rest of the team is done eating lunch?"

"Provided you behave like a civilized gentleman and not a *Girls Gone Wild* dropout."

He was enjoying this exchange, and all the fucks I hadn't given throughout the years were starting to mount into an impressive sum. I cared, and I was furious. Specifically, I cared about how much my family hated me. It was bad enough I had zero friends in Boston and avoided my family like the plague, now I had to spend my days sitting in a permanent naughty spot outside Da's office.

"I want an office," I clipped.

"Earn it," my father challenged. "You haven't one serious bone in your body."

Other than my boner.

Okay, fuck. Not constructive.

"Now, now." Syllie stood up, motioning with his hands to calm the storm brewing in the office. He was a lanky man, pale

as a corpse, the dark, closely shaved stubble over his skin giving his jaw a bluish hue.

It didn't surprise me that Cillian remained quiet. Watching Da give me the third degree was his favorite pastime, aside from sacrificing virgins and kittens to Satan, maybe.

"Let's calm down here," Syllie suggested. "How about I switch things around and get him a desk with the assistants? It'll be easier for him to learn that way."

"No," Da boomed. "He will be where I can see him. Kill and I will teach him the ropes ourselves."

"I understand. But Hunter is still a Fitzpatrick and needs to be crowned as one to show solidarity. With all due respect—" Syllie began amiably.

Now it was Cillian's turn to rise to his feet, waving his fingertips dismissively, as if the old man was a common servant. I didn't think it was possible for Cillian to breathe without looking perversely patronizing.

"Thank you," he snapped at Syllie, who was twice his age. *Bastard.*

"What for?" Syllie frowned.

"Excusing yourself and giving us our privacy. Off you go."

"But..."

"Be graceful in defeat." Kill flashed a wolfish smirk, toothy with a promise to bite when provoked. "You are embarrassing yourself, and the boy. *Leave.*"

Sylvester glared at him, his mouth hanging, before he nodded and ambled over to where I was standing, by the door. He put his hand on my shoulder, shooting me a sympathetic smile.

"Welcome back, Sonny-boy," he whispered.

I squeezed his hand on my shoulder, half-nodding. As soon as Sylvester exited, I turned to my brother. "Fuck, man, you're a cunt."

"And to think you spent twelve years' private school tuition for that mouth." Cillian rolled the blueprint on the desk neatly,

his back to me. Fucker never cursed. “Is it too late to ask for your money back, *Athair?*”

“Unfortunately, yes, *mo órga.*” *My golden.*

“My bad for being alive. For what it’s worth, I wish I’d been pulled out before conception,” I muttered, unable to stop my mouth from running.

I was the only Fitzpatrick whose trash talk rivaled that of our ancestors, who’d arrived in Massachusetts on ships from Ireland as dusty-ass sailors with the vocabulary of gutter rappers.

Both men looked at me with open disdain. I hated it, hated that they were united and had a father-son relationship, that I was a stranger in this town, in this building, and in their home, where I wasn’t welcome.

“Speaking of pulling out...” My brother turned toward me.

I’d forgotten how tall Cillian was. He filled his Armani suit like he was born in it. His brown hair was trimmed to neat perfection, his eyes golden and flaxen, just like his nickname—*mo órga.*

“Is your sex tape still making the rounds on the internet?” he asked.

After I’d boarded my father’s Gulfstream from San Diego to Boston, I found out he’d appointed a team of six IT wizards to try to take that bitch down—not only from cyberland, but to steer the media clear of the story.

That only went to show that Da had no idea how the internet worked. If it was there for a second, it was there forever. There was always going to be someone to save and repost it. I didn’t wanna break the news that even he didn’t have enough juice to alter the internet, so I let him have his moment in the viral sun. But I had no illusions. That video was there to stay.

When I’d shown my face at Avebury Court Manor before fucking off to my dick-shaped building, Mom had asked me if I wasn’t worried my future wife would see it. I’d told her if she watched it, she’d see she had every reason to be *thrilled* about my performance.

Real talk, though? I wasn't going to get married in a million years. Why buy a cow when you can develop lactose intolerance by drinking milk from every single tit in your vicinity? I'd seen my friends fall in love and go to extreme lengths to get the girl. It seemed like a giant drag.

"Nope." I smirked smugly at Cillian, trying to save whatever was left of my pride. I was slowly coming to terms with the fact that my father was going to ruin the next six months for me, and I just had to see this shit through. "All clear. As far as people are concerned, I'm as golden as you are, old sport."

It sucked that I couldn't even remember the stupid orgy that got me into trouble. I'd love to hold on to those precious memories whenever I had to deal with Da or Kill.

"Stop saying *old sport*. You're not The Great Gatsby," my father said.

"Kill thinks everything is a pissing contest," I growled.

"Everything *is* a pissing contest. Those who lose are the ones who whine about it."

"Bet, yo." I popped my cinnamon gum, nodding.

"*Bet? Yo?*" Kill looked at me like I was a horrific car accident. "Who talks like that? What do you have against the English language? You seem to butcher it whenever the opportunity presents itself. Did English hurt you when you were young? Show me where on the doll."

"Here." I pointed my index to my temple, my hand gun-shaped, and puffed my cheeks, pretending to shoot myself in the head.

My brother shook his head and left me with my father. It was odd to share the same space with Da without someone buffering us, a very rare occasion indeed.

Da had always seemed to have a soft spot for innocent Aisling, and he was enamored with devilishly smart and self-possessed Cillian. I was the savage creature who lacked that Fitzpatrick shine, and we both knew why, but neither of us had the balls to say it out loud.

My father removed his glasses and discarded them atop his desk, leaning back in his seat.

“Remember the document I showed you? The one in which I removed you from our will?” he asked.

“Not a sight I’ll soon forget.” I spat my gum into the trash can across the office, slam-dunking it seamlessly from my mouth. I wasn’t embarrassed to admit I wanted my family fortune, bad. My inheritance was my only chance at survival. I wasn’t good at anything, other than fucking and throwing parties. The only thing those traits qualified me to become was a Vegas showgirl. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the rack for that.

“I sent it to my attorney, signed by both your mother and me.” He tapped his chin, as if mulling his words over.

I felt the inside of my veins scorching, my hands curling into fists beside my body. “Why would you do that when I’ve agreed to your terms?” I asked, more calmly than I gave myself credit for. Hysteria didn’t get you far in the Fitzpatrick household. The more emotional you were, the better chance you had at getting your heart crushed by Da and Kill.

“Told them to hold on to it until you finish your six-month stint, just to make sure you knew how seriously your mother and I are taking this matter.”

I said nothing. I was at his mercy, and it made me furious. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to go to college and find something to fall back on. I looked out the window at the looming skyscrapers of Boston. My fingers wrapped around the wooden horse on my neck.

“Stop clutching your pearls, and don’t mess it up with the Brennan girl,” Da growled.

Dropping my hand from the Dala horse, I bit the inside of my cheek until I felt the warm saltiness of blood rolling in my mouth.

“Now get the hell out of my office and make your workspace your new home.”

“Yes, *sir*.”



At one point, I thought the day couldn't get any shittier, but I shouldn't have underestimated it. I spent the next few hours reading all the available material about Royal Pipelines and familiarizing myself with the company's policy, history, and origins.

There was a shit-ton of stuff I didn't know about it.

Like the fact that in 2015, GreenWorld activists had shut down sixty-eight of our stations in the US to protest our drilling in the Arctic.

Or that we were one of the first companies in the US to employ special needs persons, or that there were several schools in East Asia and Africa named after my family, because we'd funded them.

Royal Pipelines seemed to be a double-edged sword: good for some communities, disastrous for others. I wondered if Da and Kill even gave a flying fuck about shitting all over the environment. My guess was they didn't.

After a day from hell, my demeaning, piece-of-shit brother tested me on my knowledge about the company and sent me back to my desk with six more thick-ass books to read. That's how I found myself wobbling out of the office at seven o'clock, starving, missing my first evening class at college, and with a headache that felt like someone threw a rave in my skull, and every bitch in attendance wore high heels.

All I wanted was to get a cab, go back home, and shove my face into whatever dish the cook had made that day. I ordered an Uber and stood on the curb of the downtown street, watching the velvet blue night descending over the yellow-lit street. A brand new Maserati pulled up in front of me. The passenger door flew open.

"*Get in,*" a strong Southie accent ordered from inside.

I arched an eyebrow and cocked my head sideways. "Lovely proposition, and I'm very tempted, but I think I'll pass."

It was good to know I still held on to my good looks, even in full employment. Didn't matter that he was obviously a dude, a compliment was a compliment, a vital sign. *One hundred and eighty-one days of celibacy to go.*

“Get in right now, or I'll pay you a visit in your fancy new apartment. Fair warning: you do not want a female audience for the conversation we're about to have.”

Troy Brennan.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

He and Da had gone over the fine print of my arrangement with Sailor, but I'd never met him. No doubt that was Da's decision. He probably wanted to protect me from certain death because I'd have said something extra inappropriate or offensive. Or maybe it was the fact that he took more pride in his shits than he took in me and my dirty deeds.

Either way, Brennan was here now, ready to talk. So not talking wasn't an option. I got into his car, which smelled of polished leather and the kind of wealth that was almost tangible. I could taste it on my tongue. I inhaled deeply. Nine hours in the office had made me feel like I'd worked in a mine for an entire decade.

I pressed my head against the cool, buttery leather, closing my eyes, knowing he was watching me. My Adam's apple bobbed and I wet my lips, ignoring his blade-sharp gaze.

Troy started driving. I didn't ask where. I doubted he'd tell me, and even if he had, it wasn't like I had shit to say about it. Silver lining: if I died, at least I wouldn't have to show up to work tomorrow.

“I trust we don't need a formal introduction.” He took a turn onto a side street, cutting Haymarket and Bowdoin.

“Straight up,” I replied groggily. I was about to fall asleep in his car. He could cut me up right now and all I'd think about was how nice and warm the body bag was going to feel. I didn't even care that my Uber rating was going to drop for going MIA on the driver's ass.

“Then I also trust you know why you’re here.” Troy’s voice was villainous as hell. He sounded like Shredder from the Ninja Turtles movies.

Dude was quite the trusting motherfucker for someone who supposedly had enough skeletons in his closet to open a graveyard. I forced my eyelids apart, stifling a yawn. I tried to focus my gaze on his darkened profile.

“I’m guessing it’s along the lines of: don’t touch my daughter, don’t break her heart—or hymen—don’t give her any long-term ideas, blah blah...” I trailed off, wondering what the cook had made for dinner. I didn’t even know if said cook was a chick or a dude, old or young. Probably never would, with my current schedule.

Troy stopped the car, breaking from mid-speed, leaving skid marks on the street by the sound of it. Cars honked behind him. I heard a screech, followed by a fender bender. But all Troy did was stare at me like I was the craziest asshole he’d ever laid eyes on.

“No, you clown. I don’t think you stand a chance with my daughter. She’s not cut from the same dime a dozen hussy cloth you’re used to. Why would I assume she needs protection from you any more than you need protection from her?”

“Yeah. Why?” another voice inquired from behind me.

I jumped so high in my seat, my head hit the roof of the car. Christ on a scooter. I spun my head sharply, scowling. A shadowed man sat in the back seat. He looked tall, chiseled, Caucasian, and not unlike a mobster—a little older than me and calloused AF.

“And you are?” My brows arched.

“Sam Brennan. Troy’s adoptive son.”

“Just *son*,” Troy corrected unemotionally.

Aww. Even this serial-killer-ninja-asshole loved his kid more than Da loved me.

I’d heard about Sam. Rumor had it he’d been orphaned at a young age. Troy’s best friend and his former mistress were the

parents. Troy and his wife, Sparrow, had legally adopted him around the time Sailor was born.

“Which makes me Sailor’s slightly unhinged, overprotective brother with a chip on my shoulder. Which makes *you* the perfect candidate for my fist.”

What a fucking family, man. No wonder Sailor was tough as nails. The testosterone in the Brennan household was probably enough for all the frat houses on the East Coast.

“Are you threatening me?” I bared my teeth.

“Yes,” Troy and Sam answered in unison, their voices flatlined.

The little she-devil knew how to work a deadly weapon with Olympic skill. If anyone needed protection in that goddamn apartment, it was *me*.

“If you think your precious Sailor is too good for my ass, then why am I here?”

More cars honked. A white Honda went for an ongoing blare, which ratcheted the pressure in my head to explosive magnitudes. I wanted to burn Boston down, starting with Troy, Sam, Sailor, and my immediate family (possibly sparing Aisling and her pet ferret, Shelly, if she still had it).

“You’re here because I heard all about your antics in California, and I don’t want my daughter to suffer because you’re slightly less civilized than a chimp. So I’m telling you now, no funny business, no tricks, no pranks. You keep the apartment nice and tidy, you don’t make any noise, and you stay polite and courteous to her. *Neighborly*. Understood?”

Troy looked nonchalant for someone who was currently blocking a busy street in Boston during rush hour. I wondered what it felt like to walk around with balls that weighed five tons each. Lots of back problems, I imagined.

I looked at him like he was insane. To be fair—he *was*.

Had Sailor spilled the beans to her daddy about my lack of organizational skills? She didn’t seem like the snitching type. Then again, what did I actually know about her?

That she can kill you. And that the thought appeals to her.

“I’m being neighborly as fuck, sir. I even gave her a gift card yesterday.”

And a foot massage, before she shat all over my plan, but I deducted the touching part out of concern for my balls.

“She doesn’t need gift cards. Give her the gift of not being an idiot. Because if you hurt her, I will have to kill you. And I don’t mean that as a figure of speech. I will literally kill you.”

I stared at him, waiting for the laugh and slap on the back. It never came.

“Is he slow or shocked?” Sam asked from behind us, lighting a cigarette.

“Both,” Troy deadpanned.

“Just shocked,” I bit out. “It’s not every day people threaten to kill me.”

“That’s a surprise,” Troy noted sarcastically.

“It’s a promise if you cross the line,” Sam amended. “So, technically, not a threat per se.”

I was trying to figure out what I could say without sounding like a whiny douche. “I’m going to tell my old man.”

Damn, that wasn’t it. I sounded like a whiny douche *and* a sap.

“He already knows, and let’s just say he wouldn’t consider it a great loss.” Troy lifted an eyebrow.

Touché.

“I could tell the police,” I countered.

“They’re in our pocket,” Sam answered from behind my back, yawning provocatively. “Any other people you want to talk to about our conversation, or can you just grow a pair and be a decent fucking human?”

When they put it like that, I guess I really didn’t have much choice.

Also, was I being judged by a couple of murderers? *I really should take a long, hard look at my life.*

Troy resumed his driving, but not before some cars had driven up the curb to pass him. People yelled and flipped us the bird as they sped by. It was only when we got to the West End's cock-shaped building where Sailor and I lived that I realized I hadn't been breathing the entire duration of the drive.

I inhaled oxygen like I'd just come up from three minutes underwater as Troy unlocked the doors. I pushed mine open.

"Remember," he said from the depths of his car, his face overcast with the street's shadow. "Play nice."

"And clean," Sam's voice boomed from behind.

"I'll kill her with kindness," I bit out grumpily.

"Jesus Christ, I've never met someone so eager to get punched," Troy murmured. "Get out before I give you what you're begging for."

As I took the elevator up to the penthouse, I realized what the cherry on the shit cake this day had served me was: My father's people had to have seen me getting into Troy's car—they had eyes on me wherever I was—but they didn't do a damn thing about it.

I really was alone in the world.



That week, my face was plastered on every bus in Boston. It was an old picture of me smiling to the camera while clutching my bow to my chest. It read:

Boston's Sailor Brennan for the Olympics!

Gerald Fitzpatrick's doing. He was making good on his promise to grant me more exposure. He'd hired a team to maintain my neglected (read: nonexistent) social media accounts, including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. He'd also assigned a PR manager for me. Her name was Crystal, and she had a thick, Long Island accent that rattled like she chained-smoked five packs of cigarettes a day.

I wanted to curl in on myself until I was the size of an apple every time I saw my face grinning maniacally on a bus, but I didn't complain.

Then there was Hunter.

He'd spent the last five days ignoring my existence. At least he was being tidy and polite while doing so.

To be fair, there wasn't much time for socializing for either of us. I left the house at six o'clock every morning to hit the gym, then headed to the archery club until nighttime, practicing or giving lessons. Hunter worked and studied from nine to eight.

When he got home, he took two plates of whatever the cook, Nora, had left on the stovetop to his room, armed with textbooks for his college courses, and slammed the door behind him with his foot. In the mornings, I'd find the plates washed and his bedroom door slightly ajar, the sound of him snoring softly seeping into the hallway.

It worried me that he didn't take a break. Not that it should. Hunter wasn't my business.

...only he kind of *was*.

Part of my job was to make sure he was okay. I wondered if I should email Gerald about Hunter's mood. I was supposed to give the Fitzpatrick patriarch detailed, weekly updates, but they were of a technical nature, and he hadn't mentioned anything about Hunter's mental health.

I hadn't talked to my parents about Hunter. I ignored all questions regarding him and focused on telling them about Junsu and my training, which was becoming more grueling by the day. My saving grace was knowing that come Saturday, Hunter and I were attending a Royal Pipelines fundraising event together. I could check on him then.

The Fitzpatricks had thought it best if we met them somewhere neutral so we could familiarize ourselves with each other before we started coming over for dinners. Little did they know, I had no qualms about meeting them in Antarctica or a filthy alleyway as long as I could show up in ripped jeans, sneakers, and a DriFit shirt. Since that was off the table at a 5k-per-head dinner party in the glitzy Roosevelt Hotel, I had to acquire an actual dress.

I owned exactly zero dresses. Belle and Persy, who were both much more voluptuous than me and therefore couldn't lend me anything, jumped to my rescue. I thought they'd be dragging me through shops at the mall—my idea of torture—and had already braced myself for an afternoon from hell.

On Friday, right after they finished their college classes and Junsu dismissed me from training, Emmabelle sent me a message to meet them at a South End address. When I Google Mapped it, I found out it was a butcher. I decided asking questions would seem ungrateful, and I trusted they knew I

wasn't the kind of chick to make a weird fashion statement a la Lady Gaga's meat dress.

I parked my car in front of a row of red-bricked buildings. One of them had a black metal door that obviously led to the butcher. I waited in my car, engine running, nibbling on the dead skin around my nails. "There's No Home for You Here" by The White Stripes blared from the Bluetooth. It made me think of Hunter.

I considered bailing on the fundraiser. I hated parties, had never danced in my life, and there was a reason I never went shopping—I felt like a glorified coat hanger when I tried on fancy clothes. I could always see my ribcage poking through the fabric, the corpse-like outline of my sternum.

Still, the fighter in me had to see this through. Hunter's family was counting on me, I needed his father's endorsement, and besides—I owed it to Hunter, even if I disliked him.

A knock on my car window made me jump in surprise. For some stupid reason, I thought it'd be him. But no. Behind the glass, Belle flashed me a row of white, pearly teeth. She wiggled her light eyebrows, opening the door for me and offering me a little bow. Persephone was behind her, jumping up and down and squeaking in delight. I stepped out of the car, eyeing them with suspicion.

"A butcher, huh?" I yanked my brown leather satchel and hoisted it over my shoulder, frowning at their collective excitement.

"Keep an open mind, ho." Belle grinned. "Bastard's not going to know what hit him when he sees what a knockout you are under these rags."

"Seriously, Hunter is going to *die* after we're done with you." Persy practically shoved me across the street to the mysterious black door.

"Is that a promise?" I mumbled.

I would actually have to talk to Hunter tomorrow, after five days of radio silence. To my surprise, my hatred toward him had somewhat dissipated, fizzling to a small flicker of dislike.

“Persy and I have reached the conclusion that for Hunter to grow up and take responsibility, and for you to...well, get a life and a clue, you guys need to fall in love,” Belle explained, knocking on the metal door that rattled against her ring-filled fingers.

If Persephone was conventionally beautiful, Emmabelle was a risqué pinup girl who’d never be tamed. Persy wore a red polka-dot dress, while Emmabelle wore condom-tight leather pants and a holey white designer shirt that probably cost a fortune. Her lips were big, pouty, and infinitely red, her eyes dark blue, like the ocean on a stormy day. If Hunter thought *I* had a mouth on me, Belle would demolish him completely, all while looking like a long-lost Hadid sister.

“The only person Hunter Fitzpatrick is capable of loving is himself. Even then, he does a shitty job. Look at all the mess he got himself into,” I pointed out.

Belle and Percy were the only people I had told about my agreement with Hunter other than my family. I knew they would never tell a soul and trusted them with my life.

The door whined, straining against its own rust as it was yanked open. An old, wrinkly man with white hair wearing a heavy-duty vinyl butcher apron nodded hello, leading us to his backyard silently. He smelled of raw meat and sweat, not exactly like Macy’s. We followed him as he stomped toward a shed. I was about to ask my friends if this was a spontaneous escape room when he unlocked it, opened the door, and motioned us inside without coming in.

“Everything is seventy percent off retail. No receipts. No returns,” he said sternly, turned around, and tramped away.

I stared at my two friends, bewildered.

Belle shrugged, tearing her sunhat off her head and boomeranging it to her sister. “Retail is just another word for *devil*, and the devil wears Prada. Coincidentally, I cannot afford Prada. But I *can* afford this.”

“How does he get his hands on these clothes?” My eyes flared, not that I had the right to be preachy. My father ran a

less-than-clean shop, and Sam followed his footsteps. The difference was, *I* had nothing to do with their affairs.

“He’s got guys who raid vessels before they reach the port. Super Wild West. They know where to look, what to...*extract*.” Emmabelle snickered, flipping the light switch on with a familiarity that suggested she was a regular visitor, and sauntered deeper into the room. The place was full of racks. Rows and rows of wedding dresses, ballroom gowns, and upmarket frocks I’d only seen Hollywood starlets wearing. I opened my mouth, about to tell them this wasn’t a good idea, when Persy pressed a finger to my lips, shutting me up.

“Look, I’m not a huge fan of this, either. But you hate shopping malls and busy streets and...you know, *people*. This is our best shot.”

“This is wrong,” I whispered.

I always turned a blind eye to what my dad and Sam did. It helped me love them wholly. But that didn’t mean I agreed with how they chose to make money.

“C’mon, Sailor.” Emmabelle chuckled, her upper body already obscured by lush fabrics as she sifted through the dresses. “The only people who get screwed over are top designers who charge two grand for a dress that costs fifty bucks to make. The US economy will not collapse if you buy one evening dress.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath.

“Okay, just choose whatever you think won’t make me look like a fancy dessert.”

Persy clapped her hands, making her way past her sister to the XXS rack and browsing through it. I gnawed at the dead skin around my thumbnail as they plucked garment after garment they wanted me to try on, hanging them on their forearms.

My phone pinged in my back pocket. I took it out and read the text message.

HHH: Don’t forget about Saturday’s fundraiser.

Sailor: Who is this?

HHH: How many people are you planning on going to a fundraiser with?

Sailor: Hunter? You added yourself to my contacts?

HHH: The fact that I'm there is pretty self-explanatory.

Sailor: How dare you touch my things!

HHH: Easy, killer. I didn't touch your phone.

Sailor: Then how did you get here?

HHH: I asked a hacker friend to add me into your contacts.

Sailor: WHAT?

HHH: You're more easily scandalized than a 16th century British duchess. Calm your tits, Carrot Top. I didn't look through your shit.

HHH: (not that I would find anything interesting there)

Sailor: Do you realize how illegal that is?

HHH: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't remember your daddy being one of the nine justices of the Supreme Court.

HHH: Older bro doesn't seem to be working toward a law degree, either.

Sailor: I'm going to kill you.

HHH: Stand in line, sweetheart. You're not even one of the first twenty people waiting.

HHH: And you still haven't answered me about Saturday. Btw, you can't wear yoga pants and a hoodie there. Especially on my arm.

Sailor: Let's take a little detour—what does HHH stand for?

HHH: Hot, Handsome Hunter, naturally.

Sailor: I'm speechless right now.

HHH: A picture is said to be worth a thousand words. Send nudes.

Sailor: I don't think I'll be able to stand you for consecutive hours.

Persy and Belle burst out laughing from the corner of the room, drawing my attention. I looked up from my phone, having a light bulb moment. This could alleviate some of the fundraiser problem. I started typing before Hunter had the chance to send me another snide comment, the three dots next to his name already dancing.

Sailor: I want to invite two of my friends to the charity event, but you'll have to foot the bill.

HHH: I smell a negotiation.

Sailor: I'm not letting you drink or hook up with someone in our apartment.

HHH: You're not exactly selling this arrangement to me, CT.

CT? *Carrot Top*. Goddammit.

Sailor: What do you want?

HHH: What are you offering? ;)

I thought about it. Belle and Persy were talking about how they'd do my hair and makeup in the background. Yes. Having them there would take the pressure off, and I'd have someone to hold me back when I was ready to pounce on Hunter and kill him. Plus, they loved fancy events. They'd have so much fun.

Sailor: You can have one beer.

HHH: I'm sorry, do I look twelve?

Fair point, but I really didn't want to bend the rules too much.

Sailor: My friends are hot. Hanging out with them alone will be a good time.

HHH: Nothing like shooting the shit with hot girls when you're fucking celibate. Up your game, CT.

Sailor: Stop calling me that!

HHH: Stop looking like him!

Sailor: Why don't you just tell me what you want?

HHH: Why, I thought you'd never ask. A kiss.

Sailor: From who?

HHH: A flame-haired banshee.

There was a fluttery, warm thing struggling to break free behind my sternum, and I sucked in a breath, feeling my entire body tingle. I hoped it was the heart attack I clearly deserved for considering kissing him.

Sailor: Why? You call me Carrot Top and think I'm obnoxious.

I felt my fingertips growing sweaty as I typed.

HHH: Carrot Top is not obnoxious. He's actually pretty funny for a thousand year old. Yes or no?

Sailor: That's cheating. You're supposed to be celibate.

HHH: There's an ocean between kissing and fucking. More specifically, the visual offense you refer to as clothes.

Sailor: You're disgusting.

HHH: And you're tempted. You want to try me for a ride. See what the fuss is all about.

Sailor: Don't put words into my mouth.

Hunter: What about other things? ;)

Sailor: You can't even stand to look at me. It's been five days since you acknowledged my existence.

HHH: It's been five days since I looked in the mirror, old sport. Shit's been intense. YES OR NO?

Sailor: When?

HHH: Whenever the right moment presents itself. My call.

Sailor: No tongue.

HHH: Yes tongue, no fondling.

Sailor: YOU DON'T EVEN LIKE ME.

HHH: Jesus, what does liking you have to do with this? You're the only available female in my radius.

Sailor: Thanks.

HHH: Welcs.

Sailor: The kiss will mean nothing.

HHH: Should've said that before I printed out our wedding invitations. Wear a dress.

“We found it!” Persy shrieked, waving one of the gowns by its hanger.

I looked up, my cheeks so hot, I was sure I looked like I was going to explode.

“Whoa.” Emmabelle dropped a heap of clothes to the floor, her eyes zoning in on my face. “Why do you look like you just got invited to your own funeral, Sailor?”

“Because...” I tore another, final piece of dead skin from the corner of my thumb with my teeth. “I think I just did.”

Seven



Sailor

Belle and Persy were one squeal away from leaving me completely deaf when I told them they were coming to the fundraiser with Hunter and me. When the day arrived, they swung by my place a few hours before the event, looking like modern goddesses. Persy was clad in a romantic white gown, while Belle rocked a leopard mini dress. They shoved me into my own gown—an antique pink off-shoulder dress with a sweetheart plunge. The striking floral appliques at the front miraculously highlighted my nonexistent curves, and Persy put my hair up into a messy-yet-sexy chignon, with bits of flyaways framing my face. Emmabelle applied my makeup, and we found out nude colors and a thick layer of eyeliner worked best for my pale complexion and red hair. By the time Hunter woke up and shoved his Adonis form into a suit, I looked the best I ever had.

It was funny how Hunter believed he was dumb, and I believed I was unattractive—and that these opposite sources of insecurity made us enemies. I despised him for his looks, and he thought I was an unattractive bore.

He strode out of his room, cuffing his cufflinks with a frown, his black velvet bowtie still undone. The minute he spotted the three of us in the living room, Emmabelle leaning over me to apply lip gloss while we took advantage of the natural stream of sun pouring from the glassed wall, he halted.

“Holy shitballs.” He whistled low.

All three of us raised our heads to look at him. Persy gasped at his imperial beauty. I could tell Belle was undressing him, one article at a time, with dilated pupils.

“Told you they were gorgeous.” I cleared my throat.

“You’re the one I’m looking at, Carrot Top.” He stared at me, making everything else around us melt into a fuzzy background. His gaze radiated heat that could perish me. At that moment, I wished it would. “No offense, girls.”

“None taken.” Emmabelle grinned conspiratorially.

“I was talking to Sailor’s tits.”

That earned him a wild laugh from both my friends.

Momentarily losing the ability to produce words, I turned my head back to Belle. Our eyes met, and hers were twinkling with mischief and delight.

“*Disney movie,*” she mouthed, standing to her full height. “*Make the prince fall in love. Seize the castle. Become his queen.*”

She’d officially lost her mind.

“You ready?” Hunter asked, tying his bowtie with one hand as he walked to the kitchen and poured himself some coffee. I forgot he’d had the upbringing of a duke and knew how to do all sorts of things that weren’t un-sexy, like tying a necktie with one hand.

“Yes!” Persy and Belle shrieked.

“CT?” He glanced at me from under his lashes. He was back in his element after being MIA all week.

“When will you stop calling me that?”

“Hmm, that would be never.”

I let my friends shake hands with my roommate while I regulated my heart rate and drank two glasses of water, immediately regretting the decision. Peeing in this dress seemed more difficult than securing a spot in the Olympics.

The ride to the Roosevelt Hotel was full of chatter. Belle and Persy asked Hunter questions about living in California. Not only did he answer, he also seemed to take genuine interest in their studies and lives. By the time the limo slid to a stop in front of the hotel, the only person who wasn't having a ball was me.

The driver opened the door for us, and we all poured out. A slightly hysterical event coordinator in an all-black outfit met us at the lobby, introducing herself to my friends as Penny.

"I'm just going to borrow you for a second so we can get your tickets and put your names down for the grand prize. Thank you for supporting the School is Cool Foundation!"

I didn't have the heart to tell Penny my friends had donated zero dollars for the cause, and felt panic climbing up my throat as I watched the blonde twosome galloping to the far corner of the lobby along with her.

Hunter stood beside me, hands in pockets, his eyes on them.

"You weren't exaggerating. They *are* hot."

"Drop dead."

"Don't tempt me after the week I've had."

"How did you manage to pay for the tickets?" I wet my lips, knowing it was bad form to ask someone to drop 10k on your friends. But it *was* for charity. And ten thousand dollars was nothing to a guy like Gerald Fitzpatrick.

"Told Da I owed my local drug dealer money from way back."

I choked on my own saliva. "Do you?"

He tore his eyes from my friends and frowned at me. "Fuck's the matter with you? I don't have a drug dealer. *Or* a drug problem. I just needed to get this shit done. Da will never pass up an opportunity to think badly of me. If he could find this imaginary dealer and convince him to lace my cocaine with anthrax, *E. coli*, and cyanide, he would."

"Can't blame him," I piped. But actually, I could. Hunter wasn't all that bad. He definitely wasn't malicious.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

“Do what?”

“Hate me with such a passion. Your wrath gives me a semi, and I still have a kiss I can collect whenever I wish to.”

Aaaaand he’s back to being a scumbag.

“Not whenever you wish to. People can’t see us making out.” I wiped my sweaty hands on my dress, taking in the fancy lobby. The marble flooring was rose gold, the curtains pale pink, and the furniture a sleek champagne.

It wasn’t that I had no sexual experience. I’d actually had a boyfriend through junior and senior year. Beau was a fellow archer. We attended the same high school and archery club. We never went to any parties, and I wouldn’t really speak to him at school. He had his own crew and never sought me out, either. But we’d practice together many afternoons. Sometimes we went to his place afterwards, watched a movie, made out, and later, when we got older, had sex. But we never labeled it, gave each other presents, or celebrated Valentine’s Day.

Even our breakup wasn’t an emotional one. One day he told me he’d received a scholarship to a Canadian college with a competitive archery program, and he’d accepted it. I was genuinely happy for him, which I thought was the *point* of liking someone. But when I broke the good news to Mom, and said how awesome it was for Beau to move to Canada, she stared at me like I’d just escaped a mental facility and forced me into eating ice cream and watching *Blue Valentine* with her.

“Making out now? That escalated quickly. Is it the suit?” Hunter’s eyes drifted back to Persy and Belle.

I wondered how much he’d give to replace me with one of them. A lot, probably. That made me want to throw up.

“The fact that we haven’t spoken in almost a week helped.” I rummaged in the black velvet purse I’d borrowed from Emmabelle, looking for nothing in particular and pretending to be busy.

“That kiss better be worth ten grand.” He *tsked*.

“No kiss is worth that much.” I scoffed, clicking the purse shut. He turned to look at me, cool and collected.

“Obviously you’ve never been kissed by a Fitzpatrick.”

“Have *you*?” I challenged, cocking a brow. “Was it your brother or sister? I’m hoping your brother. I love me some male-on-male action.”

He threw his head back and laughed so wildly, the echo of his voice bounced off the walls. A herd of people walked toward us. I recognized them on sight: the Fitzpatricks.

His dad was tall and heavy, his mother light-featured. His older brother looked like a wickedly handsome villain, and his sister, in contrast, a perfectly demure Snow White. Unlike her two brothers, Aisling’s hair wasn’t fair. It was raven black, but that only highlighted her sparkling bluebell eyes. They were all impeccably dressed, and save for Aisling, all looked to be in different levels of a sour mood.

I stiffened at the sight of them approaching us. I considered turning around and fleeing. Hunter must’ve sensed that, because out of nowhere, his hand found the small of my back. It barely fluttered around the area, but still supported me, somehow.

“Deep breath,” he whispered, his voice calm. “Remember, they’re just people. They breathe. They eat. They fart—loudly, sometimes—and to answer your question, yes, Cillian and I French kiss all the time, and he uses an excessive amount of tongue.”

Now it was my turn to stifle a giggle.

When Hunter’s family stopped in front of us, Hunter made a round of introductions, even though we’d already met.

“Sailor, this is my father, Gerald.” He motioned to his dad.

I shook his firm, dry hand. “Pleasure to meet you again.” I tried to muster a genuine smile.

“Jury’s still out on whether I can say the same about you,” his father grumbled, winning a warning elbow from his wife. “How has my son been thus far? Better than he was at work, I hope.”

“Impeccably behaved,” I shot back, as the pressure from Hunter’s hand on my back grew. It was the truth. He was on the straight and narrow in the rare times I’d seen him.

“Nice to see you again.” Jane clasped my hand in both of hers, smiling tiredly. She always looked sad. “Thank you so much for doing this.”

“*Mom*,” Hunter groaned.

I laughed. “It is entirely my pleasure, Mrs. Fitzpatrick.”

When Cillian clasped his callused hand around mine, I looked up and my heart missed a beat. His beauty was as cruel as his expression. I didn’t remember ever seeing someone so brutally indifferent, my own father included. For all his sociopathic tendencies, Troy Brennan adored my mom, Sam, and me. Cillian Fitzpatrick looked like nothing could get to him, tanks and bombs included.

“Miss Brennan, what have you gotten yourself into?” he sneered, baring his perfect teeth.

I gathered he had very little faith in this arrangement. Refraining from kicking his balls in public, and feeling the reassuring pressure of Hunter’s palm, I grinned. “Are you asking or insinuating something?”

He chuckled, like I was an adorable toddler repeating a bad word. “She answers. Nice touch. You’re already exhibiting more personality than my brother has shown in his entire nineteen years.”

“She has more personality than you can find in all your European-heiress flings combined,” Hunter countered. “And being a dick doesn’t count for personality. It’s a muscle. So technically, you’re a meathead.”

“Hunter! Cillian!” Their mother gasped, but there was no real force or authority in her voice.

My mom used to chase Sam and me down the park when we misbehaved, and we still had a step in the penthouse we couldn’t look at because it reminded us of the lengthy timeouts we’d spent on it as a naughty spot. She loved us endlessly, but when she chided, we listened. I noticed that Gerald watched this

exchange with a suppressed smile, like he was enjoying the turn of events.

The last person I was introduced to was Aisling, whom I kind of remembered anyway. She seemed like the only nice person in their clan when I was a kid.

“Hi.” I thrust my hand in her direction. “I’m Sailor.”

“I know.” She blushed, looking down and taking my hand. “You’re friends with the Penrose sisters, right?”

“Right!” I could feel my eyes lighting up. “They’re here with me, actually. Do you know them?”

I knew Aisling was a year younger than me, seventeen. She went to a private school outside the city. Word around Boston was that the Fitzpatrick couple had really wanted a girl after Cillian, and when Hunter was born, his mother tried to conceive as soon as she could to get her precious daughter.

Aisling bowed her head shyly. “Kind of. I know the three of you helped shovel snow from the entrances of that senior housing complex last winter and saved someone’s life. It was all over the local news. I thought it was really cool.” She turned completely scarlet.

I could feel Hunter’s gaze darting to me in surprise.

“You did that?” he asked.

“Some people give back to the community, *ceann beag*, believe it or not,” said Gerald.

The men in Hunter’s family were really starting to grate on my nerves.

“You can hang out with us, if you want,” I offered to Aisling, who took the opportunity to look me in the eye for the first time. She touched her cheek.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to butt into your evening...”

“Nonsense!” I all but pulled her by the hand. “Trust me, everything is more bearable with the right people around.” My eyes darted pointedly between Cillian and her father.

I was sure everyone at the Roosevelt Hotel could hear our giggles as the two of us ran to my friends, arm in arm, escaping

the men of the Fitzpatrick family, and poor Jane, whose eyes I could feel on our backs.

“Traitor,” I heard Hunter mumbling behind me, and I laughed sadly, knowing he was going to betray me as well.

With a prettier, more suitable girl.



The event started out smoothly enough.

Belle, Persy, Aisling, and I took our plates and ate in the corner of the room, talking animatedly. First, about Laura Hartfield, a girl who used to go to school with Persy, Belle, and me and was at the event. She was twenty-one and currently draped on the arm of a fifty-something, overweight businessman, a diamond the size of my fist twinkling from her finger.

“Now, Kanye ain’t saying she a gold-digger.” Belle’s cat-like eyes followed their movements through slits of disapproval. “But she ain’t messing with no broke.”

“She could love him,” I pointed out.

Persy and I were always the two to calm the gossip monster down when Belle spoke her mind about other people. The only filters Belle was familiar with were Instagram-related, even if most times she was dead-on.

“How convenient of her to fall in love with a middle-aged gazillionaire who has no hair, but possesses teeth the size of bricks, four chins, and is rumored to have given his ex-wife three estates and a hundred mill in a divorce settlement,” Emmabelle chirped.

All three of us turned our heads to glare at her in alarm.

“C’mon.” Belle laughed, shaking her head. “The only way she’s getting off these days is with Vinnie the Vibrator.”

“That’s sad. I’d never marry someone for money,” Aisling mused, taking small bites from her mini quiche.

“That’s because you have too much of it,” Persy blurted, blushing immediately under her makeup.

Emmabelle shook her head. “No. I’ll never marry for money, either, and I work weekend shifts at Forever 21 and rummage our neighbors’ recycling cans for empty bottles to make an extra buck.”

“Me either, never.” Persy smoothed her dress over her thighs.

All eyes darted to me. I continued picking at my sautéed broccoli meticulously, wishing for a better food choice. For a 5k meal, they sure didn’t bring their A-game in the kitchen. Despite my scrawniness, I cared about food.

Finally, Belle poked me in the ribs. “Well?”

“What?” I frowned.

“If you haven’t noticed, there’s a spontaneous pact going on over here among the four of us: never be like the Laura Hartfields of the world; only be with guys for love, and make sure we all keep our promise. Are you in, or are you out?”

The prospect of being with anyone, let alone for something materialistic, seemed as likely as living on Mars.

“Yeah.” I threw a broccoli into my mouth, chewing without tasting it. “Of course. I’d never be with someone for anything other than love.”

“Let’s shake on it, then.” Persy reached her hand to the center of the table. We all placed our hands on hers. It was super awkward, but in a funny kind of way.

“To being awesome,” Persy exclaimed.

“And real,” Aisling added quietly.

“And never settling for an asshole to get a pair of Louboutins you can get at the butcher shop.” Belle laughed throatily.

Aisling peered between us with confusion at the last statement. When our mirth died, they shot me an expectant look, waiting for me to throw my two cents into the pact.

I thought about something I wanted—one thing I wished for my true love to have.

“To being with someone who loves you just the way you are, and vice versa.”

We squeezed our hands together. It felt like the end of something.

It felt like a new beginning, too.



After the pact, Aisling confessed that she had very few friends at her all-girls school, and she was happy to graduate after this year and move somewhere new.

Belle made an executive decision to invite her to our weekly Friday-night hangouts, an invitation both Persy and I were happy to extend.

Whenever I glanced at the Fitzpatrick's table, it was jam-packed with visitors coming to congratulate and shake Gerald's and Cillian's hands. Aisling said it was about a new refinery they'd opened in Maine. She added that it had been giving her father a headache and not going as planned.

Hunter was perpetually ignored. He picked at his food and checked his phone. Whenever his mother tried to talk to him, he either pretended not to hear her or offered her a one-word answer. I tried to keep my guilt to a minimum level and avoided texting him. Here was a guy who'd said he wanted to bed me just because I was the only woman around he could get his hands on, and I *still* felt bad for him.

I excused myself to go to the restroom. It took me ten minutes to push all my skirts up my waist before I peed. As I rearranged the heaps of fabric around me, I heard voices outside my cubicle.

“...came with Troy and Sparrow Brennan's daughter. Sally? Stephanie? Something with an S.” One woman clucked her tongue.

“Sailor. Her brother is hot, though.” Another laughed.

“Adoptive brother, and he is too much of a daredevil. Rich, handsome, but bad pedigree. No, thank you.”

“I saw her ad on a bus downtown. You think they’re together?”

“Sailor and Hunter? No way. He is basically sex personified, and she is...well, a great ad for contraceptives.”

Laughter. Lots and lots of laughter.

“Mousy,” the first one agreed. “But they came in together, and there’s a rumor going around that they *live* together.”

“Maybe he lost a bet,” the second woman tooted, delving through a bag of makeup by the sound of it.

“Maybe he’s running out of women to sleep with,” the other cackled.

“She better enjoy it while it lasts. He goes through them fast. I doubt she’ll keep him interested.”

“Maybe he’ll leave her with a souvenir. Did you see his sex tape? H-a-w-t.”

I flushed the toilet and stomped out of the cubicle noisily. I offered them a serene smile as I squirted soap into my hand, catching their horrified gazes in the mirror when they realized who I was. They looked to be in their mid-twenties, both wearing tight, revealing dresses and the shocked facial expressions of horrified koalas.

“I’m so glad you ladies aren’t interested in Sam, because knowing my brother, he’d never look at you twice. As for Hunter, he’s too good for you, too. But I’ll be sure to bring him up to speed regarding everything you discussed today. And his brother, Cillian, too.”

“Wait, you know Cillian?” the one with the fake tits asked.

I nodded. “Absolutely. We were just discussing the merits of women with natural breasts who stay out of gossip. Well, have fun!”

I turned around and marched away on shaky legs.



Ten minutes after the restroom incident, which I kept from my friends because there wasn’t any need to rehash my humiliation,

the band began to play, starting with “Twist and Shout.”

Belle ran to the dance floor like her butt was on fire. She didn’t know how to twist. But lack of knowledge never stopped my best friend from trying something new. I loved that about her. It always made her the most interesting person in the room.

Persy and Aisling were locked in a heated conversation about reality TV shows I’d never heard of while I fed my inner self-destructive gremlin by scrolling through my phone, reading an article about Lana Alder, who’d apparently gotten a small part in another Hollywood film. I took a deep breath, trying to control the jealousy expanding in my chest like a balloon as I watched pictures of her on set. I didn’t know how she did it, how she stayed focused on the craft while traveling, interviewing, launching sportswear lines, and making movies.

A hand appeared in my vision, two fingers snapping together to get my attention. I looked up from my phone screen.

Hunter.

“Dance with me, CT.”

“Why?” I asked, blinking at him in confusion. I had two left legs and the coordination of roadkill. I couldn’t dance if my life depended on it. I’d tried dancing at the only party I’d ever gone to—sophomore year—and was subjected to such thorough humiliation. People took videos of me dancing and forwarded it to half my school. *Saggy Sailor*, they’d graffiti-ed on my locker. Apparently, my back looked hunched and droopy when I danced.

“Because...” He tilted his chin down, his voice low, smoldering. “You’re obviously bored, and my family is watching us, and I’m partial to fondling you.”

“It’s the dress,” I muttered.

“I’d actually prefer fondling you out of it.”

I sliced my gaze sideways, noticing that Aisling and Persy hadn’t picked up on my exchange with him. They were now watching a video, probably of the reality show they were arguing about. Even though Hunter was just after a friendly

dance to show his family we were getting along, I couldn't unglue my butt from my chair.

"No fondling." I crossed my arms over my chest, buying time.

"No promises. Get up."

"Did you tell anyone we live together?" I accused, my eyes narrowing into slits.

He stared at me, wide-eyed, mouth parted. "Negatory."

"Did you tell anyone we were dating?"

"This is the lamest twenty-questions game I've ever participated in. *No.*"

"Well, people are talking about us."

"That's what people do. They fill the air with useless words to entertain each other. It's called gossip, and it sucks all the asses in the world. Doesn't mean it was me. Our building employs more than a hundred people. All of them work for my father. That means he's spreading whatever the hell he wants to spread."

"People are going to think I'm your...your..." I couldn't say it. It sounded wrong and filthy, even in my head.

"Fuck buddy?" he provided with an easy smirk, probably enjoying watching me change colors in my seat like a billboard sign.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes."

"You're welcome. Your shares will skyrocket after our six months are up. Now, let's dance."

I looked around us, feeling my forehead dampening, my heart rate accelerating. I didn't want to get up and show him what a horrific dancer I was. Hunter stretched his open palm in my direction, leaving me no choice but to accept it.

And still, I didn't.

"Am I going to stand here waiting for long? Asking for a friend called my ego," he noted.

I felt my throat bobbing, but couldn't swallow my anxiety.

Saggy Sailor paired with Boston's most eligible billionaire.

Most days, I could pretend we were just two randoms sharing a space. Now that it was clear we'd arrived together, I felt everybody ogling me, trying to find out what Hunter saw in me.

Nothing, I wanted to scream at them. He sees nothing, because there is nothing. His father is twisting his arm.

"Sailor?" Hunter frowned, obviously no longer amused by my stalling.

I mumbled something underneath my breath.

"Come again?" he asked.

I repeated myself, this time a breath louder.

"Can't hear you."

"I can't dance!" I threw my arms in the air, frustrated. I blushed so hard my scalp burned. The live band swallowed my yelp, but I still wanted to die. "I don't go to parties. I don't mingle. I don't dance. I don't know how to...how to..."

"Be a normal human?" Hunter asked unhelpfully.

I shot him a dirty look. He laughed, taking both my hands and yanking me up. I practically dragged my heels as he pulled me to the dance floor by force.

My level of mortification seemed foreign, yet somehow familiar. I hated myself for never attending any parties, for not being prepared for this, even though I was only partly to blame. Not many people wanted to hang out with the shy, awkward daughter of the guy who allegedly did the dirty work of Boston's elite. At the rare times I *was* invited to parties after the Saggy Sailor ordeal, I always passed. It was guys like Hunter who scared me the most—the beautiful, popular, athletically accomplished creatures who looked down on me. I knew they were waiting for the slightest sign of weakness to leap and tear me to shreds.

The minute we got to the dance floor, I turned around and made a run for the entrance—literally dashed for the door. Not my most mature moment, granted, but escaping the situation trumped all else. Before I could build momentum, Hunter

scooped me by my waist, like I was a toddler, and placed me right in front of him.

“Sailor,” he said gravely, but there was a hint of humor there, too.

“Let me go! I don’t want to dance. It wasn’t a part of our agreement.”

My vision blurred at the edges, and I realized I was in a real state of panic. I’d just ruined my entire badass façade with his trashed room, my archery...everything. Where were Belle and Persy? What was happening? Why couldn’t I stop shaking?

A quick glance around confirmed my worst fear. Most people who sat at their tables or swayed on the dance floor were glancing at us curiously, whispering to each other about the unfolding drama I’d created. I was becoming the main attraction.

“Sailor,” Hunter repeated, poised, his hand circled around my arm. I was tiny and gaunt against his tall, muscular frame. Insignificant in every sense of the word.

“Let go of me!”

“*Sailor.*”

“What, for the love of everything holy?” I pressed my fists to my eye sockets. I was never going to be able to look him again. And he was *definitely* not going to cash in on that kiss.

“*Listen.* It’s a slow song.” He hooked his fingers at the nape of my neck, pressing his thumbs just below my eyes, peeling my hands away. He held me like I was a porcelain doll. Fragile and beautiful and rare.

“Take a deep breath, open your eyes, and look at me,” he purred, his tone steady, almost lulling.

Somehow, I obliged. When my eyes fluttered open, I was momentarily taken aback by how sympathetic and sweet he looked, frowning down at me, his brilliant gray-blues studying me.

“This part is crucial, so listen carefully: *nobody* knows how to dance unless it’s professionally. *Nobody.* But *especially* white people from Boston. We are notoriously bad at dancing. If there

were Razzie Awards for dancing, my bathroom would be full of statues.”

I bit my lip, stifling a giggle. “Nonsense. You go to lots of parties.”

“Dancing is not my preferred cardio when I attend them, trust me.”

I chuckled bitterly. I glanced around, or at least tried to, but he kept my head screwed in place, palming both my cheeks.

“Now, I’m going to put my hands on your waist, and you are going to *not* freak out. Then you’re going to wrap your arms around my shoulders, and you are *still* not going to freak out. Then we are going to sway like drunk babies who just learned how to walk, and even then—you will *not* freak out. That’s all there is to dancing. Up to the challenge, CT?”

I nodded, swallowing to keep my groggy throat wet. I looped my hands over his shoulders. His hands wrapped around my waist, and we started moving.

I held him like he was made of glass.

He held me like I was made of clouds.

My heart rate subsided, and I inhaled, trying not to think about what an idiot I’d made of myself in the last ten minutes.

Hunter must’ve known I was still gathering my wits, because he kept quiet. I peeked around and saw other couples dancing, getting back to their business. Gerald was seated at his table, oblivious to the mini drama, thank God. Belle was in the far corner of the room in the arms of a handsome stranger in a burgundy suit. Cillian was dancing with a tall brunette next to them, but was scowling directly at Emmabelle. She was laughing loudly, making conversation. I bet the cold fish didn’t like the commotion she brought with her one bit.

Aisling and Persephone were still talking at our table.

The tune drifted into my ears, and I recognized the song. It was an acoustic version of “Truly, Madly, Deeply” by Savage Garden.

Hunter didn’t address my meltdown. I wondered how many people had seen me trying to escape his grasp, but didn’t ask.

“So...*ceann beag*?” I tilted my head sideways.

“It means *little one* in Gaelic.”

“Cute.”

“You mean condescending,” he countered. “It is.”

“Do you speak Gaelic?” I knew it wasn’t the most useful of languages, but rich people knew a lot of things others didn’t. Polo, for instance. Or tying a bowtie with one hand. Even though I was Irish through and through, my Irishness was limited to burning instead of tanning, getting freckled whenever there was a hint of sun out, and obsessing over folklore.

Hunter gave me half a nod. “Da’s fanatic about it. It was a bitch to learn.”

“Do you realize the limitless opportunities in knowing this language?” I tried to regain some of my confidence, mustering a smile.

“Not really,” he said dryly, his eyes darting to my lips. “Enlighten me.”

“You can call me anything you want, and I won’t know the meaning of it,” I all but exclaimed. “Carrot Top is nothing. Think outside the box, pretty boy. Let your imagination roam free.”

“So you admit that I’m handsome.”

“I don’t think anyone on this continent can dispute that,” I grumbled.

“Pretty sure I’m hot shit in Australia, too.”

I laughed. He wasn’t wrong. “No. You are virtually perfect, from the *outside*. But your inside makes you an endangered species. Totally murder-able.”

He examined me quietly, shaking his head and grinning.

“*Aingeal dian*,” he said. “Well, for the most part.”

“Does that mean crazy bitch?” I screwed my nose, realizing too late that I was trying to be adorable, and wondering what the hell had come over me. I never tried to be endearing, especially

where guys were concerned. I always tried to make sure I came off like I couldn't care less about them.

"If only," he answered, still staring at my lips.

"What, then?" I filled the space between us with words so he wouldn't get any ideas. We couldn't be seen kissing. In fact, I had to show his father we were friendly, but not overtly so.

He frowned. "No. Your ass is gonna Google Translate it."

"You're impossible." I fought a smile, biting down on my lip.

"Impossible? No. Extremely hard? Always." He narrowed his eyes, but took half a step back so I couldn't tell if he was speaking the truth.

I quieted, thinking about how he'd been awesome during my public meltdown. If only he wasn't a sex-crazed, billionaire brat, we wouldn't want to kill each other.

"Why did they kick you out of that British school?" I whispered.

I wondered what it felt like to be him, to barely know the city you lived in, yet know everybody in Boston knew your business.

"Sex tape."

"*That* young?" I nearly shrieked. I knew he'd starred in one a second ago. I wanted to barf every time I thought about it. I'd promised him I wouldn't Google him, though, and I hadn't.

"Kidding. I got expelled for blowing up a tree with gunpowder, believe it or not."

"I choose not," I said, stifling another laugh. Somehow I couldn't imagine the hedonistic devil in front of me doing something so wildly creative.

"You'd be right, too. It was my friend, Percy, who did it. He was named after the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who actually *did* get kicked out of school for that reason. He lost a bet. But when it came down to owning up to it, I knew Percy was going to get royally screwed if he got the boot. That boarding school

was the only thing his rich grandparents had agreed to pay for. His dad lost their family money gambling.”

Hunter took my hand, laced his fingers through mine, and gave me a little twirl. My body swooshed along with the movement instinctively. I watched the room spin under Hunter’s arm and felt the skirts of my dress rustling against the floor. He lowered my upper body like in the movies, and it occurred to me that people were watching us again, but for the life of me, I couldn’t give a damn.

“You got kicked out for a friend?” My eyes flared. “Why?”

When my back was level with the floor, he held me there for half a second, his face close to mine. “You know why. You’re just as loyal.”

He whisked me back up, and we began to sway again. I clung to him more tightly than before. He felt like iron and steel beneath my fingertips. I wanted to escape his touch and lean closer to his chest at the same time.

“Why did you never tell you father?”

“Because he wouldn’t have believed me. And if he had, it’d serve as more proof to him that I am stupider than a can of sweet corn.”

Hunter’s lips brushed against my ear, the tip of his elegant nose in my hair. My heart was in my throat. I wanted to march over to Gerald Fitzpatrick and flip his full plate all down his suit for making his son believe he was anything short of wonderful.

“Sailor?” Hunter asked.

“Yeah?” I cleared my throat.

“Guess what?” He breathed in my face. If only he didn’t smell as he had—of cinnamon and male and my full-blown demise. “You’re *dancing*.”

Fight



Hunter

Mood song: “Under the Pressure” by The War on Drugs.

Did I come from watching Da watching *me* spinning Sailor on the dance floor, whispering sweet nothings in her ear, nuzzling her hairline?

No, I did not.

Was I close to coming, though?

...ain't gonna lie, my balls *did* tingle.

She was surprisingly compliant for a girl who possessed the etiquette and cordiality of a rabid capybara (basically a giant rat—look it up. Real nasty pet choice).

Maybe she exhausted herself mid-meltdown. Like when toddlers fall asleep in the height of their tantrum. Fuck knows she looked like she was about to off herself when I tried to drag her to the dance floor.

But it wasn't like *I* had many options to choose from in the camaraderie department.

Da and Cillian ignored my existence, Mom was a shitty conversationalist, and Aisling screwed off with her new friends to form a fucking girl band or whatever. Chasing tail was not in the cards for me. I had zero friends here. Hitting up Vaughn and

Knight on the phone several times a day wasn't going to cut it anymore.

I wanted to show Da I was playing nice with the guard dog he'd appointed for me. The fact it looked like I was going to plow into her later that evening sweetened the deal, especially because he could never ask her if we fucked.

See, Da? Not as brainless as you think.

When the fundraiser ended, and Sailor kissed and hugged her friends goodbye (why did chicks do that? They were going to see each other the next goddamn day, in all probability), I shoved her into the limo and spent the time scrolling through pictures of hot girls I'd fucked. I needed to clear my head. Also, to empty my dick. Our little dance had given me an unexpected hard-on. True, she wasn't Candice Swanepoel, but damn, did she rock that dress like nobody's business.

Sailor was sitting on the end of the crème leather seat, as far away from me as humanly possible, watching the city lights flickering to their slow, midnight death. People scurried into their homes like mice.

"Thank you," her voice traveled between us, hoarse and smoky.

"Bet," I mumbled, my thumb sliding over the screen. Kardashian on a cracker, I missed Cali. I had to remind myself this was going to be over in less than six months. I was going to make Da give me the dope apartment, make sure the door didn't hit Sailor's flat ass on her way out, and fuck until I fell into a coma.

"Aren't you going to ask what for?" she challenged in her smart-ass voice.

Fuck. Even when she looked good (and she actually *did* look good in that dress with her hair up), she just had to ruin it by being so...*herself*.

I looked up from my phone unenthusiastically. "My bad. What for?"

"Managing the situation when I freaked out earlier..." She trailed off and frowned at my hand. It took me a second to

realize why she was angry again. My screen was stuck on a thirst trap of Alice squeezing her tits together and winking at the camera with a cherry in her mouth, wearing nothing but a tiny, sunflower-patterned bikini.

“Who is this?” she asked.

I wasn’t keen on airing my shit, and I never told people who I fucked, how many times, where, and when. It seemed tacky—more so when it was to Sailor, who was probably more virginal than the punch in a pre-K after-school dance.

“A chick I went to school with.”

“Nice,” she said, in the way girls lilted the word when things were anything *but* nice.

She turned back to the window. I turned back to imagining myself fucking Alice’s tits.

