

WICKED WEST REJECTS

The background is a dark, textured black. A large, glossy red high-heeled shoe is positioned diagonally from the bottom left towards the center. To the right of the shoe is a glass flask containing a bright blue liquid. From the neck of the flask, a white, skull-shaped smoke or vapor rises. The scene is surrounded by several red roses, some in the foreground and some in the background, creating a gothic and mysterious atmosphere.

BOX SET

HATEFUL
BRAVE
WISE

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CORA BRENT

WICKED WEST REJECTS

THE COMPLETE SERIES

CORA BRENT

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HATEFUL

(WICKED WEST REJECTS)

*I was warned these three boys would be the death of me. I
never meant to fall for the worst of them...*

Fresh starts don't come around often for a girl from the streets
of this city.

But a fortunate chain of events has delivered me to the center
of wealth and power.

And in the midst of three very different, very formidable
cousins with the world at their feet.

Gage, Micah and Conner were determined to be my enemies.

So I braced for a war.

But they underestimated me.

I earned respect from one of them.

Friendship from another.

And I found love with the third.

Or so I thought.

Everyone who insisted Gage Silvestro was heartless had to be
wrong.

He was just misunderstood, my unexpected soul mate.

I was fooled.

And I suffered for it.

A night of terror and tragedy became a crash course in how
easily love can turn to hate.

Eight years have passed since Gage told me to go cry in a
gutter and then disappeared.

Now he's back in the form of a ruthless mob boss who stalks
my every move.

I'd have to be crazy to give