When we got home, Sailor dashed straight to her room, slamming the door with a huff. As I made my way to mine, I heard her saying “stupid, stupid, stupid,” thumping her head against the wall. Figured she was feeling bad about that little meltdown earlier.

I closed my bedroom door and shot Alice a text.

Hunter: Send n00dz.

I followed it up with a GIF of a dog humping a pillow. Courting in the twenty-first century was the shit.

Instead of smarting off, or breaking down, or generally being a mess—cough, *Sailor*, cough—Alice replied with a picture of her from the neck down spread eagle on the bed, wearing nothing but a neon pink thong. I shimmied out of my cigar pants. I’d never really stopped being hard since I danced with Sailor.

Hunter: Now a video of you touching yourself.

Alice: Are u sure? Heard Daddy got you on lockdown.

Hunter: This is not breaking the rules. Just tilting them a little. To the right. ;)

Alice: LOL perv. They say you moved in with someone. A girl...

Hunter: Not what you think.

Alice: I don't think anything.

Ain't that the truth, baby.

I jerked off twice that night to unholy videos of Alice.

When I woke up, Sailor was gone.



Carrot Top didn't bother coming home on Sunday. Not that I cared, but it was almost taunting to have the huge-ass apartment all to myself without being able to put it to good use. My father's so-called bodyguards/private investigators were under the building, and based on the way half the goddamn world already knew I was living with Sailor, I gathered the staff in the premises also ran their mouths.

I spent the time studying statistics and other kill-me-now business-management subjects. I'd barely attended my evening classes because I'd been in the office all day every day last week—fetching coffee, answering spontaneous quizzes about the company's history my brother and father threw at me, and generally being the designated office bitch.

When Sailor failed to show her face by dinnertime, I hit the building gym to let off some steam. Yesterday at the fundraiser, Mom had suggested I go back to playing polo in one of her attempts to strike up a conversation. I'd suggested she mind her own business. I didn't want to play sports. I didn't want to do *anything*.

And therein lay the problem. I had zero ambition when it didn't involve fucking and partying. I felt hollow inside, the kind of empty that gnawed at the edges of my flesh, threatening to devour the rest of me.

I heard the front door to the apartment open around midnight. I was in my room, my door ajar, reading some bullshit textbook. To my surprise, I felt too butthurt to ask Carrot Top where she'd been. I heard her shuffling around the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of water and rummaging in the fridge.

She fixed herself something to eat. She had a real good hand when it came to food. I smelled fresh bread, peanut butter, Nutella, and roasted nuts. She was either FaceTiming her family or had put them on speaker. Her brother and dad bickered about who got to take her for lunch the next day, since they were going to be in different parts of the city. I hated her surprisingly functional family.

Ten minutes later, she turned off the lights and shut her bedroom door, locking it for good measure.

HHH: No need to lock your door. Not gonna sneak in on you.

HHH: ?

HHH: Still giving me the silent treatment to punish me for absolutely fucking nothing?

HHH: Go to hell, CT.



It was a gray Monday morning, which brought with it the urge to hurl myself under a bus.

I started the day by helping the company's executive accountant to go through the quarterly numbers. After being holed up for four hours in a dungeon with Excel sheets and middle-aged men who smelled like underwear crust, coffee, and diabetes, I took my lunch while studying in the kitchenette, enjoying the background noise of my father shrieking at people about the refinery, which was apparently at a shutdown state because of some minor explosion. After I finished, I was heading down to the compliance department to help out with filing some documents. Such was my rock-n-roll life.

I threw my empty poke bowl into the trash, rounded the hallway, and decided to take the emergency stairs instead of the elevators on a whim. Those were busy as fuck around lunch hour, and as it turned out, people in Royal Pipelines didn't care for me. Apparently, they all knew I was a lazy fuck and weren't pumped about my co-running the company with my tyrant brother when Da retired.

I took the stairs down two at a time until I heard a voice drifting from downstairs, two floors below. The echo carried it up, even though the person was obviously whispering.

“...really don’t care. As long as it’s done. Discretion is key. I’ll call you next week from another burner phone. Do not call me, understand? It’s too risky. I shouldn’t have even picked up your call today,” the voice seethed.

Syllie.

I wasn’t one to eavesdrop. Not out of good manners, God forbid, but because I gave zero-to-minus-thirty fucks about other people’s lives. Syllie, despite being an okay dudebro, was at the bottom of the list of people I was interested in. If he had a sidepiece, good for him. I shook my head, smiling to myself. Old sport was sampling other flavors secretly. Naughty. I waited, letting lover boy finish his call.

“I’m not worried about the old sod. He’s getting smugger by the second. His younger kid is also a literal fucking joke—wouldn’t recognize trouble if it gave him herpes and cut his dick off. But the older son is dangerous. We need to watch him.”

Whoa.

Re. Fucking. Wind.

Literal fucking joke? This had my name all over it. I’d nearly trademarked this bitch in my family. *Dangerous older son?* That would be *mo órga*. Precious Cillian.

Also, this sounded *nothing* like a torrid, harmless affair with an anal-loving mistress.

I wasn’t offended, though I knew he’d referred to me as a goodie bag of incompetency, STDs, and failure. I was more occupied with what he was up to. I plastered my back to the wall, trying not to make myself known. For the first time since I’d discovered my dick was good for more than pissing interesting shapes in the snow, I was interested in something that wasn’t pussy.

“Yes, that’s fine. Listen, I need to head back to the office before people ask questions. We’ll talk next week.”

He killed the call, sighed heavily, and started making his way up the stairway. Thinking on my feet, I went back up the stairs, tiptoeing, opened the first available door, and slid in. I pressed my back to it, listening to Sylvester ascending the stairs to the eighth floor. When the coast was clear, I opened the door and made my way straight to Da's office.

I was out of breath by the time I got to him. He was sitting with Cillian—surprise, surprise—laughing over their bowls of salad. I didn't knock. Part of me wanted to please him, but the other was happy to piss him off.

“For the love of God, learn how to knock.” Da put his salad down and patted his mouth with a napkin. “What do you want, *ceann beag*?”

I waited for the slow-ass door to close all the way, regulating my breath, before I talked.

“First of all, for you to stop calling me this.” I thought about how I called Sailor CT even though she hated it. “Second, I just heard Syllie talking weird shit with someone on the phone. I think it was about us.”

“Specify,” Cillian ordered, chewing on a piece of lettuce and steamed chicken from the organic bar downstairs. Even that didn't emasculate the fucker.

“I think he wants to bring us down or something.”

“*Us*?” Cillian arched a thick eyebrow, assessing me through honey-hued eyes. He took assholeness to a whole new level today—probably still pissed about the refinery explosion. But nobody was hurt, so what was the big deal?

“*You*. Happy?” I crushed my teeth together angrily. “He wants to take you down. He said something about how *Athair* was smug, and I was stupid, and you were dangerous, but that he wanted to go on with some plan.”

“Where was that?”

Cillian was the only one talking. Da had returned his attention to his salad, and I wondered if he even took me seriously. I felt my ears pinking with rage. “Emergency stairway.”

Cillian and Da exchanged looks I couldn't read. Maybe I'd have been able to if, you know, I saw them more than twice a year.

"Probably bitter about his quarterly bonus." Da patted the corners of his mouth with his green handkerchief, chewing.

Cillian frowned, but didn't correct his assumption.

"Go back to your duties, boy." My father waved me off.

"But Da..."

"Chop-chop now," he stressed, pointing at the door with his plastic fork.

I glanced between them. My brother looked at me in a strange way. The wheels in his brain turning. Whatever he was thinking, it wasn't enough to back me up. I kicked a trash can, sending paper and bottles flying everywhere.

Nice. Asshole doesn't recycle, either.

"Jesus fuck, you never listen."

"Stop. Cursing," *Athair* bit out.

Cillian motioned to security through the window emotionlessly.

"No need to call your guard dogs. I'm leaving."

I wanted to slam the glass door in their faces, but again, watched as it closed inch by inch for half a goddamn hour.

Sylvester Lewis wanted to fuck my family up, and despite everything, or maybe *because* of everything, I wasn't okay with that.

I wanted to get to the bottom of this. Before or after I screwed my father's little redhead project? Only time would tell, but I had two incentives now. Two things to wake up in the morning for:

1. Find out what Syllie was up to and deal with him myself
2. Tame Sailor Brennan, the unbroken, wild horse I wanted to use as my own personal pet until this nightmare of an agreement was over

Nine



Sailor

On Monday, I woke up to a picture of me in the local newspaper, ducking my head down while following Hunter to a limo on our way out of the fundraiser.

“The Hunter Games: Royal Pipelines Playboy Caught Canoodling Archery Mistress Sailor Brennan!” screamed the headline, which I thought was both incorrect and unwitty.

I figured Gerald was behind this, and also knew he had decided to market his son and me as a couple to tame Hunter’s disastrous image, so I tried to tell myself I didn’t care—all while shoving the newspaper to the bottom of my duffel bag, making sure Junsu couldn’t find it.

As it turned out, a couple days later it didn’t really matter.

“The boy. He’s here again,” Junsu announced solemnly, his hands clasped behind his back, a disapproving pucker on his lips.

Ignoring him, I lifted my bow, which looked like an arm ripped from a Transformer robot, drawing a breath to regain my composure. It had taken me forty-eight hours to get my head straight after the stupid fundraiser. I spent Sunday with Persy, Belle, and Aisling, eating cupcakes, watching *Riverdale*, and talking about anything other than Hunter Fitzpatrick. I realized

one dance meant nothing in the grand scheme of life. The fact of the matter was, Hunter was scrolling through pictures of half-naked girls in the limo after our so-called moment. I got temporarily blinded by his looks, but checked myself quickly. Now, it was time to focus on what truly mattered: archery.

My eyes zoomed in on the target, and I imagined it was Hunter's beautiful face. I released the arrow, watching it travel the 76.5 yards to its destination and landing on the eight-point ring.

I knew it had nothing to do with my lack of cold-eyed precision and everything to do with my sore right shoulder, but every time I complained to Junsu, he said it was the usual discomfort athletes had to deal with.

"You think it is any different in judo, fencing, and artistic swimming? They all hurt. Art is pain, Sailor."

I lowered the bow, adjusting my ball cap before plucking another arrow from the stack beside me.

"Did you hear what I said?" Junsu asked. His stern gaze prickled my skin with awareness.

"Loud and clear." I punched the timer on my watch to twenty seconds, the time given Olympic archers when they reached the finals, and began to draw the arrow. I'd been shooting between two hundred and three hundred arrows a day, working day and night.

"Well?" he said impatiently. "Shoo him away. He is waiting outside."

I shot the second arrow—this time imagining the target to be Hunter's elusive, cold heart—watching as it got the seven-point ring.

Shoot. I needed a steroid shot or I was going to perform miserably this week.

I twisted my neck to look at Junsu, smiling calmly. "Acknowledging him would encourage him. As I said before, he is not my boyfriend. If he decides to visit me here, I have no control over it, but I'm not going to stop my training because of it."

Junsu didn't mention Hunter again, and I tried not to think about his presence here. I sucked for the remainder of the practice.

Half an hour later, I strolled out of the shooting range to my car, surprised to find Hunter leaning against my trunk in his pristine navy suit, his arms and legs crossed.

He waited outside all this time?

“So this is how living in the doghouse feels.” He spread his arms, gesturing to an imaginary kennel, his words seasoned with buoyancy.

“If you're about to make a bitch joke, please spare the world, and while you're at it, get off my trunk,” I shot back.

Hunter surprised me by obliging, muttering something about things he would like to do with my trunk that had nothing to do with my vehicle.

I popped the trunk open, dumping my gear inside. I slammed it shut, feeling the sweet, curling pressure of excitement escalating in my chest despite my best efforts. When I turned around, Hunter was there, in my face. Closer than the time we'd danced together. He planted his hands on either side of me, on my car, his lips inches from mine.

“You're avoiding me,” he hissed.

“So are you.”

My roommate hadn't exactly sought me out since the fundraiser, other than the unanswered text messages. Truth was, I had no right to be hurt because he was checking out other women, and he had no right to interrupt me while I was training. The lines were beginning to blur, and I didn't like it.

Hunter's thumbs touched the edge of my butt from either side, and I wondered if it was on purpose. “Just gave you time to calm your tits. Obviously, they still need some chilling.”

“Obviously,” I said flatly, pushing at his chest. He didn't budge. I looked up, frowning.

“Out of my way, Prince Syphilis.”

“Have dinner with me, Princess Psychotic.”

“Go away. I’ll see you at home.”

“Not at home. Somewhere else. Somewhere public. Somewhere *fun*.”

He said the word *fun* like it was an awful profanity. Like fun was my archenemy. He sounded like my parents. Sure, I had fun. I just didn’t have it with boys.

Or outside of my room.

Fine, maybe I could use some help in the fun department.

“There’s perfectly edible food at home. Nora, the cook—”

“Fuck Nora in the ass with a spatula. You don’t eat outside because you’re hungry. You do it for the goddamn experience. It’s an indulgence.”

“Something you’d know all about,” I huffed, hating that he smelled like laundry detergent and male, and another thing that made my stomach dip pleurably.

“Yup.” He flicked my ear, taking a step back when he realized I was going to relent.

And I was. Because deep down, I knew I had no right to give him grief. He was making good progress on all fronts, and I was his babysitter. I should be more involved.

I tugged my car keys out of my pocket and winced as my shoulder burned with pain. How on Earth was I going to drive?

Hunter read my mind and snatched the keys from my hand, rounding my car, a bounce in his step.

“Allow me. You’ll probably get us there sometime next Thursday. My delinquent ass can donut our way and still get there faster.”

I was going to protest, but he was actually doing me a favor. The best thing I could do right now was give my shoulder some rest and ice it when we got home. I slid into the passenger seat, careful to close the door with my healthy left arm.

“Where to?” I buckled, peering at him when I was sure he was busy trying to arrange his long limbs into my space. He looked comically big, his knees touching the steering wheel on both sides. He adjusted my seat, starting the car.

“It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.”

“Shocker. Close your eyes until we get there.” He backed out of the parking spot at thirty miles per hour, gunning out of the lot like a demon. In the rearview mirror, I saw Junsu standing on the stairs to the club, brows furrowed, hands on his hips.

Not happy.

“I can’t,” I heard my voice through the pounding panic in my head. Technically, Junsu couldn’t tell me what to do. He couldn’t tell me who to date. Lana Alder dated all the time. She’d even had a high-profile affair with that actor who played the new Spiderman. “I’ll get nauseous.”

“Damn, Sailor. Way to crap on *carpe diem*.” Hunter reached over to pat my thigh, and I inwardly winced.

I was wearing yoga pants and a bland DriFit shirt and looked like Ed Sheeran in tights. He, on the other hand, looked like he was attending the Oscars. Hunter headed toward the highway at a speed more fitting for a plane taking off.

“So how come the daughter of the infamous Troy Brennan is such a dork?” he asked conversationally.

“First of all, my father is a reputable businessman unless proven otherwise.” I repeated the words Dad had told me to say ever since I was old enough to talk. People felt the urge to poke and prod about the patriarch of my family like it was a national sport.

Hunter snorted, keeping his eyes on the road. “And second of all?”

“We’re not our parents. Case in point, your father runs one of the largest corporations in America, and you, in contrast, are an amateur porn star.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve seen me in action?” A grin curved over his face.

“Nope. You asked me not to Google you, remember?”

“Before I realized you could handle me. Shame. New customers get the first ride free.”

“I’ll pass. I hear the movie is better.”

He howled with laughter, his voice sexy and gruff. Determined to ignore the butterflies swarming in my chest, I stared out the window, munching on the skin around my thumbnail.

“For your information, Alice, the chick you caught me checking out on Saturday, is just a friend.”

“Does that mean you haven’t slept with her?” My eyes were still trained on the darkness outside, but hope flared in my stomach. We were driving outside of Boston, up north.

“Nah, I’ve slept with her plenty, but she’s a total herb. Plus, she doesn’t use my balls as Baoding balls like you do. With you, I’m outmatched, outwitted, and outrageously irritated.”

“So what are you saying? That I’m too smart and mouthy to be your friend?”

“You’re too everything. I’m happy to pop your cherry, but let me give you a piece of advice—you need to tone the intensity down. I think the only thing I can beat you at is polo.”

“And a fistfight,” I mused, not correcting his assumption that I was a virgin.

You shouldn’t care, and he should never find out.

“Debatable.” He side-eyed me.

“Anyway, I know how to horseback ride.” I pressed my furnace-hot cheek against the cool window. Whenever I was around Hunter, I felt like my IQ dropped forty points. Nature was a jackass like that. My brain told me to stay the hell away, but my body begged to reproduce with this beautifully destructive male specimen.

“Polo takes more than being an accomplished equestrian.”

“I can take down a galloping horse blindfolded with one arrow,” I reminded him. “So technically, I can still beat you at polo.”

He laughed again, shaking his head.

“Never met a girl who can be so ice cold and fire hot at the same time. One second I think you’re for sure gonna faint if I touch your hand, the other I’m certain you’re about to kill me in my sleep. You’re a trip, CT.”

Hunter parked my car on a graveled road outside an old tavern in the middle of nowhere. The Tudor-style pub’s chimney produced a white trail of smoke, spiraling up to a cloudless, starless sky. There was the faint noise of crickets, the highway beyond the trees, and maybe an owl.

“How do you know about this place? I’ve lived here my entire life and never heard of it. You barely even know Boston.” I unfastened my seatbelt. As I said it, I realized the implication of this truth. Hunter had grown up away from his family, in a foreign land, with strangers.

Yesterday, Aisling had told us she got to spend her childhood in Boston entirely by chance. An all-girl boarding school opened in our area before she hit first grade. It helped that her parents went easier on her academically, since she was a girl, and Gerald never put pressure on her to join the family business. But Cillian and Hunter were both sent abroad promptly after their sixth birthday, and while Cillian completed his high school education in New England, Hunter was sent all the way to California so his parents didn’t have to deal with him.

Hunter slid out of the car. “I was on the road with my nanny coming back from a polo match this one time when I was a kid. Our car broke down, and it was pissing rain, so we went in and she let me have French fries, a greasy burger, and a milkshake. It was the first time I had French fries. Up until then, it was only the organic bullshit the personal chef made. Da happened to be in the area, so he picked us up himself. It was the first time he ever did that—like, spent time with me in the middle of the day and shit.”

He frowned, like he’d just realized why this place was special for him.

For all his formidable reputation, my father had rarely missed any of my tough tumbler classes. He let me have whatever treats I wanted, and had a second gig as my personal

chauffeur until I got my license. We spent Saturdays going to Sam's MMA tournaments, and both my parents were constant fixtures in our lives.

“Anyway, every time I visit my parents, I come here. Sometimes I take Aisling. I don't really have a crew here, so when she can't make it, I come alone.”

He pushed the old wooden door open. We ambled into an orange-lit, loud pub with three long rows of hand-carved wooden tables and matching benches. It looked like an inn straight out of a *Game of Thrones* episode, complete with loud Gaelic music and workmen gulping ale from pints. The scent of smoked meat, warm beer, and sweat curled into my nostrils.

I felt my body stiffening. I hated loud, crowded places.

Especially loud, crowded places jam-packed with strange men.

Especially seeing as I was here with soft-palmed Hunter, who was about as protective as a piece of used gum.

Every bone in my body screamed at me to turn around and do a U-turn. I wasn't a scaredy cat, but I *was* the only woman in this place, and I knew I'd invite some commentary with my boyish attire and wild hair. Hunter nudged me forward, asking the waiter who came to meet us at the door where we could sit.

“Just wherever, man. Place's packed.” A pimply teenager with two trays full of mushy peas, mashed potatoes, and roasts floated around the room, yelling the order numbers that came out of the kitchen through the chatter, laughter, and music.

We sat down, sandwiched between two old men who talked over their beers and a pack of construction workers, their faces and clothes covered in dust. The two who sat by Hunter and me looked young and had a Southern twang. A pile of foamed, empty glasses of beer sat between them as a barrier. They were obviously intoxicated, based on their slurring and slow conversation.

I fidgeted with my fingers under the table. Hunter ordered both of us root beer, earning an approving smile from me. He proceeded to frown at the menu, fingering the wooden horse peeking through his dress shirt. Rolling my thumb over the edge

of the menu, I watched the little horse pressed against the blanket of his fair chest hair, and idly wondered where my brain was, because I definitely didn't bring it with me to this pub. I finally understood the phrase *stupid hot*.

Hunter's hotness made me stupid.

"What's up with the horse?" I cleared my throat, frowning at my menu before he could catch me ogling him.

Hunter withdrew his hand from it, realizing what he was doing.

"Oh, this old shit?" He chuckled, snatching the root beer the waiter gave us and taking a drink to buy time. "It's nothing."

"Tell me how you got it anyway." I linked my fingers together, placing my chin over my knuckles. The guy next to me burped loudly, a warm gust of meat-breath fanning the side of my face.

I breathed through my mouth, trying not to gag.

"When I was a kid, whenever I was home from boarding school, my parents used to throw a nanny or two on my ass so they wouldn't have to spend time with me. On my sixth...no, eighth nanny, Da decided I needed to learn how to play polo. I was being kind of a prick about it. That summer, Nanny Number Eight—shit if I remember her name, but she was Swedish—had to physically wrestle me into the car before practice every day. I hated horses with a passion. What's to like about the fuckers? They smell, they sleep while standing, and have no gag reflex—which, if I may say, makes them rad fuck buddies, but horrible dining mates. But I digress. So I guess my Swedish nanny was starting to get a little worried for her job because I was displaying resistance—also known as being a goddamn kid. One day she gave me this Dala horse as a gift. Told me the Swedish believe it brings good luck, and I'd never fall from a horse if I wore it. Mind you, I believed in Santa until I was, like, thirteen, so of course I bought it."

"And did you? Fall from a horse, I mean?"

He looked up from the menu, his eyes glittering with mischief. "Nope. Zero scratches. No car accidents, either."

“You remember.” I stared at him pointedly. I knew the truth of my statement. It burned in my bones.

“Remember what?” His face was carefully blank.

“The name of that Swedish nanny.”

He remembered it because he cared. But he didn’t want to care. Hunter wasn’t stupid at all. He just built walls upon walls around himself that made it difficult to get through to him, because in his experience, people weren’t there to stay.

He flashed me a devilish grin. “Sorry, sweets, I don’t. What about you? How’d you get into archery, anyway? That shit’s deader than Henry the Sixth.”

Hunter took another sip of his root beer, a dark mustache forming on his upper lip. He licked it clean, and I watched as his tongue slowly swept across his mouth. I felt my throat bob. It reminded me he never had cashed in our kiss.

Maybe he forgot all about it after your meltdown at the fundraiser.

“You’ll laugh,” I warned.

“Naturally.”

I looked down. “It’s a cliché, actually. Robin Hood. Specifically, when I was little, I loved the idea of being an outlaw who’s also good. Maybe because my dad...” I paused, swallowing the shame in my throat.

“Is a respectable businessman unless proven otherwise?” Hunter quirked an eyebrow.

I laughed, feeling myself blush. “Exactly. The rumors about him chased me. His alleged sins were mine, too. I’m sure you know what it’s like to be defined by other family members.”

Hunter nodded. “Straight up.”

“I liked the narrative of Robin Hood, the romanticizing of a criminal. He seeks adventure, steals from the rich, and gives to the poor. Also, the fox in the Disney film was very orange, like my hair,” I admitted, warranting more of Hunter’s addictive laughter.

It somehow drowned out all the other noise, even from the guy next to me, who was now chain-cursing at his friend. He spoke animatedly, with his hands, and sometimes elbowed me when he tried to demonstrate something.

“Besides, I always wanted to know how to use a weapon. Guns are cold, metallic, impersonal; archery requires patience, precision, and passion,” I concluded. “Once I got into it, it became an addiction. It was a safe haven from the chatter about my family, about *me*. I guess by now you can tell I don’t have a ton of friends, so this helped burn time after school.”

It was unlike me to open up to someone, especially a stranger, and a beautiful, male one at that. I sounded like a reject, but if Hunter felt I was oversharing or pitied me, his face didn’t betray it.

He nodded, seeming to consider my words. “I’m glad you found your calling.”

“I’m sorry you haven’t.” I put my hands on the table between us, expecting...what? That Hunter would gather them in his?

He didn’t, of course.

The waiter materialized behind my back to take our orders. I swiveled awkwardly, realizing for the first time that I hadn’t even looked at the menu yet.

I was about to ask for a few more minutes when Hunter boomed behind me, “We’ll both take the pot roast with gravy, onions, and roasted potatoes, with a side of stuffed portabellas. Also, I’ll tip you twenty bucks for every time you bring a shot of Baileys to the lady when she blushes. Can you do that for us, old sport?”

The pimply waiter didn’t even bother carding us. He flashed his yellow teeth in a grin, nodded, collected our menus, and dashed to the window separating the bar from the kitchen with our order.

I turned to Hunter. He wore the lopsided grin of a misunderstood villain.

“You’re not driving, and seeing as I’m fully sober and celibate, I figured I’ll even the score.”

“In reverse,” I noted.

“It *is* my favorite position.” He opened his arms exaggeratedly, not caring if he bumped into other people’s shoulders in the process.

That made me blush, and he laughed, muttering, “Easy prey.”

Luckily, the waiter had his back to us, because it hadn’t even been three seconds since he left. I was going to be so screwed by the end of the evening. Also, so drunk.

“So... You said you don’t know what to do with your life.” I redirected him back to our conversation.

The man who sat beside me scoffed, turning his body toward me, but I didn’t swivel to meet his gaze. It was probably just in my head, anyway. I was minding my own business. Why would he look at me strangely?

“I’m brick dumb, yo. Of course I’ve no clue what I want to do with myself. I’m only good at partying, fucking, and drinking semi-responsibly. Not many people pretend to think otherwise. In fact, I’ve been told very few times that I have potential, and each time I was, I hated it. Potential is like a twelve-inch dick on an impotent: dazzlingly useless. ’Sides, I don’t *need* potential. I’ve known I was going to take over Royal Pipelines with Cillian since I was four.” Hunter knocked the rest of his root beer down, smacking the empty pint on the table.

My eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. “Whoa. That’s young.”

“My future was written for me long before I was born. Just as well, as I’d have probably been too lazy to write it myself.”

“And if you could choose?” I pressed. “What would you want to do with your life if you weren’t a Fitzpatrick?”

The man next to me was now laughing with his friend, slapping the wooden table. Utensils and glasses rattled, dancing against the wooden surface. Hunter seemed completely

oblivious to him. He was confident and nonchalant. Things like that didn't register for him.

“I don't know. I could be a DJ. Or maybe I could be a male prostitute. But only for hot chicks. And I would probably be too nice to charge them. Wait, there's a name for that. Tinder.”

Hunter laughed at his own words, but the light in his eyes switched off.

I stayed silent for a few beats, considering the way he saw himself. Finally, I said, “I think you're talented in a lot of ways. I think you're funny and stupidly likeable and carry an energy inside you that's explosive and enviable. You can make anyone feel comfortable around you, and that's something they don't teach you at college. You are charming, confident, and could talk your way out of a murder charge. You could probably be very helpful to your father's company, but maybe not crunching numbers. What about public relations, or—”

“Jesus Christ, man. Unzip his pants and suck him off, already,” the man beside me snapped.

He blasted into frantic, slurred laughter, coiling his fist and offering it to Hunter for a pound. He was promptly left hanging, as Hunter stared him down with an expression that suggested he was going to maim him with his empty pint glass. The man dropped his fist, raising both palms in surrender.

“All I'm saying is you're wasting your time with Wilma Flintstone over here. I died a little listening to her salivating all over your lap. Don't you have a friend to save you from this date from hell? Did she scam you into thinking she's hot on Bumble? What's going on? Y'all don't look like a natural fit.”

The guy beside Hunter—Rude Guy's companion—coughed out a potato chip, almost toppling backwards on the bench with laughter. A few people stopped what they were doing, quieted, and sent curious glances our way.

The taunts hit me like hail. Hard and painful and cruel, like that boy on the balcony in the wintertime who didn't want to go away.

Like Hunter felt when I first saw him.

I felt the heat of the humiliation on my cheeks, the sting of tears stabbing the back of my eyeballs. There were many things I wanted to say, scream, throw in the man's face, but I couldn't. I was too frozen to speak up.

And Hunter...Hunter just *stared* at him.

“Look, man, you've got the looks. You obviously make a fine buck with how you dress. You can do so much better than this ratty-looking thing,” the guy continued, throwing a thumb my way. “Just sayin' what everyone in this room is thinking right now.” He grabbed his beer and finished his drink in one gulp, throwing the empty pint behind his shoulder comically, wiggling his brows. The pint smashed on the floor.

Nobody laughed. Nobody spoke. Nobody *breathed*.

Hunter's left eye twitched—just the one tic. Other than that, he was very still.

I wanted to die. To cry. To shoot a poisonous arrow through Rude Guy's heart. To run away from here as far as my feet could carry me. Pack my things and leave Hunter's apartment. I wanted to change my name and my hair color and my wardrobe. Start over somewhere new, where nobody knew me. This guy *didn't* know me. That's why he'd said it.

He didn't know who my father was.

Who my brother was.

He wasn't scared of the aftermath.

How many more men I'd known had viewed me the exact same way as this guy, but never voiced it aloud because they were scared?

I stared at the jerk, knowing my face was beet red. From the corner of my eye, I could see our waiter running over with a shot of Baileys in his hand, half of its contents sloshing over the already sticky floor. He was making his way to me, I realized, my lungs deflating.

Breathe.

I couldn't breathe.

And to make matters worse, Hunter had checked out.

“Not now, you idiot!” Hunter finally snapped, expanding like a dark cloud, suddenly soaked with his own anger. He rose in one thunderous movement, flipping the half-full plate of the guy beside him and watching as its contents fell into the man’s lap.

I shrank on the wooden bench, watching’s Hunter’s eyes narrow into two slits of fury.

“What’d you just say to me?” My roommate bared his teeth, Titan-like, tall and formidable and bigger than this place. Than this moment. It looked like he was growing bigger and bigger, like the Hulk. “Get the fuck up and repeat yourself, you useless sack of shit.”

The rude man relished the opportunity for a brawl. He stood tall, chin up, chest expanded, peacock-like.

“I said your girlfriend is ugly, and now that I see how goddamn offended you are about it, I’m thinking maybe she ain’t really your steady ride. Maybe she’s your beard. A pretty boy like you has no business being with a girl like her. *If...*” He raised his hand, taking a deliberate, comic pause. “...she’s the one with the pussy between you two.”

The pub’s walls rattled with laughter, the beers on the tables splattering everywhere. I clung to my tattered self-control, keeping my wobbly chin up, although a part of me wondered how I was going to stitch my self-esteem back together after this.

It wasn’t just torn; it was massacred.

“I’m going to butcher you,” Hunter’s voice was so low, it sounded like it came from an animal. The look on his face—one I’d never seen on him before—of brazen determination dipped with fury, made my bones rattle. There was a zing of insanity there. I recognized it well. My father had the same glimmer in his eyes before he went on his late-night jobs.

“Oh, yeah?” The guy placed one hand on his rounded waist.

He was pudgy, but strong. Fat and muscle corded together into a boar-shaped man. You could tell by his body language—rotten smile, palms open—that he loved to fight, did it often, and wouldn’t hesitate to break Hunter’s neck.

“Cause it seems to me like all you’re doing is standing there, throwing empty threats my way, *pretty boy*.”

The pimply waiter ran to the back of the tavern, probably to get his superiors. A few people lowered their heads, possibly debating whether to break things up between the two men.

I managed to stand. I leaned toward Hunter across the table.

“Don’t bother. He’s a waste of space, oxygen, and probably porn clicks.” I tried to inject humor into my voice. “Let’s hit the road, Hunt.”

Hunter ignored me, staring pointedly at the guy as he took off his blazer meticulously. I knew he didn’t know how to fight. The self-proclaimed nobleman never had to deal with his own problems.

“He is nothing. A no one.” I tried again, reaching desperately for the sleeve of his dress shirt. Hunter jolted his hand away.

“*Please*, Hunter, let’s just leave.”

“Ah, she speaks. And it *is* a she. Ma’am, I have tits bigger than yours.” The guy cackled, exposing a row of yellow teeth and bouncing the two peaks of his chest toward Hunter. I was ready to punch the lights out of him myself. I wasn’t afraid of physical violence. My dad had taught me how to headbutt and knee people in the balls before I was out of diapers.

The atmosphere turned dark, unhinged. Rancid laughter, cheap alcohol, and the scent of adrenaline and violence rose from the crooked wooden floors. My fingers curled beside me as I got ready to attack. Rude Guy turned around, about to bow to the table behind us, full of people laughing and whistling, when Hunter grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and hurled him across the table.

The whole room sucked in a breath as the man flew across the pub. He fell back against the entrance door, head resting on his chest. For a second, I thought he’d broken his neck, but then he raised his head and started laughing, jumping to his feet with a lightheadedness that didn’t match his size.

He raised his fists to level with his face, circling Hunter, who still radiated quiet, deadly anger.

“Come at me now, little woman,” the man hooted, sending a direct blow straight to Hunter’s face. Unprepared, Hunter sailed backwards, stumbling over the table and wobbling on his feet just in time for the guy’s second fist to connect with his nose.

“Hunter!” I bolted toward him, lungs burning. I rounded the table, prepared to jump the meaty guy. Some men stood up, but nobody wanted to get into the firing line of two-hundred-pound men’s fists. Besides, it seemed exactly like the place to let two drunk, blue-collared men brawl it out. Only Hunter wasn’t blue-collared. Or drunk. He was an Eton-educated rich boy who probably had his nails filed by a professional regularly.

One of the two elderly men who sat at the edge of our table to us clasped my arm in his hand, stopping me.

“Don’t. Your friend needs to see this one through, or he will never forgive himself. You will not be helping him by stepping into this. If anything, he would never be able to look at you again without remembering how *you* saved *him*. He has something to prove here, sweetheart.”

“But he’s losing. He’s hurt!” I shook him off. I couldn’t bear the idea of Hunter hurting because of me. I took two more steps before the other man raised a hand to stop me.

“He’ll be more hurt if you pull him outta there. I can tell you that from seventy-six years of experience. You save his skin now, you kill his ego. One has to go. Bruises heal. Pride, on the other hand...”

I looked up, watching Hunter’s bloody face as he tried to refocus on the guy he was fighting, lolling his head from side to side. He zigzagged on his feet. They were circling each other in the center of the pub. Hunter raised his fists, protecting his face, but his dress shirt was already soaked with blood and one of his eyes was turning purple. Rude Guy didn’t look much better, his lower jaw swelling, his left eye completely shut.

Rude Guy went for a second hook, but Hunter, who was starting to get the gist of street-fighting, dodged it and threw a sucker punch right in the guy’s face. The explosive sound of

bone smashing bone reverberated in the air, sending an uncomfortable frisson up my spine. Rude Guy buckled, collapsing into himself like a stack of cards. He held his nose with both hands, moaning. Hunter took the opportunity to gain momentum and ran into him, tackling him to the ground with his shoulder. He straddled his opponent, raining sloppy fists on the guy's head, ears, and chest while the latter desperately tried to protect himself with his forearms. Blood splattered on the floor, the wall, people's shoes. Two heavy cooks and one smartly dressed man appeared from the kitchen's doors, running toward them.

“Say anything else about this girl ever again and you're dead, asshole. Dead!” Hunter threw his final fist to the side of the guy's head before each cook grabbed him by a shoulder.

As they raised him from the man, his face was unrecognizable under all the blood. Hunter let them, watching with cool indifference as the man lying in a heap of blood and sweat below his feet curled into a fetal position.

I ran to him, too panicked to control myself, and patted his cheeks, neck, and forehead. It was compulsive, frantic, and completely out of character for me. I was usually big on personal space. My fingers shook violently. I took inventory of every inch of his flesh. He looked badly beat up, but not as bad as the guy still on the ground, currently begging the pub owner not to call an ambulance because he didn't have insurance.

“Are you okay?” I whispered, realizing my voice was brittle, unsteady. I didn't care what the idiot said about me anymore. I just wanted to know Hunter was okay.

Hunter nodded, looking away at the floor. The corner of his lip bled, and I allowed myself one last misstep, brushing the blood off with my thumb.

“Talk to me,” I croaked. “Do you want to go to the hospital?”

Hunter shook his head, still staring at the same spot by his feet, shutting the gates to himself once again, locking them up and throwing away the key.

The waiter appeared beside us, squeezing Hunter's shoulder. "I'll tell my manager exactly what happened. Everybody saw how he provoked you. There was nothing you could do to prevent it. I mean, he talked mad shit about your girl, man."

"She's not my girl," Hunter said aloofly, gathering phlegm and spitting it—pink with the traces of blood in his mouth—onto the floor. He reached for his back pocket, took out his wallet, and tugged out a few bills, stuffing them in the young waiter's hand.

"Don't wash the floor. I want every asshole in this place to remember what happened today."



I jogged after Hunter outside. He unlocked my car, sliding in and revving up the engine, ignoring my existence. I swung the passenger door open, worried he'd forgotten about me and would leave me abandoned if I didn't hurry. A sharp, needle-like pain in my deltoid reminded me of my injured shoulder, and I winced, folding in half in my seat from the pain. I didn't want to think about what it meant to have a shoulder injury—both for my Olympic chances and my sanity.

Hunter was still as a statue, staring at the pub with a zombie-like expression. I wished I knew what he was thinking.

Swallowing the humiliation down my throat, I tried to make light of what happened. I was full of gratitude and fear of rejection. Worst of all, I wasn't even sure what I was offering for him to reject.

"Ironically enough, that wasn't an Irish goodbye." I produced two pieces of gum from the glove compartment, unwrapping the thin foil and offering him one.

He didn't move to take it. I shoved one piece into my mouth and began to chew.

"Thanks again. I promise I'm not as pathetically incompetent in dealing with the outside world as I seem. You just always beat me to it before I have the time to kick ass."

Now's a good time to shut up, Sailor.

It was hard to believe I was the one babysitting him, when he was the one protecting *me*.

When Hunter still didn't show any signs of life, I began to worry he was suffering from a post-traumatic disorder.

"Just tell me you're okay." I felt my head dropping, along with my shoulders, exhausted with humiliation. "And I'll let you be."

"I've never fought before," he said, finally, more to himself than to me. "I've done my fair share of screwed-up shit over the years. I even ran after my friend, Vaughn, with a machete one time. But I never really fought, you know? Threw fists. Got hurt. Hurt back."

He turned to meet my eyes. I looked up, gulping his attention ravenously.

I didn't know how it was possible, but he looked even more gorgeous with cuts and bruises. Like a brand new car sporting its very first scratch that transforms it from just another car to *your* car—with history, shared memories, and baggage.

In that moment, I wished I'd never laid eyes upon Hunter Fitzpatrick, because I knew with certainty that for all his spoiled ways, corrupted behavior, and obsession with pleasure, he was innately good, loyal, and courageous.

Those things made him very dangerous to me.

Dangerously attractive.

"Not that I encourage any type of violence, but this guy's going to remember your face for a long time while he's waiting for his to heal," I told him. "So congrats on popping your cherry—and his nose—with success."

More silence ensued. My stomach growled, reminding me it hadn't been fed in over seven hours, and I gave it a firm squeeze, trying to shush it.

Hunter shook his head, finally pulling out of the makeshift driveway.

"You hungry?"

"I could eat," I said noncommittally.

He laughed, then stopped when his lip reopened.

“You know, I remembered this place more fondly. It kind of sucks. Let’s McBinge on artery-clogging burgers while our metabolism can still take it.”

“Thank *God*. The meat there looked fishy,” I groaned.

“I have a perfectly good piece of meat between my thighs, if you’re interested.”

He was his usual, gross self again. I was actually happy for the crass comment.

“Not in the slightest.”

“Your loss.”

“And every other girl in America’s gain,” I quipped.

“Not for the next five months, thanks to your ass.”

Five months.

How had it been a month already?

It hadn’t. It had only been two weeks. But Hunter was desperate to get out of this arrangement as soon as possible. I rested my head against my headrest, the pain from my shoulder and adrenaline pumping in my veins making me sleepy. I closed my eyes just for a second, but found it difficult to reopen them as Hunter started driving, slashing through the night like a knife on our way back to Boston.

Maybe that’s why he said what he said. He thought I was asleep, not just resting.

“Agnes,” he whispered. “The nanny’s name was Agnes.”

Ten



Hunter

Mood song: “Zombie” by Jamie T.

The next week sucked worse than the previous two.

My life had seemed to shift from a theme park of orgasms, designer clothes, and eternal sunshine to an ongoing, cloudy, celibate catastrophe.

First, I had to explain why I looked like my face had been chewed by severely diseased pit bulls at the office. Luckily—and I use that term very fucking loosely—Captain Save-a-Bro, AKA Sailor, promised she wouldn’t snitch on my ass in her weekly report to Da, which made me feel like a teacher’s pet, sans the fun part, where I got rewarded with a blowie (or was that only in porn?).

Sailor and I had agreed to give Da an altered version of how things went down at the pub. Basically, we confessed that I *did* get into a fistfight, but only because the guy grabbed her. That story was received with icy skepticism by Da and Cillian, and warm endorsement by Syllie, who’d sat in Da’s office when I told them about it.

Ultimately, nobody complained about how I looked like a jacked-up *Thirteen Reasons Why* character—all cut, bruised,

and limping. If someone harassed a woman in front of *them*, they'd do the same. I was just being a goddamn gentleman.

Then there was the Syllie problem. Da had shut me down and Cillian considered watching me squirm an orgasmic occasion, so I had to do my own digging. I shadowed Syllie's ass at work when he wasn't paying attention. He was still basically the only motherfucker to be remotely civilized with me, but I knew what I'd heard, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it. Problem was, I'd had zero luck and even less opportunity thus far.

Syllie wasn't taking any private calls in the emergency stairway, and I needed to up my game. In the five days that followed the pub brawl, I surprised myself with the effortless commitment I put into tailing his ass. I experienced a soul-crushing, gut-burning urgency to know what he was up to.

Then there was the final, last problem: Sailor.

I hadn't discussed what happened in the pub with her, but I imagined she was freaked out about being called fugly and having no man among the hundred or so in the pub dispute that assessment.

Let the record show that I, personally, would pork the hell out of her.

Like, yeah, she wasn't fuck-hot in an obvious kind of way. She didn't have big tits, curves for miles, lips that looked like a neatly shaved vagina, and glossy hair. But she was the kind of girl who, the more you looked at her, the more her beauty crept up on you. She was unusually attractive, but still attractive. Kind of like Lily Cole. (It took me three times until I finally managed to jerk off to a Lily Cole picture. But once I found my rhythm, she was one of my favorite models to nut to.)

There was something whimsical about Sailor's red hair and pale skin and sage eyes. She looked like a fairy from an Irish folklore, one where a lot of strange, magical shit happened.

Call me a hopeless romantic, but if I were, say, to plow into Sailor Brennan one day, you could bet your ass I'd be looking at her face and whispering sweet nothings into her ear. (Profanity

about what I wanted to do to her uterus was considered sweet, right?)

However much I found my roommate delectable, I couldn't tell her flat out, because she already suspected I wanted into her pants (guilty) and also because we'd both acted weird since the pub brawl (also guilty).

What I couldn't explain to her was this: I'd always been the idiot. The fool. The fuckup. I blurted shit I thought would make people laugh, because I was never expected to say anything meaningful or deep. Mildly entertaining was all anyone had ever expected from me. I was so committed to being a careless idiot, that the idea of *not* being one intimidated me.

With Sailor, I couldn't be an idiot. She constantly threw me out of my comfort zone, and I kept scrambling back to it.

After we'd wolfed down our McMeals and stunk up her car, we got back home and she'd tended to my wounds in the bathroom wordlessly.

In the morning, I'd walked in to find her in the kitchen. It was seven-thirty, far too late for her to still be home. I'd watched as she shoved two Advils into her mouth, washed them down with a bottle of Evian, and dragged herself back to bed. I went to work, and when I got back, she was out, probably training.

The next time we spoke, it had been about how Nora's food was so spicy our rectums were about to sue our mouths, and how we should let her go and just DoorDash everything. Sailor confirmed that finding good food spots was her talent. Which, side note, made her marriage material, if I was into monogamy.

The next-next time, I'd helped her find something on Netflix.

The next-next-next time, she'd told me she'd fixed Nora up with a job at one of her mom's restaurants, which made Nora super grateful for her wallet and us super grateful for our health.

In short: we were basically avoiding each other. *Again.*

The first few days, I'd been adamant that Sailor could do whatever the fuck she wanted with her time. As long as the

weekly snitch-a-thon established I was as clean as a whistle, I didn't have to make her a friend. Never mind that I was lonelier than a functioning brain cell in Brody Jenner's head. Obviously, I had my pride (okay, I called Vaughn and Knight so often they legit changed their numbers, but that was purely in the name of comedy).

Today, the fifth day of our cold-war bullshit, I got home at nine, strolled into the hallway, too tired to check what Sailor had ordered for us, and headed straight to bed.

"*Ohhh*," I heard a soft moan from the door leading to the main bathroom. My dick stood up alertly.

Hold the goddamn press.

"Hmm," Sailor's little voice sighed once again.

Even though a small part of me said I was being a grade-A creeper, a bigger part told the small part to STFU, duct taping its mouth and throwing it into some strange dude's trunk. The devil on my shoulder chided me to take a peek through the door crack. In my defense, it *was* ajar. She knew what time I was coming home and was perfectly capable of locking the bathroom door, as she'd done dozens of times a day.

"Ahhh," came her voice again, and my dick roared with blood, so hard I could feel the friction from my briefs against the ridge. I wanted to rub myself against myself. That was a level of horny even *I* wasn't accustomed to.

Sailor was masturbating, and suddenly, the day—despite containing ten hours of work, bickering with Da and Cillian, following Syllie secretly like some strung-out puppy, and going to evening classes—looked a lot better.

Taking a step forward, I glanced through the sliver of space between the door and its frame. Sailor sat on the edge of the Jacuzzi, butt naked, staring at the water inside through squinted eyes. Weird orgasm face, but I wasn't judging.

She lurched forward, her body folding in two.

I realized she wasn't pleasuring herself, much to my dismay. She was wincing and massaging her right shoulder, which was

swollen. And by *swollen*, I meant her deltoid was the size of a tennis ball.

Sailor tried to swing her legs into the Jacuzzi, still clutching her right shoulder, but ended up falling flat on her ass on the marble floor. The sound of her tailbone against the surface reverberated in the room. She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking silently with pain. I was about to take a step back and let her have her moment—Sailor would kill me if I burst in to save the day—when I noticed silent tears running down her cheeks.

Turn around and walk away. Not your problem, said the devil on my shoulder, same asshole that had wanted me to rub one out in the hallway to the sight of her masturbating.

The angel somehow managed to pull the duct tape from his mouth and said, *You can't be that much of a dick. Besides, it's Sailor.*

He was right. It was Sailor, and in my world, Sailor deserved better.

Annoyed, I shoved the door open, tromping in.

“Hunter! Jesus! What are you doing?” She went from sad to outraged in a second, trying to cover her tits with her arms, but she had zero movement in her right shoulder. I hooked my hands under her armpits from behind and brought her back to a sitting position on the edge of the Jacuzzi, ripping a bathrobe from its hook and wrapping it around her shoulders. Her hands still lay protectively over her chest, and her teeth were chattering. I didn't know how to break it to her politely that I'd already seen her tits (and they were way nicer than I'd imagined, and *of course* I imagined them on the reg).

Also, if I were to defend my virtue in her position, I'd probably start by crossing my legs, because she had a nice, delicate fluff of red hair nestled between her thighs that I couldn't unsee. It wasn't a raging, curly bush that screamed neglect and lice. Just a few, soft hairs I wanted to brush away softly as I ate her pussy like In-N-Out after a night of partying.

Redirect that thought, asswipe.

“Just got home. What happened to your shoulder?” I squatted down, feeling the strain of my pants' fabric against my

knees and dick. At this moment I missed living in Thom Browne sweatpants.

“You had no right to burst in here!” Her eyes flared wildly. She clutched the edges of the robe, trying to cover more of herself. I helped her by wrapping it around her and taking a step back, looking sideways at some decorative wooden log sitting on the edge of the champagne-hued Jacuzzi.

“Wasn’t planning on it. Then I heard you moaning in pain when I went to look.”

“You shouldn’t have looked!” she shrieked.

“The door was goddamn open, *aingeal dian*,” I snapped, turning my gaze back to her.

We stared at each other, panting. I didn’t know why I called her what I did, but it made me want to punch everything in the room, starting with my own face. I realized, as I stared at her really annoying face (which never failed to get my ass into trouble), that I’d missed being in the same room with her.

“You were crying. And, no offense, but that buff linebacker’s shoulder doesn’t fit the rest of your body. We’re taking you to urgent care.” I made a move toward her, and she raised her leg jerkily, kicking me in the boys. I groaned, folded in two, and held my nuts, nearly foaming at the mouth with pain.

“What the fuck!” I yelled.

“Shit.” She gasped, raising her hands in apology. “I didn’t mean to. I thought you’d take a step back if I kicked the air.”

“That wasn’t air!”

“Sorry. I miscalculated.”

“Aiming is *literally* all you need to be good at. You’re a fucking Olympic archer!”

“Technically not yet, and you have a lot of balls.”

“Well, you have not-much tits.”

“My breasts are fine.”

“I don’t believe you. Let me have a taste.”

I looked up from my offended nuts, noticing that she was full-blown smiling, and that I was full-blown fucked.

How did I not realize Sailor Brennan had the most amazing goddamn smile in the entire goddamn world? She radiated. Her face glowed like candlelight, her eyes gleamed, and that mouth...her lips weren't thin or boring at all. They were full and pink and had a dusting of orange freckles that I wanted to devour. Violently.

Dusting of orange freckles. Listen to yourself, fucker. I was cheesing so hard all I needed was wine and some crackers to create the perfect picnic scenario.

The trouble with Sailor was she had the one thing I wanted—and not an ass that had seen a surgeon and a hundred squats a day, in case you were wondering. But talent, real and raw and tended to. Her excellence burst from her fingertips. She was sharp, laser-focused, fully bloomed. Unstoppable.

Or was she...

Sailor's situation suddenly came into sharp relief.

Advils every morning.

Missing gym time.

Developing a Vin Diesel shoulder overnight.

Yeah, bitch wasn't going to get out of this one.

“Oh...uh, what's up, Hunt? I'm sorry I kicked you in the nuts, but to be fair, you walked in on me completely naked. I swear I don't need urgent care. I—”

Without a word, I tackled her, hoisted her up on my shoulder, and wrapped my arm around her lower ass, carrying her out of the bathroom. She sucked in a breath, too sore to claw at my back in protest. I was surprised to find her skin silky everywhere. The backs of her thighs were like pressed velvet, so soft I wanted to sink my teeth into her calf and nibble my way up to her pussy. She objected the entire time I marched to her room and placed her on her bed. Next thing I did was open her closet and rip out an *Anti Social Social Club* hoodie and a pair of baggy pants. I turned around and started dressing her.

“What are you doing?” She wheezed when I put her leg through her pants. She was kicking the air again, frantic.

“You’re going to urgent care,” I clipped.

“I’m fine. It’s just a little swollen.”

She tried to worm out of her pants. I couldn’t believe I was now actively keeping a girl *in* her clothes. This was hell. I was sure of it.

“Sorry, doll.” I *tsked*, finishing with the pants and moving on to putting a hoodie on those surprisingly terrific titties. “Either you need something for that shoulder or you’re going to turn into a mutant monster. I’ve watched enough horror flicks to know you’d turn at the stroke of midnight, and I don’t want to be here in the morning when you make me your breakfast. Although, let it be known, I’d be happy to eat *you* out whenever you please.”

She yelped in agony. She couldn’t even laugh she was in so much pain. Jesus.

I found her car keys, shoved her into the passenger seat, and buckled her up like she was a kid. The entire time, Sailor threatened to kill me in numerous ways, some of them very creative and extremely painful. I answered calmly with all the ways I’d wanted to kill *her* when we first moved in together, including the sunset-in-the-Bahamas stabbing and hurling her from the Eiffel Tower. It was beyond me how someone would be so obsessed with something—getting to the Olympics, in her case—that they’d put their health at risk.

After we were done fantasizing about killing each other, she refused to shut up about how this could set her back with her training. Turning on the radio didn’t work, so I decided to change the topic.

“You know at first, I looked through the door because I thought you were flicking the bean.”

She shot me a look in my periphery, her eyes full of fire and wrath.

“You can tell a lot about a person by their masturbation choice.” I shrugged, driving the empty streets of Boston. They

were becoming familiar. “Rubbing one off in the ho-boiler bodes well for your conservative personality, you know? You seemed like the type to do it with a bowl of chocolate-dipped strawberries by your side, reading a nice Danielle Steel hardcover.”

“I don’t masturbate,” she said, staring me down defiantly, daring me to challenge that.

I believed her. She seemed like the type of chick to be too busy to explore sex, for all its wonders.

I rubbed my stubbled jaw. “Because you don’t know how, or because you don’t care about getting off?”

“Both,” she surprised me by admitting.

“I can help with the former.” I cleared my throat.

“So nice of you to offer.”

“That wasn’t a no,” I pointed out.

“It wasn’t a yes, either. I’m just trying to take my mind off the fact that I’m about to get a lecture about not treating this inflammation earlier. I hope the steroid shot will help. I have an early practice tomorrow.”

Bitch was still planning to train in a few hours. Unbelievable.

“It’s just fucking archery,” I hissed. “You shoot nothing. It’s not even a real Olympic sport. It’s the shit people watch to fall asleep. Perspective.”

“I’m truly sorry you’ve never found something you care about, Hunter, but you don’t get to judge me.”

“I just did.”

“Shut up.” She scowled.

“Make me.”

“How?”

I wiggled my brows, and she dropped her head to the headrest behind her. “Ugh. Your mind is dirtier than a junkyard.”

I kept my mouth shut the entire time we were in urgent care. Sailor got a steroid shot, painkillers, and had her shoulder scanned and checked. The stern doctor who saw us told her she needed to start physical therapy, *real* physical therapy, once the swelling was under control. He gave her at least two weeks off training. She duly agreed and acted like the goody two-shoes I'd thought she was before we moved in together.

But as we walked back to the car, she said, "Can you believe it? He actually thought I could take two weeks off."

"Because you are," I replied, not missing a beat.

Why did I care? *Why? Why? Why?*

"Absolutely not."

"I should be the one sending your parents a weekly report," I muttered.

She laughed, and then clutched her shoulder.

Seeing her like that made me violent.

At home, I put her to bed and watched as she crashed. The painkiller whooped her ass good. She was down in two seconds.

Her last words were, "Hunt, it's kind of creepy that you're staring at me like this."

I high-key agreed, but I couldn't help it. She called me Hunt and told my da I was awesome and always knew what I felt like eating when she ordered DoorDash, even if we hadn't spoken all day.

She had so much passion, and I had none. Yet I jerked off three times a day, and she didn't even need to get dicked regularly.

Sailor Brennan confused me.

I fell asleep on her carpeted bedroom floor, like a goddamn tweaker.



The next morning, Sailor came out of her room wearing her rags training clothes. I was standing behind the kitchen island,

sipping a cup of coffee in designer track pants and a hoodie.

I dragged a steaming cup of coffee her way as a pre-peace offering, before I unleashed hell on her. Sailor smiled gratefully, taking a sip and hoisting her archery equipment over her injured, slightly-less-swollen shoulder. Total demon. If I were a king going to war, I'd want her to lead my army. Bitch would destroy anything in her path to get what she wanted.

“Thanks again for yesterday. I owe you a huge one. And I'm going to start by telling your dad I think he should loosen the leash on you. You really are pretty rad.”

Her green eyes widened when she talked, like a kid telling a story.

“Take a mental picture of this moment, *aingeal dian*, because it's about to take a sharp turn for the worse.” I grabbed my phone from the marble counter and tossed it into her hands. I jerked my chin toward it.

“It's unlocked. Check my call log.”

Sailor hit the green button and looked at my last call.

“That's Junsu's number.” Her eyes flared. Her entire face twisted. First in confusion, followed closely by shock, realization, and finally, *rage*.

“I called to let him know what was up with your shoulder. Texted him a picture of the doctor's orders. You're out two weeks. Sorry, baby girl.”

There was silence.

A disproportionately good amount of it.

The uncomfortable, I'm-about-to-fuck-you-up kind of silence.

If I had the privilege of famous last words, they'd be, *Sailor's tits are a ten. I know they don't look it in oversized hoodies and DriFit shirts, but it's true.*

Just then, the woman from the morning show on the flat TV screen behind us blurted from the living room, “And now I have a special guest. With us today is the gorgeous, talented, young—did I mention gorgeous? *Ha-ha-ha*—archer, Lana Alder!”

The camera zoomed out, and I saw that the woman, who sported more plastic than The Container Store, was sitting in front of a chick who looked to be my age, maybe slightly older, and wore a green mini dress. Real talk? She was bangin'. Think Margot Robbie with a mean-ass rack and legs to rival Sofia Vergara's.

The two started chatting about Lana's upcoming movie, which honestly sounded like a hot mess, and exciting love life, which—also honestly—sounded anything but exciting. They were five minutes in before there was any mention of archery. Sailor was so mesmerized by the TV, she seemed to forget she was about to gut me with one of her arrows.

The host said, "I hear that, other than the two veteran women archers representing the US, Joanna Dingham and Mary Turner, it's a tight competition between you and Boston-based Sailor Brennan. That means you might represent us in the Olympics in Tallinn next year—as well as being an accomplished actress and model, and owning your own online clothing store!"

The hostess' cloying sweetness gave me sugar poisoning. I wondered if she puked rainbows. Also, this Lana chick had more business ventures than Richard Branson. No wonder Sailor was bitter about her.

Lana giggled in a voice high enough to break a window, showing a mouth full of capped teeth. "Oh, I promise you, I will be there next year. Unfortunately, Miss Brennan lacks the focus and charisma to rise to this occasion, at least in my humble opinion. I'm going to make the US proud, and I'm going to do it wearing my new line of jumpsuits, so look out for it!"

I took the remote and turned the TV off. Without warning, Sailor picked up her shit and darted to the door. I was faster. I pounced, blocking her way out with my body.

"Two weeks," I repeated. "Get your ass back in bed. Pronto."

Rather than answering me with actual words, Sailor took a step back, grabbed her bow, and plucked out an arrow, her face void of emotion. She was vivid, loose-limbed. Also, completely deranged. But I saw the huntress within her.

She was a daring little thing, and that made me want to fuck her even more.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I said dryly. I was bailing on work for her, and if she was going to shoot me—literally goddamn shoot me—we were going to have a problem.

She raised the bow, using her injured side, and drew the arrow in a perfectly smooth motion, squeezing one eye shut as she zeroed in on me. The string pressed against her mouth.

“Sailor.”

“Three seconds to move from the door, Hunter. Three.”

“Sorry, *aingeal dian*, but I think you just met the one motherfucker who is dumb enough not to be scared of you or your family.”

“Two.”

“Meh. You don’t have it in you.” But was I convincing her or myself?

“*One.*”

She released the arrow.

I repeat: Bitch. Released. The. Arrow.

I watched, paralyzed from the neck down, as it spun toward me. I could swear it was going to nail my throat to the door. It missed by an inch, spearing the door right above my shoulder. Swallowing, I glanced to my left, realizing the arrow had caught some of my hoodie’s fabric and was physically nailing me to the door.

She drew another arrow, nonchalant as all fucks.

“You missed.” I narrowed my eyes, staring her dead in the eye.

“Fool.” She smiled back. “I *never* miss.”

“I’d rather be the one nailing you against the door.” I flashed her a Joker-style psychotic smirk, my rage toward my pint-sized, stubborn roommate spiraling into a pool of more unidentified feelings.

Thrill. Curiosity. Horniness. (Fine, there was always horniness. Sue me.)

She popped her healthy shoulder up. “Should’ve thought of that before you called me Carrot Top.”

“You little sh—”

Pluck.

She released the second arrow, this time getting the right side of my hoodie. I was now pinned from both sides. She lowered her bow, striding toward me with her chin up, a queen observing a traitor thrown at her feet. My dick was about to slip out of my sweatpants and curl around her ankle like an eager puppy. A weird image, but the sentiment was clear.

Sailor stopped with her mouth close to mine, and I couldn’t deny the attraction. It was there—alive, swelling, roaring its three-headed, monstrous crown, cutting me open and bleeding me dry. I was on the brink of goddamn madness, caused by the most unassuming, innocent, dorky girl on the planet.

Fuck. My. Life.

“I’ll release you if you promise to step away from the door.” Her mouth moved against mine.

I don’t think she realized just how close we were to kissing territory. How I could demolish her. Effortlessly, I flexed my shoulders, causing her arrows to drop to the floor with a yielding clink. My expression dead, I grabbed her waist, turned her around, and slammed her back against the door, getting in *her* face now.

“Better.” I brushed my lips down her nose, pausing half an inch from her mouth. “Much, *much* better.”

I grabbed her wrists, bunching them together and pinning them above her head. She winced at the full motion of her shoulder. I wanted to punch myself for forgetting, but honestly, I wasn’t even sure of my birthdate at the moment.

“Just so we’re clear, you may be my babysitter, but you don’t call the shots. You do not boss me around, you do not make stupid-ass decisions with your body. Finally, you do not

fucking hunt me. *I'm* the hunter here, sweetheart. And you? The goddamn prey.”

Her eyes blazed with fire, her jaw locked. I wanted to step into her pupils and let them kill me. She was a war prisoner accepting her fate to die a hero, without betraying one national secret.

“Your name may be Hunter, but make no mistakes—you’ll never catch me.”

I smirked, trailing my index finger from her jaw down to her neck. She writhed against my body, the space between us shrinking, and not just because of me.

“Already did, *aingeal dian*. Want to know something else? I will domesticate you, too.”

“Let go of me.” Her lips thinned, her voice dancing with barely controlled temper. “I have to go. You heard Lana Alder. She wants my spot. I’m not going down without a fight.”

“You’re going all the way down to retirement if you fuck your shoulder up.”

“It’s not for you to decide.”

“The doctor decided.”

“You don’t understand!” She stomped, her cheeks pinking.

I figured there was a story behind her and the Alder chick, but now wasn’t the time to delve into it. Sailor’s breathing became labored. She balled her hands into fists and jerked around, trying to break free from my grasp.

“Sailor?”

“What?”

“*Now*,” I enunciated.

“Now what?” She bared her teeth, trying to kick me.

The need to tame her made my blood boil. I wanted to fight her to the ground and devour her, ending her and ending *me*.

Whoa. What?

“I’d like to cash in on that kiss now.”

“*What?*” Sailor’s eyes were the biggest, greenest, funkiest things I’d ever seen. “What are you talking about?”

She hadn’t forgotten the kiss. I knew because, in the rare times we were in the same room, I sometimes caught her staring at my lips and wondering. I wondered, too. We both wondered all the fucking time.

“You’re a terrible actress. Granted, probably still better than Lana Alder, but dreadful nonetheless.” I leaned into her. Our breaths mingled. Minty toothpaste from her, coffee and cinnamon gum from me.

“We...we can’t kiss.” Sailor squirmed, her tits accidentally brushing against my torso through our respective clothes. Her nipples were puckered. “We’re fighting!”

“All the better. Pissing you off is my only source of entertainment here in Boston, and this kiss is my out-of-jail card. My insurance.”

“Your monthly payment will go up if you use your insurance, you know.” She quirked one ginger eyebrow. “The next one will be harder to get.”

“Guess I’ll have to take my fucking chances.” I erased the two inches left between us, crashing my mouth on hers.

She gasped into our kiss, and I let go of her wrists, knowing damn well she wasn’t going anywhere.

Sailor let her arms dangle beside her body. I grabbed the side of her face, prying her lips open with my tongue, groaning in pent-up frustration that had been building for weeks, wrestling my tongue deeper into her mouth. I was met with no objection. Sailor’s body went limp, compliant. She was surprisingly submissive. The prey accepted its fate for now. She opened up for me like a flower—mouth, chest, legs spreading apart, blooming, begging for sunrays, meeting my tongue with hers stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust. She pulled at my lower lip with her teeth, hungry, and I ran my hands up and down her neck and face. She tasted sweet, restless.

She was so drunk on our kiss, I knew she was a second away from falling flat on her ass. I grabbed the backs of her

thighs roughly, hoisting her legs up and wrapping them around my waist, pressing her against the door.

She moaned a soft protest at the same time her warm pussy met my raging cock through our clothes, grinding against me.

We kissed for ten minutes straight before Sailor realized she was grinding against my hard-on like an ambitious night-shift stripper paying her way through grad school. I could practically feel her pussy lips clutching my shaft through our clothes. She pulled away and buried her face in my neck, shaking like a leaf. Our hearts slammed against each other, and maybe it was because I hadn't had any action in over a month, but the kiss made me black out a little. It was a euphoric kind of dizziness, like I'd just taken a benzo and was unsure whether it had kicked in or not. I wanted to kiss her again, but I didn't want to overwhelm her. I usually got a good feel of what chicks wanted from me, but Sailor was impossible to read.

Knowing she could spend the next couple months with her face in my hoodie—*Death by Mortification: Girl, 18, Dies in Hot Roommate's Arms*—I kissed her neck, the only part of her reachable from that angle.

“Junsu is going to kill me.” Her words melted into my hoodie, muffled by it. Was it just me, or were our heartbeats freakishly loud?

“Why? You banging the old sport?”

No comment.

Now that I was putting my three working brain cells to use, Sailor and her trainer were kind of tight. I would expect it from people who had Olympic ambitions together, and it wasn't the first time she'd made it sound like he didn't want her hanging out with dudes.

Sailor pushed me away, keeping her head down. She picked up her shit and flung herself back to her room, probably to check on the internet if she could get pregnant from dry-humping. I wondered what was wrong with me that I was obsessing over her goddamn shoulder when Da wanted to make confetti out of my skin, Cillian wanted to spread said confetti in

the harbor, and Syllie possibly wanted to mince all of us into meatballs.

Not to mention, I still wasn't taking any calls from Mom. Some subconscious, petty-as-fuck part of me wasn't cool with her dumping my ass in random corners of the world, making me other people's responsibility—especially knowing what I did about where I came from.

“I still need to talk to him in person,” she yelled from her room.

“I'll come with you to make sure you don't do anything stupid.” I arranged my package in my sweatpants, fishing for my phone and checking it.

Four unanswered calls from Da.

Two from Cillian.

Six text messages.

Athair: I knew you couldn't be trusted.

Athair: Where the hell are you?

Athair: If the answer is in a ditch after an orgy, just know I won't be bailing you out this time around.

Athair: I'm done with you, Hunter. DONE.

Cillian: You take dumb and pretty to an Olympic level.

Cillian: Legally Boned.

Eleven



Sailor

Why didn't Beau kiss me like that?

My mind rummaged through every corner, cell, and drawer to find the answer to that nagging question during the journey to the archery club, while Hunter drove and voice-texted his friends from California.

My body was still sewing itself back together after bursting with pleasure at my roommate's touch. No one had ever touched me the way Hunter Fitzpatrick did—like the world was ending and we had to cram all our passion into one defined moment. It terrified me how seductive the man I shared a roof with was. Because that kiss had seemed genuine, ardent, and earnest, but I knew Hunter wasn't any of those things. In fact, that's what had landed him under my supervision in the first place.

I had to step away from my Hunter-induced fog.

I wondered why I wasn't more worried about the upcoming showdown with Junsu, who was going to rip me a new one for having *the boy* text and call him about my shoulder.

I wondered why I couldn't even bring myself to freak out about Lana Alder, who seemed to be putting some PR mileage between us and was likely the frontrunner for the Olympics.

I wondered what Hunter had thought about my naked body yesterday, when he'd found me shivering and crying, trying to step into the hot tub to warm my shoulder muscles so I could massage the swelling away.

Promptly after wondering all those things, I began to develop a headache.

I wasn't naive. I knew I didn't chart in Hunter's life outside the lonely Boston bubble his father had locked him in. Out of the walls of the downtown high-rises, college assignments, and spreadsheets, he had friends aplenty. Hookups. Instagram models he flirted with. A buzzing social life, hobbies, and interests that didn't include me. He gave me the time of day because he didn't have anything else to do. But he was going to forget about me approximately two hours after our deal was done.

Focus. Head back in the game, Sailor.

Two weeks without training weren't going to kill me, right? I could use them to finally answer the emails from Crystal, the bloodthirsty PR lady Gerald Fitzpatrick had sent my way.

I chanced a look at Hunter, who was recording a voice message on his phone.

“Nah, man, I'm straight. Just keeping my head down and waiting for shit to blow over. Celibacy is going well, too. I'm really getting in touch with myself. Especially my right hand.”

Pause.

“Thank fuck the girls here are no match for the Cali produce. My dick would be on suicide watch.”

Hunter killed the engine in front of the archery club, his face still illuminated by the light from his phone. I didn't know whether to laugh or to maim him. That's what he had to say after making out with me? That the girls here weren't worth his hard-on? Because I had sufficient evidence to prove otherwise.

“Thanks for the ride and the delightful conversation,” I mumbled sarcastically at the same time he addressed me, his voice taciturn. “You have ten minutes to break it to Master Dudebro that your ass is on a two-week sabbatical. Non-

negotiable. If he gives you trouble about me, just tell him you were too smashed on painkillers, so I had to take matters into my own hands. There is also a sexual innuendo there, CT.”

“Shocking. Taking a tour in your mind is probably like visiting the Playboy mansion.”

“Please. Playboy is tame. And dead. Try *Xnnx*.”

I realized with a sinking feeling that I was CT when Hunter was in a sour mood, and *aingeal dian* when he wanted to cop a feel. God, I hated him.

We stared at each other. He raised his eyebrows, as if to say, *Are you waiting for the messiah? Leave.*

I had a million things I wanted to say to him.

I said nothing.



“When I agreed to become your trainer, I thought you cared about archery more than boys.” Junsu’s white, pointy teeth flashed in menace, eager to draw blood. He stood behind his desk, tan fingers spread against the light wood like talons. We were circling around the same two subjects: my going to urgent care to treat my inflamed shoulder without telling him, and Hunter. It’d been fifteen minutes, and I was growing tired, hungry, and frustrated. Junsu was the one who’d insisted I continue training after I complained about my shoulder. Now he was upset he hadn’t been there to monitor the checkup?

As for Hunter, Junsu went ballistic when he heard *the boy* was the one who’d taken me to urgent care. He even implied Hunter must’ve taken me to a doctor who misdiagnosed my injury purposefully to hinder my training.

“I *do* care about archery more than boys!” I glowered at him, the accusation cutting into me after the make-out session this morning.

“Then what were you doing with him yesterday?”

How was it his business? I decided to humor him, for no other reason than the fact I knew Junsu wasn’t some perv who

had ideas about me. He never saw me that way. I was certain of that. And although I'd promised Gerald Fitzpatrick to keep our deal under wraps, I figured I could trust the one person who was the closest to me outside my friends and family.

After all, Gerald had no qualms about spreading the rumor I was dating his son.

"I'll tell you something about Hunter, but you can't tell anyone." I let out a short breath, looking around us, even though I knew we were alone.

Junsu half-nodded, dragging his fingers along his desk. Sweaty pads, I noticed. He was nervous. *Why?*

"You need to promise not to repeat this." I stabbed my index in the air, feeling my armpits dampen with guilt. I was breaking a promise by telling him, and I never broke my promises. But I couldn't lose Junsu. My Olympic dream was drifting away from me, one inch at a time, sailing into the arms of Lana Alder, who'd promised to take the Olympics from me for no other reason than she could.

She'd never cared for this sport, for the craft, only about ruining it for me.

"Promise," Junsu spat the word like it filled his mouth with sand. "Now talk."

I told him about my agreement with Gerald Fitzpatrick, about Hunter's sex video, how Hunt and I were becoming friends, but not lovers. I omitted the kiss, because it was a part of a one-off agreement I now considered fulfilled. Junsu pinched the delicate skin of his temple, mulling the information in his head.

"It is not exactly, how to put? Ethical."

His phone lit up with an incoming call. He flipped it over and scowled at me.

"It's kosher. Fitzpatrick offered to take me under his wing, like many businessmen do with politicians and sportspeople. It will be mutually beneficial. We're not breaking any rules."

I was big on rules—celebrated them. I had a chip on my shoulder from being bunched together with my dad and brother.

“But you sold your soul.” He frowned, his expression like a loaded gun.

“Hunter is a good guy who needs a break. I’m helping him.”

Truth be told, right now, he was the one doing most of the helping.

“I don’t like it,” Junsu said. “At all. I want you out of his apartment.”

“No,” I heard myself answer. My career was on the line—everything I’d ever wanted—and here I was, refusing the number-one archery master in the country. “I already made this deal, and I’m not going to bail on the Fitzpatricks. We’ll agree to disagree on that point.”

Junsu considered my words, watching his fingers on the desk. It looked like he had aged overnight. His face was marred with wrinkles like battle scars. It occurred to me he might be going through something, too, that he was an actual human, with dreams and expectations and heartbreaks.

“Very well. I’ll take this into consideration. In the meantime, you will continue training as usual.”

“Junsu...” I took a breath, shaking my head. “I can’t.”

“This is the way I train. In truth, you cannot afford two weeks off.”

“But I—”

“You will train, or you will look for another trainer.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong.” I heard a voice behind my back as the door to Junsu’s office swung open. Hunter swaggered in, looping my car keys around his finger.

I closed my eyes and drew a ragged breath. *Please, God, no.*

“She’s on a two-week rest period. Doctor’s orders.” Hunter towered a head and some change over Junsu, even from his place by the door, across the room. “C’mon, Sailor. Let’s hit the road.”

“*You.*” Junsu narrowed his eyes at Hunter, his entire body shaking with quiet, simmering rage. “You took her to a doctor she doesn’t know like it’s a butcher shop. You don’t know who

she is, her athletic profile. How should I know you don't want to obstruct her Olympic quest?"

"How?" Hunter blinked, making a show of treating Junsu like a world-class idiot. He was good at it—a hurricane you wanted to chase, jam-crammed with charisma, humor, and self-assurance. "Hmm, let's see. First of all, I'm not a psycho. Second, yeah, again, I'm not a goddamn psycho. Thirdly, why would I want to hinder Sailor's efforts? And even if I would, because I'm an ungodly asshole of massive proportions, why would I go through the incredible, excruciating effort of bribing a doctor into breaking his Hippocratic Oath?"

He let that sink in for a second before continuing. "Besides, it's only two weeks, not two months. Things could get far worse for her if she continues using that Hulk-sized shoulder." Hunter jerked his chin. "How do I know *you're* not trying to hinder her Olympic efforts?" He folded his arms over his chest, squinting at Junsu comically. "Making her train in this state and pushing her around."

To my surprise, Junsu began to cough, taking a good ten seconds to breathe regularly again.

"Are you accusing me of something? She needs to train."

"She needs to *rest*," Hunter countered, stepping deeper into the room. "And if you suggest otherwise one more time, or threaten to quit training her because she's following doctor's orders, I swear I'll take this to the local news and tell every asswipe who gives a crap that you're putting your athletes at risk."

That shut Junsu up fast. I got up and snatched my bag before the two of them decided to exchange more than just words. "Stop, both of you. Junsu, you're right. I can't afford taking time off. But Hunter is also right. My shoulder is useless right now, and things can get much worse if I don't let it rest. I need to attend physical therapy and get steroid shots. To put your mind at ease, I'll go to another doctor, get a second opinion." I shot him an apologetic smile. "I promise I will take no longer than two weeks, and in the meantime, I'll watch my videos and make notes about my strengths and weaknesses."

“Your main weakness,” Junsu spat, his eyes still trained on Hunter behind me, “is standing in front of me.”

“Helicopter trainer.” Hunter threw a cinnamon gum into his mouth, chewing purposefully loudly. “Clam-jamming her ain’t gonna make her aim any better.”

“Stop.” I pushed Hunter toward the door, pivoting back to Junsu one last time.

“I’ll come tomorrow so we can talk, okay? We’ll figure it out.”

A beat of silence that stretched between us, about to snap like a rubber band against raw skin.

Finally, Junsu nodded. “Keep him away from here.”

“I will,” I promised, shoving Hunter out the door and closing it gently.

The minute we were outside, I threw my hands in the air, widening my eyes at him, awaiting explanation.

“I said I’d give you ten minutes. Twenty passed before I got my ass out of the car. Twenty-five when I heard him yelling at you from across the goddamn hallway. Remind me, how bad do we want this Olympic gig?”

Since when was there a *we*?

I rolled my eyes and started for the exit. “Very freaking bad.”

Hunter caught my stride easily, and I felt my anger subsiding. As much as I wanted to keep my distance from him, I had no concrete reason to dislike him. On the contrary, he was kind of awesome, in his own roundabout way.

“Let me buy you brunch.” Hunter draped his arm over my shoulder. It was muscular, warm, and protective. I thought about all the girls who’d slept with him, how his weight must’ve felt on top of them. His sheer manhood stirred me. I didn’t swat his arm away, even though every fiber in my body suggested I should. Strongly so.

Actually, I could use some protein to rebuild all that torn-up muscle.

“I can do the buying,” I said. “You’ve done a lot for me in the past month, and I don’t think I’ve shown enough gratitude.”

I saw Hunter opening his mouth in my periphery and held a hand up. “No, sexual favors are not a currency I am offering, or accepting.”

“Too bad. Sex is the bitcoin of our generation.”

“It is actually the oldest form of payment in civilization. Prostitution, anyone?” I rolled my eyes, but still smiled.

“Why, yes, I’ll take two of those. Look, I have another deal to offer you.”

“Thanks, but no.” I quickened my pace.

“I can hook you up with the Patriots’ physical therapist.”

“You can do that?” My breath caught in my throat, but I kept my pace even as we nearly raced through the corridor.

“Money is power, baby girl, and the universe has a twisted sense of humor, which is why I have a lot of influence. But if I do this, you make out with me—full-blown, second-base, tit-sucking, dick-rubbing make-out sesh. Oh, and I get to tour that orange forest between your legs. My time of choice, of course.”

“No,” I groaned, horrified at the mention of my private part. I trimmed and tended between my legs, but I’d never seen the need to shave or wax the hair away completely.

“I’ll let you think about it.” He patted my back condescendingly, purposefully riling me up.

“How long do I have?” I side-eyed him.

“Three seconds, or the offer is off the table. A friend of mine pulled the same shit this morning. Worked wonders on me.”

Is he kidding?

Also, is that what we are now? Friends?

“Three,” he began to count, slapping the exit door open and nodding for me to go out first.

We surged through, advancing toward my car, and I smiled a little when I noticed the progress Hunter had made. Less than a

month ago, he'd stood in this parking lot, begging me to take a deal. Now I was the one bargaining with him.

"No," I clipped.

"Two." He ignored me, unlocking the car automatically.

I was about to walk to the passenger's seat, but he grabbed me by the waist and forced me to stand close to him, in an awkward half-embrace, chaining me to the moment.

I swallowed. It was just making out. It wasn't sex. He'd still be celibate. And the Patriots' physical therapist? I mean, come on. I'd be a fool not to take it.

You'd be a fool to take anything this family has to offer you. The Fitzpatricks are one step away from ruining you. They already made you cross every line you thought you had.

"One," he whispered hoarsely.

I opened my mouth. He put his thumb inside. It was warm, rough, salty. I clamped my lips around it. He pressed his thumb against my lower teeth, immobilizing me. My heart pounded so hard, my ribs were shaking with the effort of not letting it burst out. His eyes, dark blue and brooding, bore into mine.

"I'm going to have you, prey. One way or the other. Our little deals are just a way for you to give yourself excuses for letting me into your panties. Do the smart thing, and get something out of it, too. Yes or no?"

I looked up at him: a beautiful, unexpected curse, sweet poison dripping from petals onto my tongue.

No, my mind screamed, but it stood no chance. I could already feel my mouth shaping the word, giving it body and voice and weight.

"Yes."



I ate bacon, eggs, and one slice of whole-wheat bread at the diner. Hunter opted for an Everest-sized stack of pancakes, drenched in enough maple syrup to drown Canada, complete with a milkshake that he hoovered through a Tim-Tam bar, with

a donut perched on its side, like a slice of lemon on a Coke. He devoured the food, ignoring his phone on the table between us, which blasted with incoming texts.

I eyed him curiously, like he was a strange animal, something that had yet to be recorded on Earth. He felt completely foreign. Before we started all this, I wanted to think of him as a reckless, stupid playboy with very little heart and intelligence to match. Every day he proved to be more than that brought me closer to my demise.

I wanted to undress him. Inhale him. Cinnamon and laundry detergent and *that Huntersmell* that made my insides tingle. The kiss we shared was going to haunt me to the grave. The anticipation of making out with him sent jolts of electricity through the nape of my neck.

“You should probably take some of your calls,” I suggested as I watched him eat, suddenly conscious about making suggestions and grilling him again. Last time we tried to eat somewhere public, it didn’t end well.

He didn’t look up from his plate, working through his fifth pancake.

“Is that your dad?” I asked.

“Affirmative.” He stuffed his mouth with more food.

“Did you tell him you skipped work today?”

“Negative,” he said around a mouthful of dough.

“Why the self-sabotage?” I threw a piece of crispy bacon into my mouth, chewing. “You had a good reason. I could vouch for you.”

Hunter sucked his thumb clean of maple syrup, releasing it with a pop. Something fluttered between my legs when he did that. “He’ll choose to believe the worst about me no matter what. Also, work is kind of a shitstorm ATM.”

Yup. He was abbreviating *at the moment*.

“Why?” I asked, surprised.

I’d emailed his father back and forth and read between the lines. He didn’t seem displeased with Hunter. He was actually,

dare I say, pretty happy with his progress.

Hunter let his utensils clatter beside his plate, seeming to lose his appetite.

“There’s this guy, Syllie. Been working for Da for centuries. He was my designated busboy until I came here—took care of shit for me. So this one lunch hour, I want to beat human traffic and decide to take the emergency stairway instead of the elevators down, right? I start descending the stairs, and I overhear him talking on the phone. And he says these weird-ass things that sound a lot like he’s talking about my family, but I can’t prove it.”

“What did he say?”

Hunter sat back, fingering his Dala horse. He did that when he was contemplating something. It frightened me how well I knew him now.

“I don’t know, but I feel like he’d run Royal Pipelines into the ground if he could. He said Da was smug, Cillian was smart and dangerous, and that I was...” He paused. The edges of his ears turned pink, and his face turned cold and unreadable.

“That you were what, Hunt?” I tilted my head forward, asking softly.

“A fucking joke.” He stared me dead in the eye, watching for my reaction.

I brought my thumb to my mouth and chewed the skin around my busted fingernail. When he didn’t get whatever he was expecting—a confirmation, criticism, or a compliment—he continued.

“I voiced my concerns to Da and Kill. Let’s just say it didn’t fly. I wanna know what he’s up to, who he’s doing this with, because it sounded like this conversation was the tip of the iceberg. But I don’t know how. What are the odds of me overhearing him saying something compromising again? Zero.”

I tapped my chin. “But you don’t have to.”

He cocked his head sideways, giving me that look again, the look that said I was a Halloween bucket he wanted to bust open, devour one treat at a time and show me all his tricks.

“What do you suggest?” He didn’t break our gaze.

“Let’s create the opportunity for ourselves. How much do we want to nail this bastard?”

Hunter’s eyes glimmered, and his mouth quirked into half a smirk. I was the one using a collective *we* now, and I realized there was power in it. It was fun to think of ourselves as a team, albeit one that wasn’t exactly glued together organically.

“Very freaking bad.” He repeated my words about the Olympics.

“Let’s roll, then.”



I only knew about this guy because my dad used to take me to him sometimes when he picked me up from school.

Before I got my driver’s license, Dad gave me a ride to the range twice a week after school. That left us with an hour of driving around. There was no point going home for ten minutes before dashing back to beat traffic. So we’d either grab food together at one of Mom’s many joints or he’d run some errands. One of these errands was this guy, Knox.

Knox accepted people for house visits only, and you had to text him beforehand. I did just that. I had no doubt his prompt reply came because Dad and Sam were his prime customers. Apparently, he was a former FBI agent who went rogue and now spent his days recreating all the crazy stuff the feds used to track people.

At any rate, here we were, standing in front of his place in the theater district.

Knox opened the door. He was the kind of man who could have been any age between thirty and fifty: round-bellied, his skin flushed and bloated with alcohol, and eternally clad in gray sweatpants and a wifebeater.

“Little Brennan.” He ruffled my hair like I was a kid. To him, I guess I was.

“Hey, Knox.” I motioned with my hand while it was still stuck in my hoodie’s pocket. “This is my friend, Hunter. I can vouch for him.”

“I’ll need more than that, sweetie pie.”

I jerked my hand out of my pocket and called Sam, my brother.

“Hey,” he answered on speaker. He sounded on the road. “Everything okay? Asshole giving you trouble?”

“The asshole can hear you,” Hunter grumbled.

“Actually, I need you to vouch for him to Knox, Sam.” I bit my lower lip nervously.

“Knox?” Sam chuckled in disbelief.

“Don’t ask.”

“I just did.”

“Look, are you going to vouch for me or not?” Hunter hissed.

Had they met? It sounded like they had and parted on not the best of terms.

“Knox?” Sam asked.

Knox made a sound a swine might produce, a mix between a snore and a grumble.

“He’s good for it. Hey, asshole?”

“What?” Hunter answered begrudgingly. Apparently, he was *the asshole* now. Between that and being *the boy*, I could tell he didn’t exactly feel the love from Camp Sailor.

“Tell people about this place or show them the stuff you buy there, and you’re toast. Got it?”

“Jesus, you must think very highly of me.”

“Frankly, I don’t think of you at all. Be good, Sail. Talk soon.”

I hung up on Sam and smiled to Knox. “Can we come in?”

Knox gave Hunter a final once-over, nodding hesitantly. I had an inkling that he recognized him. Did he think we were a

couple? And why did him maybe thinking that make my heart do crazy things in my chest?

We sat down on his couch. Everything was dark, the shutters closed. The house always smelled like dirty cat litter and feet, but I knew Knox wasn't broke. I wondered what *his* story was, what had made him who he was today.

"I'd ask if you want something to drink, but I doubt either of you would want to put anything in this apartment in your mouth." Knox parked his hands on his waist in front of us.

"There's one thing in this house I'd like to taste," Hunter murmured, side-eyeing me with a smirk.

I elbowed him. Hard.

"So you've decided to play Super Spies?" Knox glowered. "Hit me with it. What do you need?"

I turned to Hunter. "What's the one thing Syllie never takes off? Ever?"

"His shit-eating grin," Hunter deadpanned.

I rolled my eyes, but smiled. "No, really, though."

Hunter shrugged. "His wedding ring. Glasses, I guess."

Knox nodded, writing it down on a notepad he produced from the waistband of his sweatpants—another item on the growing list of things I never wanted to touch in this place.

"Does he have a clock in his office?" I continued.

"Duh."

"What kind?"

"The generic-to-death kind." Hunter scratched his light stubble. "Black, silver-rimmed."

Knox wrote that down, too. "He'll need to show me specific images on Google."

"We also need a GPS detector for his car and anything else you can come up with to ensure we can listen to his every word," I said. "In real time. Top-notch stuff, please."

“It’ll cost ya.” Knox *tsked*. “That might require some fieldwork, and I charge extra for that. Driving the van alone to ensure quality, plus equipment, starts at a grand an hour. Then I need to set up a remote server, drop files into a shared cloud for you to access the recording and footage, and there are processing, editing, and overtime fees for weekends and after six o’clock. Depending on your needs, this could blow up to 50k a month before you even sneeze in my direction.”

“Money’s not a problem,” Hunter said coldly, looking every inch the rich bastard he was.

Knox smiled at him knowingly. “Yeah, pretty boy, didn’t think so. One more thing.” He held his finger up. “You’re in charge of the switch-a-roo of items and planting any recording devices. I play with the law, but I try not to piss on it whenever possible.”

“I’ll handle it,” Hunter said.

Knox went into a side room he kept firmly shut, leaving us in his living room.

Hunter turned to look at me. “Why am I feeling mildly uncomfortable and seriously turned on that you’ve been here before and know shit about spying?”

I laughed. “I was with my dad.”

“The respectable businessman,” he taunted.

I shrugged, keeping my face straight. “That’s the one.”

“He is loaded,” Hunter said.

“You’re one to talk.” I laughed. “How are you planning to pay for this, anyway? I thought your dad gave you a fixed salary.”

Hunter flashed me a wolfish grin. “My mother bends backward to pacify me. Venmo is my best friend.”

“Nice.” I munched on my lips.

“What about you?” He jerked his chin toward me. “You seem kind of broke for a rich kid.”

“I am,” I admitted. “I don’t take money from my parents. I live off whatever I get paid from giving archery lessons in the

summer.”

“Pshh.”

Hunter stared at the wall, considering my words for a second, then said, “We need to shower after this.” Hunter motioned with his index around the room.

“Naturally.”

“Together.”

“*Hunt.*”

“Fine. That kiss, though.” He bit his fist, rolling his eyes in their sockets. He pointed to my phone. “Bitch is blowing up like a sex doll at a Virgins Anonymous convention. Everything cool?”

I looked down. I had two missed calls from *Maybe: Crystal PR Manager*.

I darted my eyes to him, feeling my cheeks heating with a blush.

Hunter studied me very carefully. “Da might’ve mentioned you were slow to answer her emails.”

“So you gave her my number?”

“You had a deal with my family. In order to keep our part of the bargain, you need to answer this PR chick.”

“Stop messing with my phone.”

But I couldn’t fully be mad at him when he was trying to help. *Again.*

“I’ve never messed with your phone. Just your panties.”

“Ha.”

Hunter kept staring at me, his smile big and mischievous and full of things I hadn’t even known you could feel.

No.

“You did not touch my panties,” I whispered, shocked, flustered, and... Actually, I couldn’t start counting all the things his confession made me feel.

He raised his arms in surrender. “I plead the fifth and kindly ask you not to check my pockets.”

“There’s nothing in your pockets.” My eyes flared, but I couldn’t stop smiling. What was wrong with me?

“Bet. So don’t check them.”

The need to find out whether he was pulling my leg or not overwhelmed me. The ego boost would be intoxicating if he told the truth. My eyes traveled down to his sweatpants. He was hard.

So hard.

The ridge of his cock was long and thick and pointing to his stomach. I swallowed. If kissing Hunter felt so far removed from anything I’d experienced with Beau, I wondered how having sex with him would be.

Divine.

Euphoric.

Destructive.

I then proceeded to wonder how dumb I could possibly be. I’d signed a contract vowing to keep him celibate. I couldn’t sleep with him.

I looked away, munching on the skin around my thumb. When I heard Knox still shuffling around in his room, I couldn’t take it anymore. I turned around and stuffed my hand in Hunter’s pocket without giving him any warning. My fingers collided with his penis, and I almost jumped back, when I felt something. A piece of fabric. I narrowed my eyes at him, stopping dead with my fist around the fabric.

“*No.*”

He gave me an exaggeratedly sweet look, batting his lashes.

“Stop pretending to be innocent. Your innocence died a long time ago.”

“That it did, bloodied and screaming. All the same, it could be Knox’s lingerie. He is a fine-looking specimen.”

I snorted. “I’m pulling it out.”

“Hey, that’s supposed to be my line.”

I tugged at the fabric. My fingers shook around it.

Yellow.

With red spots.

Did I have red and yellow underwear? I racked my brain trying to remember. But it wasn’t my underwear. It was a bloodied piece of cloth. It looked like part of a shirt. I realized it was a piece of the shirt the guy he’d fought with at the pub was wearing. Hunter had kept it. Shame, excitement, disappointment, and every single other feeling in my emotion basket slammed into me all at once. My eyes darted up.

He curled his fist around mine, so we were both holding the fabric. He leaned down. His lips brushed mine.

“Fuck, you are easy to rattle. Your ass is so mine for the next five months.”

“Get away from me.” But my words lacked conviction. They were empty, hollow, wispy.

“Submit, prey,” he growled darkly.

“Fight harder for it, *Hunter*.”

“I’ll swallow you whole.” His breath caressed my cheek and ear, sending my hair flying with warmth. “You don’t know my kind. Arrow-proof.”

A dark, delicious quiver ran down my spine as he whispered that.

Knox came back when we were a fraction of an inch from a kiss, with me hanging on to the remainder of my self-control with bloody fingers.

He stood in front of us with a cardboard box full of equipment, cutting the charged moment with a metaphorical knife. “Ready to play?”

Hunter looked back at him, completely poised, calm, and in control, smiling devilishly.

“Always.”

Twelve



Hunter

I replaced the clock in Syllie’s office after everyone had left.

It was just the cleaning ladies and me, vacuuming, gossiping, *ohh*-ing and *ahh*-ing to the distorted Filipino station they blasted from a radio.

The clock was the easy part. Earlier today, I’d gone down to the parking lot and put a tracker on Syllie’s car. One of Da’s accountants had stepped out of his Model X Tesla when he saw me on all fours, fingering the bottom of Syllie’s Mercedes like some auto-fetish creeper.

“What on Earth are you doing?” he’d demanded, looking down his nose at me—testament to the fact that Da hadn’t claimed me as anything other than a glorified PA, minus the generous rack.

I had to think fast. “Getting high on fumes,” I said without missing a beat.

Yeah. That was the best I could come up with. Shut up.

“Is that a thing?” His saucer eyes widened.

Considering he was approximately a thousand years old, I figured he’d buy it. I pretended to wipe my nose with the sleeve of my blazer, grinning.

“Gives the best high. If you haven’t tried it yet, are you even living?”

“Will you teach me how to do it?” His plump face twisted in question.

Being the cool kid sucked balls in Boston. Plus, *this* particular cool kid didn’t even have any friends—other than Sailor, who was a potential fuck buddy, so I couldn’t get attached.

“Bet.” I stood up. “Sometime soon. Not now.”

What I really meant was when hell froze over.

Yeah, that seemed like a good fucking time to spend time with the old sod.



The day after the clock and the car came the real pickle: the glasses. Syllie rarely took them off. He was blind as a bat. When he finally parted ways with them, he put them on his desk and rushed out of his office. I may have asked the stuttering receptionist to call him urgently regarding some papers that had come about the new refinery in Maine. It was a dumb excuse, so I knew I had five minutes, max.

I bolted into his room, pocketed the original glasses, and placed an identical pair with the recording device in their place. It was some magic-ass wireless shit that streamed the recordings live. I rounded Syllie’s desk as he walked back in.

My heart dropped to my asshole. Maybe literally. There was a moment when I wondered if I was going to survive. If not, I dreaded the headline. “Young Heir Leaves Reluctant, Semi-Loving Family and Hot Roommate Behind.”

At least I’d always be remembered for my contributions to society: orgasms, one-liners I borrowed from George Carlin, and starting the bomber-jacket-over-tux-shirt trend at All Saints High.

Song of the day: “Hey, Look, Ma I Made It” by Panic! At the Disco.

“Sonny-boy,” Sylvester greeted me. “What are you doing in my office?”

He sounded chill as fuck. This was how much I didn’t chart as a threat to him. I’d been caught red-handed in his office, and he didn’t even raise an eyebrow. I grabbed the first thing within reach on his desk, a stapler, and started for the door.

“Just wanted to borrow your stapler.” I waved it in my hand for good measure. Oscar-worthy performance, I tell ya.

“Why?” He shoved his hands into his pockets. His face had random features that didn’t really gel. He was lanky and looked like the Caucasian version of Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*.

I improvised some more. “Got a little carried away with one of the interns. Ruined her virtue. Also, her pencil skirt.” I exposed my white fangs, hooding my eyes. Syllie grinned back. Wide. After all, I was a “*literal fucking joke*,” always up for a tumble in the supply closet.

“That’s my boy.” He clapped my back, letting his hand linger there for a second too long. “I won’t tell on you,” he promised earnestly, his hand clutching his heart. “For what it’s worth, I’ve always thought your da was too harsh on you. You should live a little. Have fun.”

I raised my fist to his. We pounded it. He felt cool. My job here was done.

“Yo, if you wanna get high on gas fumes later, let me know,” I offered out of nowhere, turning to him while still walking out of his office. I thought about that idiot accountant from yesterday.

Syllie laughed. “Maybe, son. Maybe.”

Adults were trash.



Later that day, I was invited to a meeting about the Maine-based refinery Royal Pipelines was supposed to open this year, which was still under construction. Syllie rallied for Da, Cillian, yours truly, and himself to take a quick trip there in the next few months to examine it up close.

“We need to keep our finger on the pulse, get a better understanding of what’s not working. It’ll also give Hunter a chance to feel included.” Syllie spoke brightly, looking around Da’s desk.

My father, who still couldn’t look at the hedonist monster he’d created, said nothing, probably his way of trying to figure out if I was worth the hassle. I took minutes during that meeting, then mailed them to Da and Cillian, knowing there was a one-hundred-percent chance they weren’t opening my goddamn emails.

Hours later, I decided to take my lunch to the public library and cram in some studying time. Eating at the library was prohibited, so I concealed myself behind the autobiography shelves. Nobody fucking cared—not about what dead people did, and not about me.

As I debated whether it was technically possible to kill myself by smashing my head into the economics textbook, I heard a familiar voice three rows down, seeping from the Braille selections like poison.

“...in motion. You’ll have to put things together quickly. I’m shooting for next month, or the one after it. Soon.”

There was a pause. The other person was talking. What were the chances of Syllie going to the library to take a personal call? Good, I realized. The place was dead, and you wouldn’t find any of the Fitzpatrick men in the library unless it was a trendy name for a brothel.

Or so he thought.

“Father and older son pose more threat than the little one, as I mentioned,” he added.

Don’t be so fucking sure.

“Keep me posted. I’ll call soon.”

He killed the call. I threw my sandwich into the trash can, my appetite gone.

He was going to pay.



HHH: When are you coming home 2night? I got nudes.

HHH: News*. #DieAutocorrect.

HHH: (tho I got nudes too, if you're interested).

Sailor: You know that means you type the word nude more than news, right?

HHH: I'm sensing you have a point somewhere in this sentence.

Sailor: How often do you sext women?

HHH: Is that a trick question?

Sailor: Nvm. Getting into PT in 2 mins.

HHH: How's the Patriots' dude?

Sailor: Good. Thanks for hooking me up.

HHH: Always happy to hook a friend up, unlike someone I know. *eyes peeking emoji*

Sailor: If I had a guilt trip every time you made me feel shitty about holding my side of the bargain with your dad, I'd be crippled with anxiety.

HHH: Sex is great for anxiety.

Sailor: Besides, I gave you Knox.

HHH: That you did. And I successfully deployed all the devices he sold me.

Sailor: I'm glad! I knew you could do it.

HHH: When did you say you were coming home again?

Sailor: Late. Got a meeting with Junsu after this, then I have that shoot for the sports magazine Crystal got for me. DoorDash away without me.

HHH: Ok. x



I ordered sushi that night.

Not good sushi, either. Sailor always knew what to get, where to get it, and who made the best food in the city. The apartment felt extra empty without her. I resisted the urge to FaceTime Vaughn or Knight as I placed my reusable chopsticks and LaCroix on the dining table, listening to a podcast about this hipster chick who lived a year in the Scottish highlands trying to

figure out if the cryptozoological loch ness monster really did exist.

The doorbell rang. I opened up. It was a woman: Asian, real babe, with a heart-shaped face and long, purple hair that looked extra silky. Banging body. Sailor-small, as in miniature. She raised the thrice-knotted plastic bag between us.

“Lights are down, and reception is empty. This place is a ghost town. Did you know the electricity is off in the entire building? I had to take the stairs.”

I didn’t, but that meant that Da’s assholes weren’t on my case for the first time in weeks, and I wasn’t even aware. The CCTV was down.

“Nope.” I took the food from her, rummaging my pocket for the tip (people who didn’t tip DoorDash heroes twice were dead to me).

“Enjoy your meal, Rapunzel.” She winked, but didn’t make a move.

“Enjoy it with me.” I threw her a lazy smile.

“For real?”

“*Forreal, forreal.*”

Sailor was out. The building’s electricity system was down, other than in the actual apartments, I guess, because my lights were on. No one knew I had a chick in here. Bonus points, it had been a long-ass time since I’d shared a meal with something that wasn’t a textbook or Sailor.

“I’m Emily.” She stretched out her hand.

“Hunter.” I took it, pulling her in gently. She fell into my chest, giggling breathlessly.

“Whoa. This place. Are you loaded or something?”

“Cocked, too.” I was openly flirting. She was openly responding.

I closed the door behind us and took another LaCroix from the fridge. There was only one left, and Sailor was going to kill me, but whatever, served her right for not being here when I needed her. We ate.

Two hours later, Emily was still here. We watched *Brick* on Netflix because she said she was crushing on Joseph Gordon-Levitt like it was 1998. Honestly, I didn't care for the movie. But the situation was nice. Natural. Our socked feet on the coffee table, munching on the organic dark chocolate the housekeeper stocked the fridge with.

It was the last ten minutes of the movie when she realized I wasn't going to pounce her. Emily put her thigh on mine and wiggled her socked toes to touch my skin. I didn't make a move, watching it play out, and knowing I was going to stop it—*probably*—but also feeling dangerously high on the two hours of freedom I'd been given.

“My bra is super uncomfortable,” she purred, pouting. “Can I take it off?”

“Is that even a question?” I asked groggily.

Hey, that's just being a cordial host.

Emily reached under the bottom of her shirt and removed her bra with her shirt still on, throwing the lacy, white thing in my face. I let it sit there, draped on my head, for comic value, popping another chocolate square into my mouth.

“You're such a dork.” She laughed.

Brick, my ass. She was interested in watching this shit like I was interested in bathing in acetone.

“Are you going to hit on me?” she asked, finally, her eyes not wavering from my bra-clad face.

“I'm a deadly sin you don't want to commit,” I confessed.

“I've done them all.” She looked at me, straight-faced. “Do me.”

I shook my head, not believing I was doing this, but doing it anyway, because fuck, I needed the money, and *fuck*, a dirty fuck was just not worth it.

“Sorry, lovely. Getting fucked is not in your cards tonight.”

The door opened.

“Honey, I'm home,” Sailor sing-songed sarcastically. She froze on the spot when she realized I wasn't alone. I sat upright,

thinking, *This is salvageable*, until I felt the bra falling from my face onto the carpet.

Shitfuckhell.

Song of the day: “Born to Run” by Bruce Springsteen.

“CT, this is Emily.” I motioned to my guest, pretending this chick hadn’t been in the process of hoisting herself onto me a hot second ago. Swear to God, the idea of fucking her hadn’t even occurred to me. I mean, in the future—one-hundred-and-ten-percent yes. Right now, though? Too risky. My bloodline, my inheritance, my future depended on my ability to keep my pants on. Plus, I was putting a dent in the Sailor project. “Emily, that’s my roomie, Sailor.”

“Hi!” Emily jumped to her feet, waving and flashing a smile. Her tits bounced, bra-less, and her nipples were semi-hard. Sailor didn’t return the gesture. I paused the movie no one was watching anyway and strolled over to my banshee frenemy.

You could feel the atmosphere shifting, dipping in dark smoke. Emily picked up on the awkwardness. She scooped up her bra, phone, shoes, and car keys while shuffling around like a harassed ostrich.

I took Sailor’s duffel bag and disposed of it in the spare room for her. “How was the photoshoot, kiddo?”

They’d put Sailor in bright red lipstick and thick, neon blue eyeliner. Combined with her copper hair, it made her look like a sexy David Bowie cross-dresser. Her eyes were still on my face. Round and wide and bottomless and *what the fuck have I done?*

“I’m out of here,” Emily chirped to no one in particular.

I walked her to the door because I wasn’t a complete douche canoe, and because I was pretty sure she thought Sailor was my girlfriend. I squeezed her shoulder.

“I’ll call you,” I lied.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Hmm, would you mind taking the stairs?” I shifted my weight from leg to leg. “Ya know, cameras and stuff.”

“It’s a skyscraper,” she hissed.

“Oh, come on. Going down shouldn’t be that hard for you.”

Shut the fuck up, my brain yelled at me. I really had a way with words.

She dashed like a bat out of hell, leaving skid marks on the marble. I turned around, raising my palms at Sailor.

“I can explain.”

She said nothing. Just stared at me. Which was worse than being yelled at, somehow.

“We were just watching a movie.”

“Were you using her bra as glasses?” Sailor inquired dispassionately.

“Actually, the bra was a recent development. She wanted to mess around. I wasn’t game.”

“Why? It’s not like it’d have made a difference. Your father probably knows she was in the apartment through CCTV. That’s why you asked me when I was going to be here today, no?”

It seemed the electricity had come back on.

Sailor didn’t wait for an answer. She sauntered briskly to the bathroom. I followed her, feeling pussy-whipped, sans the pussy. The implausible tininess of her person in contrast to the impact she had on my life made me want to tear this place to its bones and watch it collapse, brick by brick.

“Wrong. I didn’t even know her until a couple hours ago. I ordered DoorDash, planning to listen to the material Knox sent me from Syllie, and she was the delivery girl. She said the electricity was down in the entire building. She came up the stairs because the elevators were down. Da doesn’t know.”

“That sounds like a great porn script,” Sailor mumbled, turning on the tap and trying to wash her face. She tried to claw the makeup off with her fingernails. She had no idea how to remove makeup, but pointing that out was going to make her maim me with her bow.

“It does, doesn’t it?” I stroked my jaw, thinking about the positions I’d fuck Sailor if we ever made a porno together.

“Point is, nothing happened. I’m allowed to have female friends.”

“She is not your *friend*.” She air-quoted the last word, irritated with the stubborn makeup. She turned off the faucet, punching the marble counter and wincing.

“Jealously suits you, CT. Irish chicks look great in green.”

“I’m not jealous! I wish I’d stayed out so you could go all the way and screw up your life. You’d deserve it, too.” She was shouting now, throwing her hands in the air. She dashed for the door.

I blocked her way, full-blown laughing now, my arms on either side of the doorframe.

“Is that right? You’d rat me out, CT?”

“In a heartbeat,” she snapped. “Move along now, pretty boy.”

Another jab. Man, she wanted the Vitamin D.

“*Bull. Shit*,” I whispered, not buying it for a second. Even if I’d fucked Emily, her imaginary twin sister, and every girl in this building, Sailor still wouldn’t snitch on me. She’d be mad, fuming—and would probably transport every piece of garbage in North America into my room. But she wouldn’t ruin my life.

The realization made me feel triumphed.

I knew it because I knew *her*.

“I want to leave,” Sailor enunciated.

“Not until you admit you’re jealous.” Why the fuck did I even care? Ego? Blood sport?

Both, probably.

She threw her head back, her laugh rusty. “Even though I’m not?”

“Yeah. Pacify my petty ass. Tell me what I want to hear so we can get it over with.”

“No.”

“*Coward*.”

She raised her palm to slap me, swinging her hand, but I caught her by the wrist, pressing a teasing kiss to her palm, then licking it base to index finger. I covered half her finger with my mouth, licking and sucking it with a smile. Our eyes were glued together, as if in a trance. I could see her heart pounding through her shirt, and I wanted to squeeze it in my fist and tell her she'd already lost that game between us.

I'd had the pleasure of pleasuring many women in my life. But never had I seen a girl react to me the way Sailor Brennan did while her clothes were still on.

When I was done giving her finger a blowjob, I stepped aside.

“Fine. Run. You have three seconds.”

“Before?” she drawled, her hand still in the air. She'd forgotten to lower it to the side of her body. The zing in her eyes told me she wanted another round of mind-chess.

Enter Player 2.

“I hunt you down and fuck you hard. Not deal-related. Call it hare coursing.”

“Excuse me?”

“That's the point, baby. You're excused. Unless you don't want to be. In which case, you run, I chase. Get out if you're not game. *Three.*”

Her eyes darted from my face to the door. I studied her every move. We both knew this shit between us—the electricity that had nothing to do with what was going on in the building—was here to stay.

“Two. *Leave.*”

She took four quick steps to the door, during which my soul swiftly left my body, bailing on my ass and running with her. Then Sailor skidded to a stop, not going past the threshold. She raked her fingers through her hair, producing what I guessed was the mating sound of two deranged emus.

“*Shit,*” she choked, her feet glued to the bathroom tiles. “What am I doing?”

Me, in a second.

“One.”

She fell to her knees, her back to me, her head slacking forward in defeat. It was like watching *National Geographic* as a kid, when I’d asked Nanny Number Six why the cameramen and film crew didn’t help the innocent, unassuming zebra when the tigress caught it, dangling it by its neck like a heavy piece of jewelry.

Because this is nature. Only the strong survive.

I almost took mercy on her then.

Almost.

Then I remembered my own goddamn family had an eat-your-young mentality—and the other part Nanny Number Six had mentioned: the tigress’ side. It was hungry, depraved, and wanted to stay just as alive as the zebra.

Hunters needed to eat to survive.



Sailor

His fingers curled around my topknot from behind, tugging it with an expertise that frightened me until it became a ponytail.

He pulled my head back, extending my neck. I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut.

I believed Hunter hadn’t touched Emily.

But she also served as a reminder of all the girls he would touch in the future. Our six months were going to be up before I knew it, and with them, his undivided attention. He would have other conquests to make, all of them in lands he’d yet to discover, with horizons he wanted to bask in. I was just a small island he was temporarily stuck on. Of course he wanted to sample its fruit.

Worst still, Hunter knew his effect on me, knew I would never rat him out. As much as I loathed how he attracted me, I also felt weirdly protective of him, especially where his father and brother were concerned.

I was going to keep Emily out of my weekly email to Gerald Fitzpatrick, cover up Hunter's misstep, and pretend it never happened. Since the cameras were solely outside the apartment, and Emily reportedly came in and took off down the stairway, that shouldn't be a problem.

"Open your eyes," Hunter ordered sternly. His voice had a way of nestling between my legs, giving the organ between them a pulse.

My eyes fluttered open, meeting his gaze. He was a lonely prince—untouchable, yet in need of a hug. Brilliant, yet deeply misunderstood. Sitting on a throne of broken expectations and disappointment.

I wondered if he'd ever know he was smart and brave and goodhearted.

I wondered if I'd be the foolish girl to let him in on that secret.

I realized he was right. I was the archer, but he was the true hunter.

"Admit it," he croaked, his face descending to mine from over my shoulder, his lips drawing closer, inch by inch, the heat of him tangible, blazing a straight path through my reservations, mortification, and logic. "This is happening. It is happening, and you're frightened. It's happening, and I'm not a part of your carefully laid-out plan. You don't know if you have the endurance, or the guts to see this through when it's time to say goodbye."

My throat bobbed with a swallow. It hurt, but he didn't let go of my hair. "You can survive this," he whispered into my mouth.

"This?" I groused.

"*Us*. I have a glass soul, baby. Pretty to look at, but it breaks easily, can make you bleed, and nobody gets attached to it."

I parted my lips, about to tell him he was wrong, but his mouth closed in on mine, his kiss a drugging potion soaking into me—slow, erotic, and teasing. It was nothing like our first kiss, but somehow twice as bewitching. I felt his hand snaking to my front, skimming past the outline of my breast, moving down until it reached my groin. He cupped and lifted me up to my feet, holding me between my legs, still kissing me as his fingers dug through the fabric of my yoga pants roughly. He pinned my stomach against the bathroom wall, grinding his erection between my butt cheeks through our clothes. A desperate moan escaped me. He swallowed it with another dirty kiss. He kissed everything away.

He is not going to be here to kiss it better when he dumps you after the deal is over.

He shoved his big palm into the front of my pants, and I groaned, disconnecting my mouth from his and pressing my forehead to the cold tiles as heat swirled inside me.

“I’m not a virgin,” I said. I don’t know why I said it. Maybe I wanted to make sure he didn’t go gentle on me. I wanted the full Hunter experience, even if I knew I was going to regret it the minute we stepped out of this bathroom.

His cock jerked between my butt cheeks, his body molding into mine.

“Oh, yeah?” There wasn’t a hint of jealousy in his voice, only curious amusement.

I nodded, my forehead grazing the wall.

“How many?” he asked.

I wondered about the technicalities. Did we really break the celibate rule if Hunter and I just dry-humped? No. Not really. I mean, yes, it was wrong, but manageable. Besides, Gerald mainly hated how Hunter’s business was hanging all over the media. This would be our secret. Neither he nor I wanted it to leak past these walls. Hunter had his kingdom on the line, and I my career and reputation.

“One.” I gasped when his thumb and index found my clit, pinching it. The rest of his fingers slid past my wet entrance,

gathering my need for him and rubbing it against my clit. His finger pads were warm, his stroke leisurely and skillful.

I felt like my insides were melting, one organ at a time. It wasn't butterflies. No. More like moths, eating at me, consuming me completely.

Hunter kissed his way from my ear to my neck, down to my shoulder.

“Name.”

“Beau.”

“Ex-boyfriend?”

“Something like that.”

“Did you love him?” His fingers did things inside me I couldn't explain. I just knew no one had ever touched me that way. My whole body shivered, down to my soul.

“N-no.” I couldn't lie.

“Did you like it?”

The question surprised me. I didn't think Beau himself had ever asked me that. I planted my palms on the tiles as Hunter yanked down my pants from behind in one go.

“We can't have sex. We can't break the rules,” I finally managed to say.

He laughed a devilish laugh, cupping one of my ass cheeks and squeezing hard. Hunter increased his speed, rubbing my clit and guiding his penis between my cheeks from behind. I knew he was watching what he was doing—my bare, white butt being poked around.

My legs began to tremble. I threw my head back, glad it was about to be over. The orgasm began to tickle its way up from my toes to the rest of my body.

Finally, finally, finally.

“Oh, Hunter.” I hated how right his name felt rolling out of my mouth. How moan-able it was. He stopped rubbing me off, taking a step back. It took me ten seconds to realize my orgasm

wasn't going to materialize. I turned around, eyes wide and accusing.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, feeling my face hot with confusion and desire. *That* had never happened before.

He leaned against the Jack and Jill counter, grinning, his hand shoved in his pants, playing with his very hard, *very* impressive erection.

“I want to get you off,” he popped the words carelessly, so calm you'd think we were talking about the weather.

“Then do!” I frowned so deeply my eyebrows hurt.

He laughed, a hearty, joyous laughter that rang around the room like a song. “See, but I want to get off, too. At the same time, I respect your inclination not to shit all over the celibacy rule. How about a compromise?”

I said nothing. I knew it wasn't fair to expect him to get me off if I wasn't going to reciprocate. But something about kneeling to Hunter felt intensely wrong. Here was a man who may have been a joke in his own family, but to everyone else, he was a deity, and I didn't want to join his religion. I didn't want to worship him.

Because I knew he was a god I could believe in.

“I will die before going down on my knees for you.” I jerked my chin up.

He raised his eyebrows, looking both surprised and thoroughly entertained. “Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Why's that?”

“Because you're a manwhore with a sex tape. I'm not going to be another notch on your bedpost.”

It sounded ridiculous out loud, but the sentiment was clear. I didn't want to be one of many, especially knowing he chose me only because he couldn't have his pick.

“Yet you'd be happy if I got you off?” he asked, so I could face the hypocrisy of what I was saying.

I shrugged. "You're the one who started it."

So mature, Sailor.

Laughing, he approached me again, grinning like the cat who ate the canary. Lowering himself, he got rid of my pants gathered at my ankles, dumping them on the floor and leaving me completely naked from the waist down. Next, he reached for the front of my shirt.

"Just for the record," he said tonelessly, beginning to pull the fabric forward, deliciously slowly, a smirk on his face. "Looking up at me from your knees is a great fucking angle, so you may want to reconsider."

"No, thank you." I swallowed, feeling my shirt rip. The slash of the cloth against my skin rang between the walls. He threw the ball of fabric behind his shoulder, lowering me to the bathtub step and prying my legs open with strong fingers. I watched in awe as he reached into my entrance again, gathered my juices, and rubbed them against my bare nipples. I didn't know why I wasn't stopping him.

I didn't know why I even remained in the same house.

Now Hunter was the one on his knees, his elbow propped on the edge of the Jacuzzi, grinning up at me, like he was up to something. He rose, plastering his clothed, muscular body atop of my naked one, erasing my scowl with a kiss. I let him kiss me, feeling his fingers working their way between my open legs again. My body began to hum on cue, grateful for the attention.

Hunter kissed his way down my chest, took one nipple into his mouth, and rolled his tongue around it playfully. I sighed, watching him. He moved to the other nipple, this time tugging a little with his teeth as he rubbed my clit harder. My whole body felt hot and tingly.

His tongue rolled down my stomach, dipping briefly into my bellybutton in a teasing, ticklish swirl, then farther down between my thighs.

"Jackpot," he murmured as he sucked my clit into his mouth, spreading me open with both his thumbs and stretching me to the max. He blew cold air into me, and I trembled violently with an impending orgasm before he shoved his

tongue inside me in one punishing thrust. The pleasure was so profound, my butt scooted up the stair, and I let out a yelp.

“Ahhhhh.”

His tongue flicked my clit, then thrust into me again. My back arched, my entire body jerking.

Flick. Thrust. Flick. Thrust.

This prolonged my climax, which made me both grateful and enraged. But when the pinnacle of pleasure finally hit me, it was so gradual, so intense, every muscle in my body cramped, jolted, and thrashed. I quivered all over, my hands reaching for him, but he drew both my wrists to my sides, pinning me, not letting me touch him.

“Please,” I begged. “Please.”

He raised his body, pushing down his sweatpants and briefs, his raging hard-on right in front of my face. I writhed under him as his knees framed me from both sides, his erection in front of my face.

“Suck it,” he said simply.

I opened my mouth and took him in, feeling embarrassed and gratified as a result. I was breaking my own word—from only five minutes ago—because it felt good. Well, maybe not technically. I wasn't the one on my knees for him. He'd leveled up with my face. But those were just semantics.

I wondered who the hell I was anymore.

“Coming in your mouth now,” he said before I even had a chance to suck. I realized going down on me alone had gotten him off. I gave him a slight nod, feeling his hand fisting my hair, guiding my head the way he wanted it while he came between my lips. Hot, thick liquid slid down my throat smoothly. I tasted it, salty and warm and sticky.

Hunter pulled his cock out of my mouth and put his thumb inside of it instead, swiping it over my coated tongue. He took the residue of his cum and used it to rub my cheek. Marking me. He tucked himself back in with his free hand.

“See, baby? One-hundred-percent domesticated. I may be a hunter, Sailor, but I think in your case, I'd like to keep you as a

temporary pet.”

“I hate you,” I said quietly, feeling so hot with shame I wanted to explode.

He stood up, turned around, and waved his hand dismissively, his back to me as he walked out of the bathroom.

“You know, I’d have probably bought it if it wasn’t for my pussy breath. Also, you’re welcome for the protein shot.”

Thirteen



Sailor

It was a combination of many things that landed me at the mall.

First, Junsu was giving me two cold shoulders as my one injured shoulder was recovering. I took physical therapy every day with Dave, the guy Hunter had hooked me up with. I also got my shots and avoided heavy lifting, but Junsu's irritation only grew. If anything, he was now dodging my calls and always busy when I came to the range. I gathered he wasn't happy with the Fitzpatricks' involvement in my career. I couldn't fully blame him. Stray dogs weren't loyal, and Hunter was as hungry as they come. Not to mention, his reputation alone would make Scott Disick look like salt of the Earth.

Since I'd gotten a second opinion from another doctor as promised—which matched the initial diagnosis about my shoulder—I chalked Junsu's behavior up to a bruised ego and decided to give him a few days to chill.

Second of all, there was my dire fashion situation. I was getting more interviews and attending photoshoots, now that Crystal was pushing me around, and I preferred to do it in clothes that didn't imply I was missing both my eyesight and common sense.

The third reason was, sadly, Hunter. I didn't want to consider him a factor, but the truth was, I wanted to impress

him. I wanted him to think I was pretty, to make him forget about the Emilys and Alices of the world.

Okay, if I was being completely honest, the transformation was ninety percent Hunter-related and ten percent about the mounting attention from the press and my excess of free time. But that wasn't something I was eager to share with another living soul. It could be mine and my (obviously absent) brain's secret.

So here we were, Aisling, Persy, Emmabelle, and I, armed with pumpkin spice lattes even though summer temperatures were clinging to Boston's fall months for dear life, refusing to retreat, carrying our shopping bags.

I'd purchased an entire training wardrobe of tight black pants that were as comfy as yoga pants, but looked sleek and elegant, like cigar pants. My bland, snug shirts had been replaced with cropped, trendy tops featuring lace and patterns and carefully cut designs, and I'd also been successfully bullied into buying a few cute dresses I had no doubt I'd never wear.

I'd sworn to my friends that I'd throw away what they referred to as my "boner-killing" wardrobe—mainly yoga pants that had seen more washes than Michael Phelps' swim trunks and hoodies that were so frayed, they seemed to have created more sleeves for themselves. To drive the point home, my friends had decided to accompany me to my apartment. They wanted to see for themselves that I got rid of my old clothes.

"Know what would be rad?" Emmabelle stopped everything as we were on our way out of the mall. The only thing I could think of was, *to get out of here*. I wasn't going to be *that* party pooper, though.

"Getting a new shoulder?" I asked wistfully.

"Cupcakes!" wholesome Persy exclaimed.

"Flight lessons," Aisling suggested shyly, covering her mouth with her cup of joe.

We were beginning to detect a rebellious streak in our little gazillionaire friend. It made me like having her around even more. Plus, her being here made the decision not to confide in my friends about getting eaten by Hunter Fitzpatrick like an all-

you-can-eat buffet fairly easy. After all, Aisling was a member of his immediate family, which would make the revelation that I'd made out with her brother twice:

1. Gross beyond friendship repair
2. Dangerous

What if Aisling decided to tell her parents? Or her other brother, Cillian? In fact, she needn't even tell her family for it to be a disaster. If by chance someone found out Hunter and I had been admiring each other's tonsils with our tongues, and knew Aisling was privy to that information, she would take the heat for not telling her family. It was a lose-lose situation.

"Sailor should get a haircut," Emmabelle emphasized the suggestion by snipping the air with her fingers.

I shook my head vehemently.

"And a keratin treatment!" Aisling cried, wide-eyed. "A short, straight bob with side-bangs would look *so* Emma Stone on her."

Since when was Emma Stone an adjective?

"And then she'll be able to capture Hunter's heart and make him see the light." Persy clasped her hands together, blinking at the horizon dreamily.

I wanted to maim all of them with Thor's hammer. I'd even break my no-heavy-lifting rule to make it happen.

I shot Aisling a look to see if she had any input regarding Persy's last comment. Had Hunter discussed me at all with his family? But her face was blank as a patch of fresh snow.

I'm not even on his radar when I'm not right in front of his face.

"It sounds very time-consuming," I pointed out, rubbing the back of my neck. "Also, I really don't want to capture Hunter's heart, or any other organ."

"I owe you a birthday present." Persy clapped once and pointed at me, as if to say *Jackpot*.

“What’s the hurry? Your Netflix and duvet aren’t going anywhere.” Emmabelle grabbed my hand, dragging me into a salon called Citrus. It was fancy enough to host a wedding in. The hairstylists looked like they’d been purged from an episode of *The Hills*, complete with hysterical mannerisms while discussing their favorite evening cocktail.

Before I had the chance to tell Belle I had more pressing issues than Netflix (hopefully in the form of Hunter’s hard-on and other notable muscles), I was seated on a chair, my hair yanked, coated with thick lotions, washed, cut, washed again, blow-dried, sprayed, and pulled to death. I was half-expecting to look like a contest poodle by the time it was over.

At some point, I could swear I’d been held hostage there for three days straight, but by the time the hairstylist, Brandie, released me into the wild, I wanted to shed happy tears, and not just because the torture was over.

Watching my hair in the mirror was a gut-punching experience.

Slick, glossy, and super-straight tresses framed my face. I now had sharp sideswept bangs that softened my jawline. The rest of the bob fell to my shoulders like strings of velvet. I couldn’t believe it was the same coarse hair I had wrestled with after a wash.

On the train back home, Emmabelle and Aisling couldn’t stop touching it. Persy turned to me every so often and mouthed, “*Emma Stone*” and “*Just remember you can do better than Andrew Garfield.*”

The truth was, getting rid of four pounds of hair *felt* good. Fresh, even. I couldn’t remember why I’d insisted on not doing anything with my hair in the first place. I had spent the last decade so focused on archery and proving to other people I didn’t need to be popular or pretty, that the impact of the new haircut and clothes humbled me.

All the things I’d told myself—that dolling up was shallow and self-absorbed and pointless because we were all going to get old and wrinkly—felt like self-righteous BS all of a sudden. Because while I knew I was still a far cry from perfect, I felt... pretty.

Hunter wasn't at the penthouse when we got there. It was only eight, and he usually studied until late. Still, I was conscious of my disappointment at him not being there. It wasn't a stab to the heart, I tried reasoning with myself. Just a little paper cut. Surface shallow.

I wasn't at risk of falling in love.

Famous last words.

I ordered enough pho and cahn chua to sink a ship, then proceeded to try on all the clothes I'd bought while Belle put *Sex and the City* on in the background and jumped on the couch wearing a tiara she'd purchased at Claire's, sipping wine from the wine fridge (to which I kept the keys, to ensure Hunter's sobriety).

I had so much fun I didn't even mind when my friends put a Billboard Spotify playlist on.

I was strutting out of my bedroom and into the living room wearing a new pair of red heels that had cost me ten bucks (bargain!) and a matching red mini dress, tossing my shiny hair, when the front door pushed open. Hunter walked in, his tie undone, his hair tousled to death, his tall, muscled body making all of us look like children.

He held his college backpack as well as his briefcase, back from school.

I stopped dead in my tracks, the paper cut in my heart multiplying into a thousand new ones.

Cutcutcutcutcutcut.

The scene in front of him—of Belle and Aisling getting drunk on free wine courtesy of his father, and Persy taking selfies with the background view of the city—didn't even seem to register. The only person he looked at was me.

Something in the air changed when our eyes met, and I wondered if my friends felt it, too—the way the oxygen sizzled and crackled around us, a bonfire gaining body and speed and heat.

His lips parted, and the entire room sucked in a breath, save for Aisling. There was just something magnetic and animalistic

about Hunter's presence.

"I'd like to cash in on our deal *now*," he said simply, still ignoring the rest of the girls, like they didn't even exist.

The deal: "full-blown, second-base, tit-sucking, dick-groping makeout. Oh, and I get to rub you off."

Those were his words. Not mine. My mouth went dry.

"As you can see, I'm hanging out with friends." I motioned clumsily to Emmabelle, Persy, and Aisling. The latter placed her wine glass on the coffee table and pretended to read something on her phone, frowning primly.

"As you can see..." he replied in the same measured voice, and suddenly, the music stopped and I knew everybody was glued to our exchange. "I don't give a flying fuck." His eyes dipped to his groin, and I followed his line of vision, finding him hard. From this position—him standing in front of me—I was the only one who could see it. Still, the danger of getting caught thrilled me.

I shot him a courteous smile. "You can wait."

"Or they can go," he countered. "A deal is a deal, and I may be a bad businessman, but like every Fitzpatrick, I don't take lightly to being fucked over."

In my periphery, Emmabelle cleared her throat and began to collect her things. Persy did the same, and Aisling hurried to the kitchen to empty her wine glass in the sink and rinse it. I wondered what they were thinking. How badly I was going to get grilled for this scene? I didn't know why Hunter was so careless in implying we should sleep together. There were three eyewitnesses here. All of them could potentially sell us out. I knew my friends were trustworthy and would never do it. But he didn't.

Prickly, defiant, and tired of the tiny paper cuts in my heart, I jerked my chin up. He couldn't keep pushing me around. I was, after all, his keeper.

"My friends are staying," I said icily. "Feel free to treat yourself to a cold shower if you can't handle the heat." I turned around, marched to the sofa, and restarted *Sex and the City*. I

could feel the contemplative gazes scorching my face. I put on my don't-screw-with-me expression and all three of my friends scooted onto the couch next to me, though they looked more like prisoners than willing participants.

“Hmm... Hi, Hunt. Mom says she's tried calling you all week,” Aisling mumbled, her eyes glued to her lap.

Hunter ignored her, still setting me on fire with his eyes.

“Hey, Fitzpatrick.” Emmabelle crossed her ankles on our coffee table, making herself comfortable. “Looking good in a three-piece. *Boss?*”

“Please,” he huffed, looking down at her. “Do I look broke? Brioni.”

“Wow.” Emmabelle whistled low, and for some reason, I was pathetically ecstatic to find Hunter was completely immune to the charms of my gorgeous, stylish friend. “You're even more of a dickhead than the rumors let on.”

“*Dick* is the operative word,” he grumbled, stomping his way to his room, his eyes still on me. “With no one to appreciate it.”

That was my cue to turn tomato red and wish upon him every excruciating death recorded on Earth. As soon as Hunter was out of earshot, all eyes snapped back to me.

“Can I say something before everyone bombards you with their two cents?” Aisling raised her hand timidly, like we were in a classroom.

“No,” I shot out at the same time Persy and Emmabelle said *yes*.

She cleared her throat, rearranging herself on my Hunter's couch.

“I love my brother dearly. He is actually a terrific person when you get to know him. People judge him by the headlines he makes, but I know him as the guy who comes visiting every holiday with presents and hugs and funny stories about his life. But...Sailor, he is a player. He makes you think you're the center of his world without even meaning to, then disappears when he gets bored and tired of you. And he *always* gets bored

and tired of women. I've seen him parading no less than twenty-three dates in the years he studied in California. He brought a new girl home each vacation—sometimes going through them in the course of hours, like they were underwear. I will never tell my parents about you two. It is not my business to tell. However..." She looked away, out the window, so I couldn't read her face.

What was she hoping to hide? Pity? Secondhand embarrassment?

She shook her head. "All I'm saying is, remember it's just for the time being. I'd like to think that one day, Hunter will find his lobster. But at nineteen, it's unlikely it will be anytime soon."

Silence fell over us as we considered what Aisling had just said.

"Lobsters don't mate for life," I blurted, and everyone looked at me in confusion. I poured the remainder of the wine into a glass, bringing it to my mouth with a shrug. "Sorry, but *Friends* isn't the most reliable source for general knowledge. Phoebe, in particular, always seemed like a loose cannon to me. Anyway, lobsters do not, in fact, mate for life. Actually, the dominant male lobster mates with an entire harem of female lobsters in a series of flings that lasts approximately two weeks. Basically, lobsters are not like swans or penguins. They are not monogamous. They are the douchebags of the animal kingdom—the ones who vomit into people's shoes during frat parties after losing bets and own several Instagram accounts. If there ever were an animal deserving of being boiled alive, shrieking in horror, to atone for its sins, it would be the lobster. Not that I absolve this kind of behavior toward lobsters. They, too, are people, after all." I finished with a lame joke, as if the entire monologue wasn't mental-institution-worthy enough.

They stared silently. I supposed they were asking themselves what in the ever-loving God I was talking about. Why wasn't I getting to the point of Hunter and me? I decided to wrap it up, gulping down the wine and placing the empty glass on the coffee table.

“So, I guess what I’m trying to say is, Hunter *is* a lobster. I know that. Rest assured, Aisling, if I ever found myself in a state of temporary insanity and decided to take your brother as a lover, I would be sure to remember he is not the marrying kind.”

It took Persy, Emmabelle, and Aisling a few beats of silence to collect themselves. After that, Emmabelle was the first to speak.

“Snap, bitch. You caught feelings for him.”

Persy covered her mouth with her ringed hand. “Poor Sailor. This is beyond curable. Did you hear that monologue? She is legit a goner.”

“Lost cause.” Aisling nodded gravely, doing the sign of the cross, mourning the premature death of my logic. I could see where they were coming from. Hunter was dangerous. He tossed morsels of sympathy and sweetness my way one moment, and was harsh and closed off the next. He was entirely too unpredictable for me to count on in the heart department.

Or the putting-the-toilet-seat-down department.

Or any department, really.

“Maybe he feels the same. That was the plan, after all. Getting them to fall in love,” Persy mused.

“Doubtful. You heard Aisling. Hunter’s manwhore-ness is worse than we thought.” Emmabelle frowned, like she was in the middle of calculating our next move.

“I don’t even like him.” I all but bared my teeth, bursting into nervous laughter. My phone buzzed with a text message. It was the food. Persy went to pick it up from the lobby while I shook my head, praying the walls were thick enough for Hunter not to hear this.

“Just be careful.” Aisling rubbed my arm.

“*Jee. Sus.* What makes you think I want to do anything other than punch your brother’s face?”

“The fact that you just very passionately described to us how *dispassionate* you are about him?” Emmabelle offered.

“You also looked at him like you were about to jump his bones,” Aisling supplied, tucking her chin to her chest.

“Additionally, your face turned red the minute he walked in, and has yet to take on a more human shade,” Emmabelle concluded.

“Sorry to disappoint, but there’s nothing going on between us.” I folded my arms over my chest. Now I was full-blown lying, but I was too mortified to backtrack. How dumb was I to ever let him touch me? To let things progress the way they had?

“Okay,” Aisling said.

“Right,” Emmabelle echoed.

“Food’s here!” Persy burst through the door with two huge plastic bags in her hands. Hunter materialized from the hallway, freshly showered, his blond curls damp and delicious against his glowing skin, clad in his eternal gray designer sweatpants and a black muscle shirt that showed off his ripped, bronze abs.

“You’re needed.” He pointed at me.

“What for?” I eyed him warily. If looks could kill, Hunter would be sliced in half, bleeding on the marble floor.

“Got a spider in my bedroom, and I need you to kill it.”

It was the lamest excuse I’d ever heard.

Aisling looked up, horrified. “You ask Sailor to do those things?” She wrinkled her nose.

Hunter acknowledged his sister for the first time since he’d gotten home with a frosty look.

“Chauvinism is beneath you, Ash. This is the twenty-first century. You got any idea how bangin’ I look in an apron? Come, CT.”

CT. God. I was going to stab him.

“CT?” Emmabelle raised a thick, carefully brushed eyebrow.

“Carrot Top,” he supplied.

“Wow, you’re a jerk,” she muttered.

“Wait till you meet my older brother. He makes murderers in solitary confinement look like a basket full of kitties.”

“As power-drunk as I am to rise to the occasion, you can do it yourself.” I looked away, helping Persy arrange all the food on the coffee table.

“Been doing enough DIY under this roof.” He waved his right hand, winning chortles from Persy and Belle and a disgusted look from his sister. “But no sweat. Guess I’ll transfer the spider straight to your room.”

There wasn’t any spider. I knew it. He knew it. Only my friends had such little faith in him that they actually believed Hunter was capable of tasking me with this mess.

“You do that. Put it on my pillow. Somewhere I can find it.”

“Got it, boss.” He mock-saluted, turning around and marching back down the hallway. I popped a tempura zucchini into my mouth, pretending not to obsess over the slight chance there *was* a spider, and that it was about to be put on my pillow. If Hunter did find a spider to use as an excuse to get me alone, I had no doubt he’d retaliate by making good on his promise. If anything, that would make me migrate to the living room or his bedroom for the night.

Cunning, blue-blooded bastard.

And his family thought he was stupid.

Hunter made a show of going into his en-suite bathroom as loud as humanly possible, filing from his room to mine, whistling the *Kill Bill* theme song calmly. Emmabelle burst out laughing, while Persy and Aisling exchanged worried looks. I stayed put, my body humming with the need to jump and take a look.

A spider.

On my pillow.

The suspense was killing me.

Maybe the spider itself was next. What if it was a black widow? A red-backed spider?

I shot to my feet. “I’m just going to...” I motioned with my hand to my room.

My friends nodded in unison.

“Yeah, you probably should,” Persy squeaked.

I sailed through the hallway on those damn heels, looking left and right, finding Hunter trooping back to his room, his back to me. I chased him, snatching the hem of his muscle shirt. He ignored me, essentially dragging me into his room, since I didn’t let go. Rather than giving me the time of day, he continued straight into his bathroom, disposing a piece of tissue into the trash can.

The tissue he used to move the spider from point A to point B?

“There isn’t a spider.” I scowled at him.

Our eyes met in the mirror. He looked down to turn the tap on, a small smile on his face. He took his time, washing his hands from the probably imaginary spider, toweling them off, then turning around to face me. When he did, he crowded me with his body, making me take a step back toward the shower. The glass door was open, and my injured shoulder bumped into it. I winced.

Hunter picked up a wisp of my freshly cut hair, rubbing it. We both watched the magnificent softness of it, so delicate I feared it’d melt like butter between his fingertips.

“Chopping your hair off won’t stop me from grabbing it when we have sex,” he said tonelessly.

I looked away, feeling my face heat. “Is there, or isn’t there a spider in my bedroom?” I asked, my breath dancing behind my ribcage.

Hunter still frowned at my hair, taking another step forward. I took another step backward, careful not to hit the tiles.

“Sly little banshee you are, letting us all believe you were dull-looking.”

“I am dull-looking,” I countered, still worried about the spider.

He shook his head, his gaze sliding from my hair to my eyes.

“What am I going to do with you, *aingeal dian*?” He wrapped his hands around my neck and face, tilting my head upward.

Watching him watch me felt like being buried alive. Before his eyes landed on me, I’d felt like I was wearing the wrong skin, the wrong face. Because of his gaze, I felt beautiful, and that was seriously addictive.

I took another step back involuntarily. This time my back did hit the tiles with a soft thud.

“We need to stop,” I croaked.

“Stop what?” He feigned innocence, his intense expression turning blank.

“This thing between us. You’re a master at flings. I’m not. I just came here to know if there’s a spider in my room.”

“There isn’t,” he said easily, one of his hands reaching behind me. “And let’s not insult your intelligence by pretending this was about the fucking spider.”

“You’re the one who came up with this scheme,” I reminded him.

I wondered about numbers as his body inched closer to mine, tantalizingly hot and inviting and irresistible.

Number of hearts that perished in the Hunter-storm wake.

Number of times he’d heard the word *no* and effortlessly turned it into a *yes*.

Number of tears shed because of this gorgeous creature, who couldn’t help being who he was.

“Aye,” he hissed, pressing me against the tiles now, my chest against his upper belly, our thighs aligned, our mouths almost brushing. “But I’m never above insulting my *own* intelligence.”

“Hunter Fitzpatrick, what are your intentions with my virtue?” I looked up, asking for the first time in a real, straightforward fashion.

He smirked down at me.

“Funny you should ask, Miss Brennan. I’m afraid I’m going for complete destruction.”

With one swift movement, he turned on the shower spray, soaking us both. I let out a cry, holding on to his body as the cold water pelted my flesh punishingly. I heard his gravelly laugh as he scooped me up and wrapped me around him like I was an octopus, dipping his mouth to mine before I could protest.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I remembered I had friends waiting in the living room, and that one of them was blood-related to the person devouring me in his shower, while we were both fully clothed—me with a red dress and matching heels still on.

It also didn’t escape me that I was making the very same mistake I’d vowed not to make in the living room minutes ago, when Aisling reminded me who her brother was. But I was completely helpless. Captivated under his spell.

“You’re a lobster,” I mumbled into our kiss as his tongue explored the inside of my mouth. My hand found his shaft through his sweatpants and rubbed of its own accord, feeling it swell and jerk. He was my self-medication. My alcohol. My cocaine. My un-prescribed ADHD pill, designed to enhance my emotional performance.

“Is this a *Friends* reference? Because I’m Gen-Z and not completely immersed in popular nineties culture.” He pushed my panties to the side under my dress, fingering me. I groaned as his fingers met my insides again. My flesh was still sore from him entering me with his fingers and tongue yesterday. But every sore inch of me wrapped against him, squeezing and welcoming him like a vise.

Welcome home.

“Lobsters are nature’s whore. They just have this awesome reputation as monogamous creatures. Which is...stupid. So stupid. They are literally the cockroaches of the ocean,” I blabbed, letting him kiss me while the water pounded on us. He *hmmmed* into my neck, his mouth moving down to my breasts.

“I hate lobsters.” I sighed as his fingers curled in that way that made my insides clench. I was desperate to stay outside the moment, to absorb from afar. “And I hate *Friends*.”

He stopped devouring me, taking a step back. Water dripped from the tip of his straight, narrow nose. His square, dimpled chin and pouty lips glistened with water. It clung to his eyelashes—he had great lashes, like Zayn Malik—enhancing his ruthless beauty even more.

“Are we okay?” He sloped his chin down. It was *we* again.

I shook my head. “I know we made a deal, Hunter, but I don’t know if I can do this again.”

“Do what?”

“Kiss you. Suck you off. Have your mouth on me. As you said, this is temporary, and I don’t know how you’re going to walk out of this, but if I’m being honest with myself, I think I might get hurt if I let it go further. I’m that type of girl.”

“What type is that?”

“The one who gets attached.”

“You’re stronger than getting attached to the likes of me.”

“I am strong, yes. But being strong doesn’t mean never getting hurt. It means having a high pain tolerance. I’m not dumb enough to amp it up.”

He sobered, scrubbing his cheekbone with his knuckles. Hunter turned off the water, which somehow made me feel even colder. I couldn’t read his face. He had many facial expressions, added proof he was far from stupid.

He regarded me with cold courtesy.

“Is that why you changed your hair? Got a new wardrobe? Because you don’t want us to continue doing this?” he asked evenly. He was too proud and self-assured to be hurt by this.

I let my shoulders rise and fall. “Maybe I wanted to impress you. But you shouldn’t let me.”

“Too late,” he said, reaching for his towel and throwing it into my hands. “But if that’s what you want, I respect that.”

“Do you really?”

He bobbed his head in a silent yes. It felt like the end of something big. Something life-altering. Something Mom and Dad had been praying for.

I wiped myself off as much as I could and returned to the living room with my tail between my legs. None of my friends asked me about my damp hair or sullen expression. I watched them eat, hugged them goodbye, and observed them from the floor-to-ceiling windows as they huddled toward the train station, figures hunched, probably talking about the curious case of the spider.

I dragged myself to bed.

Sleep never came.

Fourteen



Hunter

Song of the day: “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction” by The Rolling Stones.

The day after Sailor cockblocked me, everybody seemed deliciously murder-able.

Da was a cunt, Cillian’s horns were extra pointy, and Syllie was holed up in his goddamn office, not doing anything suspicious or noteworthy. Knox was on payroll recording his ass pretty much twenty-four-seven and living in a van to make sure he caught every conversation the fucker had, and still, nothing.

I got hit on by two secretaries who forgot the memo that I was the office airhead or were sent by Da as a test. I turned them down in a less-than-polite fashion (“My cock is on dickation”).

I thought about texting Sailor—came close to doing it three times—but realized it would be selfish.

Anyway, she wasn’t completely wrong.

Our bitch of an arrangement had three months to run its course, and then she was going to beat it (and I would finally stop beating one out).

Obviously, I would be sad to see her go, but keeping her had never been an option. If I had to guess, the loss of Sailor would feel like the loss of a really good pizza some asshole sneezed

on. It'd suck balls, but at least I'd have had a taste, and there were more restaurants to choose from.

Anyway.

Sailor wasn't there when I came home that evening from another grueling night class. This time I did text her, just to make sure she was okay. She was. She texted back that she was returning to the archery club after spending time with Ash and the Sweet'N Low version of the Olsen twins. Sailor was spending a lot of time with Ash, which made me believe maybe I'd see her even after our arrangement was donezo.

Only for that to work, I'd have to pick up my mom's calls and actually spend time with my family. That wasn't going to happen anytime soon, though I'd promised Da to attend family social functions.

The following night, I crashed before Sailor made it home. Today, I'd left her a note with a coffee before I went to work, wishing her a good day, because apparently I was turning into someone's sweet grandma.

The first thing I noticed at work was that Sylvester wasn't there.

"Seen Syllie?" I stuck my head into Cillian's office. He was sitting behind his desk, drowning in refinery blueprints. He was wearing a tailor-made Oxxford and had his hair slicked back neatly. He was punchable to a goddamn fault.

He looked up, his lips puckering in annoyance at my existence. I knew I cramped his style with my general loser-ness. It was like running the White House with David Hasselhoff as vice president.

"His wife is going through a minor medical procedure. He won't be here today."

"No shit. She okay?" I couldn't hide my mirth, which sucked. But his absence meant I could snoop around his office. I hoped it wasn't anything serious—just like, removing a mole or getting a boob job (if those were even a thing anymore. Everybody knew the world was all about ass-plants now).

“And what, pray tell, made you mistake me for someone who cares?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but he shooed me away with a flick of his wrist, his eyes still on the blueprints. “Never mind. Life’s too short to hear your answer.”

“Asshole,” I muttered, glowering at him.

“That, I am. And as one, I tend to shit over those who piss me off. Better step back, *ceann beag*.”

After those parting words, I bolted to Syllie’s office, drew the blinds to his glass walls, and started sifting through his drawers to find anything that could clue me in on his plans.

I was about to leave his office empty-handed when I noticed something on his desk, in plain sight—somewhere I hadn’t even thought to look. A piece of paper. I reversed, frowning at it. It was a list of names. Most of them I didn’t recognize, but one stood out, because it was the same chick who did PR for Sailor. Why would Syllie need PR? What scandal was he planning on extinguishing? He wasn’t running for political office, that was for damn sure. He was the kind of fuckface who only cared about making money. The public sector wouldn’t appeal to him. I took a picture of the names with my phone, making a mental note to Google them, and dashed out.

The minute I was out of his office, I collided with a dainty body.

“Hunter,” a delicate shriek whined.

“Mom?”

Ech.

She clutched her little Balenciaga purse to her chest, wearing a dress with a matching pattern. Jane Fitzpatrick had brought the looks into the union between her and Da, and I took after her in that department. She looked beautiful, and equally as pissy. Eyebrows pinched together, mouth flat.

“You’ve been avoiding my calls,” she said. No *Hi*. No *How are you doing?* Straight to stating the fucking obvious.

You’ve been avoiding me, I wanted to counter. *For thirteen years, to be exact. When Da wanted to send me away, you*

should've said no. When I got kicked out of Eton, you should've brought me back. You never fought for me, Mom. Why would I fight for you?

“Been busy.” I popped a cinnamon gum into my mouth, starting for my station outside Da’s office. Back to my doggy spot. “Need anything?”

Parenting classes?

Moral compass?

A fucking heart?

“Yes. Some time with my son.”

Ahhh, not that. She continued, undeterred, as she quickened her pace to catch up with me.

“Your father said we’d be seeing more of you, that it was a part of your deal. But every time I contact Sailor regarding making arrangements for dinner, she says you’re too busy, and you never answer your phone.”

Sailor had been cutting me some major slack in recent weeks. Truth was, I straight up dodged them. So far I’d managed to do pretty well. Between college, work, Sailor’s injury, and that pub brawl, my life had been a goodie bag of calamities.

“Shame, Mom. Well, anyway, we’ve seen each other today, which has been good. Great. That should tide us over until next month.”

“Actually, you’re coming this week.” Her high heels stubbed the marble floor angrily. I felt like an asshole for making her chase me, but not enough to stop.

“Explain.” I rounded the corner. She followed.

“I talked to Sailor. She said she’ll make you come, no matter what.”

That certainly wasn’t what she told me when I actually tried to come with her in my arms, I thought testily. Still, it annoyed me that my grip on Sailor was loosening. She really was taking a step back from that thing between us, hence the plans with my mom.

“She’s my PA now. Sweet.” I stopped at my desk and flipped through files without purpose just to look busy. “Well, it’s settled, then. Anything else?”

“Yes. It’s on Friday. I’m cooking. And I have another question.”

“Of course you do.”

I was turning into Cillian, and I hated it. Being a cunt did not come easily to me.

“What did I ever do to make you hate me?” She looked up at me, and I could see in my periphery that her eyes were shining with unshed tears. *Fuck*. This wasn’t a conversation I wanted to have—in the office or at all. I didn’t look up from the file I was browsing through.

“Nothing. I think it’s safe to say you did absolutely nothing for me,” I said, amending, “I mean, *to* me.”

I closed the file with a thud, sparing her the look she’d been begging for.

The idea of having Sailor watch firsthand how little my family thought of me was infuriating, but inevitable. She already kind of had, at the charity bullshit, but she hadn’t been sitting with us, so it wasn’t like she’d experienced it from the front row. I shouldn’t care, anyway. As established, we were nothing to each other.

“I wish you knew the whole story.” She sniffed, looking down.

“I wish I cared.”



HHH: Thanks for the ambush dinner.

Sailor: Anytime.

HHH: ← Not going.

Sailor: ↑Not optional I’m afraid. My parents are going to be there. Sam, too.

HHH: Sounds like an intervention.

Sailor: Nope. You’ve got your sh*t together.

HHH: I can't believe I went down on a chick who doesn't spell the word shit.

Sailor: Hunter!

HHH: What? It's like one step away from a nun. I feel like this is bucket-list-worthy. Can I strike off nun?

Sailor: I'm agnostic.

HHH: I'll show you the light.

Sailor: You've already shown me plenty of things. None of them godly.

HHH: Not according to your moans.

No answer. Of course I had to take it one step too far. This was when I usually gave up on a chick, chalking it up as too much work. But with Sailor, her defiance turned me on.

HHH: Am I going to see you today?

Sailor: I'm watching tapes after practice until late. Then I have a photoshoot for a sports mag.

HHH: *Crosses off fingering a celebrity, too.*

HHH: I'll wait. What 2 DoorDash?

Sailor: Do they deliver manners?

HHH: Sushi with a side of my superior sense of humor it is.

Sailor: Try to make sure the delivery person keeps their clothes on this time.

HHH: No promises.



That night, Sailor and I had sushi while listening to Syllie's tapes and trying to decode some of his conversations. It felt like buddy studying for a test together or some shit. I kept punctuating my speech with my chopsticks and asking her: "And what about that?" "Did you hear what he just said?" "Does that sound suspicious?"

We came to some conclusions, though not exactly groundbreaking shit. Syllie definitely hated Cillian with Shakespearean fucking passion. He hated Da, too, but tried to remain professional when talking shit about him. He didn't talk about me at all, something neither I nor Sailor pointed out for the sake of my ego, which currently was unsalvageably destroyed.

RIP, pride. Can you miss something you've never had?

“I think,” Sailor said as she packed up the empty containers, getting ready to throw them into the recycling bin, “he is definitely hiding something. And if you want something bad enough—more than the person you’re up against—you always get it. So, yeah, you can nail him.”

I'd rather nail you. “Are you speaking from experience?” I asked. I wanted to know why she always looked one step away from dismembering Lana Alder. Not that Sailor needed much to get riled up, but her hatred toward the hot archer seemed personal, intimate. I knew my roommate, and she didn’t blacklist people unless they were major-league cunts.

“I don’t know,” she said quietly. “Guess I’ll find out soon.”

“I’ve seen her in action.” I slam-dunked an empty can of LaCroix straight into the recycling. We both knew who I was talking about. “She’s not a natural-born archer. She ain’t you.”

“Talent is just one ingredient. It doesn’t make for a perfectly executed dish. There are other factors to consider.” She kept herself busy tidying the coffee table.

“You have the recipe, too.” I took the trash from her, disposing of it myself.

“Then why is she winning?” she asked softly behind me. “Because right now, it looks like she does. What does she have that I don’t?”

“Fame.” My back was still to her as I continued moving about.

“And beauty,” she finished.

I wanted to say that no, Lana Alder didn’t hold a candle to her mysterious, punch-to-the-balls beauty. That Sailor had discipline and passion and morals, and you couldn’t beat those with a toothy, white smile.

I knew, because I was a Lana, and the dudes with the talent always left me eating dust when it came to the finish line.

Look at my friend Vaughn, who got an internship in England.

Or Knight, who was attending his college of choice and slaying the fuck out of life.

I wanted to say reality catches up with the myth. Always.

Instead, I walked back to her and kissed her temple. “Just fame,” I said.

She nodded, seeming to understand all I wasn’t saying. Sailor reciprocated by pressing her hand over my heart, stopping me from moving away.

“About Syllie,” she said. “What he said about you... I just want to share something my father once told me. He said if you love someone, and they love you, there’s no point taking offense in what they say or do to you, because they never mean you harm, anyway. And if you don’t love someone, if you don’t care about them, then there’s no point in taking offense in what they say or do to you, because you don’t care about them. Either way —”

“You don’t get offended,” I finished. It was a fair point; even I had to agree.

She smiled. “Yes. This Sylvester Lewis guy, you don’t care about him. Don’t make it personal, then. Just bring him down.”

We shared an awkward hug, during which I wondered when my limbs had turned so goddamn clumsy, and then I retired to my bedroom before I did something stupid.

I got an incoming text message before I’d even closed the door. *Sailor?*

Maybe she changed her mind.

Maybe it’s a booty call.

That temple kiss was a killer.

But no, it was Alice, my old flame. The chick my father may or may not have paid a fortune to keep her mouth shut. I never bothered to ask her if she jumped on the bandwagon, because the answer would hurt like a bitch. Still, I’d messed around with her not even weeks ago. What was fucking wrong with me?

Everything, you moron. That’s why you have a babysitter.

I opened the message. It was another thirst trap. This time a picture of her pink-lace-covered crotch with her hand shoved inside the panties. Real subtle. It was followed by an actual text.

Alice: Skype? ☺

I turned my phone to silent and crashed, dreaming of Sailor straddling my face and riding it.

When I woke up, all I had were nocturnal emission, a killer headache, and a thirst for Syllie's blood.

Fifteen



Sailor

Hunter used a GPS app to get to his parents' gigantic mansion.

He didn't know the way by heart, something he admitted to me with a sullen frown that ripped through my chest like a bear's claws. We had to be buzzed into the premises after waiting at the iron-wrought gate for fifteen minutes for a servant to open for us.

"Sorry I don't have a key," he mumbled sourly. I nodded.

"God. This place looks like the Castle of Otranto. You sure your grandfather's ghost isn't roaming around?"

"If it is, I bet it's taken up residence in the help quarter's bathrooms. He was a notorious rake."

"Takes one to know one."

"I'd be hiding in the showers—not my parents'. But damn, it'd be a good time."

The trip up the drive went silently, me clad in a sensible, off-white dress—mainly to appease his parents—and Hunter with a sour frown. The gates rolled closed slowly behind us, almost tauntingly so.

My parents were going to crap themselves when they saw me wearing something so feminine, but I knew Hunter was on

edge about this visit and wanted things to go as smoothly as possible.

Guilt also gnawed at my gut for shutting him down for the rest of the week leading to today. Part of it was about protecting myself from getting attached to him, and the other part was trying to extinguish public relations fires.

The day after Hunter and I shared sushi and that temple kiss, Lana Alder had challenged me to discuss the feud between us during her appearance on *Rise and Shine, America*. I watched the video on YouTube on repeat while sitting on the toilet, long after I finished my morning pee. She'd grinned slyly as she turned to the camera.

"I wish I could be as supportive to Sailor Brennan as I am toward my other Olympic sisters. Unfortunately, she did something unforgivable to me. I think it's high time she addressed it publicly, seeing as she's been relentlessly promoting herself in the media. People need to know the real Sailor Brennan, not the person she tries to appear to be."

Lana went on to suggest that someone with heavy pockets must be backing me, but she made it sound like whoever it was also rolled me between their sheets. I got a phone call from Crystal not an hour after the interview aired, her phlegmy smoker's cough assaulting my ear.

"You have to tell me what happened between you and Lana so I'll know how to approach this."

"I can't," I croaked. I didn't want to repeat it in anyone's ears.

"That bad?"

I nodded, forgetting she couldn't see me. I squeezed my eyes shut. "It was an accident."

Hunter had tried to talk to me about it a few times, but confiding in him would have led to more questions, which equaled more intimacy, which resulted in total disaster.

We finally reached his parents' house, and our car slid around the circle drive. Hunter parked next to a handcrafted fountain: the silhouette of a maiden holding a bowl above her

head, the water pouring from it around her like a waterfall. The fountain—as the rest of the estate—was lit in warm, champagne lights. I noticed my father’s Maserati already parked there, as well as Sam’s matte-finish Porsche 911 and a brand new black Aston Martin Valkyrie that admittedly looked like a squashed ladybug.

Hunter rounded my car to open the door for me, oblivious to the stinking wealth he wasn’t a part of.

Jane greeted us at the door, flinging herself into Hunter’s arms. She received a pat on the back. My parents and Sam were evidently somewhere in the castle, getting their tour from Aisling, Cillian, and Gerald. Everyone was dressed formally, and everyone eyed me like I was a ticking bomb about to detonate all over the vintage furniture.

Which, just like the exterior of Avebury Court Manor, was noteworthy.

Everything here was big and extravagant. The first floor stretched across what could easily be three football fields. The limestone beneath my feet was a dramatic shade of crème, with accents of gold, copper, and bronze. The central chandelier dripping from the high ceiling was made of dozens of vintage champagne bottles with little lights inside them, and the vases across the hallways were the size of a fully-grown person, crammed with fresh, oversized flowers.

“Come, I’ll give you a tour. There’s a bowling alley, gym, two swimming pools, and a candy bar.” Jane tugged at my hand, barely containing her joy at having us around.

A candy bar?

Hunter must’ve seen the look on my face as his mother dragged me toward the other side of the floor, because his palm found my free hand and rubbed the inside of it. “You heard right.”

“I thought my ears were failing me.”

“Nope. Just your panties. Get rid of them.”

We exchanged a private grin as Jane began to babble about the architecture of the castle.

The tour took forty minutes, and we still couldn't cover all the rooms on the first floor. By the time we were done, I wasn't so heartbroken that Hunter hadn't grown up here. This place wouldn't feel like a home in a million years. For the entire tour, Jane tried to strike up a conversation with her son. She was met with polite, dry responses. Hunter regarded her with distant civility. It reminded me of a potential buyer who was listening to a pitch from a realtor, rather than a conversation between a mother and her son.

Finally, we returned to the dining room. My parents and Sam were there, back from their own tour from hell. I hugged them.

Sam said, "Whoa, a dress."

I punched his arm. "Take a hike."

"No, thanks. I'll get lost in this nightmare of a house."

Aisling, who stood next to Sam, let out a nervous laugh, blushing as she looked at him. He ignored her.

"Again, I'm right fucking here." Hunter narrowed his eyes at me.

Sam's gaze flicked to my roommate. "Is he treating you well, little sis?" he asked, not breaking his hold on Hunter's gaze.

I rolled my eyes. "That's for me to take care of. Welcome to the twenty-first century, *big bro*."

"That wasn't a yes," Sam pointed out.

"He is treating me fine," I said.

When we sat down, Mom squeezed my hand from across the table and winked.

"You look good, my love."

"I *feel* good." I smiled, reassuring her. I felt like crap, actually, except for my shoulder, which was better now. I was hysterical about the Lana business, and the proximity to Hunter didn't help matters, either. I had the terrible sense of losing control, or maybe realizing I'd never had it in the first place.

“Not too good, I hope.” Dad flashed Hunter a look full of menace, which Hunter met, unblinking.

“Way too good, unfortunately for me,” Hunter muttered.

“Aaaand it’s showtime.” Cillian plucked a glass of wine from a silver tray offered to him by a servant, sitting back indulgently.

“Front-row seat,” Sam remarked next to Cillian, and the two clinked their glasses with condescending smirks.

“*Ceann beag*, do you think you can manage one dinner without offending everyone at the table, including some of the dishes and decorations?” Gerald inquired coldly, taking a seat at the head of the table.

He hadn’t bothered greeting me when we walked in, and he’d barely glanced at Hunter. In fact, the only time he *did* look at us was when Hunter was oblivious to him. Then he’d sneaked a peek. It was like he was having a one-sided power struggle with his own son. It made me want to hurl a fork in his direction.

Hunter took a glass of wine from the tray, offering it to me, before plucking one for himself. He was walking on thin ice—stomping on it, more like—and I couldn’t blame him. The air was thick with aggression, and he needed to save face. “Do I think I can? Certainly. Do I want to? No, that would be boring. Care if I treat myself to a glass of wine?”

“I do, actually. You are nineteen.” Gerald sniffed his wine, swirling it in its glass.

“Yes, an age when it is legal to drink in every western country save the United States.”

“Which is, unfortunately, where you are currently situated.” Cillian grinned at his younger brother.

“Could’ve fooled me. This place feels a lot like hell,” Hunter mumbled.

I jumped into the conversation headfirst, wanting to avert the looming family crisis.

“Mr. Fitzpatrick, I can assure you Hunter hasn’t had a lick of alcohol since we moved in together. He is the designated driver.

I'm sure one glass of wine isn't going to hinder his progress."

"Are you that lax on him with other rules, too?" Gerald frowned at me from across the table.

I smiled, batting my eyelashes. *Forget the fork, I'm throwing the steak knife at him, and I'm aiming for his heart.*

"I've never been accused of being lax before, sir."

"I'm sure you were not accused of anything, sweetheart," Dad said through clenched teeth, staring Gerald down.

Gerald raised his hands in the air, backing off. "Clearly. I was merely teasing."

"Tease someone your age." Sam flashed a smile that didn't match the danger lying behind it.

We had some kind of raw fish as a starter, followed by bread, cheese, and various tapas dishes. Then came the main course: steak and whipped mashed potatoes with butter and chives, with shavings of a type of mushroom that cost hundreds by the ounce. Mom seemed to hit it off with Jane conversation-wise, I talked to Aisling, and Dad, Gerald, and Sam discussed business, which left Cillian and Hunter to try to form some kind of a tête-à-tête. I half-listened to them while discussing colleges with Aisling.

"How is Syllie's wife doing?" Hunter asked.

I'd noticed that when provoked about his antics, Hunter never missed an opportunity to flip his family the finger, but when he was actually talking to them, he walked on eggshells.

Cillian shrugged, cradling his wine glass and staring through his brother like he didn't exist. "Unfortunately, I don't keep tabs on women's health unless they frequent my bed."

"And you speak of my manners," Hunter said tightly, throwing a large piece of steak into his mouth and chewing.

"I have the refinery to care for. Syllie is a very resourceful person. I'm sure he can help his wife with whatever she's dealing with."

"Resourceful enough to hurt us?" Hunter asked, arching an eyebrow.

Aisling was telling me about the merits of going to an out-of-state college, but I was drawn to the conversation between the brothers.

“Probably.” Cillian yawned, picking up a blueberry and examining it coldly.

I saw what he saw, what he liked about the tiny fruit—that little crown each perfect blueberry had that made it regal.

“Yet you wouldn’t back me up in front of *Athair*.”

“Correct.”

“Why, pray tell, is that?”

Cillian considered him through narrowed eyes. They’d fit on a snake better than they did on a human being. Cillian was gorgeous, his colors warm against the iciness of the rest of him. The older Fitzpatrick brother always looked a step away from gracefully dipping a sword into your chest and watching you draw your last breath with a pretty smile.

“Because you didn’t have sufficient evidence and you reeked of hysteria. Both made your case weak.”

Hunter said nothing, watching his sibling under a deep-set frown.

“Did you know that the word *hysteria* derives from the Latin word for *uterus*?” Cillian asked conversationally, dissecting his steak meticulously into pieces the exact same size, a la *American Psycho*. “In ancient Greece, it was believed that a wandering and discontented uterus was to blame for that dreaded female ailment of excessive emotion.” He put his fork down and stared at what he’d carved on his plate.

I watched him behind the diamond-studded rim of my wine glass.

Cillian’s hawk-like eyes and panther gestures gave me violent, uncomfortable shivers. He made me feel uneasy, unequipped—like the dirt beneath his shiny loafers, and he hadn’t even tried all that hard to provoke these emotions in me. I didn’t envy the people he actively hated.

“Do you speak Latin, Cillian?” I asked, taking a bite of my steak.

Aisling stopped talking, shooting me a do-you-want-to-die? horrified expression. The rest of the table fell silent, the tension hovering above our heads like a thick, dark cloud.

“A fair amount. Any particular reason you’d care?” He popped a piece of steak into his mouth.

He’d requested his steak so raw, so bloody, the juicy meat made the corners of his perfect lips glisten.

“I was wondering if the word *jerk* derives from the Latin word *jealousy*. Thought you could shed some light regarding that.” I smiled sweetly, cocking my head to look at him.

Jane sprayed her red wine across the table, making a choking sound that prompted Gerald to pat her back. Dad, Sam, and Hunter exchanged amused looks, chuckling under their breaths. Mom’s eyes glittered with pride. Sticking it to the big man ran in our family.

Cillian tucked his chin down, regarding me for the first time with faint interest, like my existence was a brand new thing he needed to consider.

“Do you think you’re clever, Miss Brennan?”

“Not a genius by any means, but I get by with my perfectly adequate, average IQ.” Another mocking smile touched my lips. “I’d ask you the same question, but I already know the answer. You think you’re the smartest person in the room.”

Cillian sat back and watched me, enjoying a private joke at my expense. “Prove me wrong.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” I made a show of taking my phone out of my purse. I knew it was the equivalent of taking a dump on the table as far as etiquette went, but I couldn’t help myself. I browsed through my images until I found the one I was looking for and passed my phone to Cillian across the table.

“Hunter’s IQ test from when he moved to Todos Santos,” I explained. “I found it in one of the packed boxes in our apartment. Actually, I can see all the Fitzpatrick siblings’ scores. Hunter must’ve packed them by accident. Your baby brother sits at 147 points, which marks him as a literal genius. Yours is merely 139. Still above average, but no 147. Now tell me,

Cillian, is your math as good as your Latin?" I blinked innocently.

"*Mo órga.*" Gerald cleared his throat behind his napkin, signaling Cillian to kill this conversation.

But I couldn't stop myself. I was on a roll.

Cillian sat back, refusing to show signs of discomfort.

"Measuring one's competence by their IQ level is like measuring a horse by its coat."

"Or a woman by her bra size, to put it in a form *ceann beag* could relate to," Gerald jested, his potbelly wobbling with laughter.

Jane winced at her husband, slapping the tips of his fingers across the table. She muttered an apology to my parents. Dad and Mom exchanged looks, relieved. Compared to the Fitzpatricks, we were actually a normal family.

Sam, however, watched the entire thing, his eyes ping-ponging back and forth, with a smile behind his pint of Guinness. I had no idea where he'd gotten it. No one else was having Guinness. But this was my brother after all, the most resourceful man in Massachusetts.

Hunter sipped his water. I noticed he hadn't touched his wine. Everybody in the room was probably under the assumption he'd devour his little treat. It was a long middle finger to what was expected of him. A tinge of pride prickled my chest.

"Thank you for explaining it to me in simple English, *Athair*. For a minute there I was, *hysterically* at a loss," Hunter said.

"Do not speak out of turn," Gerald warned, stabbing into his steak like it was his enemy.

"I wasn't planning on speaking at all. Mom was hella adamant I be here, though." Hunter fingered his chin, throwing the ball back to his father's court.

"She has her vices. You are one of them." Gerald turned his attention back to his steak.

“And you’re not, which is why I’m here, taunting the hell out of you with my presence alone,” Hunter deadpanned.

Aisling sucked in a breath, and Jane paled and coughed out her drink—her MO, apparently.

Gerald’s chair scraped back with a screeching sound. He rose to his feet, slapping the table with a roar. “Enough! It’s bad enough that you have brought shame on this family—”

“Don’t talk to him like that.” It was Jane’s turn to dart up to her feet. She looked even more frail and bony next to her husband.

I glanced between Hunter and Gerald, knowing I was missing a very big piece of the puzzle.

Jaw clenched, eyes dead, Hunter stood, turned around, and stalked out of the room. I couldn’t blame him. This house—this family—seemed to purge him whenever he made an attempt to fit in. His father despised him, his brother ridiculed him, and his mother was too weak to stop either of them.

I rose, pressing my fingertips to the table. I could feel all eyes but the Fitzpatrick parents’ on me. Dad, Mom, Sam, and Aisling watched my reaction to Hunter’s meltdown. Even Cillian eyed me, probably curious what other ill-mannered tricks I had up my sleeve.

“I just want you to know one thing.” I pointed at Gerald, feeling my eyes narrow into slits. “When I agreed to this arrangement, I thought I was helping a loving dad guide his son back to the right path. But you’re not loving, and honestly? You’re barely even a dad. You’re a patronizing, bigheaded schmuck. You have no right to be mad at Hunter for turning to booze and sex with random people. He never seems to get any love where he needs it the most—his family. Whatever failure you see in him, be sure to know a big slice of it is your own.”

Without waiting for his reaction, I turned away in the direction Hunter had gone, my veins sizzling with rage. I stomped my way along the wide corridor. It was long and vein-like, twisting here and there. Every time I thought I’d found the farthest part of the floor, I was met with another golden curve decorated by a statue that led to yet another corner. This house

was too big to manage. I wondered if Aisling knew every part of it.

At some point, I noticed three granite steps leading to an untouched, heavily decorated family room. All the furniture was angled toward the glass door leading to a beautiful English garden. The door was slightly ajar—on purpose or by design, I'd never know. Without thinking, I pushed the glass door open all the way, stepping outside.

I knew wandering off unannounced after Hunter, whom I'd defended ruthlessly the entire night, looked suspicious, that his father was likely wondering if I, too, had drunk the Hunter Kool-Aid and succumbed to his charm. But I needed to calm myself, far away from the Fitzpatricks. My mother jogged to get rid of the humming energy beneath her flesh. Me? I used my arrow and bow. But I didn't have them now.

I wanted to ruin something to make myself feel better, even if that something was myself.

The weather had cooled. The chilly breeze coated my bare arms as my heels dug into the damp earth under the lush grass of the backyard. Although calling it a backyard was the understatement of the universe. It was more like an entire meadow, stretched into a barbecue area with an Olympic-sized pool complete with sunbeds, and on the far right, there was some sort of ivy-covered, medieval-looking glass structure. I eyed it, wondering what it could be. I'd already gathered that Gerald Fitzpatrick liked flashing his wealth like a creeper on a subway.

What could be more excessive than a candy bar? Maybe the glass house was where Gerald kept his compassion and sympathy—sealed, locked, and shoved far away from the main property.

It wasn't in my nature to be nosy, but I wanted to know if Hunter was there. The need to console him clawed at my skin.

I marched to the ivy-laced room, patting it for the door handle. I hoped it wasn't locked. As I dragged my fingernails along the door, I felt a long, muscular arm stretch behind me, brushing my shoulder. I jumped back, gasping. The hand reached for a secret door handle nestled behind a thick coat of

ivy, opening it effortlessly, creating a sliver of space between the door and its frame. An unnatural amount of light poured from the crack. My head twisted back, my blood roaring between my ears, signaling me it was a fight-or-flight kind of situation.

Hunter smiled down at me calmly. “Butterfly garden.”

“It’s exactly like your dad to cage the symbol of freedom in a small, confined room for entertainment purposes,” I muttered.

His eyes twinkled in amusement.

“And it’s hella *you* to make that kind of statement.”

I shrugged. “I’m not very good at keeping my mouth shut.”

“As you demonstrated at the table.”

“I hope I didn’t make it worse for you.”

“Nothing can make it worse for me, *aingeal dian*.” His sultry voice wrapped around my body like a snake. He didn’t sound angry or upset. Just sad.

“Where have you been?” I pushed away from him, struggling to swallow the lump in my throat.

“Waiting for your ass to figure out my whereabouts. Here, I want to show you something.”

He gave me a slight shove, pushing me into the room. The door closed behind us with a soft *click*. I blinked, getting used to the artificial light that attacked my retinas.

It was a moist, nearly blistering room, with a rounded see-through ceiling, lots of overhead lighting, and lavish, wild plants winding behind wooden bannisters. They looked like a curious audience behind red velvet ropes. The railings lined a walkway around the room. There were two rustic, arbor-covered benches on either side of the garden and an artificial pond covered with moss, surrounded by heavy gray stones. But the thing that made my knees buckle was the swarm of butterflies fluttering around us. Hundreds of them. Blue and orange. White, green, dotted, and striped, small and large. I followed them with my eyes, momentarily forgetting Hunter was in the room. I twirled in place as I surveyed one particular orange one, adorned with symmetrically perfect black dots. It beat around me happily, and I went very still, like I was getting ready to draw an arrow, my

body hardening into stone. The butterfly rested on the tip of my nose, its little wings clapping together as it settled. I crossed my eyes comically to watch it.

“A few years ago, Da was caught having a sordid affair with a married woman. Not just any married woman, actually, Mom’s younger sister, Virginia. Her husband found out about it and tried to extort money from him. It worked—initially, anyway. But when Gin’s husband asked for shares in Royal Pipelines in exchange for his silence, I guess Da figured it was never going to go away completely unless he nipped it in the bud. He made a press release and confessed to having an affair with his wife’s sister, admitting they’d slept together many times, including in his marital bed. Mom was so pissed she kicked him out of the bedroom. But see, his legacy and company meant more to him than their marriage. It hardly even surprised my mother that he went and confessed to fucking her sister in front of the entire world. In a bid to win her forgiveness, Da made this butterfly garden for her, because butterflies are her favorite animal. And Mom, who couldn’t see the irony in that, accepted his apology. Needless to say, Gin, her husband, and my three cousins haven’t been invited to any Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners since then.”

“Jesus,” I breathed out, looking around the room and suddenly seeing it in a completely different light—tainted, somehow. “That’s insane.”

Hunter caught a butterfly in his hand, brought it to his face, and opened his palm, watching it fluttering away.

“Butterflies lead short, interesting, decadent lives. They live for about two weeks and never sleep. They do rest, on occasion. Otherwise, they’re always on the go. They prefer nectar to food, and just like me, they have three legs. But can I tell you the most striking fact about butterflies?”

Hunter’s hot mouth found the shell of my ear from behind, and my pulse stuttered, struggling to stay confined to the limits of my body. When had he gotten so close to me? When did he turn my body so I had my back to him?

I wanted to burst out of my skin and run away from him. From *this*. I closed my eyes, feeling my throat bob.

“Tell me,” I whispered, expecting the butterfly to fly away at the movement of my mouth. But no. It stayed on my face. I felt it flapping its wings lazily, sloping toward Hunter. Maybe it was waiting to hear his answer, too.

“Suspended development.” Hunter’s lips closed on the lobe of my ear, nibbling softly.

I shivered at the heat of his mouth, and his tongue swiped the velvety part of my ear. I wanted him to tear my dress, throw me on the ground, and take me from behind, making me the prey he so often told me I was.

“When the temperature drops to a certain degree, butterflies hibernate. They actually freeze in time—in *age*—waiting for summer to come and unchain them from the weather, to set them free. Butterflies can’t fly when they’re cold.”

“Like Sleeping Beauty,” I breathed, thinking about the hours, days, weeks, months, and *years* I’d been obsessed with proving I was better than Lana. No, not even better, just *worthy*. It was like being stuck in a constant winter, frozen, waiting for something I couldn’t even name.

Hunter grinned against my ear, his lips skimming down my throat, leaving a shudder in their wake. Our bodies were humming with something dangerous and carnal, and I wondered if people were looking for us. Someone could open the door and see us, and everything we’d worked for—everything we had on the line—would go up in flames.

But somehow, at this particular moment, I didn’t care.

“The prince is not going to save you, *aingeal dian*. He is stuck in his castle, fighting his own battle. Are you ready to step out of your comfort zone and live?” he asked, almost brokenly. I’d never seen him so bare, so raw. “You have to let life touch you. Drown a little with me, baby.”

I opened my mouth, not sure what was going to come out of it. The minute I did, the orange butterfly fluttered away, swirling in circles upwards, spiraling like smoke. It came to rest atop a fluorescent light. I felt the loss of it. I turned to face Hunter and placed both my palms on his chest, pretending to keep him away, but really, I was looking for an excuse to touch him again.

“You know, I always thought my dad was going to hate you, but I don’t think he does. I think he even likes you a little, in his own, very dry, very cautious way.” I cleared my throat, changing the subject lamely.

Hunter lowered his head, his lips puckering. “He thinks you’re so far out of my league, I don’t pose a threat.” He finished on a chuckle. “And he’s not wrong. As for my da, he wants to strangle you.”

“The feeling is mutual. Only difference is, if he tries to strangle me, my father will strangle him, and Sam will finish the job.” I quirked an eyebrow.

Hunter laughed, shoving his hands into his pockets. Butterflies danced around us, and I wondered why he wasn’t kissing me. Then I remembered I’d begged him not to.

The teenage idiot in me was disappointed that he’d respected my wishes.

“I’m glad you didn’t grow up here. This place is soul-crushing. I’m surprised Aisling turned out to be so awesome.”

“Aisling is like a cat. She’s got a good amount of souls.” He still wasn’t touching me, taking another step back.

Confused, I kept the conversation going. “I was going to ask, what did you mean by saying your dad is not your mother’s vice? That he doesn’t interest her?”

“She lost interest in him way before he took Gin to his bed.” Hunter cocked his head, smiling lazily. “But I also referred to the fact I’m not his. Biologically, anyway. Mom had an affair sometime between Cillian and Aisling, around the time she found out he was getting BJ’s from his secretary. It’s the best-kept secret of the Fitzgerald family. I found out at boarding school, through a friend of a friend whose dad knew mine. Apparently I was dubbed Beautiful Bastard at every country club on the East Coast because I was a cute kid, but hella illegitimate.”

My mouth nearly fell to the ground. Suddenly, I hated Jane as much as I did her husband.

“That is...” I started.

“A goddamn relief.” Hunter pretended to wipe his brow, chuckling to himself and taking another step back. He was almost at the door. I couldn’t figure out why he’d put space between us all of a sudden.

“I rarely throw the affair in my father’s face, but when I do, it always gives me the desired effect.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“Complete meltdown of the Fitzpatrick patriarch.”

“And your biological dad?” I stared at the ground when I asked. I was afraid of the answer.

Hunter waved the question off. “Not a person of interest. When I asked my mom, she pleaded insanity and said he was a male model who fucked off back to Eastern Europe after he was done with her. Which explains why I look nothing like Da, Cillian, and Aisling.”

Which explains why you look like a Greek god.

It helped me understand why he felt so hated here, why he was sent away, why he viewed himself as an airheaded playboy—a role his father had burdened him with, and he went along with. Hunter may have been one of the most sought-after bachelors in America, but the people he wanted attention and warmth from, his family, weren’t there for him.

He took another step back.

Suddenly, an overwhelming need to hug him consumed me, to a point where I wanted to squeeze the breath out of him until he knew he mattered to me.

“Why are you walking away from me?” I finally snapped, my brows furrowed. Hunter pushed the door open, took one step out the door.

“I would like to test a theory,” he said, moving one of his hands along his square, perfect jaw. “If I freeze you in friend-zone winter, will you run for my heat, or stay content with your useless little wings?”

“I’m not a butterfly.” I scowled, knowing he and my friends were right. I was catching feelings for him. I had the Hunter

bug. But every time we came close to being something semi-real, I pulled away.

Now, I felt the urge to defy his father and his stupid agreement.

To break a promise.

To drown, lose gravity, make a mistake I couldn't take back.

Hunter gave me his back, walking away, making the decision for us.

“You are my butterfly, Sailor. And maybe I'm not Gerald's flesh and blood, but make no mistakes—when I finally catch you, I intend to capture you, too.”

Sixteen



Sailor

Hunter left shortly after that, taking my car and not bothering with goodbyes. I didn't blame him. It'd look suspicious if we left together after I'd defended him and we'd both disappeared for almost thirty minutes. Besides, my parents were happy to give me a ride home. They grilled me about life with Hunter throughout the drive, but it was nice to catch up with them. I noticed they asked about my shoulder out of concern, and about Aisling, Persy, and Emmabelle, but they refrained from talking to me about archery.

"Aren't you going to ask how practice is going?" I sniffed from the back seat, looking for a non-Hunter-related subject. Archery was safe, a good topic. Dad met my eyes through the rearview mirror, side-nodding his head to Mom.

"Red, your stage."

"We think you should enroll in a summer semester next year," she said quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

"What? Why?" I asked. My parents had always supported my craft, even when they were worried that was all I cared about.

"Something to fall back on," Mom explained while Dad muttered, "We don't want you to waste your life away on one

thing.”

I quieted.

They thought I was wasting my life away?

That I wasn't going to make it to the Olympics?

I stared out the window, fighting the sting in my eyes. It wasn't just them, or the injury, or Hunter's revelation about not being his father's child, or the horrific dinner, or even Lana challenging me to come clean about what had happened between us all those years ago. What really bugged me was that there was a grain of truth to what everyone was saying about me.

I was obsessed with archery in a non-healthy way.

Sailor Brennan had managed to sail through life without going on dates, falling in love, going to parties, applying to college, or *living*; because everything posed a threat to archery. Love. Friendships. School.

I tried to convince myself the sacrifices were necessary to get to where I wanted to be in my career, but the truth was, they weren't. Lana got to enjoy both worlds. She had the dates and the boyfriends and the clothing lines and the movies *and* the archery.

Why was I pushing Hunter away time and time again, when it was obvious this whole agreement was just another way for his dad to punish him for not being his?

So what if we were going to say goodbye soon? He was here now. That was more than I could hope for.

When my father pulled the Maserati to a stop at my building, the silence stretched in the car. I wanted to cut it with a knife.

“Look,” Dad said at the same time Mom sighed. “Sailor, we didn't mean—”

“No,” I said, pushing my door open. “Save it. You're right. I haven't been living. I've been hiding away from life behind a bow, staring at it with one eye shut. But I'll get better. At least I'll try to—not only for my sake, but for yours, too.”

I slammed the door and ran into the lobby, letting the doors swallow me. I didn't look back to see if they were waiting until I'd gotten into the elevator safely.

I knew they did.

They always waited, watched, cared for me.

Mom and Dad were my summer.



The apartment was dark and cool. There was something clinical and hotel-like about it, due to the air conditioner working overtime and the sleek, sophisticated furnishings that offered no personality. Up until now, I hadn't known how Hunter could stand it. Now I knew—he had no idea what a real home looked like.

I kicked my shoes off, my heart tap-tap-tapping impatiently, like an index finger over a surface.

I tiptoed my way to his room. The door was ajar. It was always ajar, a constant invitation. I pushed it open, and my heart sank when I realized he was fast asleep, his long, lithe limbs spread lazily on his California king bed. His skin was bronze, his taut muscles extended. Even asleep, he had the face of a sinister devil, framed by the blond curls of an angel.

Inwardly cursing myself for being late and him for being tired, I was about to stumble back to the living room and put something on Netflix, too amped up to go to bed. Just as I took a step back, Hunter's voice, smooth and rough, came to me through the dark.

“Let me warm you up, *aingeal dian*.”

I turned back, walking into his room like I was facing death row. With every step I took, I felt like I was shedding, leaving something behind.

Step. *Fear*.

Step. *Anxiety*.

Step. *Obsession*.

Step. *Overthinking*.

I reached the foot of his bed. He extended his hand to me. I didn't take it. Not yet. Something stopped me. I knew better than to ask for some kind of assurance, so it wasn't about that. Still, I was uneasy. On edge.

Hunter sat upright, took my hand in his, and brought it to his heart. His bare chest was warm and hard. His skin smooth behind his chest hair. There was no hint of humor in his voice.

“Cross my heart and hope to die, when I first saw you in that parking lot, I knew your blood type was gold. I think we'll be a good lesson for each other, Sailor. You don't know how to live, and I don't know how to do anything *but* live hedonistically.”

As he said that, I realized I'd never felt more mortal. But being mortal was being alive. I had so much to lose. So much to gain. So much to feel.

Hunter stood, using his thumb to brush the strap of my dress from my shoulder.

“I hate winter,” I croaked, looking down. “I've always hated winter.”

“Me too.” He captured my lips in his, unzipping my dress from behind until I was in front of him in nothing but my bra and panties. He kept kissing me—just kissing—gently, artfully, making me forget myself completely.

I forgot I was in the arms of the most untrustworthy man in America.

A man who promised me nothing but heartbreak.

A man who made me break my promise to his father—a promise laced with my future—simply because he knew how to charm his way out of every situation.

The first rain of fall started beating on the windows outside, and my heart squeezed in my chest.

Send me a signal, God, I'd asked the day Hunter thrust himself into my life. I wondered what fate was trying to tell me now.

He kissed me until my lips were sore, and when he took a step back to scan my body head to toe, I noticed he'd gotten rid of my bra somehow without my even realizing it. My underwear

was shoved halfway down my legs, to my knees. I blinked back at him, awaiting verdict.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at you.” He rearranged the bulge in the center of his sweatpants.

“You’ve already seen me naked.” I scowled, taking a step forward and wrapping my arms around his neck. He dodged me again, still watching my body.

“Not willingly.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Then, you were a bomb waiting to be diffused. Now you’re an offering.”

I gritted my teeth, ready to lash out at him. Every time we were in the same room, the urge to fight him and have sex with him overwhelmed me.

“Well?” I pushed my panties all the way down, knotting my arms over my breasts, arching an eyebrow. “Am I good enough for you?”

“No,” he said evenly. “You’re better than me.”

With that, he pounced, throwing me to his bed, kissing my lips roughly, his mouth traveling down my neck. He stopped at my chest, drawing one of my nipples into his mouth and sucking it so hard I let out a whimper. I shoved his sweatpants down by the waistband, bracketing his waist with my legs and toeing the fabric away like a savage while my hands roamed his back. After sucking my entire breast into his mouth, he moved to the next one while reaching between us and playing with my clit. This time, he bit my nipple, teasing it with his teeth and tongue. I writhed, finding his engorged erection between our bodies, squeezing it hard.

“I’m going to fuck your brains out,” he groaned into my skin, his face sliding down from my tits to my navel. My entire body shook. His ridge slipped from my hand as he moved, leaving me with nothing. I felt empty, buzzing with anticipation.

“Do it, then.” I stomped on his mattress.

He laughed, taking his sweet time and drawing circles with his tongue down to my belly button, lazy strokes that made me thrash beneath him, arching my back, offering more of my body to him.

I wanted to regret the day I'd said yes to this arrangement, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Strangely, I felt this was exactly where I was supposed to be, and who I was supposed to be with.

His mouth clamped on my clit, and he sucked it into his mouth. I moaned, running my fingers through his glorious hair, watching him eat me out with hungry eyes. He looked me in the eye the entire time, and I wanted to cry, because I knew no other man could make me feel the way he did. I felt like a peach, dripping nectar directly into his mouth.

The orgasm crept up on me. One moment I was enjoying his strokes, my body shivering on his bed, and the next each and every one of my muscles clenched, tightened, and tensed, my eyes falling shut as I cried out his name.

It took me almost a full minute to come down from the post-orgasmic fog, and by the time I sobered up, he was already sheathed with a condom, nudging my legs apart, and angling his cock into me, watching as his tip slid in.

I looked up at him. His eyes seared through mine.

“Permission to wreck your uterus?”

I nodded.

“I won't be gentle.” He flashed one of his infamous half-smirks—the one he'd probably used thousands of times and resulted in thousands of orgasms. It felt dirty to the bone, being with him in a way so many others had. Problem was, no one told me how enjoyable his filthy halo would feel rubbing on me.

“I don't need gentle. I'm a warrior, remember?” I grabbed his face, bringing him down for a scorching-hot kiss.

He slid all the way in with one thrust, biting the side of my neck like a tiger draining his victim of blood. “That's what makes you so unfortunately irresistible.”

He thrust inside me in long, deep strokes. With each shove, I felt the bed moving an inch. The headboard slammed against the wall, the mattress squeaking its protest beneath us. Hunter hoisted one of my legs over his shoulder, wrapping the other against his waist while his eyes bore into mine. The bed and I whined in unison.

“Slow down,” I half-protected when I couldn’t understand whether it was me shaking the bed with my tremors, or the bed quaking beneath me.

Hunter was relentless. He was so hard and thick, I wondered if my insides would forever be molded to the shape of his erection. Screwing with him would make for an easier birth experience, I swore. He widened and stretched me, and I’d never felt so deliciously full in my life.

Hunter stopped, grabbed the back of my thigh from his shoulder, and flipped me over on my stomach. Reaching down between my legs, he hoisted my ass up in the air and spread my butt cheeks with his thumbs.

“Indulge me, baby,” he hissed, coating his finger with my juices and sliding it into my tight hole. It squeezed around him nervously, and he wiggled his finger a little inside, stroking gently.

“Why?”

He kissed the side of my face, the silhouette of his features in my peripheral. He was so beautiful it squeezed my heart, making me want to cry.

“Because I’m your favorite villain,” he whispered.

With that, he withdrew his finger and then slid it back into me, an inch at a time. I cried out, clenching the sheets between my fingers and squeezing my eyes shut. He pushed his fingers into me at the same time. I loved it. All of it. Having him in both my holes. So full of him.

I loved that it felt a dash degrading.

Most of all, I loved that Hunter Fitzpatrick was crazy enough to screw someone behind his father’s back and risk

losing his inheritance. Brave enough to fuck the daughter of a mob boss like an animal, knowing the potential consequences.

He was fearless, and a rebel, and a sinner, and a saint.

A prince who'd never wanted his title.

A pure-hearted rake.

He was everything a woman should run away from, personified. And yet here I was, falling deeper.

Overwhelming pleasure coursed between us, and I felt him swelling and jerking inside me as I fought my next climax, desperate we do this together.

“Are you coming?” I panted.

“Baby, I’m about to need an IV after this shit. Permission to be filthy?”

“Granted.” A moan tore from my mouth at the same time he pulled out of me. My knees knocked together. I shook, feeling the loss of him. He ripped the condom off, cupped my pussy with his hand, shoving three fingers into me, and pressed his cock into my sore, tight hole. With my butt up in the air and wide open, I felt the thick liquid of his cum shooting around it in hot ribbons. He pushed his fingers deeper between my lips, covering my entrance completely so his cum couldn’t drip into it. I came, too.

Hunter collapsed on top of me, his chest pressing against my sweaty back, and before we knew what was happening, the bed tipped over to one side, one of its legs breaking. The shattering noise of split wood filled the otherwise silent room.

I rolled down from the tipped mattress, and the only thought that crossed my mind was that my shoulder didn’t need another hit, especially after I was making some progress. But before my body reached the ground, I felt Hunter’s arm wrap around my waist, pulling me back up the bed gently. I clung to him like we were stranded in the middle of the ocean on a piece of wood.

“Jesus,” I groaned. “How’d that happen?”

“Is that a hypothetical question, or can I give you the long, dirty answer?” Hunter murmured into my ear, nibbling on my lobe, making me giggle.

I scrambled to get up on my feet, but he pinned me down, grabbing my butt. He kissed the side of my face.

“Wait here. I’ll clean you up.”

“The bed is broken,” I reminded him. “This is not a movie. I’m not going to luxuriously rest on a bed that’s tilted down.”

He rolled his eyes at me theatrically. “Cramping my style.”

He lifted me, honeymoon-style, and carried me to his ensuite bathroom. In there, he hoisted me on the counter, took a towel, rinsed it in hot water, and cleaned between my legs. I watched him the entire time. There was no way he did that with all of his hookups.

Stop thinking about them. Stop obsessing over the many girls he’s been with. There are more to come, and anyway, it’s none of your business.

“You handled things in a really badass way today,” I said after a while.

The silence was comfortable, but watching his face as his eyes focused on cleaning my most intimate places unraveled me. I still couldn’t believe I’d slept with someone who wasn’t a steady boyfriend of sorts.

Hunter shook his head. “I learned from a young age that women are not here to stay. My parents sent me to boarding school when I was six. I had nannies coming out of my ass whenever I was home. I don’t think my mom consciously knew she wasn’t there for me, but that doesn’t change the fact that she wasn’t. The nannies were interchangeable and frequently replaced. Da made it a point to change them every season so I wouldn’t learn to rely on a woman. I think it scared him to think one of his boys wouldn’t be fully independent. He did it with Cillian, too. Only difference was, Kill was born with a soul ten shades darker than a normal human—his father’s son through and through. We both grew up learning that women were disposable, born to serve us, and sire heirs. Da cheated on Mom. Mom cheated on Da. Kill...fuck knows what goes through his head while he samples his endless string of meaningless flings, but he knows how to do it quietly.”

I touched his face, urging him to say more. I could practically hear the wheels in his brain turn as he thought about it.

“What Da didn’t take into consideration was that I wasn’t Cillian. I wasn’t born a cold-blooded, self-serving degenerate with a taste for pain. So I went for the closest thing—a poor imitation. But it always came off without that Cillian Fitzpatrick shine. My flings are messy and public and, as it turns out, really fucking expensive.”

I laughed at that last part, cupping my mouth. Hunter let loose a tired grin, throwing the used towel onto the floor. The housekeeper would wash it when she came tomorrow morning, just like this was a hotel.

Maybe that’s how Hunter had always felt—like a guest, even in his own apartment.

I hopped down, pressing my hands to his chest. My whole body was sore. From the waist down, I felt like I’d been wrecked. From the waist up, every inch of my skin was covered with a red rash from his unforgiving stubble.

“Thanks.” I kissed the corner of his mouth.

“For what?”

“For being real. I know it’s hard.”

I started to my room, resisting the urge to invite him to my bed, seeing as his was broken. Never mind that we broke it together. I decided to be very careful with Hunter when it came to things that could be viewed as clingy or too relationship-y. Not just for his sake, but for mine, too.

The minute I stepped over his bathroom’s threshold, though, his hand snaked and caught me by the waist.

“Where do you think you’re going, *aingeal dian*? If you can still walk, that means we’re not finished yet.”

He carried me to my own bed and did unspeakable things to my body three more times that night.

Then fell asleep on top of me, our limbs tangled together.

And when we woke up the next morning, true to his promise, it was almost impossible to walk with the soreness between my legs. It felt like I was peeing fire, and I actually feared to do a number two.

But what I worried about most was my heart, which felt ten pounds heavier, and so swollen I almost tripped over my own feet.

Seventeen



Hunter

The next six weeks passed quickly.

I was drowning in work and essays, but never missed a chance to fuck my roommate, who—it was safe to admit now—had turned out to be the best roommate in the history of roommates.

Just to be on the safe side, I didn't get my bed replaced. It made slipping into her bed every night seem more practical and less...whatever. Even after Sailor got back to training full-time and started waking up early again, I still found time to fit in a morning quickie, even if it meant waking up with her.

It really took the edge off the rest of the day.

Bonus points: Da didn't seem to be pissed at Sailor after that bullshit dinner, so there was no immediate threat to my inheritance. While he was careful not to talk to me, and limited our already-restricted communication, Sailor told me he'd been emailing her more frequently and had even used the term of endearment "sweetheart" (insert throwing up emoji here).

"He said he respected the way I stood up for you and gave him a piece of my mind, but at the same time, he knew I was smart enough not to get involved with you," she told me the day

after that dinner, ironically minutes after I'd used her thighs as ear-warmers and eaten her out for twenty minutes.

My lips were still glistening with her juices when I laughed, throwing one arm behind my head.

"Maybe I'm not that smart." She nuzzled her head in the crook of my arm as her fingers played with my chest hair. I fucking loved when she did that. I didn't even know why. Sometimes she tugged at them real hard, but it was an intimate gesture no fling had ever done.

"Maybe he's not that sharp," I replied.

"The answer probably lies somewhere in the middle," she mused.

I took her face in both my hands and kissed her hard. "There's no way you are less than a genius. Takes one to know one."

Though I didn't feel like a genius, no matter what my IQ test indicated.

After that stupid-ass dinner, we went to visit my family or hers almost every weekend. Dinner with the Brennans was the tits.

Sparrow Brennan was a world-class cook (literally), and it was fun watching the infamous Troy Brennan getting the third degree from his spitfire wife and hell-raising daughter. I even learned how to get along with Sam. Sort of, anyway. He was a scary motherfucker.

We talked about every subject under the sun—politics and TV shows and new things to do in the city and the future, but never about money, which felt fresh. Da and Cillian *only* talked about money. Sometimes Aisling tagged along, which I liked, too, because she was pretty much the only family member I had that I was sure didn't want to maim me to death with a dildo. But also didn't like it, because she looked at Sam like he had the world clenched in his dirty-ass, violent palm. Aisling and Sam were a bad idea.

She was the princess in the ivory tower, and he was the punk who was going to steal and corrupt her on his lunch break from

setting the world on fire.

He was too everything—old, experienced, and dangerous—for my baby sister.

Sometimes the Penrose sisters were there, too. I didn't mind them all that much. I told myself they probably had no idea Sailor and I were fucking. They no doubt thought I didn't deserve her, or worse—that I had no chance with her in the first place. Both were true, by the way.

Things didn't go as fine and dandy when we had to visit my family, but as long as I kept my interactions with Da to a minimum, I survived. I even shared a few lukewarm words with Cillian that entailed zero profanity—mainly Patriots crap or how the new refinery in Maine was going down the shitters (my words, not his, God forbid). Still, it counted for something. One day at work, Kill even brought a cheesesteak sandwich and a large Coke to my desk when I was studying for an exam and didn't have time to take my lunch break.

“Here, Legally Blonde.” He tossed the food onto my desk without sparing me a look.

“Fuck. Thanks, old sport.” I looked at the food in disbelief. “Juggling college and work is a bitch.”

Kill slid a piece of paper with an email on it across my desk after the food. “Have someone else write your essays for you. Have them make you summaries for the tests. Life's too short to pretend you give a damn about business law.”

“Do you give a damn about anything?” I jested. My parents had fucked both of us up thoroughly, but in different ways. I cared too much and acted up. He didn't care about anything at all.

“I'm sure I do, but I've yet to find it,” he said.

“Liar.”

“The truth is overrated—an uncreative, uninspired way of seeing things.”

I got used to the hard work and the late-night studying. I even got used to fucking just one girl. The only thing that made me frustrated as hell was Sylvester. I listened to his recordings

thoroughly, almost every night, and still couldn't find anything concrete to nail him with.

One day, Da called me into his office. I could count the times he'd done that since The Dinner on one hand, so I approached in a sour mood. Pushing the door open, I noticed Kill and Syllie already seated in front of him.

"Sit," Da spat, barely glancing at an empty chair next to Syllie.

"I'd rather stand. What's up?" I asked.

All eyes darted to me. I think they were as surprised as I was to hear my voice, low and sober and lacking that playful, wannabe-rapper twang my family loathed so much. I was growing a spine. The growing pains were a bitch, but I was starting to recognize that I didn't have much choice.

"Hunter," my father warned.

"Leave him be, *Athair*. There are much more pressing issues right now," Cillian growled impatiently.

I'd have kissed him on the mouth if he wasn't my brother and my lips weren't partial to a little redheaded banshee.

"Well?" I jutted my chin out.

My father sat back. He looked worn out, tired as fuck.

"The three of us—you, me, and Cillian—are going on a trip to monitor the progress on the refinery. We're giving them the opportunity to sort the machinery mess, but it is clear something needs to be done. There have been too many hiccups with the project, and I think it could raise overall morale if we show a united front and go there together," Da said.

I was surprised to be included. At this point, I was thankful they didn't put a pair of goddamn orange shorts and a white bra on me and call me their office Hooters waitress, but something else irked me.

"What about you, Syllie? Are you coming?" I flashed him my good-natured smile.

The man turned to me, shaking his head.

“Someone needs to make sure everything runs smoothly here. Also, my wife has that *thing*,” he added as an afterthought.

“What thing?” I pressed. Someone goddamn had to.

“She’s a bit under the weather. She underwent surgery a little less than two months ago.”

“What surgery?” I didn’t relent. I could see Kill in my periphery, smiling in amusement.

“Oh, I’m not sure this is a conversation she’d appreciate me having. Obviously, I regret I cannot join you.”

“Obviously,” I repeated, cocking my head, examining his face. He met my eyes with defiance.

“Weren’t you the one who brought it to *Athair*’s attention that we were falling behind schedule on the refinery and it would never pass health and safety inspections at this rate?”

Syllie’s smile began to fade. I knew I was pissing off more than just him. Da hated being criticized. Especially by me.

“That’s his job,” my father boomed behind his desk. “What’s your point, *ceann beag*?”

I shrugged. “No point. Just putting things together.”

“Your job is filing things, not gluing them into a narrative,” Da reminded me. “It’s settled then. You’re coming with us. You’re excused now.”

I saluted him, marching out. Instead of sitting back at my desk, I sauntered all the way to Syllie’s office, checking on all the BS I’d used to record him, seeing that nothing had been moved. Since that first time I’d met Knox, I’d paid him two more visits and managed to put a tracker on Syllie’s phone (he used burner phones, but even the slyest motherfuckers slipped sometimes). I’d gotten two numbers for reliable private investigators, but I knew something like that could blow up in my face if I didn’t handle it carefully.

My nights were spent as follows:

Come back home.

Fuck Sailor.

Talk about our days over takeout food—she was my Western Wall, there to listen without judgment, to hear without shoving her opinion down my throat—then listen to Syllie’s recordings after I was done with my college shit. Sometimes Sailor helped me. We would sit together on the couch, I’d massage her legs, and we’d both have our AirPods tucked in, listening to different parts of Syllie’s recordings. When one of us felt we were on to something, we’d play it for the other. So far, though, Syllie was too careful for his own good.

Finally, when we retired to bed, I’d fuck her again. Sometimes she fucked me. Sailor was a feisty one.

We didn’t talk about what we were.

What we weren’t.

We just existed: a butterfly and a man who appreciated beautiful things.

Co-existing in the eye of a storm we’d been thrown into.



Knight: Yo, asswipe. What are you doing next weekend?

Hunter: Scratching my balls. Making voodoo dolls of my dad. That kind of thing. What kind of question is that?

Knight: One I’d like a serious answer to, you little ass fucker.

Hunter: Not ass-fucking, unfortunately. Study, probs. Got dinner at my folks. You?

Knight: In Boston with bae for her book deal. We’re coming to see you.

Hunter: You’re fucking an author now? That’s the height of intellectuality you’re going to reach. I hope you realize that.

Knight: Did I say see you? I meant stay with you. Also: Ha. Ha.

Hunter: Cheap bastard.

Knight: Is that a yes?

Hunter: It’s not a no.

Knight: Would your nerdy roommate mind?

I hadn’t told Knight or Vaughn about bumping uglies with Sailor—not that I was embarrassed or anything. But I knew she was private. She hadn’t confided in her friends about us, and it felt like betraying her confidence. Especially if at some point

my father found out about us and shit hit the fan. The more we kept it on the down low, the better. I wasn't going to throw away my inheritance over a pussy—no matter how sweet and tight—and she was getting sweet-ass media coverage and hitting all her PR marks.

Sailor was recently interviewed on a local morning show, had been featured in two teen magazines, and Crystal, her agent, had said her name had been Googled more last month than a certain Kardashian sister, even though the latter allegedly remodeled her entire face and some other body parts. Keeping Sailor a secret was making sure what we had was just that—an ongoing fling with an expiration date. She wasn't my girlfriend. But we lived under the same roof and enjoyed sucking each other's privates.

Really, there was no reason to tell Knight about Sailor, just like there was no reason to tell him about any of the other flings I'd had over the years.

Hunter: I hardly care what she thinks.

Knight: Brutal as always.

Hunter: Catch ya next week.

Knight: Be seein' ya.



The following morning, my new king-sized bed arrived. I got it for Knight and his fiancée, Luna. I paid a rush fee to make sure the little fuckers had somewhere to sleep. I hadn't gotten the chance to bring Sailor up to speed about it, because the previous night, as soon as she'd walked in the door, I'd been too busy ravishing her to squeeze a sentence in.

It caught her off guard as we drank our morning coffee on Saturday morning like two grown-ups or some shit. The elevator dinged and the movers came out, holding the boxed pieces with the giant-ass print of the bed.

Sailor arched an eyebrow over the rim of her cup, feigning calm curiosity, but I knew she was pissed. Her green eyes always turned a shade darker when she was annoyed.

“I don’t remember exiling you from my bed. We have a bit more time to our arrangement.”

I grinned, dropping a kiss at the crown of her head.

“Not gonna sleep in the new bed for a second. My friend Knight and his girlfriend-slash-fiancée-slash-ballbuster Luna want to crash with us next weekend. She’s meeting with her literary agent here or some shit. That cool?”

“Sure.” She shrugged and meant it.

The tension had evaporated from her shoulders. I knew it was going to be hard on her when I gave her the boot. Honestly, I’d miss her ass, too (and her pussy, and mouth).

“But you won’t be sleeping in my bed when they’re here. No one can know about us,” she warned.

I nodded, happy she still had her head screwed on right. Some chicks lost it where a well-endowed billionaire was concerned. Not Sailor Brennan, though.

“I’ll crash on the couch when they’re here.”

She turned around, rinsed her coffee cup, and put it away. I came behind her, trapping her to the counter, massaging her shoulders. The right one was still a little sore, but she told me she’d been killing it at the range. I thought her chances of getting that Olympic spot were really good. It was going to soften the blow and give her shit to focus on when we were over. I couldn’t wait to drown in unlimited pussy and cheer on Sailor as she kicked ass and took names in the Olympics. I would even toast with a drink or six when she got that medal.

“What are we doing today?” I asked, kissing the back of her neck. “I mean, other than porking each other.”

“Not much.” She turned around, her voice flat. “I’m going shopping with Emma, Persy, and Aisling.”

She’d been doing a lot of shopping lately and looking fuck-hot in her new clothes. Her hair was bangin’, too, and I overheard one of the Penrose sisters, the mouthy one, Emmabelle, telling her she should get a Tinder account. She was coming out of her shell, and in true Sailor fashion, she’d broken that bitch in two and strutted out on ten-inch heels. I couldn’t

help but feel stupidly lucky to be the guy next to her. She was going to be a man-eater soon, but I had been the first to fuck her out of her weird limbo, to introduce her to society.

“I’ll tag along.” I pinched her ass.

Despite the time that had passed, I still hadn’t acquired any friends in Boston. It was goddamn near impossible. I worked with middle-aged people all day, then took evening classes in college, mainly with single moms and older people who worked full-time jobs like me.

Sailor put her hand on my chest. It was her go-to. That, and licking her finger and cleaning shit off of my face when we were eating. Just like the chest-hair pulling, I didn’t hate it.

“Um, no, you aren’t.”

“Why not?” I frowned, surprised.

“Because we’re going to talk about girl stuff.”

“Like penises and dildos?” I was supremely hopeful that was what women talked about. Naked. Other than my sister. I’d rather die than picture my baby sister naked. Sweet Jesus, why did I let my mind wander that far? Now I couldn’t not picture Aisling having a slumber party in her lingerie, and I wanted to throw up all over the kitchen island like in that *South Park* episode.

Fuck my life in the ass.

Sailor cocked her head, frowning. “Try clothes and boys and petty, albeit harmless, gossip.”

“I like clothes and petty, albeit harmless, gossip.”

“Did I mention we do all this to the soundtrack of *A Walk to Remember*? No? Because no gathering would be complete without a few chick flicks,” she drew out.

“Pass,” I grunted, not wanting to beg for her company.

She threw her head back and laughed, rubbing my arm. Sailor (*Sai-lor*. Pretty name, I realized, albeit fashionably-fucking-late) was not cold or distant like I’d imagined. She touched me all the time in a non-I-wanna-get-dicked-by-you way.

“I figured you’d be looking for entertainment, so I took it upon myself to call your brother and make plans for you.” She sneaked away from my touch when I began to draw her close for a quickie.

“My brother?” I echoed, spinning on my heel. Did I have another bastard brother I wasn’t aware of? Because there was no way she was talking about Kill. “You mean the asshole who looks at me like I’m cow shit clinging to his twelve-hundred dollar Magnannis?”

“One and the same.” She zipped her North Face rucksack, throwing my bomber jacket into my hands from the back of the kitchen island stool. “You’re going horseback riding.”

“You’re shitting me.” I stared at her, jacket still in hand. “Why would I do that?”

Why wouldn’t I do that?

I wasn’t sure if I was angry or in awe of her persuasion skills. I’d been successfully avoiding any type of conversation with my mom and da because they sucked all the balls, but with Cillian, I was outwardly, full-blown beefing. My feelings for him weren’t complicated or convoluted. I simply wished him a slow, painful death. My heart couldn’t be bought with a cheesesteak and the email of some TA at Harvard who overcharged for essays I could download online.

“You can’t hate your entire family,” Sailor pointed out, shouldering into her jacket. It had been pissing since that first night of rain when I wrecked her uterus. “You have to make some allies if you want to survive being a Fitzpatrick. He’s going to be your first.”

“Sounds ambitious. Also, unlikely.”

“Also, happening,” she countered calmly, shoving me toward the door with surprising strength.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I bared my teeth, dragging my heels along the floor like a toddler.

“Look at it as my parting gift to you. I don’t want to say goodbye without knowing you have a few people to rely on. Figured your mom and Cillian are your best bet.”

“Why not Aisling?” I tried to dodge her touch at the same time I tried to pinch her ass. We tango-ed like a pair of aggressive peacocks for a few seconds.

“Oh, you have Aisling’s vote, for sure. But you need the swing states’ support. Think of Cillian as Virginia.”

To put his name with anything virginal would be a crime, but I saved her my smart-ass comment.

I wanted to be mad at her, but for the life of me, couldn’t. Leave it to this crazy bitch—and I used the term endearingly—to call the other craziest motherfucker I’d ever known and negotiate the terms of my relationship with him.

“I don’t have any riding shit,” I gritted, stalling.

“Figured as much. Cillian said he’ll let you borrow some,” Sailor sing-songed.

I turned around to face her as she swung the door open. The movers were marching back from my room, dusting off their hands.

“I hate you.” I double-tipped them, waving them goodbye. Because I could be both a cunt and a great person at the same time.

“I’ll find a way to carry on.” She flashed me a smile I wanted to wipe off with a kiss.

“Don’t be so sure. It’ll be a struggle when I hate-fuck you and put a hole with your shape through your mattress.”

Sailor gave me another shove. “Then I truly hope your friends won’t mind sleeping on a Sailor-shaped mattress, because I’ll definitely be taking the new bed. Good luck and goodbye!”

The door slammed in my face, and all I could do was laugh.

Goddammit, Sailor.



Downstairs, Kill picked me up to go to the equestrian center. I spent the ride fiddling with the Dala horse on my neck while Cillian sneered at numerous things we passed along the way: a

bed of wilting flowers, a broken tree on the side of the road, general litter. Everything pissed the asshole off. He was going to be dead by age thirty-three of a heart attack. He gave me such rotten-ass jujū I'd need to lock myself in a Hindu holy site on an Indian mountain for a decade just to get rid of his negativity.

When we got there, I found out Cillian had a few horses that legit belonged to him. Apparently, he hadn't limited his riding hobby to my ass alone. I knew Kill had played polo in his youth, too, and was more accomplished than I (insert shocked emoji here), but when we hurled our tall frames onto two twin, black Arabian horses and began riding, it was pretty clear we were both skilled.

Cillian handed me a helmet, a saddle, and a pair of boots. He looked like an eighteenth-century aristocrat in his gear, and I wondered if he enjoyed being so perfect twenty-four-fucking-seven. From the outside, it looked exhausting.

We headed to the neck of the woods, the saddle—made of rich leather that'd been broken in by my brother—tinged my nostrils with an earthy scent. I'd missed riding. There were signs scattered across the woods warning riders about hunters (ironic). When Cillian shot me a sidelong glance to see if I cared, I shrugged, aided my horse, and galloped forward. Straying far on a horse I wasn't familiar with in woods I didn't know was supremely stupid, but I knew my brother was responsible enough to keep us both alive.

Kill caught up with me quickly.

“So, are you still playing the part of Auguste Dupin and scheming Sylvester's downfall?”

Of course he'd reference an Edgar Allan Poe character before Sherlock Holmes. Kill thrived on being different. He probably thought I was under the impression Auguste Dupin was some sophisticated French dessert. I rode faster, making him sweat for the conversation.

“He's cooking something up,” I clipped. “Years of being an asshole make me an expert at recognizing shitheads when I see them.”

“I trust your instincts,” Kill drawled with his usual, grave politeness, ignoring the pack of blonde stable girls who burst out of a corner of the woods, giggling and pointing at us. Cillian didn’t even spare the groupies a look. I realized, with some annoyance, that I wasn’t particularly interested in sampling their goods, either.

“Then why aren’t you backing me up on this?” I seethed.

Did Kill’s hatred for me trump his love for Royal Pipelines? I tried to remain calm. Cillian loathed emotions. I wondered how, exactly, he was going to give Da the precious heirs he was obviously waiting for when my older brother was appalled by any type of emotion, lust included.

“You started this, put things in motion. Now it’s your job to finish it,” Cillian explained, aiding his horse and quickening its pace, his back straight as an arrow. We kept chasing each other, changing paces. I remembered his words: “*Everything is a pissing contest.*”

I launched forward, catching up with him.

Song of the day: “Wild Horses” by The Rolling Stones.

“I don’t like tests,” I hissed.

“I don’t like taxes,” he deadpanned. “But guess what I’m doing every April fifteenth? Let me give you a hint, not five Californian cheerleaders on my friend’s fourteen-thousand-dollar carpet.”

I almost laughed. For all his shittiness, my brother was cooler than a Trader Joe’s cashier.

“That sucks,” I groaned, referring to Syllie. I still couldn’t remember the orgy.

“Welcome to adulthood. Leave your joy and creativity at the door.”

“What if I can’t nail him?” I dug my nails into his horse’s coat. I’d noticed Kill was warming up his black Arabian, aiding him frequently, like he wanted to jump him. I found it typical that he hadn’t even given his two favorite horses names. He was impersonal, even to the things he was fond of.

“Shame for Royal Pipelines, but we had a good run,” he said dispassionately, staring ahead.

The horses lunged like a dream and took to the saddles well. They were young but calm and good-natured. We rode into the thick of the woods, surrounded by trees and moss. There was a clear path leading hell-knows-where, the sun seeping through the needled pines, the fresh scent of earth surrounding us.

Cillian was just as suspicious of Syllie as I was. That’s why Syllie loathed him. And it was why Kill hadn’t ridiculed me when I presented my theory.

“You want to see if I fuck it up.” I snapped my fingers, finally getting it.

My brother removed an invisible piece of lint from his riding coat. “You need a good challenge. Just make sure to hang the rebel in the town square instead of humping his leg when you’re done.”

“Fuck you.”

“Language is a powerful tool, *ceann beag*. You better stop abusing it.”

“Meaning?” I gave him the stink eye.

I loathed his self-control. It freaked me out. I imagined he was one of those sociopaths who could fuck someone for hours without coming just to punish them. He was that disciplined.

“Priceless and worthless are the same sum, presented in different manners. Words make you or break you. By cursing, you reduce yourself to someone who cannot convey their feelings sufficiently.”

“Okay, Geoffrey Chaucer Jr., back to Sylvester. What do you think he’s planning?”

“Considering he asked for more shares and a substantial raise a few months back and got turned down for both, I imagine he knows he’s on his way out and wants to stick his hand in the honey pot before it’s too late. He could skim millions from the company. Billions, if he’s ambitious and feeling extra vindictive.”

He said *billions* in the same tone I said *pennies*. That sum was utterly disposable to him.

Kill took a sharp turn. I followed. We were riding around what looked like an archery range—not Sailor’s, which was in the heart of the city. This one looked like some sort of a camp. I wondered if she’d ever been here, before remembering I didn’t give two shits if she had.

Cillian asked me about college, and then about Sailor (“the feisty redhead,” to be exact), then proceeded to say the most shocking thing that had ever come out of his mouth.

“The Fitzpatricks take care of their own, Hunter. Even so, I don’t need to tell you we have a strict eat-your-young policy. But Da doesn’t hate you.”

“Which one?” I inquired when we began to make our way from the woods back to the stables. “Yours, or the Eastern European fucker who porked our mom?”

“The one that matters,” he quipped. “The one that’s putting you through hell so you can walk away with the skills it takes to run one of the largest corporations in the world alongside me.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe, anyway. We all have scars,” Cillian said icily. “Some of us choose to wear them like fine jewels; others hide them. You simply try to ignore them. Face your problems, *ceann beag*. Because guess what? They’re not going anywhere.”

“I’m glad you managed living away from your parents—from your *family*—from age six unscathed. But I’m not you. And let me tell you something else that might rock your world: I don’t want to be you, either. I wanted a father. A mother. A goddamn brother and a baby sister. The whole package. I didn’t want the private schools and the horses and the wealth. I just wanted a family.”

“A family was never in the cards for either of us,” Kill hissed, ramming his feet into the stirrups like a beginner. His horse bucked, unused to its owner raising his voice.

I slowed my pace, eyeing him.

“Mother has been on antidepressants since Aisling was born and was unfit to take care of a hamster, let alone three kids. Da was rarely home. He slept in the office more than half the week. The nannies were not allowed to live on Avebury Court grounds, because Mom feared Da would have sex with them, a fear that was not unwarranted. In the time you were away, she went to rehab twice. Aisling has been tossed around between nannies like a tennis ball. Calling them a mess would be the understatement of the century. They sent us away because they knew our best chance at surviving this family was having minimal contact with it. The truth is, I was born to inherit the Fitzpatrick mess and shoulder all the family issues, you were born to avenge *Athair*’s infidelity, and poor Aisling was born to try to patch up the chaos they’d created.”

I didn’t know my mother suffered from depression and dependency, but I was too poisoned by loneliness and neglect to find compassion for her.

“Yeah, well, worked for you.” I gathered phlegm, spitting it to the ground. I didn’t know that about Aisling, but it didn’t surprise me. My baby sister was a cactus: adaptable, easy to keep alive, and thrived on next to nothing. Kill and I were different creatures—athletic and spirited, wild and unrestrained.

“Quite,” he said, robot-like.

“You didn’t care that they tossed you aside because you think you’re above love, don’t you?” I didn’t think he was capable of feeling it. I didn’t think I could, either, but that’s because I was *below* love, undeserving of it.

“Love is a great marketing strategy. Sells a lot of books, movies, and diamonds. Aside from that, I do not consider myself a big fan of it.”

“No marriage for you, then?” I asked. Kill was thirty, and about as likely to settle down as a wild fucking boar.

“I will, to someone who is fit to sire my heirs and feels comfortable raising them away from the city—from *me*.”

“Are you going to time-travel to a century where an idea like this wouldn’t earn you a slap in the face?” I wondered aloud. He laughed, actually laughed and shook his head,

muttering, “Little Naïve, so naïve. Money’s a great incentive to be anything, even a glorified slave.”

“Chauvinist much?”

“Hardly. I didn’t limit this statement to women. I could tame any man for the right price, too.”

We poured back onto the track, entangled in our own thoughts. I wanted to get away from here, but also stay longer. I hadn’t spent quality time with Cillian in years. Maybe ever. And I didn’t want to go back to a Sailor-less apartment. It always felt cold and hollow without another person there.

We got to the stables and dismounted. I thanked my brother politely.

“Their names are Washington and Hamilton,” my brother huffed out of nowhere, stroking his horse’s nose. The horse nudged his shoulder, asking for more, but Kill had already turned and looked at me. He had the rare talent of giving you just enough for you to want more, but never to bring you to satisfaction.

“Where are Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Jay?” A sarcastic smirk curved on my face.

“In the stables, resting,” he replied, dead-ass serious. He stood straight and looked grim, and I realized maybe Cillian Fitzpatrick didn’t always want to be Cillian Fitzpatrick, after all. It was probably daunting to be above everyone twenty-four-fucking-seven.

Fuck, I’d die without cursing alone.

I shook my head, throwing my arm over his shoulder. He didn’t swat it away like I’d expected him to, just stared at me with a mixture of confusion and disdain.

“Let me buy you a burger,” I offered, internally sweating my balls. A rejection would crush me.

“I don’t eat garbage,” he drawled. “But I’ll treat you to the best meat you’ll ever have.”

I very much doubted he could offer me any meat better than what I was pounding into these days, but agreed anyway. When we walked back to his car, Cillian said, “The Brennan girl is

going to have you by the balls if you touch her. Do not touch her.”

“I could handle her *if* I wanted her.” My mood turned sour as I threw the passenger door open.

We both buckled at the same time.

“No, you can’t,” he countered.

“So who can?” I hissed, turning to face him as he revved up the engine. “You, I suppose?”

He backed out of the graveled parking lot, taking his hands off the steering wheel to attend to the task of PUTTING HIS FUCKING GLOVES ON. I couldn’t believe I was going to get killed in the name of my brother’s supreme fashion sense.

“If I thought she was worth the effort, yes.”

“Who is worthy of the efforts of the great Cillian Fitzpatrick?” I leaned into my seat, grinning venomously. “Heir to a Western oil empire, with a master’s from Harvard Business School, the face of a deity, the body of Adonis, and the wit of a thousand white-shoe lawyers?” I quoted what had been written about him in a tabloid a couple years ago, verbatim.

“No one,” he said easily. “None that I’ve encountered, at any rate.”

“You did date that princess from Monaco,” I noted.

His longest relationship had lasted six months. I suspected it was because she wasn’t close enough for him to find flaws in her in a timely manner. He finally put his hands on the goddamn wheel, two seconds before taking a sharp turn. “Your point?”

“You date, you fuck, you live—just like I do. You just hide it better.”

“We’re only as bad as the crimes we get caught perpetrating. Learn from the best, and make sure to stay away from Brennan and her friends while you’re at it—especially the two sisters with garbage for manners. Aisling has been parading them at Avebury Court like wild bobcats she caught in the hills.”

I thought it was odd that he mentioned Emmabelle and Persy specifically, but I was too riled up about the Sailor

comment to care.

“Sure thing, asshole.”

“And stop cursing.”

“Fucking fine.”

Eighteen



Sailor

“Oopsie-daisy. Another penny goes in the piggy bank,” I whispered in Junsu’s ear, tapping his shoulder.

My trainer jumped backward, bumping his head against the wall with a surprised *yap*. Junsu was *never* scared. This caught me off guard, and I stumbled in the opposite direction. Wincing, he rubbed the back of his head as he killed his telephone call without even saying goodbye to whoever was on the other line. He tucked his cell into his front pocket.

He’d been acting strange lately—showing up late to our sessions, disappearing down the hall to take personal calls, losing focus. At some point, I’d brought in a piggy bank I found at the dollar store next to his office and told him he’d have to put a penny in it every time he disappeared or acted strange. It was a pleasant way to make him refocus. I had to admit—the piggy bank was filling up, *fast*.

Last time he’d picked it up to roll another penny in the slit, I could tell it was heavy. The penny dropped with a soft thud, hitting more coppered coins. The pig’s belly was full.

“You not do that ever again!” Junsu flashed his pointy teeth at me, shaking his fist.

He must've seen the horror on my face, because he relaxed immediately, squeezing my healthy shoulder. "Sorry. This just stress."

"Anything I can do to help?" I eyed him.

Junsu kept his personal life under wraps. I knew he was happily married with three children, had moved here thirty years ago, and enjoyed doing tai chi in the park with his wife every weekend. He led a blissfully uneventful life, but I was beginning to suspect something had disrupted his status quo. Maybe someone was sick? Or one of his kids got into trouble?

But no. I knew they were all healthy and doing well. The only remotely notable crisis Junsu had ever had was a year ago, when he and his wife thought they couldn't afford putting their oldest son, Kwan, through Columbia. He got accepted, but had zero scholarships. Finally, they'd managed to pull through and come up with the funds. I never asked how. It wasn't my business.

"No." He shook his head. "Let's start the training."

We fell into step, heading for the range, the silence between us buzzing like a fly in my ear.

"Lana's going to be here in two weeks." I began to chew the skin around my thumbnail. It was raw and pink and spoke the story of my anxiety these days.

The past few weeks had been brutal. Both Lana and I fought for the media's affection, doing interviews and photoshoots and junkets. I was exhausted. I loathed being in front of the cameras. This side of the business wore me out.

I loved the sport, but hated the career.

Junsu hitched one shoulder up, hands clasped behind his back. His lack of response drove me up the wall.

I wet my lips. "Should I be worried?"

"Yes," he said. "But so should she. You are both very good. One of you ought to be slightly better. We will find out who soon."

I should've known better than to expect a full, glowing endorsement, wrapped in a reassuring bow that I was going to

kick her ass when we met for the finals in Boston to determine which of us was heading to the Olympics. It wasn't Junsu's style. Still, his answer stung.

After our training session, I drove back to my apartment, knowing Knight and Luna, Hunter's friends, were already there. **The eagles have landed**, Hunter had texted me earlier. **I bailed out of work early just to catch them bumping talons on our stairway. Totes gross.**
x

They were staying tonight and tomorrow, and I was afraid they'd hate me, or worse, find me unremarkable and invisible, like the rest of the world. I was frightened that the bubble Hunter and I had wrapped ourselves in would burst in our faces once my roommate got the memo I was just the awkward, feisty girl who'd been assigned to babysit him but ended up crawling into his bed just like the others.

When the elevator to our private penthouse dinged open, my heart slammed so hard in my chest I was nauseous. Laughter and hollers rolled from the kitchen. My eyes immediately darted to Hunter and another guy our age. They were leaning against the counter, drinking root beer from fancy-looking bottles. The guy was tall—taller than Hunter—and boringly beautiful to a point of revulsion. Tucked under his massive arm was a tan girl with cornrows braided up into a ponytail. She looked like an Egyptian princess—wildly striking, with slanted, light eyes and pillowy lips. Her eyes ping-ponged back and forth between them, a slight, amused smile on her lips. Hunter wore a Brunello Cucinelli wool and cashmere suit, and Knight was in a white Palm Angels hoodie and Giuseppe Zanotti leather mid-top sneakers. They wore fifteen-thousand dollars between themselves.

Crazy rich playboys.

“So this girl, Alice, is bent over the billiard table, telling this asshole about her Christian summer camp adventures, and our boy Hunt is *fucking* her in front of an entire room.” Hunter's friend, Knight, jerked his thumb toward him, cackling. “Now get this, Moonshine. All this time, Hunter is having, like, a legit, in-depth conversation with Vaughn about something—I don't even remember what—without breaking pace or a sweat as he's

plunging into her. What was it you talked about?” Knight elbowed Hunter.

None of them had noticed me yet, even after I stepped out of the elevator, watching them, mesmerized.

Alice. Alice from Instagram. Alice he was flirting with. Alice of his own, private Wonderland. My heart bled tar. I felt heavy and sluggish, my mind cloudy. I was jealous, I realized.

“Which senior celebrity you’d rather do, Michelle Pfeiffer or Madonna,” Hunter supplied, taking another sip of his drink, his hand tucked into the front pocket of his light gray cigar pants.

He looked so much sharper and mature than Knight, with his blond hair sleeked back elegantly, like the rest of the Fitzpatrick clan.

“Michelle Pfeiffer all the way,” I interrupted, discarding my duffel bag by the entrance, strolling in. All eyes darted to me in surprise. I smiled with too much teeth, trying to appear calm, as I went on to explain, “*Batman Returns*, anyone?”

“I’m giving you half the points.” Knight pointed at me with the neck of his bottle. “Because you had the celebrity right, but the movie wrong. *Dangerous Minds*, by the way. I’m Knight.” He disentangled from his gorgeous fiancée to approach me.

I reached out to him, expecting a handshake. Knight grabbed my hand, jerking me into a crushing hug full of soul. This guy, I knew by his hug alone, came from a family of professional huggers and knew love intimately and madly. Luna was a lucky girl.

“Thank you for taking care of our boy. We know he’s a cunt.”

“Knight!” Luna giggled, butting into our hug and squeezing me, too. She smelled like a warm fabric softener sheet, and had zero mean-girl vibe about her despite her beauty. “I’m Luna.”

“I’m Sailor.”

“We know,” they said in unison, laughing. When we broke the hug and turned to Hunter, we found him staring at us, his expression blank.

“I said Madonna,” he pointed out matter-of-factly. “Like a Virgin’? Not after I’m done with you, baby girl.”

“Yeah. ‘Burning Up’ would be her song the morning after, though.” Knight swaggered over to Hunter, slapping him on the back.

We all laughed, but I didn’t feel anywhere near happy. I was coming face to face with my nightmare, AKA Hunter’s very recent past and reputation, which I’d tried to pretend wasn’t a part of who he was.

A Casanova.

A manwhore.

A guy not to be trusted.

“So, are we going clubbing or what?” Knight cracked open another root beer, downing it in one go and emitting a loud burp. “We gotta celebrate Luna’s new book contract.”

“Clubbing with two recovering alcoholics sounds like real fucking fun, said no one, ever.” Hunter stuck his fingers into the empty bottles on the kitchen island, using them as makeshift nails to point between him and Knight. “We’ll celebrate your girl kicking ass in another way. Ye Gold Rush kids of the West are in the Athens of America. While Todos Santos is more like Aiya Napa, I’m going to show you a good time. Get ready. We leave in fifteen minutes.”

Knight and Luna exchanged glances and headed toward Hunter’s room for a change of clothes, but not before stressing to me, once again, how grateful they were for the accommodation—as if it was my apartment, not Hunter’s.

I didn’t fail to notice that Hunter hadn’t included me in their plans for tonight, or even acknowledged me directly since I’d walked into the apartment. I wasn’t a part of their evening plan. I tried to ignore the sharp slice of disappointment in my chest, but the realization made it hard for me to breathe.

“Heading to the shower. Hope you had a good day,” I offered him a wave and half a smile.

“Yeah, you too.” Hunter turned his back to me and began to discard the empty root beer bottles in the recycling can.

I halted, unable to take another step. Was it something I did that made him ignore me? I didn't think so. We'd slept together last night. And the night before. This morning, he woke me up with his face between my thighs, biting, nibbling, and licking me all over.

But that's just sex, I scoffed inwardly. *A part of your arrangement. He doesn't see you as more than a warm hole to keep him satisfied, a means to an end. Namely, his very fat inheritance.*

I hopped into the shower, letting the extra-hot water pound against my skin. I also brushed my teeth to try to wash the bitterness from my mouth. By the time I stepped out of the bathroom wearing my *Surely not everyone was Kung Fu fighting* PJs (ten bucks on Etsy, a far cry from the people I was sharing a roof with this weekend) I was met with three pairs of angry stares.

Hunter, Knight, and Luna stood in the hallway, cross-armed, scowling at me like I'd wronged them somehow.

"What?" I looked down, making sure I'd remembered to put my pants on. I had.

"What were you doing in there? Finger-banging yourself to the image of me five hundred times? We're already late, and you're wearing your goddamn PJs. Put on some jeans." Hunter waved a hand in my direction.

"Oh." I flushed scarlet. "I didn't know...I thought..." I clapped my mouth shut, realizing I was being super awkward again.

At the same time, I was also so relieved, I nearly threw up.

"Yeah, you didn't. Letting me run around looking like this in a city full of red-blooded women and alcohol?" Hunter gestured to his full height, head to toe. "You're supposed to keep me celibate and sober. So get your ass dressed and do."

So that's why he needed me there.

My heart sank. *Figures.*



An hour later, Hunter pulled over in front of the Cutler Majestic Theater on Tremont Street in my car. The place was famous for being apparently haunted. A former, albeit fictional, mayor of Boston had died there watching a performance. There were also supposedly the two spirits of a married couple and one of a little girl who accepted hidden gifts that were left there for her.

I shared this information with our guests, who looked like they were about to bolt back to California on foot as Hunter got out of the car and started opening doors for us.

“Ghosts? Blood? Murders? Vaughn would have married this place,” Knight said, making Hunter and Luna laugh.

I’d heard the name a few times, but it meant nothing to me.

“Well, fucker’s not on the continent. Besides, he and Sailor would’ve probably murdered each other, and I don’t have time or energy to be a witness at a lengthy trial.” Hunter closed the passenger door with a bang after we all poured out. “Especially when I can almost taste freedom. And pussy. I can taste that, too.”

You do, every day, I wanted to scream. Or do I not count?

But of course, I knew why he did it. We couldn’t show people we were together in the biblical sense of the word. That was our agreement.

“Anyway.” Hunter yawned. “I rented the place for the night. The personal chef is already here. We’re having organic, plant-based food, because Luna is vegetarian and Sailor is...like, a chick.”

“Oh!” Luna squeaked in response, high-fiving me. I tried to remain upbeat. *Like* a chick? Was I not an actual woman now? Besides, this was bullshit, and he knew it. We ate out together all the time, and I was the more adventurous eater. In fact, one time he said I had the metabolism of a quarterback frat boy.

“Leaves, dude?” Knight threw Hunter a look that said he’d lost all respect.

“Fear not.” Hunter raised a warning hand. “In return for our hospitality in the food department—if I can even indeed call

vegetables food—we will be watching a marathon of old-school movies, consisting of *Fight Club*, *Top Gun*, and *Dirty Harry*.”

“I’m not sitting through that!” Luna exclaimed, coming down from her initial euphoria.

“Even if it’s on top of me? Bareback?” Knight grinned, hooking his muscular bicep around her neck. Luna swatted his arm and laughed.

We made our way into the theater. An array of dishes—salads, pastas, and casseroles—were waiting outside in the lobby, complete with a makeshift dining area. We ate quickly, then went into the theater. There were two theater staff present. They dimmed the lights, put on the first movie—*Dirty Harry*—and made themselves scarce. We were seated in the front row of the upper level, in complete darkness, on plush seats. Knight and Hunter crossed their long legs at the ankles on the railings, with Knight putting Luna’s hand over his hard thigh, stroking it lovingly. Hunter and I didn’t touch, even though we sat right next to each other.

I couldn’t concentrate on the first two movies—*Dirty Harry* and *Top Gun*. All I could do was mull over how much it bothered me that Hunter hadn’t shown me any special treatment, or any treatment at *all*, for that matter. How hard was it going to be to face reality when our contract was up?

Over the weeks we’d slept together and listened to Sylvester Lewis’ tapes wrapped around each other with our AirPods, I’d willed myself to imagine Hunter walking away from me, saying goodbye one last time. I did it over and over again. I hoped the pain would subside with time—the more I envisioned it and the more I practiced.

It never did.

By the time *Fight Club* started, Luna and Knight had given up pretending they were watching the movies. They were fooling around, Luna straddling Knight on his seat. They made noises. Moans and groans and wet kisses. Their teeth collided, fabric shuffled. I couldn’t even decipher whether it was Brad Pitt or Edward Norton on the screen. I glanced at Hunter, who was sandwiched between me on one side, and Knight and Luna on the other. His eyes were dead on the screen as he poured a

bag of M&M's into his bucket of popcorn, skillfully balancing the huge thing on his knee.

I returned my gaze to the movie, my pinky on the armrest between us twitching, touching his briefly.

Touch me, fool.

He pulled away from my touch to scrub his stubbled jaw. The small, unrequited gesture felt like whiplash. My need to break over that one, silly rejection overwhelmed me. I felt like I'd lost him unexpectedly and prematurely, ahead of time.

If only you'd practiced imagining him kicking you out a hundred more times, huh? a sarcastic voice inside me taunted.

"Have you watched *Fight Club* before?" I cleared my throat.

"Is this a joke? Do birds fly?" He threw a handful of M&M's and popcorn into his mouth, chewing.

"Depends on the bird. Ostriches don't."

He turned to look at me. I could see him in my periphery, frowning, like I belonged in a mental institution.

Kiss me.

Claim me.

Show them I'm more than just the sitter.

Instead of voicing my dark, erotic, pathetic thoughts, I yawned and stood up, stretching.

"Restroom break. Will be back soon."

"Now? Shit's just about to go down." Hunter's eyes widened.

I chose the longer path, past the empty seats that weren't occupied by Knight, Luna, and Hunter as an escape route.

"I saw Brad Pitt topless. That was the height of the movie for me. It can only go downhill from here," I muttered to myself.

I slipped downstairs to the restroom. I didn't need to pee, but I took the time to freshen up, wash my face, and stare at myself in the mirror. I wore a gray, off-shoulder dress and my

checked Vans, paired with a denim jacket. Still comfortable, but not complete dudebro attire. Smoothing my orange hair with my fingers, I left the restroom. The idea of returning upstairs and facing more of Knight and Luna's love, and Hunter's aloofness, made me nearly violent. Besides, the place was allegedly *haunted*. There was so much to see.

I decided to take a stroll along the hallway. It was old and imperial, with dozens of golden lights glittering like diamonds everywhere you looked. Brown marble columns rose from the floor like trees. I stepped into the first floor of the auditorium, under the deck, where Hunter and his friends couldn't see me. The arched ceiling and detailed decorations did something to my heart I couldn't explain. It squeezed in pride—pride that I was a part of this city, a small part of this place's history. *I've been here*, I thought. In a hundred years, or maybe two, when I'm long gone, someone else would see all this.

But now it was my turn to bask in this magic.

I ambled toward the stage, moving in the shadows, invisible to the rest of them. A quick glimpse upstairs confirmed that Knight and Luna were not in a condition to see *anything*. It looked like they were having sex under the slip of fabric from Luna's flowery dress. She moved like a wave on top of Knight. Hunter's eyes were still on the movie, cold and full of ire. I stumbled backstage, behind the screen, gliding my hand over every piece of furniture and prop. I guessed *The Nutcracker* was playing, because the stage equipment included white-and-red-striped swirly columns, an aeronautic balloon, and a Christmas tree. My hand halted on a simple wooden chair with a gown draped over it. I lifted the fabric and put it to my nose, breathing it in.

It smelled of sweat, polyester, and hairspray. I squeezed my eyes closed, knowing the movie playing on the giant screen hid me. I was completely protected.

Putting the gown back where it was, I picked up a piece of wrinkled paper on the seat that looked like it'd been read to death—a song, I realized.

His love was like the sun.

Even when it wasn't there,

It didn't mean it ceased to exist.

And even when his rays did not warm her skin.

He kept her universe alive.

And even when the night engulfed her in loneliness, when winter wrestled him out of her life.

She knew he would come back.

He always did.

Long after they said goodbye.

I clutched the paper to my chest. Bowing my head, I pressed my lips to the lyrics. God, what was happening to me?

I felt the paper snatched from my hands. My eyes popped open, and when I looked up, I saw Hunter, his eyes dead on mine.

I was the first one to break our gaze as I watched his fist clenching the paper, destroying it. I smiled sadly at the irony. Did that mean I was coming to terms with our fate? With our impending goodbye?

Hunter threw the balled paper behind his shoulder, erasing all the distance between us with one step. He was still in his work attire, pale gray suit with a silky, wine-red tie. He tilted my chin up with one finger. I slapped his hand away. I was irrationally angry with him and too scared to admit why, even to myself.

Because I wasn't content with being just the babysitter he slept with to let off steam.

Because I expected more than being treated like an acquaintance.

Because I wanted us to have what Knight and Luna had.

He raised one eyebrow in question.

I turned around and walked away. I was almost at the stairs when Hunter wrapped his fingers around my wrist and pulled me behind the burgundy-velvet curtain that felt heavy and thick as it shielded us from sight.

He nuzzled his nose against my face, inhaling me with a shudder.

“When you’re like that, you make me want to fuck the defiance out of you, *aingeal dian*.”

For all the times I’d asked him what my nickname meant, I’d never had the courage to Google it and find out myself. I still hoped he’d voluntarily tell me before our time was up. Plus, I liked the mystery. I knew I was probably going to look it up as soon as we parted ways. I was bound to obsess over every little detail once he was gone. Which reminded me—I needed to start looking for apartments, since my parents had repurposed my old bedroom. Another thing I’d postponed.

“You barely even acknowledged me out there,” I protested, glad for the dim light that hid my bright-red blush. I was crammed between his hot, strong body and the wall.

“I didn’t know how,” Hunter admitted, his lips finding the lobe of my ear, nibbling at it. His mouth had a way of sending shivers to the rest of my body the minute it touched an inch of me. “I’ve never had a…” He paused, thinking about how to label us.

Girlfriend?

“Lady friend. A real one,” he finished, his mouth moving to the curve of my neck, his tongue sliding along it. “I don’t know how to communicate with you without unbuttoning your clothes with my teeth.”

“So you decided not to pay me any attention at all?” My breath hitched, but I kept the conversation going.

When he realized I wasn’t touching him back, wasn’t reciprocating, he took my hand and put it on the bulge between his legs. He was hard.

He just watched his friends bone right in front of him. Don’t feel so special.

“Since when do you care?” His lips skimmed mine. He used one of his hands to grab my butt and pin me against the wall, and the other to pull my dress up so he could push his hand inside me.

“Since you made me feel like shit,” I countered, squeezing him *there*. I didn’t put much strength into it, but I wasn’t gentle, either. If I hoped it’d clear him out of his hormone-induced fog, I was dead wrong. Hunter just laughed throatily, shoved my hand into his slacks, and curled his fingers over mine to make sure I was holding his shaft.

“Good girl. Up and down, now. Rub it, baby.”

“*Hunt*,” I croaked, but still rubbed him off. I hated that I succumbed to him. My only solace was the fact that I didn’t do it to get *him* off. I did it because it was incredibly hot. Us, making out in this haunted theater that was almost solely ours tonight, fooling myself by pretending I had what Luna had, when Hunter clearly offered me nothing more than sex.

“Yeah, baby,” he groaned, grinding against my hand. “Show those ghosts how it’s done. Casper porn all the way.”

“Answer me, Hunter. Why were you ignoring me?” I asked, going faster, watching as his eyes rolled backwards in agony and pleasure. He still didn’t answer, so I stopped midway, withdrawing my hand and folding my arms over my chest. His eyes widened.

“Jesus fuck, Sailor! What did you want me to do? Kiss you? Make out with you in public? That’d throw us out of fuck-buddies purgatory, which is exactly where we’re supposed to be. I have a shit-ton of money on the line. You’ve got your career. This shit’s almost over. Why kill the fun now?”

Fuck buddies.

The way his mouth formed the word—the mere existence of the word *in* his mouth—made every inch of my skin blossom with violent goosebumps. Fuck. Buddies. That’s all we were. Friends who had sex with each other.

Hunter wanted us to remain nothing, and I? I wanted everything.

Sensing he wasn’t going to get a verbal answer, Hunter twisted his hand between us, dipped it under my dress, and shoved my panties down to my knees. I shivered when I realized how wet and ruined my panties were, especially in the middle of our fight.

“Let me make you feel better,” he whispered into my mouth, kissing me once again. Slow. So slow. Designed to seduce.

“They might catch us,” I whispered.

“Let them. That’ll show them how much attention I give you.” He leaned forward and got rid of my panties, pulling them all the way down. I kicked them aside, still in my Vans. Hunter pushed me flat against the wall.

“Spread your legs for me,” he ordered.

“You’re not the boss of m...”

“Swear to God, Sailor, I will fuck your mouth so hard you’ll lose teeth if you disobey.”

I nudged my knees apart, opening myself in front of him. He crouched on his knees in his suit, using his thumbs to open the lips between my legs. He put his lips close to me, inhaled, then blew what I knew was a fresh, minty exhale inside me, peppered with a chocolate-y, M&M’s smell.

I quivered, my hands flying to his shoulders. “Do it again,” I moaned.

He blew into me again, and I clenched against the air, begging for more.

“Tell me.” Hunter spread me wider with his thumbs, and I felt the pressure, the slight pain down there as he stretched me. “Do you really think you can say no to me?”

I didn’t answer, because I didn’t like my answer. I just stared at him defiantly, even as he was close to giving me an orgasm while hardly touching me. *Hunter Fitzpatrick is a dangerous habit*, I thought. *I should be glad to quit him*.

He blew into me again, his eyes on mine.

My hands moved from his shoulders to his hair, tugging at the soft, silky strands.

“More.”

He plunged two fingers into me, curling them upwards to hit my G-spot, the sound of my wetness around him filling the air, and began to thrust. Slowly. So slowly I thought I was going to die. His eyes didn’t leave mine as he did it, his expression grave.

“Faster,” I croaked.

He shook his head.

“This is a punishing orgasm, not a rewarding one, Sailor. You should’ve thought about that before you had the idea of breaking this off.”

I collapsed down along the wall, keeping his head between my legs and wiggling my butt on the floor, trying to quicken the pace myself, but he wouldn’t let me. Hunter flattened one of his hands against my lower stomach, pinning me in place.

I moaned. “I want more.”

“Specify,” he nearly barked.

There was a commotion in the scene playing on the big screen that hid us. Brad Pitt and Edward Norton were not happy campers. I thought we were safe from being found.

“Have sex with me.” I swallowed my shame.

“*Bzzzzz*,” he said. “Wrong terminology. Now say it like a proper twenty-first century chick.”

“Fuck me,” I whispered, looking down.

He quickened his pace, knowing I was close. “Louder.”

“Fuck me.” I raised my voice.

“Can’t hear you,” he sing-songed.

“*Fuck m—*” I began to yell, but before I could, he was on top of me, unfastening his belt and shoving himself into me. He went in bareback—the first time we’d done it without a condom—and my eyes bulged at the sensation of his hot, silky flesh inside me. I groaned into his shoulder, clutching his back as he began to move.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I was glad we’d had *that* conversation. The one about STDs. It wasn’t official or anything—Hunter had complained about his father forcing him into being tested when he moved back to Boston—but still, it was nice to know chlamydia was not in my near future.

He pumped fast—feral, jerky, and completely out of rhythm. Hunter had a few moves I’d become accustomed to. There was

what I called the stripper move, where he would plow in and out in one, smooth, wave-like movement, like in soft porn movies. Then he had the frat-boy move, where he nailed me to whatever surface we were lying on and pumped into me in fast, deep, punishing thrusts. This was neither of those things. Tonight he entered me like he thought I was going to evaporate into air any moment and he needed to find his release before that happened.

I felt like he was slicing me, breaking me even more, and I decided to fight back. I clawed my raw fingernails from his shoulder to his chest, pushing him away, but not really.

“I hate you,” I muttered, and he replied by shutting me up with a filthy kiss full of tongue and teeth.

But I meant what I said. I hated that he made me feel, that he’d ruined my plan to sail through life smoothly, without having to get hurt. I hated that he’d invited me to drown with him at his parents’ butterfly garden, and the stupid girl that I was, I had.

Now I needed air.

I slapped his face, hard, to break the kiss. He pulled away, shocked, but when he was about to pull out of me, I grabbed his bare butt cheeks—the only thing bare about him, we were both fully clothed—and drove him into me deeper.

“No. Give me an orgasm, and *then* leave me alone. I mean it, Hunter. We’re through.”

Something in his face changed just then.

I remembered an important thing Hunter had told me one day, when we were lying together in my bed.

“It’s true that I’ve never stayed with a woman, but it’s also true that women never stay with me. My mom neglected me. The revolving door of nannies didn’t help, either. My only sister used to ask my da for permission before calling me because he’d told her I was bad influence. Any other chick who noticed me wanted to either fuck my face or get access to my wallet. Women don’t think highly of me, but the truth is, I don’t think so highly of them, either.”

I was dumping him without even being with him, playing on the notion he hated the most—women leaving him unexpectedly.

And he wasn't happy.

Hunter thrust into me again and again and again, the pleasure he awakened in my body at odds with the sharp pain I felt in my soul. I wanted to take the words back, but I didn't want to sacrifice my happiness for his, either.

When the climax began to rock me back and forth, euphoria washing over my limbs, I felt him pulsating and twitching inside of me. He pulled out, held his engorged red cock in his fist, and extended my neck by tugging my hair back. My heart thundered in my chest. He pressed the tip of his wet cock—that smelled exactly like me—to my hairline and glided it down my face as he came in spurts, creating a line of his cum along my face. He stopped at my mouth, one eyebrow slanted, his eyes daring me to refuse him.

I opened my mouth obediently, and he shoved it in, finishing in my mouth.

I tilted my head back, letting it hit the back of my throat, then swallowed.

Hunter stood up swiftly and buckled himself. He'd opened his mouth to say something—something harsh, something he would undoubtedly regret—when the burgundy-velvet curtain engulfing us swiped open.

“Whoa,” Knight whistled. He stood to the side of the stage, slow-clapping us.

Luna was beside him, cupping her mouth, her eyes wide.

“Is that a thing? A babysitter with a happy ending?” Knight grinned.

I felt so much blood rushing to my face, I thought I was going to explode.

Hunter turned and walked away, not even bothering to answer his best friend or pick me up from the floor, with his cum still dripping from my chin.

Nineteen



Hunter

The second I was done waving goodbye to Knight and Luna at the airport, I drove back to the apartment in Sailor's car, applying major-ass self-restraint not to rip the wheel from its socket and throw it out the fucking window.

She wanted to bail on this arrangement now, when we were so close to the finish line? Yeah. No. Fuck this and fuck her.

Literally. I was going to. Punishingly. Because that's how she liked it, and because I drew the line when her insecurities started messing with my sex life. Damn, I had pre-cum leaking from the tip of my cock, ninth grade-style, just from thinking about what I'd do to her.

When we'd gotten back home from the theater last night, I couldn't help it. I'd waited until everyone was asleep, picked up the phone, and called Cillian. He sounded like he was at a busy restaurant, only that didn't make any sense, because it was hella late. Everybody in the background spoke French. When I told him it was serious, he muttered under his breath and went outside. The noise of waves crashing on the shore filled my ears. Where the hell was he? Cannes? Monaco? Fucking heaven?

"You better be dying or talking with your mouth wrapped around the barrel of a gun. It's three a.m." I heard the flicker of

a lighter as he lit a cigar. My brother didn't do pot or cigarettes. Only King of Denmark cigars.

It may have been three a.m. in Boston, but not wherever the fuck he was. Was he in Europe? Did he use Da's Gulfstreamer? Way to leave the carbon footprint of a thousand Nephilim in the name of exotic pussy. And to think I was the one with the bad rep between us two.

"Wishful thinking, brother. It is unlike you to be optimistic." I adapted his flatline voice.

"Get to the point," he hissed.

I paused.

"Promise not to snitch on me first."

I was taking a big risk here, but I had no one to talk to about this. Knight wouldn't understand. He'd known he was in love with Luna before he was out of diapers, a hopeless romantic. Vaughn wouldn't, either. Fucker was so cold I doubted he loved his own mother.

That left me with my brother. A comfortable medium: deadly sociopathic, but with the ability to mimic and think like a normal human.

"What makes you think I care enough about what you're about to say to promise you anything?" he asked, sounding entertained.

Cuntcuntcunt.

"Kill," I warned.

"On with it, *ceann beag*. Gossip is beneath me."

Everything is beneath you, I thought bitterly.

"I'm fucking the nanny," I admitted, flat out.

My confession was met with loud silence. I unglued my phone from my ear to see if the call was still on. It was. For a second, I regretted how spontaneously I'd given my half-brother—my *full-hater*—enough ammo to make Da leave me penniless.

Then Cillian spoke. “Is there more to the story, or is this a state-the-obvious theme night?” he growled darkly.

“Wait, you don’t seem surprised.”

“That’s because I’m not.”

“How did you know?” I sat up on the couch. Everyone’s doors were closed, so there was no danger of my being heard.

“Figured when she called me about you that you’d found your way into her heart. And the only tool you have to dig into a woman’s body is your dick. I did the math.”

“Do you think Da knows?”

“Doubt it. He just wants your dick not to shoot everywhere like it’s the wild west, and you seem contained.”

“Well, I haven’t fucked anyone else in all this time. I’m also sober.”

“I don’t care. Move along. My time is precious.” Cillian flicked the cigar with a soft thud I could hear. The music from the restaurant he had left became louder for a second, when someone pushed the door open and called for him in French. He answered her, also in French. She giggled and closed the door.

I shook my head. She’d asked him what he wanted for breakfast. He answered with her name—Rachelle. I Googled the time difference between Boston and Paris. It was nine a.m. there. *Fucker*. I shook my head.

“Anyway, we were supposed to keep this shit happening until she moves out, but she wants to break it off now.”

“And?”

“And I don’t want to be celibate again!” I snapped. *Idiot*.

My brother chuckled. He found few things as pleasurable as my distress. “What changed her mind?”

“My friend from Cali was over with his fiancée. I kind of ignored her when they were here. And when we did talk, I reminded her that it was just temporary. I think I called it fuck-buddy purgatory.”

“And they say romance is dead,” he noted sarcastically.

“Fuck you.”

“I’m starting to believe I’m the only living person in Boston who hasn’t had the displeasure,” he jested. “Did your friends bring up your sordid past in Todos Santos, by any chance?”

I thought about the story Knight was telling Luna when we thought Sailor wasn’t there and let out a growl.

“She knew I was a player.” I dismissed his theory, though really, could I blame her for bailing on my ass? The weekend was disastrous.

“It’s easy to forget in a city where she’s your only source of entertainment and your social life is nonexistent.”

“What do I do now?”

“Grovel.”

“Screw that.”

“That’s an option, but not nearly as pleasurable as the redheaded beauty sleeping under your roof.” Kill’s husky voice became roughened.

He thought she was beautiful? That made me feel stupidly proud and inanely angry at the same time.

Another groan escaped me. “Gotta go. For the record, you didn’t help at all,” I said.

“For the record, I didn’t try.”

He hung up first, but sent a message a second after.

Cillian: Told you not to touch that one.

Now, two days later, here I was, pushing the door open, expecting to find Sailor in the kitchen, sulking, waiting for an apology (why was I apologizing again?), eyeing me like I took a shit in her bed—like she had for the remainder of Knight and Luna’s stay. The worst part was, I *was* going to apologize. I’d bought flowers from Trader Joe’s.

I even Googled *best flowers to get a chick*.

I put *work* into this thing.

But Sailor wasn't here. The apartment was empty. I strode to the kitchen island, disposing the flowers on the counter and imagining the worst—she was just the type to throw the last five months away and bail on me—when I noticed a piece of paper on the kitchen island.

I picked it up.

Hunt,

Lana is in town early. I went to see Crystal for an urgent meeting, then found out we landed the GW cover. I'm flying to New York and will be back in a couple days. Notified your father.

Be good.

Sailor

I gritted my teeth to a point I was surprised they didn't turn to dust.

I had two days of zero supervision without my nanny dearest, and all I wanted was to have her back. The irony wasn't lost on me. My most unholy temptation was living under the same roof, a wolf in sheep's clothing. I pulled my phone from my pocket, but as I stared at her name in my contacts, I realized this wasn't a conversation I wanted to have on the phone.

It wasn't a conversation I wanted to have at *all*, to be honest.

Besides, maybe some time apart would do us good. Maybe it'd set her head straight and make her see we didn't need each other after all. Maybe it would remind *me* of what Sailor was: a temporary fix. I'd talked about her and analyzed her behavior—with my tyrant brother, no less—which meant this shit had gone too far.

The more I thought about it, the more I was happy she wasn't here. Good riddance.

I hoped she'd have fun shooting the *GW* cover she wasn't even excited for.

Maybe she would. Sailor did a fine job lying to herself. She hated fame. Loathed interviews. Detested being in the spotlight. And recently, I suspected, she'd also come to despise archery itself. She was working on autopilot.

Feeling my nostrils flare with anger, I grabbed the flowers and shoved them into the trash can, cramming them in with my foot, half-kicking them all over the kitchen.

I grabbed my laptop and retired to my room, planning to go ham on some Thai food and listen to Syllie's recordings to finally find incriminating information on the asshole.

Without the goddamn *nanny*.



Four hours into the recording, I hit the jackpot.

By the sound of it, he was meeting face to face with someone. I didn't know who, but prior to that, I'd heard him driving for an hour and a half, so it was likely out of Boston. He'd been fidgety on his way there—changed radio channels frequently, sighed and muttered profanity at the traffic. He'd called his wife twice and forgotten what he wanted to tell her both times. Kill had called him once to get some details about our refinery trip to Maine. He'd cross-examined him about the health and safety failures. Three of the machines there were down. It all sounded like gibberish to me. Desalter units. Vacuum distillation. Amine gas treater. The only thing I knew was this shit sounded like something I didn't want to touch. After Sylvester hung up the phone, I heard him punching the steering wheel again and again and again, mumbling, *dammit*.

He'd slammed his car door shut (I made a mental note to check where he'd driven with the tracking device I'd put there) and walked into someplace. It sounded quiet, the earth crunchy with leaves. He talked to someone. Male. He sounded older and not from here. Thick, Eastern European accent. Russian, maybe. His English was impeccable, though, his words measured.

“How are we getting along with the plan?” Syllie sniffed.

He was pacing, I could tell. Hours upon hours of listening to his recordings had helped me recognize his tells: the way he

talked, walked, and clicked his pen in succession when he was nervous.

“We are making progress, but as I said before, it is a sophisticated operation, and there are a lot of things to take into consideration. We are planning for seven potential scenarios. The men involved in the operation would like some reassurance that their families will be compensated, should something happen to them.”

“And they will be compensated,” Syllie snapped. “As long as the Fitzpatricks are out of my way.”

“I’m afraid they’ll need more assurance than that. I do not blame them for being skeptical. It is not every day a beggar tries to dethrone a king.” The Eastern European man clucked his tongue, lighting a cigarette by the sound of the lighter flicking.

“Where is this coming from?” Syllie spat. “The details of our deal have already been signed and agreed upon.”

“Deals change. The risk is great. Your reward, greater.”

“And the contract?” Sylvester was probably foaming at the fucking mouth at this point.

“Good as any old piece of paper. You’ve yet to pay a penny, and they’ve yet to execute your plan. They can still back out. Right now, it seems like they are.”

“You think I have millions lying around, waiting to be gifted? Think about the amount of money Royal Pipelines will lose as a result. We’re talking at least two hundred mill in the red, not to mention the legal fees. And don’t get me started on our shareholders. It will be a black day for Wall Street.”

I sat upright in my bed, causing the half-empty cartons of Thai food to spill from where they were propped on my thighs to the carpet. Hell if I cared. This was what I needed—some kind of admission, proof that Syllie was planning something. And he was. Weirdly, the first person I wanted to run to with this information wasn’t Da or even Kill. It was Sailor. Which went to show how pussy-whipped I was, because she had no skin in this game. But I knew how proud she’d be that I’d nailed it.

That's it, asshole. You're going cold turkey on this bitch, even after she comes back. You need to get her out of your system.

“You will lose a fraction of what you are gaining.” The man who spoke with Syllie took a drag of his cigarette. “And have the world at your feet in return. If your excuse for why you shouldn't raise refinery workers' salaries is stirring pity in Wall Street brokers, you may want to try another tactic.”

“What are you asking?” My father's right hand retorted. “Get to the point.”

“They would each like three million dollars over the course of the next three years, paid in unmarked Bitcoin, so they can trade and resell them as they see fit. As for me, I'd like a substantial number of shares in Royal Pipelines. I'll buy them kosher, and you'll slip the money back to me through the back door.”

“What do you consider substantial?”

“Fifteen percent is my starting point.”

“Is this a joke?”

“I'm afraid humor is not my strong suit.”

There was silence, and then some arguing. In the end, they didn't reach an agreement, but it was easy to see the Eastern European dude had Syllie's balls in a vise. I stopped listening when Syllie stomped his way back to the car and slammed his door.

I wanted to take this to Cillian and Da, to throw it in their faces and tell them I'd been right all along. In fact, I'd shoved my feet into my sneakers and dropped the USB with the recording in my front pocket, halfway through the door, when I remembered what Cillian had said.

It was my operation to handle.

It was my war to fight.

I'd started it, and I needed to finish—a hunter going for the kill.

Even though I knew Sylvester Lewis was up to something, I didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle yet. There was more to unveil. Worst of all, I knew Syllie to be a very resourceful man and was afraid he'd spin it somehow with his smooth tongue.

No. I was going to wait it out and deal with him myself.

I was going to earn my place at Royal Pipelines.

I was going to show *Athair* I was his.

Twenty



Sailor

The last thing I wanted to do after New York was go straight from the airport to the archery club.

My feet blistered from standing on heels all day, my skin was raw from the makeup they'd slapped on me—then rubbed off of my face—and my scalp burned from all the hairspray and tugging. I'd sat for three hours and answered questions that had nothing to do with archery, then ended up missing my training session in New York. Everything felt chaotic and pointless. Since when was being an athlete about the fame and not the actual sport?

But Junsu had insisted I meet him at the club. Things between us were so strained, I figured appeasing him was more important than catching up on sleep. Besides, a huge chunk of me didn't want to face Hunter again. I'd received radio silence from him the last couple days.

I asked Dad, who picked me up from the airport, to take me straight to the club. He didn't protest, though I could see the apostrophes between his eyebrows on our way there. I itched to reach and smooth them with my fingers.

"If you have something to say, you might as well do it," I grumbled as we rounded the street to the club.

I knew he and Mom were worried about me. I'd never given them an answer about the summer semester. I just pretended we hadn't had that conversation, shoved it into the jam-packed denial drawer in my head.

Fuck-buddy purgatory. Life purgatory. Same difference.

"You look like you haven't slept in days." Dad kept his eyes on the road, his jaw twitching.

Growing up, it had always surprised me how my dad, who seemed so formidable and terrifying to the rest of the world, gave me pretty much free reign when it came to my own life. When I asked him about it once, he said, "*I cannot keep you from making mistakes, because then you'll never learn from them. The world is tough, and cruel, and mostly unfair. It's our job to find a way to navigate our way in it. The more I shield you, the less chance you'll have of surviving.*"

"That's because I haven't," I admitted, fiddling with my seatbelt as we sliced past rows of red-bricked buildings, little cafes, and potted plants. The sky was wooly, heavy with gray clouds. Autumn had molded into winter. The seasons were changing, and with them, the circumstances of my life. "But I will. Now that Lana is here, all I need is to prove I deserve the Olympic spot. Then I can finally take my foot off the gas."

"Like you did in the last decade?" he quipped, strangling the steering wheel.

"Whatever happened to letting me make my own mistakes so I can learn from them?"

"Whatever happened to *learning* from your mistakes? You're killing yourself," he countered. "And seeing you like this is killing your mother. I will not be a widower because you've a chip on your shoulder and something to prove. Clearly, the Fitzpatrick boy didn't have the desired effect on you."

Dumbstruck, I whirled toward him, struggling to keep my jaw from dropping.

"Excuse me?"

He rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt up. "I thought an arranged relationship would work for you as it worked for your

mother and me. I was wrong,” he grumbled, not a trace of apology in his voice.

“Hunter and I are not in a relationship,” I lied. Maybe. Who the hell knew what we were at this point?

Dad had kind of, sort of, okay—*totally*—kidnapped Mom and married her back in the day. They hadn’t expected to fall in love, but fall madly in love they did. Still, I struggled to understand what made him think *this* was the norm.

“It sure looked like it from where I was sitting at the Fitzpatrick dinner table.”

“Hunter’s celibate,” I bit out.

Dad side-eyed me, giving me the bored, shockingly condescending look he spared his enemies.

“Don’t lie to me, kid. I make a living off my bullshit radar, and your version of things stinks.”

“So you just handed me over to Fitzpatrick because you thought it’d loosen me up? Open my eyes to the wonders of the world?” I scoffed, aghast.

He threw the Maserati into park in front of the club, but didn’t kill the engine. I didn’t make a move. Junsu could wait. I was too busy digesting the fact that my dad had all but pimped me out in the name of bringing me out of my shell.

Dad ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, scowling at the center console.

“You needed a push in the right direction. Still do. It is fine not to be boy-crazy, but you can’t ignore the world forever. You’ve never had a crush. Beau wasn’t a crush. He was a fucking *beard*. You’ve never taken interest in doing anything, becoming something, pursuing a profession. You needed someone to introduce you to the world. Hunter was supposed to be the guy to do it.”

Hunter was the guy, I thought bitterly. Thanks to him, I had Ash, had learned how to push myself forward, to believe in myself, and stood up to Junsu. Because of him, I’d started dressing up and paying attention to what I looked like. Hunter had dragged me out of the house to restaurants and the theater

and to meet his friends and family. He made me a part of something bigger than my teeny-tiny life. I couldn't deny it. And Hunter, like my parents, hated my obsession with what I was doing—my tunnel-visioned quest to the Olympics.

“He is,” I croaked, staring at my hands in my lap now.

Dad looked up at me, surprised.

I cleared my throat. “He is that guy. He changed me, Dad. Maybe not as fast or as thoroughly as you and Mom had hoped, but he did. I'm not the same person I was when we moved in together.”

“Then why the fuck are you still like this?” He peered at me, puzzled. He was such a man.

“Like what?”

“Still...” He motioned in my general direction. “Consumed. Obsessed. *You*.”

“Because it's not so black and white. And anyway, we're not together-together.” I felt my cheeks heating. I couldn't believe I was talking to my dad about this, of all people. It was like taking dating advice from Dracula. “He is not serious about me,” I admitted, my voice coming out softer than I intended.

“I wasn't marriage material before your mother made me. Be patient.” He flashed me a rare smile, ruffling my hair. “Now get the fuck out, sweetheart. I have work.”

I chuckled, pushing the passenger door open and getting out with more energy than I'd had for the couple days I spent in New York.

“Good luck, baby.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”



Bill, the receptionist at the club, informed me that Junsu wanted to see me in his office, but he was running a little late.

“Emergency at home. He'll be here soon. Just walk right in.” Bill mock-punched my shoulder hello.

I rolled my luggage around his counter. “Thanks. Mind if I leave this here?”

“Be my guest.” He shrugged, getting back to hunching over the desk in front of him, playing solitaire on his laptop.

Walking to Junsu’s office felt daunting, death-row like. I knew he was unhappy with me, and I knew we were growing apart. The familiar hallway felt narrower, the air stuffy. I realized Dad was right. It was time to stop resenting Hunter for his past and give him a fair chance. Maybe after I moved out we’d continue seeing each other. Maybe—just maybe—Hunter said all those things about our arrangement and how it was all temporary for the same reason I reminded myself that we had an expiration date: to keep himself from hurting.

To dare me to defy our six-month plan.

The truth was, for the past few months, there was nowhere I’d rather be than with Hunter Fitzpatrick. He was my home, the little corner in the universe that understood me.

I knocked on Junsu’s door before remembering Bill had said he wasn’t there. Pushing the door open, I took a step in.

Froze.

Sucked in a breath.

My lungs collapsed first, then my smile. One brick at a time. My system shut down, my throat dried up, and my heart...

It skipped a beat...no, two, three beats before it started hammering in my chest violently, desperate to burst out and flap helplessly on the floor, like a fish out of water.

“Jesus Christ!” My throat burned with the scream.

Hunter was sitting in Junsu’s chair, naked. Lana was on top of him, straddling his narrow waist. She was wearing *his* dress shirt and seemingly nothing underneath. She had her back to me, but there was no mistaking the lush, brunette hair extensions. Her arms were wrapped around his neck possessively, her face buried in his chest.

I wanted to throw up.

Lana spun her head in my direction, her lips curling into a vicious smile that cut through me like a blade. Seeing her up close like this after so much time felt like coming face to face with Echinda—half-woman, half-snake, *all* poison.

“Oops, was this one yours?” she purred, running a manicured, nude-colored nail across his fine jaw. Hunter swatted her touch away, sobering.

I took a step back. Tentatively.

“Fuck.” He darted up. “Sailor, wait!”

Fuck indeed.

He had his pants on—thank God for small miracles. Lana dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, and he stepped around her like she was dirt on his way to me. I turned around and ran. Not walked—ran. I knew if he got to me, he’d see everything on my face, the ugly, pathetic truth of my feelings for him. The only thing I had left was my pride. He was not getting it.

My heart, maybe, but not my pride.

Hunter chased me, his footsteps ringing off the walls of the hallway. I thought about what they’d done, putting the story behind the horrific scene together. She had his shirt on, which meant she had to have been naked with him at some point. They’d had sex—filthy, intimate, rough sex. When he *knew* how much I hated her. Bad blood ran between Lana and me like a river, and Hunter had bathed in it. He’d handed her my ass. He’d betrayed me.

“Stop! Just let me explain.” Hunter was at my heels as I burst through the glass door of the club, realizing I didn’t have my car. Frantically, I looked left and right, noticing there were a lot of cars I didn’t recognize in the usually empty parking lot.

Bill got up from his station and ran to the door, but I shook my head. “I can handle this, Bill.”

I didn’t have time to call an Uber. I had to escape by foot, at least until I got rid of Hunter.

“Sailor.” Hunter spun me by my injured shoulder. His touch felt like fire. It burned through me, and I nearly yelped. He was

still shirtless.

“Don’t touch me!” I clawed at his skin desperately, managing to leave bloody scratches on his forearm.

He ignored them. “It’s not what it looks like.” He raised his hands in defense.

I heard commotion around us, but nothing registered other than the white-hot anger coursing through my body.

“You’d say that, wouldn’t you, considering I hold your future in my hands.” I started taking the stairs down, but Hunter yanked me back up, bringing me to his chest and enveloping me in a fierce hug. I tried to kick his nuts. He grabbed my knee, pushing it aside, knotting my leg around him. He cupped my face, shielding me from sight, and whispered into my ear, “Don’t look up, baby.”

I looked up disobediently, feeling an ugly, taunting smile mar my face. I wanted to hurt him back. What I saw was close to a dozen photographers—paparazzi, no doubt—taking photos of us. The flashes felt like lashes, each catcall and muffled laugh a beating to my soul.

Click. Click. Click.

Me, heartbroken and distraught.

Click. Click. Click.

Him, half-naked and guilty.

I nearly collapsed with the adrenaline buzzing through me, but Hunter dragged me back into the club and shut the door. The photographers followed him to the threshold, but didn’t get inside.

“Let go of me,” I roared as Hunter hoisted me up by my midriff, my back pressed against his hard chest, and pulled me to the back hallway, kicking and screaming, where they couldn’t see us. I wondered where Lana was, how much pleasure she took from this.

Infinite amounts.

Hunter pinned me to the wall, breathing in my face. His breath smelled like a woman, of a cloying, sweet perfume and

hints of watermelon lip gloss. His lips had some glitter residue. My body shook with so much anger, betrayal, and despair, the first thing I did when he released me was slap his cheek with all the force I still had in me. His face flew in the other direction, and he closed his eyes, drawing a calming breath, his nostrils flaring.

“Aingeal dian.”

“Call me that name one more time, and I’ll gouge your eye out with one of my arrows.”

“We’ve been set up. Somebody called the photographers. Somebody *wanted* them to see me like this. You like that.”

“And of course, you, forever the easy prey where a pretty woman is concerned, rose to the occasion of being seduced,” I exclaimed theatrically, my uncontrolled rage turning into bitter sarcasm. “Poor Hunter Fitzpatrick. So close to his family’s fortune, yet so, so far.”

“I didn’t...” he started, but I pushed him away. He couldn’t deny what I’d just seen with my own eyes.

“Save me the excuses and leave.”

Junsu came running through the corridor, thunder in his eyes.

“Get away from her!” he barked like a rabid dog, shaking his fist in the air. He possessed a vitality I hadn’t seen in him for months. “I kick your ass!”

Hunter lifted his hands, looking between the two of us, his deep breaths contracting his abs into a tight six pack.

“Sailor,” Hunter murmured under his breath. “I have some things I need to tell you, and we need to have this conversation alone.”

“This is the last time I’m going to repeat myself.” I lifted my finger to Hunter. “We’re done forever. Don’t talk to me. Don’t approach me. I’ll talk to your dad about the fine print regarding our...arrangement.” I kept it vague, as if I hadn’t told Junsu all the details. “I’ll send my dad and Sam to pick up my stuff from the apartment.”

With that, I bolted back toward the door, pushing through it with the speed of a bullet. Some of the photographers were still loitering around, smoking and looking at their phones. As soon as I burst out, they picked their cameras up and started chasing me.

I caught sight of Lana standing in the corner of the parking lot, fully dressed in a chic off-shoulder pink sweater, skinny jeans, and riding boots, giving an interview to a sports reporter, addressing the rumors about her and her new beau, Hunter Fitzpatrick.

“It’s still the early days.” She laughed throatily, making a show of flipping her hair. “And as you can see, unfortunately, there’s a lot of interest from unwanted female admirers.”

The reporters burst out laughing, nodding enthusiastically.

Me. I was the admirer. The stalker. The weird idiot who had a public meltdown when she found them. The need to throttle Lana made my fingertips burn.

All because of one mistake. One accident. One tragedy that had linked Lana and me together forever.

I knew Hunter was being escorted out of the club by security under Junsu’s supervision, and that my trainer would understand why I couldn’t stay, so I started running. I put one foot in front of the other until I hit a good pace. My mother was a runner. I’d inherited my lithe, athletic legs from her. Running relatively long distances, even without practice, wasn’t a problem.

It was when the wind hit my face that I realized I was crying. The heat of my tears against my ice-cold cheeks made my face feel numb. My tears flew behind me as I sliced through the air, running faster, toward downtown. I’d make a phone call after I dodged the photographers. First, I had to lose them.

It was only when I was fifteen blocks from the club that I dared peek over my shoulder. The paparazzi were nowhere in sight. They’d already gotten what they were looking for—a scandal they could spin a million different ways and juicy photos that’d get tongues wagging.

I stopped at a traffic light, pressing my hands to my knees, panting. As soon as I regulated my breath, I took my phone out.

Ten missed calls from Junsu. Twelve from Mom. Two from Dad. Four between Sam, Emmabelle, and Persy. Thirty-one from Hunter. My battery was dying.

I hit the dial button and called Mom back.

“Hey, Mom, can you pick me up?” I tried to keep my voice as casual as I could, even though I knew she knew something was up. She wouldn’t call me so many times for nothing. Some of the pictures must have had already hit the websites as the news broke.

All I heard was a sniff on the other line, and then, “On my way.”



Later that night, the gossip sites added a convoluted story to the pictures of me storming out of the club and Hunter chasing me half-naked. As I suspected, the headlines ranged from “Hunk Dumps Archer Sailor Brennan for Bombshell Lana Alder” to “Billionaire’s Son (yes, the one with the sex tape!) Caught Cheating on Olympic Hottie.”

There was even one story claiming an insider insisted Hunter and I were in an arranged relationship to keep him out of trouble. I had no doubt who’d orchestrated the entire thing: Lana. The minute she found out I lived with him, she went after him and put this entire nightmare in motion. The only thing I still couldn’t figure out was how she found out who I lived with. Who gave her the info?

“I mean, they did call you a hottie.” Emmabelle passed me a tub of ice cream, snatching the phone from my hand so I couldn’t read more speculations about my relationship with Hunter. Belle, Persy, and Aisling were all perched in my childhood bedroom on my old bed, which my parents had dragged back from storage when news of Hunter and Lana started making the rounds. Mom floated in and out of my room periodically, offering milkshakes, cookies, and ice cream. Not only was I heartbroken, but now I would likely die prematurely of type two diabetes.

“They also referred to you as an Olympic athlete,” Aisling pointed out sheepishly, munching on her lower lip.

It was probably weird for her to be here, being the sister of the offender, but she kept a straight face and didn’t try to defend him.

“So, are you going to tell us Hunter’s charges?” Emmabelle poked my ribs. “Are we talking breaking the contract and screwing you over with his dad, which is infuriating, albeit redeemable, or is it...*more*?”

I was washed with sympathetic gazes. Although my friends had practically witnessed my fooling around with Hunter, I’d never confirmed my relationship with him, and they’d never pushed.

Feeling my throat working, I began to pick invisible lint from the blanket on top of my crossed legs. I felt guilty for not confiding in them sooner. I never kept anything from my friends.

“Are you asking if we were together?” I cleared my throat.

The tub of ice cream was transferred into Persy’s hand when Belle realized I wasn’t going to eat any.

“We’re asking if you’re in love,” Persy said gently, squeezing my thigh.

“And byproduct, if we need to go there and kick his ass.” Emmabelle flexed her nonexistent bicep. “Don’t worry, Aisling. You’re excused from the task.”

“Oh, I’ll be the one aiming straight for his genitals to show where my loyalty lies.” Aisling’s eyes flared.

We all burst out in laughter. Even me.

Aisling shook her head and patted my leg. “I will never forget the day you brought me into your circle.”

“I know, but blood is thicker than water,” I croaked.

“That may be, but loyalty is thicker than blood,” Aisling replied. “We’re a team now. A pack. The Boston Belles.”

The room fell silent. The new nickname rolled nicely off her tongue. It rang true and sweet. I smiled again, mainly to make

my friends feel like they were getting somewhere with their attempts to console me.

“So?” Emmabelle turned the conversation back to me. “Are you in love with the well-endowed sex-tape prince?”

It was so like her to find his sex tape and watch it on repeat.

“Yeah,” I answered quietly, surprising even myself. “God, I am. Crap.”

“Crap,” they echoed in unison.

“Indeed,” Belle added helpfully.

She covered me with her body, draping over me like a second blanket. Persy hugged me from one side, the ice cream tub still in her hand, freezing the back of my head, and Aisling climbed the bed and hugged me from the other side. My friends engulfed me from all directions.

I felt loved. So loved, I couldn't help but wonder how the man I hated so much right now was doing.

Hunter didn't have friends here.

No support group.

Good, I thought. Let him rot in hell and feel the weight of the consequences of his actions.



The morning after, I paid a visit to Gerald Fitzpatrick at his home office. It was buttcrack o'clock, but I wanted to get it out of the way before I started training. Also, coming into his office and risking facing Hunter was my idea of hell.

Dad had picked up my car and belongings from Hunter's apartment the night before. I didn't ask him if he saw my ex-roommate, but he mentioned Hunter had tried calling me several times. *Several* was ninety-six, to be exact, including some text messages trying to coax me to listen to him. At some point Hunter had texted that he was outside my parents' building. He'd waited there for four hours by the time stamp of his text messages.

I blocked his number after that.

“I suppose you’re here to apologize for your colossal failure,” Mr. Fitzpatrick sneered behind his dark oak desk. His office consisted of a wall-to-ceiling, back-to-back library full to the brim with books, a desk, three chairs, and a minibar. Expensive paintings by Picasso and Modigliani hung on the very little space that wasn’t occupied with books. The tax on those things alone could buy six houses here in the city.

“Not exactly,” I said, keeping my back straight, my demeanor calm. I was still standing, as I hadn’t been invited to sit down. Just as well. I wanted to make it short and not so sweet.

“Are you denying that my son slept with the Alder girl?” Gerald raised a thick, bushy eyebrow, his index finger covering the length of his twisted mouth.

“I didn’t catch them having sex.” I popped one shoulder up.

“So you’re *defending* him yet again?” His eyes widened.

I shook my head, meeting his eyes. “No. But I can’t condemn him for what I don’t know for a fact. But I do know *I* slept with him. I don’t want this on my conscience. This is why I’m here today, to tell you I betrayed your confidence, broke the terms of our deal, and won’t be going through with the last month of our agreement. Please send me the invoice for the money you’ve invested in my career so I can repay you.”

I stepped forward, sliding him a sheet with my information. My fingers shook around it. “For what it’s worth, I know Hunter hasn’t been with anyone other than myself and perhaps Lana Alder during those months, and he was always sober. He’s put a lot of effort into work and college, gave it his best shot.”

I left out his late nights working on the Syllie Project, as we’d called it. It wasn’t my tale to tell.

Gerald leaned forward, ignoring the document I’d placed between us. “Are you implying he deserves the inheritance?” He scowled, each word spat like it was profanity.

My throat bobbed with a swallow. I could mess it up for Hunter. And a part of me—not a small part, I had to admit—wanted to do just that. Because my heart was in pieces. Ever since yesterday, I hadn’t felt like my lungs were full, no matter

how much I tried breathing. It felt like something had been ripped from my chest, and the hollowness had spread to the rest of me like a disease.

But ruining it for Hunter was also ruining it for me.

I didn't want the responsibility of tarnishing his life, even if he'd shattered mine.

"I think he definitely deserves to be a part of the family business, and to have his piece of the inheritance," I answered evenly. "He is a changed man, despite his mishap."

Every word felt like a sword in my mouth.

"And you are willing to pay for your PR campaign? Cover all costs?" he stressed, his face unreadable.

Was he accepting my offer to pay for everything, or was he going to secretly sue me for everything I had?

"Yeah." I licked my lips, resisting the urge to nibble at my thumb. "I'll pay for everything. I might need to have a monthly plan—I won't take the money from my parents—but I will. I promise."

He stared at me harshly. "Leave."

I looked around us. The room was quiet and empty and cold, like its owner.

"That's it?"

"Yes. Get the hell out of my office."

"Sir, I—"

"*Out.* Before I change my mind and make it much worse for both of you."

I turned around and marched to the door, halting when I reached the threshold. Something, maybe my dignity, willed me to chance one more look at him.

"I really am sorry," I whispered. "And I know he is, too. If Hunter could be anything in the world, it would be your son. Your *real* son."

His head was bowed. If he heard me, I couldn't tell. His shoulders trembled, just for a second.

Crying? Laughing? Shaking his head?

One thing was for sure: Gerald Fitzpatrick didn't fully hate his bastard son, whether he admitted it or not.



My reputation was in the mud.

I knew that as soon as I got to the archery club. A few reporters milled around the door, flicking cigarette butts and talking among themselves. I shouldered past before their cameras could aim at me like weapons. Junsu was quick to open the door from the inside, jerk me in, and slam it in their faces.

He ushered me to his office, his hand on my back. "The boy ruined everything, just like I thought," he muttered, his hair a mess, eyes swollen from lack of sleep. "People say you in no mental state to win the competition against Lana to determine which one goes to Olympics."

"That's nonsense," I huffed. I caught up to his steps, but he was moving like a storm, demon-quick and aiming for destruction. "Hunter has nothing to do with the competition. I'm ready."

But was I really? I felt like I was floating on a cloud parallel to my own life. I didn't know what I wanted anymore, what I was capable of.

He stopped in front of his office, squeezing both my arms in a rare fatherly gesture.

"I don't want it to break you." He clasped me harder, his eyes begging me for something I couldn't understand.

"It won't." I wiggled free of his touch, red anger rising within me.

"You've waited too long for this," he said slowly. "What if you collapse in the range?"

"I will *not*." I gritted my teeth, pushing the door to his office open and walking in. He followed me, closing the door behind us. I took a seat. I noticed the piggy bank was gone. Maybe

Hunter and Lana had to break it to buy condoms. He'd certainly run through a few boxes with me.

Are they together now? When it doesn't matter anyway? When his father knows and I'm out of the picture? Probably.

"So why did you want to see me yesterday?" I slapped my thigh hard to break myself loose of the memory of Lana sitting on top of Hunter. It was all I could think about. I couldn't sleep, eat, or function—just play that moment on repeat.

Junsu pinched his temple from his spot by the door, then shook his head, realizing I'd asked him a question. "What?"

What was wrong with him?

"I asked why you wanted to see me straight after I landed yesterday. Why you asked me to come to your office," I repeated slowly.

"Oh. Because I had time to train Lana those days you were gone. She very good, Sailor. I worry for your chances."

I smiled tightly. Junsu had kind of sucked at the whole-mental preparation part recently. It felt like no one around me wanted me in the Olympics. Everybody thought I'd sacrificed my life for the cause. This was the last straw.

"I'm good too. I'll be fine."

"A trial with a selection panel will be here the day after tomorrow." He dropped the mother of all bombs at my feet, letting it detonate in my face. I knew it was going to happen sometime soon, but in *two days*?

The other two members of the Olympic team had won their spots based on their national rankings. Lana and I were competing for the individual spot on the team. The selection panel would be the deciding factor between us.

"When did you learn about this?" I shot to my feet.

"Over the weekend." He fingered a bow that hung on his wall, the bow he had used when he won the gold medal all those years ago.

I thought about the word. *Bow*. I didn't want to bow to anyone. This was why I'd mastered the instrument in the first

place.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were busy in photoshoot,” he accused, letting the last word twist out of his mouth like it was made of nails and broken glass.

I wanted to scream in his face, grab his shoulders, shake him, and throw the responsibility for this mess at his door. How dare he keep this from me? I’d have stayed and practiced more had I known.

“Try next Olympics,” Junsu said softly, his voice below a whisper. His entire face crinkled, like a ball of tissue left in someone’s coat pocket the entire winter. “Five years, Sailor. You still so young.”

Oh, but my soul, I wanted to reply. It’d seen so many things. It was so old, so well worn and practiced in disappointment.

I stormed past him, my shoulder brushing his on my way out. I was a huntress, made for big, glorious things. A sailor crossing oceans, conquering foreign seas.

I was going to meet Lana and see our battle through, even if it brought me to Hades.

And if I failed, at least I’d know I tried. Fought. At least I’d know I was a Brennan.

Twenty-One



The morning before the day of my face-off with Lana, Mom woke me up the way she had when I was a kid.

She brushed my hair away from my face, her fingers cold against my hot cheeks.

She kissed my temple, whispering into my ear, “I called you Sailor because I wanted you to see the world, to visit continents, to cross oceans and seas. In ancient times, sailors used to tattoo sparrows on their skin before leaving the docks. It brought them luck, you see. And since my name is Sparrow, I want to bring *you* luck. I want you to carry me everywhere in spirit. I’ll be there for you always. Only I think I failed, my brave girl. I think I failed you miserably. I hope he succeeds. I hope he knows you are so much more than beautiful. You are *real*.”

I blinked away the sleep, letting my eyes flutter open. The room was still dark and cold, foreign to me despite the many years I’d occupied it. It didn’t smell of Hunter and the food we’d ordered and our sweaty bodies swallowing each other up.

“He?” I croaked.

I’d given my parents direct orders not to let Hunter in. Mom stood. I felt the dip of the mattress rising with her.

“Look at your nightstand.” She brushed her fingertips against my forehead, leaving my room.

I sat up straight, rubbing the sleep off of my eyes. Sure enough, Hunter’s wooden horse necklace that brought him luck was waiting for me there—the same horse he’d believed prevented him from falling.

A rush of warmth passed through my chest. If nothing else, it was nice to know that despite sampling both of us, Hunter had the good manners to cheer on his main piece and not Lana. A note floated down from the nightstand. I picked it up.

If you want it, it is yours.

To keep. To use. To burn.

With this, you’ll never fall.

—Hunter

I smiled bitterly, allowing a tear to slide down my cheek.

“Silly boy,” I whispered. “I already have.”



Hunter

The days after the tabloids exploded with pictures of me half-naked (six pack intact), I skipped work, opting to chase after Sailor to apologize for what hadn’t happened with Lana.

I mean, technically, I did go into the office, but only in the middle of the night, and only to get my hands on all the refinery documents in Syllie’s possession. The only way to access the management floor was with Cillian’s or Da’s electronic fingerprint scan. I used a gel lifter I bought from Knox to duplicate Da’s fingerprints, knowing the CCTV camera was watching me as I broke into my own company’s office. I made

sure I smiled and flipped it the bird before strolling in. The pile of illegal things I was doing grew by the nanosecond, but it was too late to chicken out.

I wanted to explain to Sailor that the reason I was in the archery club in the first place had nothing to do with Lana What's-Her-Rack. But I knew what she saw, and even I had to admit, it looked fucking bad. And after a while, I realized she wasn't going to listen anyway.

So instead of crawling on my knees, continuing to beg for the forgiveness I knew she wouldn't grant, I decided to give her something else, something she'd appreciate far more.

Which meant here I was in the archery club again, fucking lame stalker that I was.

I hadn't slept a wink the past three nights, not since Sailor dumped me for good. I had been listening to recordings until my ears rang. I looked like a hot pile of baked shit as I loitered outside the archery club, waiting for her to get out of practice.

When she did, I blocked her way like a deranged ninja, jumping between two cars.

Forget the knight in shining armor. I'm the dipshit in tin foil.

"Jesus Christ!" she hissed, throwing her duffel bag at me instinctively. I caught it and tossed it aside, pulling her by the arm.

Song of the day: "Creep" by Radiohead.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone." She drew back in the opposite direction, not missing a chance to try to scratch me with her nails.

God, I missed her.

"I will, but not before you listen to this." I took my phone out of my pocket and shoved one of my AirPods into my ear and the other into hers, scrolling my thumb on my touch screen to find what I was looking for.

"Gross. I don't need your earwax in my system."

"I put worse things in you, and you didn't seem all that disgusted." I bared my teeth tauntingly.

She was about to take the AirPods out and throw it in my face, but I grabbed her hand, kissing her palm again, as I did when she tried to hurt me (which, let's admit it, was frequently).

She shot me an angry look that said *it better be worth it*.

I wanted to kiss her little freckled nose, and I hated myself for losing the privilege to do so because of some stupid misunderstanding.

"I found out who set us up, who made this shit with Lana leak," I said, taking a moment to appreciate how dope the hashtag would be: #LanaLeak. Sailor didn't share my admiration for my superior wit. She rolled her eyes, picking up the duffel bag I'd tossed away, and hoisting it on her shoulder.

"Not this again."

I hit play before she could say anything else. The recording started. Junsu and Lana were talking somewhere loud. A diner, by the sound of customers and the gum-popping waitress who insisted on topping off their coffees every five seconds.

Junsu: I don't know what it's going to take for Sailor to give up competition. Maybe not ever. She want it bad. I try with her shoulder being inflamed, but she got it treated, refused to make it worse.

Lana: Well, you should've tried harder, Junsu. That's what my team paid you for—to make sure this wouldn't come to a point where I'd have to compete with her. Do you have any idea how pissed my sponsors will be if I don't make it to the Olympics? There's a lot on the line. Last I checked, I paid you the money for your kid's college in full.

Junsu: I know. I thinking of other possibilities to stop her.

Lana: Lay it on me, old man. I'm willing to try anything at this point. I'll lose a movie deal if I don't get to the Olympics. It's, like, in the actual contract with the studio, that I'll make it to the Olympics. Can you believe it? People are trash.

Junsu: There is one more way, I think. She has agreement with the boy. The pretty, rich one. Secret deal. This how she got all

the sudden publicity. I think maybe touching that will help. She live with him now.

Lana: What rich boy? What agreement? I knew it! I knew there was something weird going on. This bitch didn't pop all over my newsfeed for no reason. Someone is pushing her. Who's the guy?

Junsu: I have the name here. Wait. He has been coming to club lately. I think they may be couple. I think he is—how you say?—her Achilles' heel. I think he the key to sorting this mess.

This was the part where Junsu must've passed his phone to Lana. Then:

Lana: Hmm. Hunter Fitzpatrick. Heard about him. Wouldn't mind being his arm candy for the winter. Let's set this up, Junsu. You do the dirty work and make sure I have access to him. I'll bring the paps. Start working for what you were paid to do.

Junsu: Okay. Just don't hurt her. Don't hurt Sailor. She can still have next Olympics. Yes?

Lana: By the next Olympics I will be a gazillionaire and Sailor will be a virgin spinster who has nothing but archery in her life. I'll be out of the game and deep into my acting career. She can have the Olympics then.

I ripped the AirPods from my ear, killing the recording. The rest was more bullshit Lana spewed about Sailor, which she didn't need to hear. Sailor's huge jade eyes stared up at me, the gold and gray in them glittering. Every muscle in her body looked tight and strained, and I found this moment to ponder the stupidest thing in the universe—if we ever had kids, what eye color would they have, between my deep blue and her wild green?

How about focus on her not wanting to murder you first, old sport?

“Hell if I know how he found out about the agreement.” I shook my head. “But there you have it.”

“God, Hunter. I told him. About our agreement. About...” She cupped her mouth, keeling like she was about to throw up. “I did this. I told Junsu. And he used it against me. Lana bribed

him. Jesus Christ. My own trainer..." She trailed off, straightening her spine and pacing back and forth in the parking lot, pulling at her short tresses.

It was a lot to take in. Sailor and Junsu had worked together for a long time. I rubbed her back, surprised that she let me. Then again, she was in shock. She kept saying, "He betrayed me" over and over again. Then the tune changed to, "And you betrayed me, too."

"Now, hold that thought." I grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her to sit on some random car's hood.

She slapped my hands away, scowling at me. "I know what I saw."

"No, you know what you *think* you saw. Around the time your shoulder was injured, I started suspecting Junsu's motives. His behavior seemed at odds with that of a trainer who wanted his athlete to succeed. I already had recording devices and Sherlock Holmes' equipment coming out of my ass, so I figured—what's another offense to my list of growing breaches of privacy? I was getting good at playing super spy. I wired him up unbeknownst to him, just for shits and giggles, and have been listening to him periodically. One in the piggy bank. The other in a watch that's a replica of the one he put on his desk for a second to try my Rolex."

Her eyes widened in shock. "You came to visit Junsu?"

I nodded. "Pretended to take an interest in private lessons. Scared the bejesus out of him when I said I wanted to learn so I could survive post-apocalypse."

That earned me a faint smile. Tough crowd.

I soldiered on. "These recordings won't hold in court, *aingeal dian*, because my ass had no business wiring him up. The day you so-called caught Lana and me doing it, I came in because Junsu said he had something to show me. It sounded a lot like a threat, and I worried it was about you. Only it wasn't Junsu who walked into his office. It was Lana. And she caught me messing with his drawers. It looked bad. Like, horrible. She thought I was trying to find juice on him—which was true—and had me by the balls. But I knew the wire in the piggy bank was

still working, so I pretended to cooperate with her, knowing I could prove to you that nothing happened. Also, she gave me the information I was after.”

I hit the play button again on my phone, this time on another trimmed section of the recording. The AirPods still in Sailor’s ear began to play.

Lana: Busted, pretty boy.

Hunter: You scared the living shit out of me. I was just on my way out.

Lana: Where do you think you’re going? We both know you’re not supposed to be here.

Hunter: Junsu called me.

Lana: To go through his drawers? I don’t think so.

Hunter: And what brings you here? Got a taste for older men?

Lana: Only if they serve my purposes.

Hunter: Hey. What the fuck are you doing?

Lana: Texting my friends from the local newspapers our whereabouts. And Junsu, too, to tell your girl to come over here and see this. We’re about to raise a scandal, baby.

Hunter: Why would Junsu answer your ass? I’ve met bricks less tough than him.

Lana: Because we’re working together on something—no point in keeping you in the dark. You’re about to become a part of my plan. Lose your shirt.

Hunter: Lose your entitled, shit-eating grin first.

Lana: Meow. I wouldn’t cross me, pretty boy. I’m a girl on a mission, and right now, you’re it.

Hunter: God, you sound like a B-grade porn adaptation of the Power Rangers. I mean, it sounds like something I’d be into, but surprisingly, it’s not.

Lana: Lose. The. Shirt.

Hunter: What if I say no?

Lana: You leave here in handcuffs and even your daddy won't be able to explain what you were doing breaking into a locked drawer. Especially seeing as you've already had a brush with the police this year. Rape charges, right?

Hunter: They were dropped. And if I say yes?

Lana: Sailor drops out of the race, and I leave you to pick up the pieces. Although I must say, I'm the better option.

Hunter: Let's agree to disagree. Just so you know, I'm not going to fuck you, kiss you, or touch you. So let's get that out of the way.

Lana: (laughs) I'm all set in that department. Save your charity fucks for someone who needs them, like Sailor. Playing pretend is enough. She'll be coming here soon. Lose the shirt, stud.

I stopped the recording again, raising an eyebrow. If that wasn't sufficient proof I hadn't been porking her archenemy, I didn't know what was. Problem was, I couldn't exactly relay all this shit to her on the phone or via text messages. Because, illegal.

She chewed on the skin around her thumbnail, then shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut.

"It doesn't matter. None of it matters. Another month together wouldn't have done us any good. Not me, anyway. I am already in l—" She stopped herself, breathing hard, realizing what she was about to say.

"You're what?" I pressed. "What did you want to say?"

"Never mind. Anyway, it doesn't matter. We had a month left, and I don't want it. You're free of the contract. I'm sure your father has already told you your inheritance won't be affected."

My father didn't tell me shit, actually, since I'd been dodging his and my mother's calls since this blew up, but whatever. I didn't have time to correct her. I wanted to tell her so many things. But when she hopped down from the hood and made her way to her car, I couldn't stop her.

Couldn't stop her because she was right. A few more weeks wouldn't matter.

Right because sure, I didn't sleep with anyone else, but that hadn't meant I wasn't a dick to her a million other times.

Right because she had bigger fish to fry. Namely Junsu and Lana.

She got into her car. I had this idea to do what I'd threatened to do all those months ago, when I first came here to corner her—stand behind her car and stop her from leaving. I no longer believed she would run me over, but for the first time in a long time, I didn't want to be a self-serving piece of shit.

If she didn't want to be with me, I couldn't force her.

And that realization hit me like a ten-ton brick.

As soon as her car raced out of the parking lot, I took my phone out and texted her. Figured she'd be quick to lift my block once she knew I had information that could be useful to her regarding Lana and Junsu. Turned out, I was right.

Hunter: A few more weeks. Come on. For old times' sake.

Sailor: Sorry. You don't fit into my world anymore.

Hunter: I'm not a fucking loveseat, Sailor.

Hunter: Although...

Sailor: I know, I know, I can sit on your face anytime.

Hunter: Dick, too. <3

Sailor: Stop texting me.

Twenty-Two



Sailor

Seven years ago

I raced through the thick of the woods, the moss and winter mud soft beneath my feet. My boots sank deeper into the muck with each step I took, and I fought against the weight of gravity, desperate to flee. Footsteps splashed fast and swift behind me. My heart smashed against my ribcage, like a prisoner shaking the bars. *Let me out*, it screamed.

It was a mistake—an awful, unfortunate mistake.

The dog wasn't supposed to be there. The range had been completely empty before I drew the arrow, blindfolded and laughing.

And laughing.

And laughing.

And laughing.

The moment played in my head, over and over again. Fellow students asked if I could do it. I said I could. I knew I could. Someone wrapped their bandana over my eyes tightly. Then they put him there when I couldn't see. Tied him to the target using ropes they stole from a nearby ranch. The helpless yelp

was my first clue. The last breath he drew, crying as the arrow pinned him to the target. The blood across the bullseye. The chunks of his flesh. I ripped the bandana from my face, letting out a scream. All the others were laughing.

They called Lana. “Your dog,” they said. “She killed him.”

I ran faster when I thought about her face, her tears. I heard the sound of additional footsteps ricocheting through the tall trees. Boots. Splashes. Calls.

More people were coming.

My mother’s voice, shrill and panicked, echoed my name. “Sailor!”

I focused on the horizon, the tall pine trees and dark green wilderness. I had this idea in my head that my parents would stop loving me if they knew what I’d done.

My calves burned, my quads quivered, and tears blurred my vision. I stumbled over a thick log hidden by autumn leaves, flying to the ground, headfirst.

Mud filled my face, and my knees hit something hard. The hot, wet pain of a deep scrape and fresh blood sliced through my leg.

I coughed the dirt out of my mouth, but it clung to my tongue. My palms burned from trying—and failing—to soften the fall. Quickly, I gathered my limbs, the way you do scattered belongings, and stood up on shaky legs. I was about to turn around when I felt the tip of an arrow pressing against my spine. The person behind it, holding the bow and arrow, cornered me against an oak tree. My face was to the trunk. I was so scared I couldn’t breathe.

“He was my everything,” I heard her say, and my heart lurched and twisted, coiling into itself in dozens of knots that made it almost impossible for it to beat. Lana Alder had a small, jarring voice and a faint Swiss accent. “My uncle gave him to me when I moved here from Zurich. I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t speak the language. It was just Spot and me. He was my best friend. You took away my best friend. I have no one now.”

She dug the arrow into my back. Even if she released it from her bow, she still wouldn't have enough momentum to kill me. But she could put me in a wheelchair. Mom and Dad had made me watch a lot of documentaries about archery and the danger of it before they let me practice.

And you went and let people blindfold you and killed a dog.

I wanted to choke on the cold, damp mud still in my mouth. It tasted salty, bitter, and ashen. It began to rain, but the woods were so thick with trees, I barely felt it on my skin. The scent of petrichor rose to my nostrils, and for the first time since I was born, I wished I were dead.

Mom's voice called for me again. Dad's, too.

"I'm sorry," I finally managed to croak. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see him. I was blindfolded. I had no idea. I didn't... I couldn't..."

What made things worse was I'd heard Lana had only agreed to come from New Mexico to camp in Massachusetts if she could bring Spot with her. That's how much she wanted him here. They'd had to issue a bunch of permits for the mutt to walk around on the premises. I guessed whoever took care of him wasn't paying enough attention.

My body felt stiff, like a salt statue, hard but easily dissolved. I was going to lurch and throw up the minute the shock subsided. My mother's voice grew near. I knew she'd find me. We had this thing between us—one not all children had with their parents. It was a connection that felt like a part of me was still in her womb. We could sense each other from miles away. Every time Mom and I hugged, we called it recharging. We plastered our stomachs together in bed and said *Bzzzzz* the way the phone did when you plugged it in. Then she'd tell me she was so glad I was her family, which was a beautiful thing to say, because it made me feel like she would have chosen me even if I weren't hers.

Lana didn't have a choice.

She didn't have a mother, either. Her parents had died in a car accident, and her only relative in the world had agreed to

take her reluctantly, because she came with a healthy sum of money and assets.

Lana lived with her uncle and his much younger girlfriend, the one Dad said had enough plastic surgery for three desperate housewives of Orange County.

Tears began to leak from my eyes. I never cried.

“I hate you,” Lana whispered softly into my ear. “I hate you, Sailor Brennan. I don’t even like archery all that much. I came here because my uncle wanted to take Miss Deidre on a vacation in the Cook Islands and thought it would be a good opportunity to throw me somewhere where other people could watch over me. But I promise you, now I will make it my mission to take what is yours.”

I thought about all the times she’d called me ugly this weekend, said my face put her in a bad mood. And I realized she didn’t think it was an accident. Nothing could make her believe it was. She thought I’d deliberately taken away the thing closest to her heart as a part of a game, and now I had to pay.

“You want to be an archer? I will become a better one. You get a pet? I’ll kill it. A boyfriend? I will steal him. Whatever you acquire in life, Sailor, I will take it from you. Because you took something from me.”

The arrow dug deeper into my back. I tried to twist and turn to get away from the pain, but it followed me everywhere. She pressed harder.

“Stop,” I croaked. “Please. I’m sorry. It was an accident. You’re hurting me.”

Lana didn’t deter. I felt the arrow piercing my skin, reaching my bone. I hated begging, hated lowering myself to asking for mercy. With a yelp, I turned around and pushed her with all my strength. I let out a feral growl that felt like it wasn’t even coming from me. She flew back, collapsing to the mud. I ran toward her, realizing I’d pushed her by the arrow.

I crouched down. “Lana? Oh my God. Are you okay?”

What have I done now?

She lay on the bed of yellow and orange leaves, blinking lethargically at the raining sky—the way I’d seen that boy from the castle do all those years ago—defying the rain, and the hail, and the wind. Standing up to the darkness.

The arrow was stuck in Lana’s stomach. A red stain began to form around it through her fleece jacket.

No. No. No.

“Never...forgive...you.”

Those were her last words before my parents found us.

Before she was rushed to the hospital.

Before Dad made the entire thing go away, making sure no one knew what happened—about dead Spot, about how Lana suffered a bowel injury called peritonitis, where some of the contents of her intestines spilled into her stomach and caused an infection she suffered from for weeks. She was bedridden, alone in the hospital, with her uncle only returning after he’d finished his vacation, during which he’d married his girlfriend.

I knew Lana would make good on her promise to get back at me.

I never adopted any pets.

Never had the courage to fall in love and get attached to boys.

And I bided my time until I knew I could win.



The day of my match with Lana, I came to the range an hour early, knowing she’d be practicing. I was right. I lurked under the roofed stands, watching her draw an arrow and send it spiraling to the inner red mark of the target. A clean kill. Lana was good, at least in all the places she wasn’t bad.

The four judges from the Olympic committee had already entered the club. Junsu and the staff were talking to them upstairs. Their bags were at the reception area. Before I went to the range, I asked Bill if he could go outside and see if there were any photographers. I promised I’d keep an eye on the bags.

He agreed. As soon as he was out of sight, I planted what I needed in each of the judges' suitcases. When he came back, I pressed a wet kiss to his cheek.

“Thank you for being a great friend.”

“Sure thing. Thank you for being the least scary warrior I've ever met.”

I smiled. I knew it was goodbye.

He didn't.

I'd spent the night trying to figure out how I was going to use the information Hunter had given me about Junsu and Lana in a way that wouldn't frame him, and I hadn't slept a wink.

At the range, I made my way straight to Lana's target. The ground was soft beneath my feet, but I knew better than to think the fall would be anything short of painful.

I stopped when my back was pressed against the target, standing in front of Lana, daring her to draw. We were alone out here. She could, if she wanted to.

Lana lowered her bow, her eyes narrowing into suspicious slits.

Wordlessly, I threw something between us. A simple bandana, offering her a rematch.

A smile tugged over her lips. The taunting kind.

“So sorry I had to sample your boyfriend. Not knowing what he tasted like was a mystery I couldn't bear,” she purred sweetly.

Even though I believed Hunter, her words still hit me somewhere deep. I wanted to pounce on her and tear her limbs for even uttering his name. He was mine, even when he wasn't.

I smiled back at her. I had a plan. “Take the bandana.”

“I can kill you, even blindfolded.”

“Please do. Was he good?” I asked, watching as she made her way to the bandana in the middle of the space between us.

“So you don't know? You two haven't spoken?”

I shook my head. She thought he'd kept her secret.

"He was great." She flipped her shiny hair to one shoulder, still walking. "I might see him today for dinner after I'm done whooping your ass. We'll see. The Patriots' quarterback also wants a date. It's hard being me."

"I can imagine," I said.

She picked up the bandana, went back to her spot, and tied it over her eyes. Raising her bow, she aimed at me. My heart was in my throat. I wanted to move away, to punch my own face for what I'd gotten myself into. Lana's hands were steady, but her chest rose and fell quickly.

"You idiot. You know I'll do it," she muttered, seeing nothing behind the blindfold.

"Then do." I swallowed. "Kill me like I killed Spot."

"*Don't* say his name," she warned. "Don't you dare."

"It was an accident," I repeated. "A terrible accident I've regretted every moment since that day."

"I know!" she snapped, lowering her bow momentarily, stomping. "It wasn't just about Spot, you idiot. It was about everything. You had parents and a family and talent and security. And you were easy prey. So insecure and apologetic and...and..." She waved her hand in my direction. "*You.*"

She raised her bow again, huffing, "Now stand still."

I did. Sweat dripped down my spine under my sweater, and I felt my legs shaking. I wanted to throw up. She drew the arrow again. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

Do it. Get it out of your system before it is my turn to hurt you back.

"Drop out of the match, and I won't kill you," came her voice.

My eyes popped open.

"That's a big request," I said hoarsely.

"*You are my target,*" she pointed out.

“Because I put myself here willingly,” I argued. “Will all be forgiven and forgotten if I step down and don’t show up in half an hour?”

She didn’t know I was wired under my sweater.

That she was being recorded.

“Yes,” she said grimly. “But you need to tell them now.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay.” She lowered her bow again, removing the blindfold and discarding it on the ground. Her eyes, dead and flat, scanned me.

“Just so you know...” Her throaty voice wrapped around my neck. “Hunter was everything the media said he was, and more. I had a lot of fun stealing your boyfriend. I wish we could continue this. I’d have loved to torture you for a lifetime.”

I stepped away, knowing now how deep and delusional her lie was. “I know.”

I turned around to find Junsu in the shadows, under the roofed seats, scowling. I brushed past him, not stopping when he whispered my name.

He used to shout it before. Now, he was scared.

He knew.



Junsu was at my heels. Now that I’d decided not to compete, he pretended to be invested. Devastated, even. He spoke, but none of the things he said registered. I unlocked my car, stuffing my bag into the passenger seat.

Junsu grabbed my shoulder and spun me so I faced him, his expression etched with fury.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“I’m guessing that’s a rhetorical question.” I brushed off his touch.

That was it. I’d lost. My Olympic dream officially went down the drain. Hell, I’d flushed it myself. Somewhere in the

back of my head, panic had begun to set in. I knew it was the last time I'd set foot in this club. After everything that happened—everything that was *about* to happen—I couldn't come back and practice here. Not professionally, and not as a hobby. I imagined I'd find a new place, or maybe go to the woods or to the farmhouse my parents had outside of Boston. I would still practice, but not professionally.

It was time to find out who I was.

What I was good at, what I stood for.

It was time to get out of my shell and live. *And it's frightening.*

“You didn't even try. You quit.” He motioned his arm toward the club.

“So?” I shrugged. “My career. My dream. My prerogative.”

“*My reputation,*” he countered, shoving a finger to his chest. “You could lose by few points. Now I look incompetent.”

“Ah.” I smiled. “Cat's out of the bag now. So you *did* want me to lose, just not by much.”

Junsu's face fell. “What? No! I...”

I leaned forward, brushing my lip over his nose purposefully. I felt goosebumps rise on his skin. We'd never been this close physically. “I know what you did, Junsu. You and Lana. I know about your deal. Lana came clean to Hunter when she tried to seduce him in your office. You did this to yourself. Now I have a witness, and a three-page letter I left with each of the four judges on the committee. They're going to find them shortly, if they haven't already. An identical letter was sent to the United States' Olympic and Paralympic Committees. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm on my way to the police station. Hunter Fitzpatrick, AKA the boy, already gave them his official statement, as per my request.”

I bowed, the way he'd taught me when he started training me, mocking the sign of respect he'd insisted we give each other.

“No!” Junsu barked desperately, tugging at my hand.

I lunged into the driver's seat, locking the doors automatically before he got to me. He pounded his palms over the window, his voice muffled by the glass between us.

“She had money! I needed to pay for my son's college.”

I started the car, feeling tears stinging my eyes. I didn't dare let them loose.

“Sailor! You ruin my career if you do that! My family! My reputation!”

I backed out of the parking lot, blazing down the street I'd driven every day. It held memories, a piece of my heart, and a broken dream I now left behind.

I knew I wouldn't be able to set foot on it afterwards.

By nighttime, the details about Junsu and Lana were plastered all over the news. I got calls asking if I wanted to retake a match with someone else, considering Lana was not going anywhere near the Olympics anytime soon after what she'd done. I declined. The Olympic spot went to a thirty-three-year-old mother of four from rural Indiana by default. Her stats were crazy.

Mom, Dad, and Sam gathered in the living room around me while we watched her interview. Their hands were on my back, shoulders, and arms.

I was safe with my family. I was home.

Twenty-Three



Hunter

It occurred to me, as I stepped into my father's office for the first time in four days, that I was about to get my ass fucked so hard, I'd be able to easily slide an entire watermelon into it by the time he was done with me.

Four days.

Zero sleep.

Zero work time.

Two unwritten college assignments.

Plenty of half-leads regarding Syllie's wrongdoings.

Victory was within reach. I could brush it with my fingertips, and I was rabid for it. Maybe the bloodthirsty Fitzpatrick lineage did run through me. Because I'd never felt particularly competitive until I moved here.

The visit to the refinery was scheduled for tomorrow, and guess who'd finally decided to show signs of life and reappear at the office?

Ding, ding, motherfucking ding. Yours truly.

"You're alive," my father pointed out rather unhappily, still reading something on his iPad at his desk, his eyebrows somewhere on his upper forehead.

Cillian sprawled in front of him in his designated seat, texting.

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” I stepped inside, planting my ass on the seat next to Cillian.

I turned to my brother. “Leave.”

His molten eyes shot up from his phone. He had the challenging, taunting gaze of a man who was waiting to be invited to war.

“Are you high?” he inquired politely.

“Sober as a miserable, bloated celebrity post-rehab. I need to talk to Da. Alone.”

They exchanged a look that spoke dozens of sentences. Finally, Gerald nodded. My brother stood, but not before flashing me a warning look that said after Da plowed into my ass, he intended to shove explosives into it.

The door closed, and I turned to my father.

“I have some great leads about what Sylvester is up to,” I started, but he cut me off with a wave of a hand, sending the iPad crashing against his desk.

“You go MIA for four days after your agreement with the Brennan girl goes bust, and you think I care about your conspiracy theories?”

“I think you care about this company,” I enunciated through gritted teeth. “And I have information.”

“Stop being a professional timewaster,” Da countered. “And get to the heart of it. You are here because you messed up and didn’t have the guts to face the music. You broke the rules. You weren’t celibate.”

“No,” I admitted. “I wasn’t, but I didn’t sleep with that other chick, Lana. And that thing with Sailor...” I paused, feeling my nostrils flare. “It wasn’t just fucking.”

I wanted to take back the sentence, take it all the way back. What was I saying? I didn’t have feelings for Carrot Top, did I? Only she hadn’t been Carrot Top for a long-ass time. She was the girl I wanted to talk to every day, all day, if I could. The girl

who made me laugh. The girl who gave me a hard-on, not only up close, but just thinking about her. The traces of her scent alone made me want to hump the shower tiles.

I hated that I cared about Sailor Brennan, that I couldn't stop thinking about her, worrying about her, obsessing over what she was doing, thinking, DoorDashing. The little huntress had gone and conquered every inch of my brain, filling it with herself, and without my notice—without my fucking *permission*—slipped from my brain to my heart.

“Don't try to sell me the girlfriend angle.” Da raised his hand to cut me off. “I wasn't born yesterday.”

“I didn't say she was my girlfriend. But I feel...*things*,” I said vaguely. I also said the word *things* like it was made out of pube hair, spitting it out of my mouth in record time.

“Was?” *Athair* regarded me skeptically.

“She dumped me,” I admitted.

“I don't believe that for a second.”

“I don't give a flying fuck what you believe.” I smiled courteously, crossing my legs and cupping my hands over one knee. “It is the truth, and you don't get to dismiss it. I guess this is the part you've been waiting for, where you wave your new signed will in my face. Go ahead. Have your fun.”

Not missing a golden opportunity to shed blood, he opened his drawer and produced that goddamn will, making a show of flipping the pages by licking the pad of his index (side note: people who do that should burn in hell. Twice), signing his initials on each page quickly.

Looking up, he flashed me a grin.

Song of the day: “Dead Bodies Everywhere” by Korn.

“I do have a proposition for you,” he said while signing.

“I love propositions,” I replied, oddly calm. “That's what got me into this mess in the first place. What do you have in mind?”

“You say you developed *feelings* for that girl—” He air-quoted the word *feelings*, a Parker Jotter pen between his

fingers.

I wanted to put him in a box. It'd be worth the solitary confinement.

“Sailor,” I cut him off. “Her name is not ‘that girl’. It’s Sailor.”

“Yes. Her. And I say this is just a desperate plea to try to save your inheritance. So how about this? I’m giving you a second chance. A clean slate. A redemption, if you will. Admit that this was a lie, that you didn’t actually develop feelings toward Sailor, and I will tear this will apart right now. But there is a condition.”

“What’s the condition?” I asked, unblinking.

“You cut all contact with her. Forever.”

The last word sat between us like a ticking bomb. Forever was a long-ass time. An hour? That sounded more doable.

“Genes aside, we’re cut from the same cloth, aren’t we, *ceann beag*?” He cocked his head. “This is what you’ve been trying to prove to me. That you’re a Fitzpatrick. That you belong.”

“If you’re asking me to choose between my family fortune and a girl, my answer is obvious—the fortune.” I paused, watching his throat working behind his silky orange tie. “But if you’re asking me to choose between the family fortune and Sailor Brennan, I’m going to have to kiss your money goodbye and bow out of this one, Fitzpatrick or not.”

His smile evaporated. He wasn’t expecting that plot twist. Honestly, I wasn’t, either. Especially considering Sailor had conveyed to me her lack of wanting to stay in touch verbally, by text, physically, and every other way short of skywriting. Maybe she *had* told me to piss off through skywriting. I hadn’t looked at the sky in a while.

Nevertheless, it was the truth. I couldn’t resist the chance to pursue her. I couldn’t forfeit the right to hug her, order DoorDash food with her, argue about who was a better tipper, and tell her about my day. Because those were the happiest moments of my life, and every single goddamn time I reached

for my Dala horse and my neck was bare, I knew she had it—my one possession that meant something.

If she hasn't burned it by now, that is.

“You’re rejecting my offer?” Da sobered, smoothing his tie.

“Trust me, we’re both bummed about it. So I guess that means I’m fired?” I stood.

I still needed to finish my Sylvester investigation, no matter what. I no longer stopped midway when shit became hard.

“You’re not coming to Maine,” he confirmed. “Start looking for a job.”

“Bet.” I gave him a little bow and flipped him the bird for good measure. As I stepped out, I grabbed the chrome handle of the glass door and turned around to him with my parting words. “By the way, this door? Designed by a masochist. It takes three hours to close it. Here, that should fix it.” I kicked the door’s cylinder. Unhinged, it flew into Da’s office and crashed on the floor in one piece.

I looked up at him, flashing an unhinged smile from the supervillain variety. “Maybe I am a Fitzpatrick after all. Look how good I am at ruining things. You’re welcome.”



That evening, I sat my ass down to listen to how Syllie’s night was going. The answer was bound to be better than mine. I tried to DoorDash the Cypriot place that had opened three blocks from my apartment, but found out my bank account had been cleaned by Daddy Dearest—all future and current transactions declined.

The old Hunter—the one from six months ago—would’ve called the mom he ghosted not-so-friendly and had her Venmo the necessary funds to feed Africa. But the new Hunter was too prideful to beg, let alone for food. So I cracked open a can of beans, tried to microwave it, almost caused an explosion (who knew metal wasn’t microwave-safe? Not this fucker), and settled for crackers and expired cream cheese.

I was legit the bitch-eating-crackers-like-he-owns-the-place meme. FML in the ass.

I was wondering how I was going to continue paying Knox, who was literally sitting in a van, freezing his balls off, to record Syllie live through the devices he'd sold me. I hoped he accepted sexual favors, because homeboy was currently more broke than Jenna Jameson had she switched careers to celibacy expert. I was fucked in the most unorgasmic way known to man.

I was three hours into the evening's investigation on Syllie—he'd just finished having dinner with his family, during which he and his wife had discussed the riveting subject of matching Christmas sweaters—when I heard the three knocks on my door.

I put my crackers down, frowning. If it was Cillian with one of his devil's pep talks, we were going to exchange some fists, not words. But no. Cillian should've been on a plane on his way to Maine by now. I went to the door, throwing it open.

And there she stood.

Aingeal dian.

Holding a bag of takeout food. Grease trickled from the edges of the brown bag. Sailor and junk food. My mouth watered, and my balls tightened.

Am I dead? Is this heaven?

“This is not a let's-have-sex offering, Hunt. It's not even a peace offering.” She raised one palm in warning. “But I come bearing gifts and an offer. You helped me nail Lana. Let me help you nail Syllie.”

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply through my nose.

“Can you say *nail* again, please? Specifically, *nail me, Hunter*. You practically already said all the words, just not in sequence.”

She burst out laughing as I hooked a finger into her jacket and pulled her in, not giving a fuck about being broke and unemployed and neck-deep in trouble.

“What'd you get?” I threw my arm over her shoulder, kissing the crown of her head as we walked toward the living

room. And just like that, it felt like she was never gone. Just another blissful night with my girl.

“I thought we’d try the new Cypriot place. It got rad reviews.”

I bit my fist again. I’d made the right choice.

Fuck the money.



I knew, in a subconscious way, that the only shot I had at catching Syllie was if he made a mistake. But Syllie was a careful bastard, so when I found out I’d been the one to throw him off-kilter, I nearly jizzed my pants.

It was right after Sailor and I polished off our souvlaki and halloumi cheese wraps. We listened to him as he got the call in which he was informed that I hadn’t boarded the commercial plane to Maine with my father and brother.

“What do you mean he is not on the plane?” he seethed to the person on the other line. I couldn’t listen to what the other party was saying. Sylvester had used another burner phone. “How could he not be on the plane?”

Sailor and I exchanged glances, our backs hunched over the laptop, listening to the live recording.

“The whole plan is pointless without him there! No, don’t tell me to calm down. Months of planning, all down the drain. You might as well cancel the entire operation if he’s not there. The idiot will take over once they’re done and dealt with, and my troubles will triple.”

“Done and dealt with?” Sailor whisper-shouted, her eyes widening. “Did he just say that?”

A few things happened in that moment. Maybe because Sailor looked at me like I was an intelligent, capable human being and not a moneyed gigolo. She looked at me like I could crack this riddle.

And I realized...well, that I *could*.

I did a quick math:

1. Syllie sent my father and brother to a refinery that'd been dealing with health and safety issues.
2. The machinery was faulty. Three of them, at least. That's why we were scheduled to visit there in the first place.
3. Syllie could and probably *planned* to stage an accident in which all three of us—Da, Cillian and I—would die. All he needed was one orchestrated explosion. Mom and Aisling, while they'd inherit the majority of shares, wouldn't run the company in a million years. Which put the position in Syllie's capable hands.

Holy shit. He wanted to kill us. And I'd just fucked up his plan big time. Now the question was—would he go through with it still, or was he postponing because my ass wasn't en route to Maine?

Sailor seemed to read my mind, shoving my phone into my hand. "You have to call them."

I called Cillian five times. I tried another three times to reach my father. I also texted them a thousand times. They were either on the plane or somewhere with zero reception. I remembered Cillian complaining about the lack of reception in that part of Maine. I was sure Syllie took this into consideration when he'd planned all this.

"What do I do now?" I stood, pacing back and forth. "What do I do to save my asshole family?"

"Now," Sailor said simply, "you do what Fitzpatricks do best: you go to war, and you win."

Twenty-Four



Hunter

I borrowed Sailor's car, drove her back to her parents' house (I didn't take any chances in case Syllie had hired muscle to come to my apartment and finish me off), then drove straight to his house, hoping he was still there. I was glad for Knox's investigative skills. He knew where Syllie lived, worked out, took shits, and all his favorite call girls.

The entire drive there, I tried calling Da and Cillian. Finally, I called Mom and told her to try to reach them and not stop until she found them and told them not to go to the refinery.

"But why?" she asked for the millionth time.

"Because fucking stop asking questions, Mom. Just do it!"

I parked in front of Syllie's place in Charlestown, a ten-bedroom Jacobian-style mansion, stark white over black windows, with a lush front yard I currently wanted to set on fire. I slammed the driver's door shut and tromped my way to the entrance, banging on the door, then punching the bell five times for good measure. It was way past visiting hours, but if I wasn't going to get some sleep tonight, fuck if anyone in his family would.

Syllie opened the door with a scowl, wearing a purple burgundy house robe. I swear my libido bled to death the second

I saw him.

His face turned from deadly to pleasant in an instant.

“Hunter, what a lovely surprise. I thought you were supposed to be on your way to Maine?” he asked innocently.

“God, terrible acting. I’m talking Harrison Ford in *The Frisco Kid*. Just terrible. We need to talk.”

“Something happened?” He grimaced.

I wanted to punch his teeth in. I smiled instead. I’d asked Aisling to work on Mom and convince her to give me the private plane to get to Maine—not that my mother wouldn’t give me a limb if I asked for it, but I didn’t want to talk to her if I could help it.

“Just playing catch-up.” I shrugged.

“At midnight?” His eyes nearly bulged.

I inclined my head, buying time. “What can I say? I missed you *so*.”

He invited me in, hesitantly, and motioned for me to follow him to his office on the third floor. He opened the door to the balcony after pouring us two timbers of whiskey. I knew better than to put my lips to any drink Syllie gave me, but swirled the golden liquid in its tumbler for show.

“I know about your plan.” I let the drink slosh over the rim. “And I know who’s helping you execute it.”

That part was a lie, but if there was one thing I was good at, it was having a poker face. It had saved my ass countless times.

“Of course I studied for the test.”

“Of course you’re the only girl I thought about this week.”

“Of course I’m not too intoxicated to operate this heavy machinery.”

“I have no idea what you mean.” He leaned on the bannister, taking a sip of his drink. It was the little things that gave him away: the beads of sweat gathering at his temples, the way his lips twitched, how deeply he leaned against a high balcony. He was nervous.

I leaned against the doorframe, far from the bannister, studying him. “I hope you have a better line of defense when you get arrested, Mr. Lewis. Because trying to blow up a refinery with dozens of people inside, including the three major shareholders of Royal Pipelines, is no kiddie game.”

None of those things were confirmed, but his face twisted in horror as the words left my mouth, and I knew I was spot-on. He quickly rearranged his features, placing his timber of whiskey on the marble railing.

“Who fed you this nonsense, Sonny-boy?”

“Your partner in crime,” I replied. Another lie.

“I have no such thing.”

“Would you continue singing this tune if I told you every single time you used burner phones to call him, he recorded both of you?” I quirked an eyebrow.

Lies, lies, lies.

His face fell.

He thought I had something I wasn't in possession of.

“Boris should know better,” he gritted out.

Boris, huh? I was sure Sailor's dad knew who he was, and made a mental note to check.

Syllie continued, “But you have one thing wrong. I knew you weren't going to be there. I never wished you harm.”

“Please don't take offense when I call all the bullshits in the world on that.”

He shook his head, rushing to me. I raised a hand, motioning for him to stop where he was. He did.

“Look, I knew this thing with your father and brother was going to blow up sooner or later. I knew you wouldn't accompany them to Maine. And you didn't. The truth is, Sonny-boy, I would never wish you harm because...”

God, not this.

“Because I'm your father.” His throat worked around the admission, the words spilling out between us, toxic.

“My father is some Eastern European underwear model,” I countered.

“That’s what Gerald told everyone so he could keep me on his payroll, because he knew I was too important to let go of. And it’s what your mother unfortunately went along with to keep the peace in the Fitzpatrick household. But think about it, Sonny-boy. Who took care of you over the years? Who did you rush to when you needed help? Who cleaned up the mess for you? Me. Always me. I was practically a father to you *without* being a father to you. I took care of you. And now, I’m telling you, this is the beginning of a new era. We can take this company and run it together. We can do great things. Be a team. They will never respect you, Hunter. You are not a blue-blooded Fitzpatrick, a true heir. Your father put Cillian on the pedestal, and you will never reach his level—not because you’re not as good, but because Gerald would never allow it. You are looked down upon. They are not your family.”

He took another step, and I let him. He put his hand on my shoulder. I let him do that, too.

“Thrown around from one private school to the other, then exiled to your uncle and aunt on the West Coast—you never stood a chance. I tried telling your father, Hunter. I *begged*...”

He took a ragged breath, looking away from me and shaking his head, like it all pained him too much. “Look, I know I haven’t been the best father to you so far by not coming clean about this. I had my own family to think of. I have three daughters. But I promise, from now on, I’ll be there.”

“Will you take me to softball games?” I croaked, my voice rough with emotion.

He paused, regarding me with wariness, before agreeing. “Yes, Sonny-boy. Yes, I will, if that’s what you want.”

“And will we have family dinners?” I continued.

“Of course.” His eyes widened, and he embraced me in a half-hug, relieved. “Of course. Weekly. I’ll tell Dianne you are always welcome.”

Dianne was his wife. The next part I said after pretending to wipe an imaginary tear from the corner of my eye. “And will

you teach me about the birds and the bees? I heard rumors, Daddy, but really, do boys do that to girls? It sounds so... painful.”

He disconnected from me, examining my face.

I started laughing. “Damn.” I pushed him away. “Get the fuck out. I’m not your son. I may be dumb and pretty, but for fuck’s sake, I *am* pretty. You look like Gargamel.”

As I said that, I realized I’d stopped believing it. Well, some of it. I wasn’t stupid. I wasn’t a dumbass. I was just an asshole with no one to hold him accountable for anything. Until now.

“You little piece of—”

The front door three floors under us was kicked open before Syllie finished his thought. Shouts of “FBI” rang from the first floor.

I sighed at him exaggeratedly, lifting my timber of whiskey and using my hand to pry his jaw open by squeezing his cheeks. I poured the contents of my glass into his mouth.

“Here. I’ve a feeling you’ll need some liquid courage for this next part.”

I knew the police had been sent to the Lewis residence. That type of courtesy I expected, seeing as I’d called them with my story, but had no hard proof to give them. The fact that the FBI was here made me think someone else was involved.

Troy Brennan, to be exact. Sailor had asked him for help, knowing I might not be able to pull it off myself. She’d asked her father for help, even though she hated everything he did and represented. For *me*.

Syllie’s face contorted in fury. “They’re dead men walking. There’s no way you can reach them, you little idiot. They don’t have any reception where they are.”

“Why did you do this?” I asked.

Footfalls raced up the stairs. Dozens of them, it sounded like. It was happening.

“I was always mistreated. I gave Royal Pipelines my best years and didn’t even get a raise. The truth is, your father has a

lot of blood on his hands, which is why he hired Troy Brennan and his son to work on retainer for him. Cillian is a well-suited terrorist, a devil waiting to unleash hell at any moment. And you? You're a simple idiot. I tried to save this company from itself, from awful, unjust succession." Syllie grabbed me by the shirt and tried to fling me over the bannister.

He'd been calling *me* an idiot the entire six months I was in Boston, but somehow thought he could fling a two-hundred-pound, six-foot-four-inch ex-polo player made of sheer muscle and pheromones. I stumbled two steps before throwing him toward the bannister, bending him so half his body was hanging in the air, between life and death.

It was a tall fucking house. The air felt thin and chilly, like breathing icicles.

"You're dead, Fitzpatrick!" he spat, his face red.

The boys in black kicked the office door open (I *loved* when they did that; door handles were for pussies) and rushed over to grab him by the robe.

I waved goodbye with my fingertips. "We'll always have our little league softball," I called.

"Fuck you!" he yelled back, rather impolitely. "I want to call my lawyer. Let me speak to my lawyer."

I stayed half an hour to give two investigators my side of things, then asked if I could start making my way to Maine. They said yes. When I exited the Lewis household, I got a text message.

Ash: Mom said you're not getting anything before you talk to her face to face. Sorry.

I wanted to kill someone.



"You do realize your husband and son are mere hours from being blown to pieces in a remote place with zero reception?" I moved down the corridor toward my mother's office.

She led me briskly to her private room—not the bedroom she sometimes shared with Da. She nodded. “I do. But you are just as important as they are, sweetie.”

I said nothing to that, because I still didn’t believe it. After we got in, she closed the door and took a seat behind her desk. I didn’t even know why she had an office. It’s not like she’d worked a day in her life.

I remained standing. I didn’t have time. “Get it over with and give me the keys to the private jet.”

“Private jets don’t have a k—”

“It’s a figure of speech.” I smiled. “Talk, Mother.”

She shook her head, looking down at her fingers, which were splashed on the table.

“I know you’re mad at me, Hunter, and for good reason. I had you illegitimately to get back at your father, then sent you away when you were six. You have every right in the world to despise me. But honey, you must understand. I wasn’t a terrible mother to you. I was a terrible mother, period. When I found out I was pregnant with you...” She sucked in a breath and looked the other way, shaking her head, like the memory was too much.

If this was her plan to make shit better, she was doing a terrible job.

“It was the happiest moment of my life. Would you like to know why?”

Not really. “Sure,” I groaned instead. Anything to make her give me the goddamn Gulfstreamer.

She looked up at me, her eyes shining. “Because you, I knew I’d love the most. I was crazy in love with your father—your real father—but Filip never loved me back. In fact, he ran back to Croatia when he realized I was going to leave Gerald for him. Your father paid him handsomely to disappear, I assume. But you were my lovechild, Hunter. Still are. You were the only one of my children I breastfed, that I nurtured until you were three.”

“Wow. I’m humbled,” I said sarcastically. I didn’t understand where she was going with this.

“But...” She held up a hand. “I struggled with a lot of things, severe depression among them. I stayed in bed for weeks at a time. Sometimes your father would drag me out, and we’d have violent fights. I tore out his hair one time. Another, I broke his rib. I wasn’t fit to be a mother, so sending you away before you saw all that seemed like the only option.”

“And bring Aisling into the world,” I reminded her. “That was important, too. Fuck up one more kid.”

“Aisling was my apology for Filip.”

“Damn, that sounds bad.” I sucked my teeth.

She jumped from her seat, running to me. Every bone in my body turned to ice. Even when she stopped a few inches away. Even when she began to lower herself to her knees.

“Dammit, Hunter, I cannot tolerate this anymore. You have to forgive me.”

“Or else?” I asked, shoving my hands into my pockets. I forgot, momentarily, that I had my asshole family to save. I was so immersed in my mother’s attempt to patch things up.

She looked up, on her knees in front of me. “Or I’m not giving you the Gulfstreamer.”

“Your husband and son will die,” I said slowly, examining her.

She really was insane. She smiled at me, her eyes full of tears. It was a sad, broken smile, that of a person who has nothing left to lose.

“You’re killing me every day you don’t take my calls. Please.” She lowered her face to my sneakers. Jesus Christ. Was she going to...oh, *fuck*. She was. She was going to kiss my feet. I couldn’t take it. Couldn’t see the person who’d purged me out into the world losing the remainder of her pride.

“Get up,” I roared, yanking her by the shoulder. “I forgive you.”

“Really?” She was bawling now.

“Yes, really. The apology was a fucking mess, but it is obvious it’s important to you. Now, please, for the love of God,

Mom, send the Gulfstreamer.”

“It’s already warmed up and waiting for you in the gang hanger. Oh, I love you, Hunt.”

I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around her, patting her head awkwardly. “Yeah, Mom. Love you, too.”



My last stop before boarding the plane to Maine was the Brennan residence. Sailor lived in a high-rise with her parents, so honking for her to come down wasn’t in the cards. I had to drag my ass to her door.

She opened, looking alert, like it wasn’t two in the morning. She’d been waiting for me.

“Well?” Her eyes widened in anticipation.

“You told your dad. You’ve never asked him for this kind of favor.”

“I had to help you in some way,” she said quietly.

I knew how much it had cost her, how much it wounded her sense of who she was, and vowed to make it up to her.

“Can I go Christian Grey on your ass and invite you for a trip in my private plane?” I flashed her my pearly whites.

“I guess. But no BDSM.”

“Boo. You’re no fun.”

“Invite someone else, then.” She laughed.

I pulled her out, barely resisting the urge to kiss her.

“Fun is overrated. Let’s go.”

Twenty-Five



Hunter

The private plane was plush and yacht-styled, all mahogany and crème accents and brass fittings. I didn't want to think about the amount of Cillian and Gerald jizz these custom seats had seen, and I was so mad at them when I thought about the amount of pussy they had access to on this ride. In fact, I almost decided not to save their ungrateful asses for not sharing their toy with me.

Almost.

Then I remembered pussy didn't matter anymore, unless it was attached to a certain redheaded banshee.

I was on pins and needles all the way to Maine. Whether Syllie got what he deserved or not, I still needed to tell my brother and father the refinery was about to explode. I didn't know when, exactly, Syllie wanted to put the plan in motion. Logically, I had at least until the morning to get to them, and the flight was a short one. But what if Da wanted to see the refinery as soon as he landed? That was a golden opportunity for the fuckers to blow his ass up.

My old man was exactly the kind of person to go check on his property at four in the morning, as soon as his feet touched the ground.

Sailor talked about everything and nothing to lighten the mood. She gave me the ins and outs of her face-off with Lana and Junsu, said she was checking out other places to practice, but that she was hanging the bow, so to speak.

“So what will you do now?” I tapped my foot on the floor.

A stewardess with a black uniform leaned down to offer us refreshments and food with a plastic smile. She was young-ish. Young enough to wink at me after Sailor was busy unscrewing her bottle of apple juice while I cracked open my root beer. The stewardess brushed my shoulder with her hand when she left, telling me she was there if I needed anything.

Sailor saw it, but said nothing.

I shook my head. “I don’t want her,” I said.

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” she replied, peeling off the label on the cold, dripping bottle of juice. “The deal is off. You can do whatever you like.”

“I’d like to do you, then,” I deadpanned.

“Hunter.” She sighed. “Friends, remember?”

She was exasperating.

“So what are you going to do, if not archery?” I asked again, sitting back, watching her through hooded eyes. I couldn’t believe I’d thought her to be anything less than gorgeous a few months ago. I was addicted to every curve of her face now.

“Promise not to laugh?” she asked.

I shook my head. Now it was *her* turn to laugh. I grinned.

“I want to study journalism.”

“Why?”

“Food critic.”

“Dope,” I said. We were pretending my family wasn’t on the brink of exploding. I appreciated that she went along with the charade.

“Right?” She bit her lip.

“Totally.”

“Hunter...” She trailed off, bringing her thumb to her mouth.

Uh-oh. There was concern in her voice. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Fuck if I remember.” I shrugged. “Four days ago?” That sounded about right. I did take catnaps, dozing off for ten minutes here and there.

She tapped her shoulder and said, “I promise to wake you up if you get a notification or a phone call.”

I stood and walked over to the crème and navy velvet sofa where she was seated. I pressed my head against her shoulder and closed my eyes. She kissed my hair.

It was the sweetest sleep I ever had.



There really was no reception on the godforsaken hill where the refinery was positioned. Right next to it were the living facilities of the workers, where Da and Cillian were staying to show solidarity and I guess to convey that they weren't above slumming it with the blue-collar folks. (Spoiler alert: they were.)

Luckily, there was reception on the way to the facilities, so I had time to text Troy, Sam, Mom, and Aisling, letting them know we'd gotten here okay. Apparently, Syllie had been singing to the FBI and trying to pin everything on this Boris dude, since he thought they had more than they did.

He was going to rot in jail for a long-ass time.

But none of it would be worth it if I couldn't get to Da and Cillian.

I bounced my leg in the back of the Range Rover that drove us to the refinery, looking out the window. Dawn gradually broke, leaving the frosty mountains aglow in pink and yellow.

When we finally pulled up at the apartment complex by the refinery, someone opened the door for us and announced that Da and Cillian were in Da's room upstairs. I bolted after him while

Sailor thanked our driver and asked to speak to the manager. I'd asked her to ask them to evacuate the refinery and surrounding area completely. Even if we weren't there when it exploded, it was likely to reach the apartments and even farther down the street to the fisherman's village.

I took the stairs to *Athair's* room three at a time. When I reached his door, I swung it open, not bothering with a knock. I found Cillian and Da sitting at a corner desk of an extremely modest room that had a double bed covered with an orange, fuzzy quilt. The furniture looked clean but dated. They were both wide awake. Da was drinking scotch. Cillian sifted through a bunch of documents, looking like he gave very few fucks about my surprise entrance.

On the desk next to Cillian, his phone flashed with an incoming message.

Fucker had reception somehow.

Unbelievable.

Fresh anger ripped through me, tripling in quantity. They'd *ghosted* me.

I stormed inside, picked up his phone, and hurled it across the room. It hit the wall and broke in HALF, which—I'd been pretty sure until today—was fucking impossible. Screw polo. I was obviously a wasted baseball hero.

“You want to tell me you haven't had reception for twelve hours now? That you haven't checked your emails and phones for that long? Bullshit! I tried to reach you dozens of times before dragging my sorry ass here. Why weren't you picking up?” I leaned down, roaring. Flecks of my saliva flew onto their faces.

Cillian flipped a page in his document, refusing to acknowledge my presence in the room. Da took another measured sip from his drink.

Don't kill them yourself. It's what Syllie wants.

“You want to tell him or should I?” Cillian asked flatly, his eyes still on the goddamn document.

My father looked me straight in the eye, smirking. “You’ve passed the test, son.”

I had visions just then: visions of myself bashing my father’s head against the wall behind him.

Visions of wrestling Cillian to the floor and punching the smugness out of his fair features.

Stuff like that. But I just flashed my craziest, don’t-forget-to-smile grin, which must’ve looked a lot like the promising start of a psychotic episode. “I did? How. Fucking. *Fun*. Please enlighten me, Father Dearest.”

Cillian finally had the courtesy to dump the document he was reading on the desk. He glanced up at me. “When you came to us about Syllie, *Athair* didn’t want to believe it. To me, Syllie was always a loose cannon. I took it upon myself to assign Troy Brennan to the task of seeing what he was up to, what dish Sylvester was stirring for us in the disaster pot.” Cillian delivered his speech in a matter-of-fact way that implied he was reciting a cabbage soup recipe.

So that’s why the FBI came kicking down Syllie’s door. Troy already had sufficient legally-obtained evidence on him.

“We found out what he was up to with Boris Omelniski and his little friends in Maine, about the plan to blow the refinery with us in it. We made sure it was empty and all faulty machinery had been shut down. It was a money-sucker, but we couldn’t take any risks.”

My whole body simmered with rage that threatened to choke me.

“Then why did you put me through all this bullshit?” I hissed, my teeth clenched together. “Shut me down every time I tried to warn you about him? Made me go through dozens of sleepless nights of listening to the fucker, on top of doing college work and working full time for your asses? I jumped through hoops and lived on zero sleep to prevent this bullshit... and you’re telling me you knew about it all along?”

My father stood, stepping around the desk and opening his arms. It occurred to me, albeit sadly, that no matter how badly he treated me, I still referred to him as Da, even in my head.

“Hence, you passed the test.”

“Fuck your test!” I seethed, pointing at him. “Fuck it in the ass with a twelve-inch dildo. I almost killed myself trying to save you. I bent over backwards for you. I went to war for you. I was willing to burn, to die, to perish. For. *You*.”

It was Cillian’s turn to stand. “As I said, it was your dirty job to pull. Pull you did, and in a timely manner. Something that, fortunately, has never been a problem for you, judging by the lack of baby mommas knocking on our door.”

“Go to hell, Cillian.” I dragged my fingers through my hair.

“Already there. It’s called life.”

“So you trusted me to crack this riddle, but not enough to rely on me?” I turned my attention back to Da.

Troy Brennan was about as ruthless and skillful as they came, and Sam Brennan was the golden child of the underworld. Those two could win a cold war with a decade-old laptop and a BB gun. That’s what they did for a living. Of course they’d unveiled Syllie’s plan before I did.

“Correct,” my father said, a twinkle of warmth in his eyes. “Needless to say, the will shall be altered accordingly. You are my heir. My child. A Fitzpatrick. You will keep your job at Royal Pipelines. And you will get a corner office, the one next to Cillian’s. You proved yourself a true member of the family, Hunter.” He opened his arms, expecting me to...what? Jump right in?

I smiled tightly. “Fuck you, your money, and your last name, old sport. If I have to earn being your family, I never will be.”

Twenty-Six



We rented a car and drove the four hours back to Boston. Hunter was silent the entire time, save for the first ten minutes, when he rehashed everything that had happened with his father and brother in a strange, detached voice that didn't belong to him.

“That’s how little faith they had in me.”

“You didn’t exactly give them prime reason to trust you before, though.” I argued their point, not necessarily because I agreed with them, but because I knew how miserable it would make Hunter to be estranged from his family. No matter the complexities of their relationship, he loved and adored Cillian and Gerald, looked up to them. He always wanted to be like them and never thought he could.

“You sound like them.”

“You mean, logical?”

He scoffed. “Did *you* know about my dad hiring yours?” He sent me a sidelong glance, scowling as he continued zipping through the open road.

“Are you insane?” I asked. “Of course not.”

“And if you knew?” he pressed.

I was hoping he wouldn't ask that. I shook my head. "I don't answer hypothetical questions."

"Newsflash: you're about to answer this one," he shot back.

"You need to calm down."

"What I need is someone on my fucking side."

"I *am* on your side," I growled.

"You'd be in my bed, if you were," he had the audacity to say, no trace of guilt or remorse in his words. "Yet you aren't."

"That's because I'm on *my* side, too."

"Meaning?" He scoffed.

"Meaning I don't want to be any more attached to you than I already am, because you obviously don't feel the same."

"And if I do?" he asked after a charged pause.

I shook my head. "You don't. You're incapable of that. You come from a long line of adulterers. How would you know any different?"

He sat back, shaking his head. I immediately knew how awful that sounded. How disgusting I was to him. "Cat's out of the bag now. So if I'm a serial adulterer like my parents, does that mean you're going to be carving people's faces like a pumpkin like your daddy? Are we playing the gene game now? 'Cause rest assured, darling, we may not be the same brand of fuck-up, but we are both far from the realms of normalcy."

I said nothing. He was right.

Hunter continued, "What would it take for you to know I'm serious about this? About us? A grand gesture? A binding contract? A fucking ring?"

"Maybe stop being ashamed of me. Of us," I bit back. "That could have been enough."

I referred to the night with Knight and Luna, to all the times he'd minimized whatever it was we'd had. I was sure he caught the reference.

Hunter got a text message. He opened it, driving.

“Fuck,” he muttered, throwing his phone to the central console as more text messages poured in, lighting his screen in white. His screensaver was a picture of a woman’s ass with the saying: *Go hard or go home*.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he punched the steering wheel, seething. “I need to catch a plane to London. Something came up.”

“What?” I asked, incredulous.

“Vaughn,” he said, as if that explained everything. “I’m dropping you off at home. Hopefully I’ll be able to keep my pants on while I’m there. As for you, try not to kill anyone, yeah?”



Now a week had passed since Hunter grabbed me by the arm and stormed out of the refinery apartments in Maine. It was the first time since he was a boy in the rain that I’d seen him truly broken.

I hadn’t heard from him since he’d left for London. I didn’t want to ask Aisling about him, but of course I couldn’t help myself. She said he’d gone for the weekend and hadn’t been picking up anyone’s calls. When I finally broke down and visited his apartment, he wasn’t there.

Not two days ago, and not yesterday, long after he was supposed to be back, according to Ash.

Hunter had disappeared, and with him, my favorite summer.



“Thank you so much for doing this. I know how much you *loathe* the media.” Vanessa Shieling of the *Good Morning, Boston!* show leaned forward and tapped my thigh, a veneered smile on her face.

There was something almost clownish about her Botox-enhanced perfection. Her carefully swept blonde hair was too shiny, too put-together. She straightened her back in her seat, brushing nonexistent wrinkles from her A-line red dress.

“How do you know I dislike interviews?”

She wasn't wrong. The best part about retiring from archery was I didn't have to talk to the media anymore. Because while Royal Pipeline's refinery didn't explode, the Junsu and Lana case did. The media wanted my side of the story. I refused, but then Crystal, whom I still had a contract with, argued that by not addressing it, I was letting the rumors about my own misconduct roam free.

“You did nothing wrong, at least this decade. You killed her dog, not her parents,” she spat over the phone, and I cringed. But she wasn't wrong. I needed to set the record straight once and for all.

“Thirty seconds,” the director of the show called from the depths of the darkness in front of the well-lit studio. There was a whole other world in front of the stage, with Boston's landscape in the background—one with cameras and wires and people with head mics and frantic assistants, living in the shadows of the glamorous TV world. There was also an audience. The seats were jam-packed and full of viewers.

Vanessa gave the director the thumbs-up. “We have everything we need?”

“Yup,” he answered.

Everything they needed? I didn't like the sound of that.

“Ready?” She turned to ask me.

“As I ever will be,” I muttered.

Once we were on air, Vanessa began questioning me about the rivalry with Lana, the roots of it. I told her about Spot and about Lana's injury, which I'd caused. I came clean about my part of what happened. Then we discussed all the things that had been done to me. Lana and Junsu were facing serious allegations, and likely weren't going to participate in any official sports in this lifetime. Then Vanessa turned her line of questions to more private matters.

“Let's talk about those paparazzi pictures.” Vanessa rested her chin over her knuckles, frowning in concentration. “You were seen storming out of your former archery club with a half-

naked Hunter Fitzpatrick on your heels. For viewers who are not aware, Mr. Fitzpatrick is the nineteen-year-old heir to Royal Pipelines and a notorious playboy. Earlier last year, he was involved in a scandalous sex-tape incident that—”

I raised my palm. “No.”

“Excuse me?” She smiled tightly.

“No. You cannot reduce him to being a playboy, to...to some guy who had a sex tape. He was filmed without his knowledge while doing something...” I wanted to say “that he regretted,” but Hunter probably didn’t regret one second of it. “...something that should’ve been done more privately, yes. But he is not some silly heir. He is hardworking and honest and generous and caring. He would put himself at risk for those he cares about.”

I thought about the pub brawl he’d gotten into when we barely knew each other, about the lengths he’d gone to to save his father and brother. I even thought about that stupid fundraiser, when I’d freaked out and he’d held me in his arms, refusing to let go until I was completely okay.

“Hunter has made mistakes, but so has the rest of humanity,” I continued. “Only difference is Hunter has had the public eye on him since day one. He never had a chance to figure himself out privately.”

“Are you saying you guys are an item?” Vanessa grinned.

Seriously? That’s what she got out of everything I said?

I felt myself blushing under the thick layer of makeup. “That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“So you’re *not* an item,” she stressed.

“Right,” I said around a lump of bitterness in my throat. “We’re just...friends.”

Then why does it feel like dying to admit that?

“Well,” Vanessa said sweetly, tapping her cards on her lap. “As it happens, he doesn’t see things the same way as you do. Which brings me to the following item. I’d like to invite my next guest, Hunter Fitzpatrick!”

My heart jerked inside my chest like a snake had bitten it. I sucked in a breath and blinked as he came into focus, wearing a smart, camel-hued suit—accessorized with his killer cheekbones, taunting smirk, and beautiful blond locks swept backward. His blue, blue eyes zeroed in on me as he strode into the studio, leaving no room for questions.

He was the Hunter.

I was the prey.

He sauntered to the center of the stage. Instead of taking a seat next to me on one of the blue loungers—in front of Vanessa—he remained standing, putting a mic someone from the production team gave him to his mouth.

“Well, fuck me,” Hunter spoke into the microphone, running a hand through his velvet hair. His feline eyes, so wildly exotic and blue they caught every sliver of light in the room, glittered with mischief. “I just realized something pretty depressing, Vanessa.”

“What is that, Mr. Fitzpatrick? And please use appropriate language for a morning show.” The pedicured host flashed a dazzling smile to the camera, by way of apology.

It was blatantly obvious she was torn between being delighted at this new, unexpected outburst that would surely bump up her ratings, and horrified about him dropping the F-bomb on television, especially because most of her viewers were housewives and young mothers.

I tried to regulate my breaths, acutely aware my heart flapping here and there in my ribcage.

“I’m in love with Sailor Brennan. Shit. Okay, that’s no good.” He chuckled, strolling the length of the studio with the microphone in his hand, frowning. “End me now, Vanessa. For I’m already toast. It is much, *much* more embarrassing than my other brush with fame. Then, I had my dick out. Now, I have my heart on the line. My friends are going to have a field day when they see this. I was the last one standing, you see. I thought I was immune from the L-word. I always made sure to put a condom on my emotions before talking to a chick, let alone doing anything more. So many women have left me over the

years, I figured leaving them first was the best course of action. But you, Sailor, you're the one I won't let get away." His eyes burned darkly, intensely, like a fire catching as they bore into mine. "Serial killer much? Yeah, but it's the truth. I'm not letting you leave me."

People laughed in the audience, and poor Vanessa's tight smile evaporated into a look of horror.

I barely managed to comprehend what he was saying. It felt like an out-of-body experience.

Hunter Fitzpatrick was confessing his undying love to me.

Publicly.

So *painfully* publicly.

I'd told him I thought I was his dirty little secret, so he'd made a public declaration. In the car back from Maine, he'd asked what it would take. A ring...a contract... And what did I answer? To stop being ashamed of us. This was him proving to me that he never was.

"And of course," Hunter spread his arms, continuing his monologue, "in true Fitzpatrick fashion, I had to go and fall in love with the daughter of a..." He paused, backtracking when he realized what he was about to say. "A legitimate businessman, unless proven otherwise."

The audience burst out laughing, and I blushed. Hunter turned around, found my gaze, and smiled. It was a smile I'd never seen before. It wasn't taunting or sexy or entertained. He looked boyish, almost sheepish. There was something deliciously innocent about that smile. I wanted to capture it, take a picture, frame it, and tuck it under my pillow.

"Fuck me, Sailor Brennan. You really did a number on my heart. I guess what I'm trying to say—while offending the ears of every middle-aged housewife in this state—is that this is real. It's always been real. You said I never wanted you, but the truth was, I never wanted anyone *but* you. Not really. But I hadn't realized it until you walked away, and for the first time in my life, I couldn't eat, sleep, or breathe. I see you, *aingeal dian*, even when you're trying to hide. *Especially* when you are trying

to hide. I cannot unsee you. I'm like that kid from *The Sixth Sense*. Only you're not dead, and I'm not hella annoying."

More laughter. I realized some of the giggling came from my throat. I also realized I was choked up, my eyes coated with tears through which I watched him, blurry and defiant and a changed man, but still the same guy I'd grown to admire.

He walked to my seat, crouching down on one knee in front of me in an act of pure submission. "Angry angel. *Aingeal dian* means *angry angel*. The first time I held you in my arms, at the fundraiser event, two things occurred to me. The first was that I couldn't let go of you, even if you asked really, and I mean *really* nicely. The second was that I was unworthy of keeping you. I ran away from you my entire life without even knowing you, Sailor. But the moment I met you—okay, maybe a few weeks after that—I figured out not having you was not an option. So, here I am, asking for a second chance. And some ass. But the ass can definitely come later. I just want us to be us. Together. Exclusively. DoorDash and Netflix galore. Like a real couple and shit."

"Mr. Fitzpatrick!" Vanessa gasped, putting a hand to her chest, pretending to be scandalized. "For the love of God, language!"

Hunter and I shared a conspiratorial grin.

"My bad. Anyway, that's the bottom line. I'm stupid in love with you, Sailor Brennan. Will you have my dumb ass? Flaws included. No returns."

"Fourteen business days to return said butt, and I get my full heart back if your performance is not to my satisfaction." I started bargaining with him on live television.

This was what we did. We bantered.

His eyes lit up with mischief. "You never complained about the performance during your free trial period."

"Meh." I shrugged. "It was free. Paying for something with hearts and other organs is a completely different matter."

"Fine. I believe in my product. You got yourself a deal." He stood up in front of me. I reached my hand between us to shake

on it. He took it and jerked me up, engulfing me in his huge arms.

He pressed a kiss to my mouth, a Hollywood-worthy kiss—the type you see in '90s movies seconds before the credits roll.

I was Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, an unlikely heroine in my own story.

I heard the audience stand up and cheer for us, clapping and whistling and laughing with joy. In the background, Vanessa was talking about young love and about finding yourself in another person. It sounded like she was reading it from the back of a Philosophy skincare bottle.

Hunter's lips left mine for a beat, and I growled my protest immediately, searching for them again.

“Say yes,” he breathed into my mouth. “Say you’ll never leave.”

“Never,” I murmured. “I love you so much, Hunter. It terrifies me how far I’ll go to save you.”

“However far that is, know I’ll go even farther for you.”

He kissed me again, and the universe tilted, shifted, wiping everything clean: other people and trees and birds and buildings. The only thing left standing, upside-down, were the two of us, clasped in each other's arms, defying gravity. It felt surreal. *Unreal.*

And this, I thought as I drowned in his kisses, is how you know it is real.



Three days later, Sailor drove me to Avebury Court Manor.

I wanted to see my father and Cillian a little less than I wanted to scuba dive with Scylla, the unfriendly mythical Greek sea monster. Alas, my mother had come knocking on my door numerous times, begging, crying, and pleading. After she'd admitted I was her golden child, it was a dick move to refuse

her. Anyway, Sailor said if I wanted her to move her shit back to our apartment, I had to stitch things up with my family. For her, I'd make nice with world-class dictators.

But I'm repeating myself, because Da and Cillian give Bashar al-Assad a run for his money.

Then there was the other thing I hated to admit: I actually *loved* working for Royal Pipelines. I grew up thinking I'd hate it because I was destined to do it, not realizing it would fulfill me to be a part of my family's company.

Making money was my calling. It gave me a hard-on. Somewhere along the way, I'd gotten attached to Royal Pipelines, and Cillian and *Athair* were a big part of it.

"Just listen to what they have to say." Sailor tapped her thumb over the steering wheel.

I stared out the window, scowling at the trees shedding golden and red leaves. The gray, Gotham-like sky above the shingled colonial buildings poured hail. I realized with displeasure that I loved Boston and its East Coast grit—its filthy alleyways, four seasons, and Irishness. It bled my legacy, and I couldn't turn my back on it. I'd lived the last few years pretending to be an all-American, Californian dudebro who was into sports and the beach and girls who wore neon biker shorts to attend Kanye West's church. But my soul wasn't mass-market plastic like theirs.

My soul was inked with Boston.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged.

"I will," I told my girlfriend—yes, *girlfriend*—absentmindedly. Though I wasn't exactly optimistic. "But here's a spoiler: They'll tell me I can have my job back, I'll agree, and then we'll have dinner. We'll bail out before dessert for anal. Bareback. I'll come everywhere. Let's hope you don't get pink eye."

Unless Sparrow brings that banoffee pie she makes. Then anal can wait and we'll stay for dessert. I would convert to its religion if it had one.

“Fine by me.” Sailor popped her lips. “All I’m asking is for you to give them a chance.”

“Done.”

“And tell me why you went to London.”

I smirked down at her. She’d asked me this a thousand times. I always gave her the same answer.

“Sorry, baby girl. It’s not my secret to tell. Just know I didn’t touch anyone there, other than myself. I did jerk off to pictures of you arching that I found on Google.”

The electronic gate of my parents’ mansion opened, and Sailor drove in, parking alongside the huge fountain at the entrance. I slid out and opened the door for her. We walked in hand in hand. A minute before we passed the threshold, she stopped. She squeezed my palm and looked up at me.

“Six months ago, I was hell-bent on going to the Olympics, and you were determined not to work for your father. Now, both those things aren’t true. I have no idea where life will take me, but definitely not the Olympics. You became your own person, a talented businessman, a guy with a *girlfriend*. Whatever we did, Hunter, we did it together. No matter what happens today, know that we both came a long way. I’ve never been prouder to be on someone’s arm.”

I leaned down, kissing the tip of her nose. She was a fucking vision, Sailor Brennan. I finally understood why Knight could never touch anyone else, even before he and Luna hooked up. No other girl in the world could stir in me what Sailor did when I looked at her. Adriana Lima in-fucking-cluded.

“Just out of curiosity, how many arms have you been draped on?” I murmured into the shell of her ear, entertained by the goose bumps prickling her flesh.

“One,” she whispered. “I’m looking at him right now.”

“That takes the sting out of the compliment.” I laughed.

“Take the compliment, Hunter.”

“Take your clothes off, prey.”

We strolled into the dining hall, which grew louder and livelier with noise and laughter as we ambled in. When we stopped at the edge of the double doors, we noticed the room was filled with our loved ones.

Mom, Da, Cillian, Aisling, Troy, Sparrow, Sam, the Penrose sisters, and all the servants of the estate.

My parents turned to face us in unison, sensing my presence before I announced myself. Mom jumped out of her recliner like her ass was on fire, collecting Sailor and me into a greedy hug. The room went quiet as she let out a guttural shriek full of relief.

“You’re here. Oh my goodness, you’re really here. Thank you so much for convincing him to come, Sailor.”

“My pleasure, Jane. Hunter’s, too.” Sailor elbowed me pointedly, maneuvering out of the very awkward hug and leaving me to actually hug my mother for the first time in a decade.

I patted her back, and she stepped away, cupping my cheeks. She scanned my face, taking inventory. Her eyes were full of unshed tears, hope, and love—so much love, its weight nearly suffocated me. I wondered how I’d never seen it before. But the answer was clear: I’d never loved someone myself to know what love looked like.

Not truly.

Not until Sailor.

I placed one of my hands on my mother’s, squeezing it against my cheek. “Sorry I was an asshole.”

She shook her head. “No, Hunter. I’m the one who’s sorry. All I want is a chance to make it right.”

“You have it,” I answered. If I got a second chance not to be B-grade gigolo, why couldn’t she?

“Son,” Da called from the depths of the room, sitting on a golden recliner in the center of the dining hall. “Come sit. We have something to discuss.”

Cillian was seated to his right. Troy and Sam to his left. Sparrow sat so close to Troy, she was practically on his lap. There were two empty chairs in front of him, which I guessed

were reserved for Sailor and me. The Fitzpatricks preferred to conduct their business privately, so this was out of character. We usually liked our encounters like we did our steaks: rare and without any add-ons.

I took Sailor's palm in mine and led her to sit down in front of them.

"Thank you for coming, *ceann beag*." Da bowed his head, letting out a ragged, relieved breath. He looked pained—humbled, almost.

Cillian tapped his hand impatiently, bringing him back to the moment.

Troy Brennan surprised me by being the first to talk.

"Sorry to interrupt your little Dr. Phil moment. Since some of us have real jobs to get back to, I guess I should do the talking. I met my wife, Sparrow, in quite unnatural circumstances. I married her because I felt inclined to, not because I was particularly in the mood for nuptials." He took Sparrow's hand. "Frankly, I didn't think I *had* a good fit. I was a lone wolf, which suited me well, or so I thought. Turned out, all I needed was a good kick in the ass. Sometimes, what we want and what we need are two vastly different things. I learned that the unexpected way. So when Gerald came to me with a seven-digit business proposal, in which my daughter's happiness could be enhanced, I took it."

Sailor and I exchanged expressions. I could feel her pulse thrumming on her wrist against mine. We turned our gaze to my father.

That motherfucker...

"It is true." Gerald sat back, pinching his lips together.

Everyone in the room held their breath. The air was thick with bittersweet agony.

Da continued, "I met Sailor Brennan months ago, while taking an archery class with a client, after years of not seeing her. Sailor's trainer, Junsu, conducted the class for us. She came for her own practice when we were about to leave. We decided to stay and watch her. Her precision and care were compulsive,

divine; after she was done, we congratulated her. We were standing in the parking lot, talking, when a thief snatched an elderly woman's purse on the street. Sailor went after him like lightning when no one else did. She chased him across the street, jumped on him, brought him down, grabbed the purse, and hit him across the head with it for good measure. She returned the purse, walked back to us, smiled politely, and asked Junsu if she could come train earlier the next day. I thought to myself, *this is the kind of kid who should be influencing Hunter*—not the degenerate, nouveau riche Kardashian-style clowns he associated himself with in southern California. She had feisty Irish blood running through her veins, and I wanted you, Hunter, to remember that you were made of the same stuff—sturdy, rough, and capable. I admit I set you up for failure twice. One, I required you not to touch her for six months, knowing you would fail, because she had the fire you've been looking for your whole life. And two, I did not help you solve the Sylvester case. But *only* because I knew you were capable of doing that yourself. I wasn't proving a point to *me*, son. That wasn't the test. I was proving it to *you*, showing you that you could do it. This was not an audition for you to re-enter the family. You were always a part of us. I wanted you to unveil your own greatness. Guess what? You did."

I felt my jaw ticking, but I refrained from lashing out. Sailor and I had been placed in an arranged relationship without our consent and knowledge. And the worst part was that my father and Troy hadn't been wrong in their predictions. We did fall for each other. And I did learn about my capabilities through Da's twisted plan.

Gerald leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his eyes digging into my scowl, trying to read it. "I've never shunned you, *ceann beag*. You're my son. Mine, and no one else's. I call you *little one* because you were always precious to me. From the moment you were born, you were so lovely, people on the street mistook you for a girl. God touched you, blessed you with something special, and I couldn't wait to see what you'd do with it. My love for you was dipped in a good amount of apprehension, because you didn't come from me. You were not biologically programmed to love me back like Cillian and Aisling, and that unsettled me. There was something wild and

foreign and mysterious about you, an undiscovered continent full of secrets and things I did not know or possess. You were smart as a demon and completely unstoppable, a storm. When you chose to misuse the gifts you were given, it broke my heart, but I always knew you had it—the ruthless gene. You simply had to be pushed in the right direction.”

I knew it was my turn to say something, but I was still waiting for Kill to speak. Whether Gerald Fitzpatrick loved me like a son or not, it was obvious to the entire city of Boston that his heir, the future leader of the Fitzpatrick clan, was going to be none other than Cillian. He was going to take over this kingdom, and my place in it depended on him.

The truth of it rattled me. I was a prince between two kings, always would be.

But for the first time, I stopped resenting the fact that he was born to rule, and I, to govern beside him.

I turned my face toward Kill. “Anything to add?”

He crossed his legs, assessing me through a thinly veiled expression of boredom. “We’re going to have disagreements, arguments, and fights. I’m going to do things you’re going to hate, and you are going to have to bite your tongue and march on, like the good soldier you are. I, in return, promise to accommodate your poor language choices and ability to find a sexual innuendo in anything on the planet, and I promise not to touch your girlfriend.”

“Well.” Sailor jumped into his speech, taking the bait, like Kill knew she would.

He sat back and grinned at her, awaiting the verbal whip.

“You don’t really have much choice in the matter. No offense, but I’d rather take a corpse to bed than you.”

“None taken, and it would probably offer you more affection,” Cillian confirmed, returning his eyes to me.

“Possibly because you will *be* a corpse if you talk about my sister like that again,” Sam added with a poisonous little smile.

Everyone but Cillian laughed.

“Nevertheless,” Kill continued, “I want you to be my right hand. I know you are good for it. You’ve proven yourself trustworthy, honest, and hardworking. You’ll be my moral compass. God knows I need one. I want you by my side, brother.”

I stood, tugging Sailor by the hand, signaling to her that the conversation was over. To me, it was.

“I’ll need a detailed contract ensuring my inheritance is intact, and furthermore, that you waive the right to dangle it in my face every time we have a disagreement.” I looked between my brother and father. “Am I understood?”

My father shot to his feet, scowling.

“We just told you we love you, and you want your inheritance rights to be documented?”

“I am a Fitzpatrick.” I shot him a cold smile.

I turned to make my way to the dining table. Sailor hugged Aisling and the Penrose sisters hurriedly before rushing to my side. We entered the dining hall. Everybody followed. I took a seat at the side of the table.

Da took the seat beside me, making his position clear.

Cillian took the head of the table, signaling the shift of generations.

Troy sat on the other side of the table’s head, Sam by his side.

Da put his hand on mine. From across the table, Mom smiled, silent tears running down her powdered cheeks.

Kill raised his wine glass in salute at the head of the table. Everyone joined the toast this time—all drinking actual wine.

“To our kingdom, and to showing our enemies why it will remain ours. To being a Fitzpatrick.” He paused, looking between the two Penrose sisters speculatively, an inch of a smile curving over his face. “And to Boston.”

Epilogue



Sailor

Four years later

Feathery kisses made their way down my throat. The loose fabric of Hunter's shirt, which I'd used as pajamas, was pulled over my head. I recognized those kisses well: the let's-get-freaky morning kisses that signaled the start of a new day.

I turned to my side, wiggling my butt into Hunter's erection, my eyes still closed.

"Too tired," I murmured.

"Too horny," he replied gruffly, springing his dick out of his briefs and nestling it between my butt cheeks.

I didn't know when exactly he'd gotten rid of my underwear—only that I'd gone to sleep wearing a pair, and right now I was naked from the waist down. His engorged shaft was hot and velvety against my skin. Saliva pooled in my mouth.

Yes, please.

"Hunter Fitzpatrick. No means no."

"No can also mean maybe, if I promise to get you off before your eyes are open," he murmured, and I felt his breath on my neck.

Minty. He'd already had a shower and brushed his teeth. I bet he was minutes away from dashing to work. He was always the first one in the office. Gerald Fitzpatrick was showing signs of retiring, which put Cillian as potentially the youngest CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company in American history. It also meant Hunter was putting in extra hours at the office. I didn't mind. We always met somewhere nice after work to try new food.

I was a food critic nowadays. *Savory Sailor Sampling Boston* was picking up. I was even thinking of starting my own YouTube channel and website. My Instagram (which was checkmarked, something that made Hunter jokingly check off *boning a celebrity* from his imaginary list), already had over seventy thousand followers, including three high-profile celebrities.

None of them were Lana Alder. She'd stayed under the radar since her banishment from archery, along with Junsu. I heard she was an aesthetician in Albuquerque. And a few years ago, Sam told me he saw Junsu wearing a fast food uniform, walking down the street.

"Give it your best shot, stud." I rolled to my back, feeling Hunter's face already nestling between my thighs. I bucked my hips up to meet his lips, groaning when his hot, minty tongue pressed against my entrance. I was already embarrassingly wet.

"Jesus," I moaned.

"Speaking," Hunter said, *into* me. I laughed as his tongue swirled around my clit. "How can I help?" His voice was muffled, as his mouth was on my pussy. He faked an echo, drawling a quieting "*Help, help, help.*" I felt my body vibrating with pleasure, delight, and laughter.

"My boyfriend and I have the most inappropriate sex discussions. I don't know what to do with him."

"Well..." He sucked my clit into his mouth, pumped it a little, then released it, pushing two fingers into my wetness and playing with me. His other hand moved to my breast, flicking my puckered nipple. I shuddered and clenched around him, sighing as my entire body tingled. Currents of voltage ran from my toes to my head.

“Maybe he shouldn’t be your boyfriend, then,” Hunter suggested.

His mouth was now available to talk—he worked his magic with his fingers—and when I popped my eyes open and stared at him in confusion, he was looking at me, his head still between my legs. He straightened up on his knees, not breaking eye contact as he pushed a third and fourth finger into me. I felt full and tight and on the verge of something euphoric. My body was blossoming with an orgasm, but panic washed through me.

“Do you consider this an appropriate time to break up with me?” I asked as evenly as I could, considering my out-of-control pulse and mild hysteria.

He licked his lips. “Is this worry I detect, Miss Brennan?”

My eyes widened. What was his game?

“No. Of course not. I couldn’t care less. Besides, you’d never leave me.”

Over the years, Hunter and I had become a fixture in the tabloids for all the right reasons. We went to charity events together, wearing the best frocks. We were caught canoodling in our swimsuits on exotic vacations with our families. We never caused drama and never had a public feud, and we were the second-best thing since Boston’s most eligible bachelor, Cillian, wasn’t showing signs of settling down.

We were a solid couple, to a point that people had largely forgotten Hunter had been in a sex tape. I felt secure in our relationship, in who he was now.

“Thing is.” He pressed his thumb to my clit, his fingers still inside me. He rubbed my sensitive bud in circles. “That boyfriend gig? Kind of got old for me, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” I half-moaned, half-whispered. I was shaking all over, coming hard against his fingers. The rush was insane, gloriously climactic, but also filled with anxiety. “Hmm, do you...want to take a break?”

“I want to be your *husband*,” he finished, my body clenching tightly around his fingers as the orgasm washed over

me. He used his available hand to produce something from under his pillow—a little box—throwing it into my hands.

My fingers shook around it, and I dropped it on my chest, laughing nervously. I picked the box up again, struggling to open it. My heart raced. My breath caught. My chest filled with pure, unfiltered joy I couldn't contain. I thought I was going to burst.

“Hunter...”

“Open it,” he demanded hoarsely, clearing his throat.

I realized he was nervous, too.

I opened it, and what I saw inside brought tears to my eyes. It wasn't just an engagement ring. No. The stones—rubies and diamonds—were arranged in the shape of a bow. It must've cost a fortune. Not to mention it was definitely a custom design. I looked up, wide-eyed.

“Before you say anything.” He leaned down, grabbing a second velvet box from under the pillow. He threw it into my hands. This time I caught it without a problem. “This one's mine. You know, if you say yes.”

I opened the second box. Hunter's ring was black, with three gold stripes in the shape of an arrow.

I was the bow.

He was the arrow.

We hunted together. A team.

We were also each other's prey.

“I want you,” he said gruffly. “Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow. Forever. I want you to be mine, Sailor Brennan. No one else's, ever.”

“Yes,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. “I want that, too.”

He slid the ring onto my engagement finger, leaned down, and kissed me hard. It was a blur of passion, tears, and hunger. The kiss turned feral. He flipped me to my stomach and was inside me, just like he'd said he wanted to be when he woke me

up. I didn't care much for my morning breath, nor for the fact that he was probably running late for work.

"*Aingeal dian,*" he whispered to my nape as he thrust into me.

"My favorite Hunter," I whimpered beneath him.

He would never know, I thought.

How he'd caught me.

How he'd captured me.

How he truly owned me.

The boy who let the hail drown him.

Who didn't fight back.

Who once gave up.

He would never know, because in his eyes, I was the one who'd caught him.



Hunter

"What'd you send him this time?" Cillian asked, going through a thick pile of envelopes on his desk.

Who the fuck sent snail mail anymore? Did people give zero fucks about the rainforests? I mean, okay, I worked for a company producing fucking *fuel*—I could see the glaring irony in my statement—but fuel was essential to run cars and airplanes. It was vital to run heaters and build asphalt. Paper was wholly unnecessary at this point. Want to read? Buy a Kindle. Want to send a letter? Email someone. Use Messenger. WhatsApp. Carve a message in a fucking cave.

I took a seat in front of a standing Kill, rolling the ring I was already wearing on my wedding finger. "Just a few pictures of us in Barbados. Some souvenirs from our weekend in Puerto Rico."

It had become a hobby of mine to send Syllie a biannual update on how the company was doing without him—great, by the way—and what we were doing in the outside world. I sent him pictures of me smiling in vacations, getting my degree, and apartment shopping with Sailor. I got a sick kick out of it, knowing he was rotting in a cell for the rest of his life for attempted murders while I lived my best life with the woman I loved.

Cillian wasn't so personal with his hatred toward Syllie. Don't get me wrong, he would go to extreme lengths to ruin people's lives, but he needed them to be able to fight back. Syllie was a done deal, and Cillian was above playing with his food.

Me? I was the asshole in the cafeteria who started the food fight.

"Nicely done," Cillian clipped, gathering all the envelopes his secretary had sorted for him alphabetically and dumping them into the trash can under his desk. "Now get out of my office. Your contentment is ruining my appetite."

"Are you sure it's my contentment and not an allergic reaction to life?" I pretended to salute, standing up.

"Positive."

"Nothing about you is positive, fuckface." I laughed.

"You kiss our mother with that mouth?" he *tutted*, sitting down to take a call.

"Cursing is the least of the dirty things I do with my mouth, son." I clucked my tongue, gunning him down with both index fingers.

"Call me son one more time and the rest of your meals will be consumed through a straw," Kill hissed. "Don't let the door hit you in the ass."

"Aww. You said ass." I slapped a hand over my mouth, feigning shock. "That's a potty word. Go put a dollar in the piggy bank."

Cillian picked up a small golden statue on his desk and hurled it at me. I dodged it by inches, laughing as it crashed

against the glass wall, sending the eyes of everyone outside flying to watch what happened.

He smirked up at me, a devious glint in his eyes. “*Out.*”

“Don’t forget eight o’clock. We have this dinner thing with Sailor and her parents.” I pointed at him. He shook his head.

“*Gread leat.*” He was now throwing me out in Gaelic.

“Love you, bro.”

“I’ll call security,” he threatened.

He wasn’t even kidding. We’d been known to use security on each other multiple times during our disagreements in the last four years. I got out of his office, making my way to mine—approximately three steps away. I had my own assistant now. Since I’d graduated, actually. People actually gave a shit about my opinion in this place.

I made money for Royal Pipelines as the head of PR and marketing. I liked working with people, charming my way into their good graces. I channeled my extrovert personality for a good cause. I made serious dough, and I actually took the company in the direction I wanted it to go: greener. More environmentally friendly. True, Greenpeace wasn’t going to hit us up for drinks anytime soon, but thanks to my future projects, Royal Pipelines was no longer the ocean’s villain.

The first thing I did was stop the drilling in the Alaskan Arctic. Cillian spun it publicly that the high cost of the drilling wasn’t worth the amount of oil we’d found. It was bullshit, but it soothed his precious pride. We were no longer fucking with the world’s natural air conditioner and killing all the fishies.

Not to mention, I had *friends* now. With pulses and everything. The real deal.

True, I didn’t love them like brothers the way I did Knight and Vaughn, but for that, I actually *had* a brother.

“Hunter!” Da’s voice boomed from the other side of the floor. He was just getting out of the elevator, pacing toward his office. “A word, son.”

I made a U-turn and walked toward him. We met inside his office. He closed the door (the new one, which didn’t take a

fucking century to close), because now, we met all the time to talk about everything, without Cillian as a buffer.

“What’s up?” I leaned my shoulder against a glass wall, tucking my hands into my suit pockets. He rounded his desk and sat behind it, smoothing his tie.

“What did she say?” He scrunched his eyebrows.

His firstborn was as far from marriage as The Joker was from sanity, and Aisling was still young. I was his best bet for grandchildren.

“Who?” I feigned confusion.

“I’m too old for these charades. What did Sailor say?” His eyes narrowed.

“She needs more time.”

I scanned him coolly for his reaction. His face fell before he schooled it, offering me a what-can-you-do huff. He tried so hard to keep a poker face, but the fact he reached for his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead gave away his despair.

“Buy her a bigger ring. That’ll do the trick.”

“Not with Sailor.” I shook my head, still eyeing him.

He groaned, rubbing his temple. “Probably. She’s a toughie.”

“I’m tougher.” I grinned, pulling out my hand and showing him my ring finger. “I won’t keep you and Mom waiting for long. I want to put this shit on lock as fast as I can, before she realizes she can do much better.”

Da looked up from his seat, shaking his head, and whispered, “No, she can’t.”

I believed him—not that it was true about Sailor and me, but that he meant it.

“I love you, *ceann beag*. More than this kingdom.” Da smirked, slow and deliberate, trying not to burst with pride.

I grinned back, fingering the Dala horse on my neck. Sailor had given it back to me the day she’d moved back in. It was no longer colorless, though. She’d painted it orange—like her hair.

“I love you, old sport. More than pu—”

“*No.*”

“Puppies! Chill.”

I turned around and made my way to my office, laughing.

I *totally* meant pussy.

The End

Acknowledgements

This has been such a special book for me to write. Hunter Fitzpatrick was supposed to be nothing but a side character in *All Saints High*. I never planned for him to have his own book, let alone to write an entire series about his family. But he just possessed me with his charm, and I found myself unable to resist his story.

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Thankful,

L.J. Shen

Before you leave, here is the first chapter of *Pretty Reckless*, book one in the All Saints High series. Find all about Vaughn, Knight, Daria and their stories!

Prologue



It started with a lemonade

And ended with my heart

This, my pretty reckless rival, is how our screwed-up story starts

Age Fourteen.

Daria

The tiles under my feet shake as a herd of ballerinas blazes past me, their feet pounding like artillery in the distance.

Brown hair. Black hair. Straight hair. Red hair. Curly hair. They blur into a rainbow of trims and scrunchies. My eyes are searching for the blond head I'd like to bash against the well-worn floor.

Feel free not to be here today, Queen Bitch.

I stand frozen on the threshold of my mother's ballet studio, my pale pink leotard sticking to my ribs. My white duffel bag dangles from my shoulder. My tight bun makes my scalp burn. Whenever I let my hair down, my golden locks fall off in chunks on the bathroom floor. I tell Mom it's from messing with my hair too much, but that's BS. And if she gave a damn—*really* gave one, not just pretended to—she'd know this, too.

I wiggle my banged-up toes in my pointe shoes, swallowing the ball of anxiety in my throat. Via isn't here. *Thank you, Marx.*

Girls torpedo past me, bumping into my shoulders. I feel their giggles in my empty stomach. My duffel bag falls with a thud. My classmates are leaner, longer, and more flexible with rod-straight backs like an exclamation mark. Me? I'm small and muscular like a question mark. Always unsure and on the verge of snapping. My face is not stoic and regal; it's traitorous and unpredictable. Some wear their hearts on their sleeves—I wear mine on my mouth. I smile with my teeth when I'm happy, and when my mom looks at me, I'm always happy.

"You should really take gymnastics or cheer, Lovebug. It suits you so much better than ballet."

But Mom sometimes says things that dig at my self-esteem. There's a rounded dent on its surface now, the shape of her words, and that's where I keep my anger.

Melody Green-Followhill is a former ballerina who broke her leg during her first week at Juilliard when she was eighteen. Ballet has been expected of me since the day I was born. And—just my luck—I happen to be exceptionally bad at it.

Enter Via Scully.

Also fourteen, Via is everything I strive to be. Taller, blonder, and skinnier. Worst of all, her natural talent makes my dancing look like an insult to leotards all over the world.

Three months ago, Via received a letter from the Royal Ballet Academy asking her to audition. Four weeks ago—she did. Her hotshot parents couldn't get the time off work, so my mom jumped at the chance to fly her on a weeklong trip to London. Now the entire class is waiting to hear if Via is going to study at the Royal Ballet Academy. Word around the studio is she has it in the bag. Even the Ukrainian danseur Alexei Petrov—a sixteen-year-old prodigy who is like the Justin Bieber of ballet—posted an IG story with her after the audition.

Looking forward to creating magic together.

It wouldn't surprise me to learn Via can do magic. She's always been a witch.

“Lovebug, stop fretting by the door. You're blocking everyone's way,” my mother singsongs with her back to me. I can see her reflection through the floor-to-ceiling mirror. She's frowning at the attendance sheet and glancing at the door, hoping to see Via.

Sorry, Mom. Just your spawn over here.

Via is always late, and my mother, who never tolerates tardiness, lets her get away with it.

I bend down to pick up my duffel bag and pad into the studio. A shiny barre frames the room, and a floor-to-ceiling window displays downtown Todos Santos in all its photogenic, upper-crust glory. Peach-colored benches grace tree-lined streets, and crystal blue towers sparkle like the thin line where the ocean kisses the sky.

I hear the door squeaking open and squeeze my eyes shut.

Please don't be here.

“Via! We've been waiting for you,” Mom's chirp is like a BB gun shooting me in the back, and I tumble over my own

feet from the shockwave. Snorts explode all over the room. I manage to grip the barre, pulling myself up a second before my knees hit the floor. Flushed, I grasp it in one hand and slide into a sloppy plié.

“Lovebug, be a darling and make some room for Via,” Mom purrs.

Symbolically, Mother, I’d love for Via to make my ass some room, too.

Of course, her precious prodigy isn’t wearing her ballet gear today even though she owns Italian-imported leotards other girls can only dream of. Via clearly comes from money because even rich people don’t like shelling out two hundred bucks for a basic leotard. Other than Mom—who probably figures I’ll never be a true ballerina so the least she can do is dress me up like one.

Today, Via is wearing a cropped yellow Tweety Bird shirt and ripped leggings. Her eyes are red, and her hair is a mess. Does she even make an effort?

She throws me a patronizing smirk. “*Lovebug.*”

“*Puppy,*” I retort.

“Puppy?” She snorts.

“I’d call you a bitch, but let’s admit it, your bite doesn’t really have teeth.”

I readjust my shoes, pretending that I’m over her. I’m *not* over her. She monopolizes my mother’s time, and she’s been on my case way before I started talking back. Via attends another school in San Diego. She claims it’s because her parents think the kids in Todos Santos are too sheltered and spoiled. Her parents want her to grow up with *real* people.

Know what else is fake? Pretending to be something you’re not. I own up to the fact I’m a prissy princess. Sue me (Please do. I can afford really good legal defense).

“Meet me after class, Vi,” Mom quips, then turns back around to the stereo. Vi (*Vi!*) uses the opportunity to stretch her leg, stomping on my toes in the process.

“Oops. Looks like you’re not the only clumsy person around here, Daria.”

“I would tell you to drop dead, but I’m afraid my mom would force me to go to your funeral, and you legit aren’t worth my time.”

“I would tell you to kiss my ass, but your mom already does that. If she only liked you half as much as she likes me. It’s cool, though; at least you have money for therapy. And a nose job.” She pats my back with a smirk, and I hate, *hate*, *hate* that she is prettier.

I can’t concentrate for the rest of the hour. I’m not stupid. Even though I know my mother loves me more than Via, I also know it’s because she’s genetically programmed to do so.

Centuries tick by, but the class is finally dismissed. All the girls sashay to the elevator in pairs.

“Daria darling, do me a favor and get us drinks from Starbucks. I’m going to the little girls’ room, then wrapping something up real quick with Vi.” Mom pats my shoulder, then saunters out of the studio, leaving a trail of her perfume like fairy dust. My mom would donate all her organs to save one of her students’ fingernails. She smothers her ballerinas with love, leaving me saddled with jealousy.

I grab Mom’s bag and turn around before I have a chance to exchange what Daddy calls “unpleasantries” with Via.

“You should’ve seen her face when I auditioned.” Via stretches in front of the mirror behind me. She’s as agile as a contortionist. Sometimes I think she could wrap herself around my neck and choke me to death.

“We had a blast. She told me that by the looks of it, not only am I in, but I’m also going to be their star student. It felt kind of…” She snaps her fingers, looking for the word. I see her in the reflection of the mirror but don’t turn around. Tears are hanging on my lower lashes for their dear lives. “A redemption, or something. Like you can’t be a ballerina because you’re so, you know, *you*. But then there’s *me*. So at least she’ll get to see someone she loves make it.”

Daddy says a green Hulk lives inside me, and he gets bigger and bigger when I get jealous, and sometimes, the Hulk blasts through my skin and does things the Daria he knows and loves would never do. He says jealousy is the tribute mediocrity pays to genius, and I'm no mediocre girl.

Let's just say I disagree.

I've always been popular, and I've always fought hard for a place in the food chain where I can enjoy the view. But I think I'm ordinary. Via is extraordinary and glows so bright, she burns everything in her vicinity. I'm the dust beneath her feet, and I'm crushed, and bitter, and *Hulky*.

Nobody *wants* to be a bad person. But some people—like me—just can't help themselves. A tear rolls down my cheek, and I'm thankful we're alone. I turn around to face her.

“What the hell is your problem?”

“What isn't?” She sighs. “You are a spoiled princess, a shallow idiot, and a terrible dancer. How can someone so untalented be born to *the* Melody Green-Followhill?”

I don't know! I want to scream. *No one wants to be born to a genius. Marx, bless Sean Lennon for surviving his own existence.*

I eye her pricey pointe shoes and arch a mocking eyebrow. “Don't pretend I'm the only princess here.”

“You're an airhead, Daria.” She shakes her head.

“At least I'm not a spaz.” I pretend to be blasé, but my whole body is shaking.

“You can't even get into a decent first position.” She throws her hands in the air. She isn't wrong, and that enrages me.

“Again—why. Do. You. Care!” I roar.

“Because you're a waste of fucking space, that's why! While I'm busting my ass, you get a place in this class just because your mother is the teacher.”

This is my chance to tell her the truth.

That I'm busting mine even harder, precisely because I wasn't born a ballerina. Instead, my heart shatters like glass. I spin on my heel and dart down the fire escape, taking the stairs two at a time. I pour myself out into the blazing California heat. Any other girl would take a left and disappear inside Liberty Park, but I take a right and enter Starbucks because I can't—*won't*—disappoint my mom more than I already have. I look left and right to make sure the coast is clear, then release the sob that has weighed on my chest for the past hour. I get into line, tugging open Mom's purse from her bag as I wipe my tears away with my sleeve. Something falls to the floor, so I pick it up.

It's a crisp letter with my home address on it, but the name gives me pause.

Sylvia Scully.

Sniffing, I rip the letter open. I don't stop to think that it isn't mine to open. Seeing Via's mere name above my address makes me want to scream until the walls in this place fall. The first thing that registers is the symbol at the top.

The Royal Ballet Academy.

My eyes are like a wonky mixed tape. They keep rewinding to the same words.

Acceptance Letter.

Acceptance Letter.

Acceptance Letter.

Via got accepted. I should be thrilled she'll be out of my hair in a few months, but instead, the acidic taste of envy bursts inside my mouth.

She has everything.

The parents. The money. The fame. The talent. Most of all—my mother's undivided attention.

She has everything, and I have nothing, and the Hulk inside me grows larger. His body so huge it presses against my diaphragm.

A whole new life in one envelope. *Via's* life hanging by a paper. A paper that's in my hand.

“Sweetie? Honey?” The barista snaps me out of my trance with a tone that suggests I'm not a sweetie nor a honey. “What would you like?”

For Via to die.

I place my order and shuffle to the corner of the room so I can read the letter for the thousandth time. As if the words will change by some miracle.

Five minutes later, I take both drinks and exit on to the sidewalk. I dart to the nearest trash can to dispose of my iced tea lemonade so I can hold the letter without dampening it. Mom probably wanted to open it with *Via*, and I just took away their little moment.

Sorry to interrupt your bonding sesh.

“Put the drink down, and nobody gets hurt,” booms a voice behind me, like liquid honey, as my hand hovers over the trash can. It's male, but he's young. I spin in place, not sure I heard him right. His chin dipped low, I can't see his face clearly because of a Raiders ball cap that's been worn to death. He's tall and scrawny—almost scarily so—but he glides toward me like a Bengal tiger. As if he's found a way to walk on air and can't be bothered with mundane things like muscle tone.

“Are we throwing this away?” He points at the lemonade.

We? Bitch, at this point, there's not even a you to me.

I motion to him with the drink. He can have the stupid iced tea lemonade. Gosh. He is interrupting my meltdown for a lemonade.

“Nothing's free in this world, Skull Eyes.”

I blink, willing him to evaporate from my vision. Did this jackass really just call me Skull Eyes? At least I don't look like a skeleton. My mind is upstairs with *Via*. Why does Mom receive letters on her behalf? Why couldn't they send it directly to *Via's* house? Is Mom adopting her ass now?

I think about my sister, Bailey. At only nine, she already shows promise as a gifted dancer. Via moving to London might encourage Mom to put Bailey in the Royal Ballet Academy, too. Mom had talked about me applying there before it became clear that I could be a Panera bagel before I'd become a professional ballerina. I begin to glue the pieces of my screwed-up reality together.

What if I had to migrate to London to watch both girls make it big while I swam in my pool of mediocrity?

Bailey and Via would become BFFs.

I'd have to live somewhere rainy and gray.

We'd leave Vaughn and Knight and even Luna behind. All my childhood friends.

Via would officially take my place in Mom's heart.

Hmm, no thanks.

Not today, Satan.

When I don't answer, the boy takes a step toward me. I'm not scared although...maybe I should be? He's wearing dirty jeans—I'm talking mud and dust, not, like, purposely haphazard—and a worn blue shirt that looks two sizes too big with a hole the size of a small fist where his heart is. Someone wrote around it in a black Sharpie and girlie handwriting, *Is it a sign?—Adriana, xoxo* and I want to know if Adriana is prettier than me.

“Why are you calling me Skull Eyes?” I clench the letter in my fist.

“Because.” He slopes his head so low all I can see are his lips, and they look petal-soft and pink. Feminine, almost. His voice is smooth to a point it hurts a little in my chest. I don't know why. Guys my age are revolting to me. They smell like pizza that has sat in the sun for days. “You have skulls in your eyes, Silly Billy. Know what you need?”

For Mom to stop telling me that I suck?

For Via to disappear?

Take your pick, dude.

I shove my free hand into my mom's wallet and pluck out a ten-dollar bill. He looks as if he could use a meal. I pray he'll take it before Mom comes down and starts asking questions. I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, much less strangers who look like they are dumpster diving for their next meal.

"Sea glass." He thrusts his hand in my direction, ignoring the money and the drink.

"Like the stuff you get on Etsy?" I huff.

Great. You're a weirdo, too.

"Huh? Nah, that shit's trash. Orange sea glass. The real stuff. Found it on the beach last week and Googled it. It's the rarest thing in the world, you know?"

"Why would you give a total stranger something so precious?" I roll my eyes.

"Why not?"

"Um, hello, attention span much? Weren't you the one who just said nothing in this world is free?"

"Who said it's free? Did you get all your annual periods today at once or something?"

"Don't talk about my period!"

"Fine. No period talk. But you need a real friend right now, and I'm officially applying for the position. I even dressed the part. Look." He motions to his hobo clothes with an apologetic smile.

And just like that, heat pours into my chest like hot wax. Anger, I find, has the tendency to be crisp. I really want to throat punch him. He pities me? *Pities*. The guy with the hole in his shirt.

"You want to be my friend?" I bark out a laugh. "Pathetic much? Like, who even says that?"

"Me. I say that. And I never claimed not to be pathetic." He tugs at his ripped shirt and raises his head slowly, unveiling

more of his face. A nose my mom would call Roman and a jaw that's too square for someone my age. He's all sharp angles, and maybe one day he will be handsome, but right now, he looks like an anime cartoon character. Mighty Max.

"Look, do you want the lemonade and money or not? My mom should be here any minute."

"And?"

"And she can't see us together."

"Because of how I look?"

Duh.

"No, because you're a boy." I don't want to be mean to him even though, usually, I am. Especially to boys. Especially to boys with beautiful faces and honey voices.

Boys can smell heartbreak from across a continent. Even at fourteen. Even in the middle of an innocent summer afternoon. We girls have an invisible string behind our belly button, and only certain guys can tug at it.

This boy...he will snap it if I let him.

"Take the sea glass. Owe me something." He motions to me with an open palm. I stare at the ugly little rock. My fist clenches around the letter. The paper hisses.

The boy lifts his head completely, and our eyes meet. He studies me with quiet interest as though I'm a painting, not a person. My heart is rioting all over, and the dumbest thought crosses my mind. Ever notice how the heart is *literally* caged by the ribs? That's insane. As if our body knows it can break so easily, it needs to be protected. White dots fill my vision, and he's swimming somewhere behind them, against the stream.

"What's in the letter?" he asks.

"My worst nightmare."

"Give it to me," he orders, so I do. I don't know why. Most likely because I want to get rid of it. Because I want Via to

hurt as much as I do. Because I want Mom to be upset. *Marx, what's wrong with me?* I'm a horrible person.

His eyes are still on mine as he tears the letter to shreds and lets the pieces float like confetti into the trash can between us. His eyes are dark green and bottomless like a thickly fogged forest. I want to step inside and run until I'm in the depth of the woods. Something occurs to me just then.

"You're not from here," I say. He is too pure. Too good. Too real.

He shakes his head slowly. "Mississippi. Well, my dad's family. Anyway. Owe me something," he repeats, almost begging.

Why does he want me to owe him something?

So he could ask for something back.

I don't relent, frozen to my spot. Instead, I hand him the lemonade. He takes it, closes the distance between us, pops the lid open, and pours the contents all over the ruined letter. His body brushes against mine. We're stomach to stomach. Legs to legs. Heart to heart.

"Close your eyes."

His voice is gruff and thick and different. This time, I surrender.

I know what's about to happen, and I'm letting it happen anyway.

My first kiss.

I always thought it would happen with a football player or a pop star or a European exchange student. Someone outside of the small borders of my sheltered, Instagram-filtered world. Not with a kid who has a hole in his shirt. But I need this. Need to feel desired and pretty and wanted.

His lips flutter over mine, and it tickles, so I snort. I can feel his warm breath skating across my lips, his baseball cap grazing my forehead and the way his mouth slides against mine, lips locking with uncertainty. I forget to breathe for a second, my hands on his shoulders, but then something inside

me begs me to dart my tongue out and really taste him. We're sucking air from each other's mouths. We're doing it all wrong. My lips open for him. His open, too. My heart is pounding so hard I can feel the blood whooshing in my veins when he says, "Not yet. I'll take that, too, but not yet."

A groan escapes my lips.

"What would you have asked of me if I took the sea glass?"

"To save me all your firsts," he whispers somewhere between my ear and mouth as his body brushes away from mine.

I don't want to open my eyes and let the moment end. But he makes the choice for both of us. The warmth of his body leaves mine as he takes a step back.

I still don't have the guts to open my mouth and ask for his name.

Ten, fifteen, twenty seconds pass.

My eyelids flutter open on their own accord as my body begins to sway.

He's gone.

Disoriented, I lean against the trash can, fiddling with the strap of my mother's bag. Five seconds pass before Mom loops her arm around mine out of nowhere and leads me to the Range Rover. My legs fly across the pavement. My head twists back.

Blue shirt? Ball cap? Petal lips? Did I imagine the whole thing?

"There you are. Thanks for the coffee. What, no iced tea lemonade today?"

After I fail to answer, we climb into her vehicle and buckle up. Mom sifts through her Prada bag resting on the center console.

"Huh. I swear I took four letters from the mailbox today, not three."

And that's when it hits me—*she doesn't know*. Via got in, and she has no idea the letter came today. Then this guy tore it apart because it upset me...

Kismet. Kiss-met. Fate.

Dad decided two years ago that he was tired of hearing all three girls in the household moaning, "Oh, my God," so now we have to replace the word *God* with the word *Marx*, after Karl Marx, a dude who was apparently into atheism or whatever. I feel like God or Marx—*someone*—sent this boy to help me. If he were even real. Maybe I made him up in my head to come to terms with what I did.

I open a compact mirror and apply some lip gloss, my heart racing.

"You're always distracted, Mom. If you dropped a letter, you'd have seen it."

Mom pouts, then nods. In the minute it takes her to start the engine, I realize two things:

One—she was expecting this letter like her next breath.

Two—she is devastated.

"Before I forget, Lovebug, I bought you the diary you wanted." Mom produces a thick black-cased leather notebook from her Prada bag and hands it to me. I noticed it before, but I never assume things are for me anymore. She's always distracted, buying Via all types of gifts.

As we ride in silence, I have an epiphany.

This is where I'll write my sins.

This is where I'll bury my tragedies.

I snap the mirror shut and tuck my hands into the pockets of my white hoodie, where I find something small and hard. I take it out and stare at it, amazed.

The orange sea glass.

He gave me the sea glass even though I never accepted it.

Save me all your firsts.

I close my eyes and let a fat tear roll down my cheek.

He was real.



Penn

Question: Who gives their most precious belonging to a girl they don't know?

Answer: This motherfucker right here. Print me an "I'm with stupid" shirt with an arrow pointing straight to my dick.

Could've sold the damn thing and topped off Via's cell phone credit. Now that ship's sailed. I can spot it in the distance, sinking quickly.

The worst part is that I knew nothing would come out of it. At fourteen, I've only kissed two girls. They both had enormous tongues and too much saliva. This girl looked like her tongue would be small, so I couldn't pass up trying.

But the minute my lips touched hers, I just couldn't do it. She looked kind of manic. Sad. Clingy? I don't fucking know. Maybe I just didn't have the balls. Maybe watching her three times a week from afar paralyzed me.

Hey, how do you turn off your own mind? It needs to shut up. Now.

My friend Kannon passes me the joint on my front porch. That's the one perk of having your mom live with her drug-dealing boyfriend. Free pot. And since food is scarce these days, I'll take whatever is on the table.

A bunch of wannabe gangsters in red bandanas cross our side of the street with their pit bulls and a boom box playing angry Spanish rap. The dogs bark, yanking on their chains.

Kannon barks right back at them. He's so high his head might hit a fucking plane. I take a hit, then hand Camilo the joint.

"I'll lend you fifty so you can make the call." Camilo coughs. He is huge and tan and already has impressive facial hair. He looks like someone's Mexican dad.

"We don't need to call anyone!" my twin sister yells from the grass next to us. She is lying face down, sobbing into the yellow lawn. I think she is hoping the sun will burn her into the ground.

"Are y'all deaf or something?! I didn't get in!"

"We'll take the money." I ignore her. We have to call the ballet place. Via can't stay here. It ain't safe.

"I love you, Penn, but you're a pain in the ass." She hiccups, plucking blades of grass and throwing them in our direction without lifting her head. She'll thank me later. When she is famous and rich—do ballerinas get rich?—and I'm still sitting here with my dumb friends smoking pot and salivating over lemon-haired Todos Santos girls. Maybe I won't have to stand on street corners and deal. I'm good at shit. Sports and fighting mainly. Coach says I need to eat more protein for muscle and more carbs to get some body fat, but that's not happening anytime soon because most of my money is spent buying Via's bus tickets to her ballet classes.

I tag along because I'm hella worried about her riding on that bus alone. Especially in winter when it gets dark early.

"I thought you said your sister's good? How come she didn't get in?" Kannon yawns, moving his hand over his long dreads. The sides of his head are shaved, creating a black man-bun. I punch his arm so hard he collapses back on the rocking chair with a silent scream, clutching his bicep, still hardy-har-harring.

"I think a demonstration is in order. Chop-chop, Via. Show us your moves." Cam puts "Milkshake" by Kelis on his phone, balling a gum wrapper in his hand and throwing it at the back of her head.

Her sobs stop, replaced with catatonic silence. I turn around, scrubbing my chin before twisting back to Camilo and swinging a fist at his jaw. I hear it unlock from its usual place and him *harrumphing*.

Darting up from the grass, Via runs into the house and slams the door behind her. I'm not sure what business she has sitting in the living room when Rhett is home, griping about being tired and hungry. She will probably get into a screaming match with him and return to the porch with her tail between her legs. My mom is too high to interfere, but even when she does, she chooses her boyfriend's side. Even when he uses Via's leotards, which her teacher buys for her, to shine his shoes. He does that often to get a rise out of her. On days she shows up to class in her torn leggings and hand-me-down shirts, she spends the bus ride sobbing. Those are usually the days when I rub his briefs on the public toilet seats in Liberty Park.

It's incredibly therapeutic.

"Hand me the fifty." I open my palm and turn to Cam, who slaps the bill into my hand obediently. I'm going to buy myself and Via burgers the size of my face, then top the credit on her phone so she can call Mrs. Followhill.

I charge down my street to In-N-Out, Camilo and Kannon trailing me like the wind. Cracked concrete and murals of dead teenagers wearing halos line the street. Our palm trees seem to hunch down from the burden of poverty, leaning over buildings that are short and yellow like bad teeth.

But twenty minutes later, the satisfaction of clutching a paper bag filled with greasy burgers and fries is overwhelming. Via's gonna forget all about her meltdown when she sees it. I push the door to my house open, and the first thing I see makes me drop the food to the floor.

My mother's boyfriend is straddling my sister on the couch, his jigglng belly pouring out on her chest. He pummels her face, his sweaty, hairy chest glistening and his arm flexing every time he does. His ripped jeans are unbuttoned, and his zipper is all the way down. She is wheezing and coughing,

trying to breathe. Without thinking, I dash toward them and unplaster him from her. Her face is bloody, and she's croaking out weak protests, telling him that he's a cheap bastard, and he keeps yelling that she is a thieving whore. I grab Rhett by the collar of his shirt and pull him from her. He swings with the momentum, falling on the floor. I punch his face so hard, the sound of his jaw cracking echoes around the room. He whips his head back, hitting the floor. I spin back to Via, and all I see is her back as she slides through her own blood, tripping to the door. I grab her wrist, but she wiggles free. Something falls between us with a soft click. I pick it up, and it looks like a tooth. Jesus fucking Christ. He knocked her tooth out.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice muffled from the blood in her mouth. "I'm sorry. I can't, Penn."

"Via!" I cry out.

"Please," she yells. "Let me go."

I try to chase her, slipping in the trail of blood she leaves behind. My hands are covered in it now. I stand and start for the still-open door. A hand snatches me back and throws me on the couch.

"Not so quick, little asshole. Now's your turn."

I close my eyes and let it happen, knowing why Via has to run.

Geography is destiny.



It's been three days since Via ran away.

Two and a half since I've last managed to stomach anything without throwing it up (Pabst counts, right?).

After Rhett beat her up for stealing his phone and trying to call London, I'm not surprised she ain't back. I know better than to fuck with Rhett. Via is usually even more cautious with

him because she's a girl. It was a moment of weakness on her part, and it cost her more than she was willing to pay.

On Friday afternoon, I find myself loitering outside her ballet class, hoping she'll appear. Maybe she's crashing at her teacher's house. They seem close, but it's hard to tell since Via puts on a mask every time the bus we board slides into the city limits of Todos Santos. The fact she hasn't touched base yet makes me heave when I think about it. I'm telling myself she has her reasons.

At six, pink-wearing girls start pouring out of the building. I dawdle by the shiny black Range Rover with my hands in my pockets, waiting for the teacher. She comes out last, waving and laughing with a bunch of students. Another girl walks beside her. The girl I kissed, to be exact. The girl I've been obsessing over for a year, to be super-exact. She is beautiful like the shit hanging in the museums. In a really sad, distant, look-but-don't-touch way. I trek toward them, and they meet me halfway. The girl's eyes widen, and she looks sideways to see if anyone else is here to witness us talking. She thinks I'm here for her.

"Hi." She tucks hair behind her ears, her gaze traveling to Mrs. Followhill in a silent I-swear-I-don't-know-this-guy plea.

"Hey." I kill the butterflies in my stomach because now's not the place and definitely not the time, then turn to the teacher. "Ma'am, my sister, Via, is in your class. I haven't seen her in three days."

The teacher's eyebrows pinch together as though I just announced I'll be taking a shit on the hood of her vehicle. She tells the blonde to wait inside the giant Range Rover, then tugs at my arm, heading toward an alleyway. Sandwiched between two buildings, she sort of forces me to sit down on a tall step (dafuq?) and starts talking.

"I've been calling her five times a day and leaving messages," she whispers hotly in my face. "I wanted to let her know she'd been accepted to the Royal Academy. When the letter never arrived, I called them to check. Everything is in

motion now. As I said before, you needn't worry about the tuition. I'll be paying the fee."

My nostrils flare. All this in her future, and she could be lying in a ditch right now. Goddamn Via. Goddamn all pretty, volatile fourteen-year-old girls.

"Well, ma'am, thank you for the gift she'll never be able to cash in on since *we* can't find her," I respectfully mock her. But *we* is just me. Mom is out of it—she never really bothered bouncing out of her first drug binge some years ago—and Rhett is probably happy he has one less mouth to feed. When the truancy officer called from school earlier, I told him Via went to my aunt's, something my mother later confirmed when he showed up on our doorstep. Mom, wild-haired and sucking on a cigarette as if it were an oxygen mask, never once asked if it was true. If I call the police, they'll dump both our asses in foster care. Maybe together, but probably not. I can't let that happen. I can't be separated from Via.

Mrs. Followhill stares at me with an expression as if she just realized she caught a stomach bug. She is probably wondering how I dare speak to her like that. Usually, I'm a bit more user-friendly. Then again, I don't usually have to deal with a missing sister. I clean my mother's puke from the walls and close the bathroom door on Rhett when he falls asleep on the toilet seat. I don't look at grown-ups with the same air of reverence her daughter does.

"Whoa." That's all Mrs. Followhill says.

"Thanks for the insight. Have a nice life." I stand and swagger toward the street. She catches my arm and yanks me back. I twist around to face her.

"My daughter..." She licks her lips, then looks down, looks *guilty*. The girl is leaning against the Rover, staring at us, chewing on her thumbnail. "My daughter and Via haven't been getting along. I tried to encourage them to communicate, but the more I pushed them together, the more they seemed to dislike one another. I *think* I had a letter go missing last week. A letter that could have been...important. I don't even know why I'm telling you this." She lets out a breath, shaking her

head. "I guess I just...I don't want to know, you know? I hate the fact that my mind is even going there."

But maybe it should.

The flashback crashes into my memory.

The paper that hissed in her little fist.

Me taking it from her.

Tearing it apart.

Throwing it into the trash can, watching her face blossom into bliss.

Pouring the lemonade on the remains for good measure when her blue eyes twinkled the request.

Setting my sister's dreams on fire.

Kicking this entire nightmare into motion.

My jaw flexes, and I take a step back. I throw one last glance at the chick, filing her into memory.

Archive under: Shit List.

Revisit document: When I'm able to ruin her.

"So Via's not with you?" My voice hardens around the words. Like tin. I'm desperate. I have no lead. I want to rip the world apart to find her, but the world is not mine to destroy. The world just continues turning at the same pace, because kids like Via and me? We disappear all the time, and no one notices.

Mrs. Followhill shakes her head. She hesitates, touching my arm. "Hey, why don't you come with me? I'll drop Daria off at home, and we can look for her."

Daria.

I turn around and stalk toward the bus stop, feeling stupid and hateful and alive. More alive than I've ever felt. Because I want to kill Daria. Daria made everything fade into the background the first time I saw her, and while I was busy admiring, everything around us burned.

You look like you could use a friend, I told her. Stupid boyish faith. I mentally throw it onto the ground and stomp on it on my way to the bus as it slides to the curb.

Daria was right. I was pathetic. Stupid. Blinded by her hair and lips and sweet melancholy.

Making a beeline to the bus stop, I hear Mrs. Followhill yelling my name behind me in the distance. She knows my name. She knows me. Us. I don't know why it disturbs me. I don't know why I still give a fuck that this girl knows I'm poor.

I hop on the first available bus, not sure where it will take me.

As far away from the girl, but not far enough from myself.

The burn in my chest intensifies, the hole around my heart growing bigger, and my grandmother whispers in the back of my mind.

Skull Eyes.

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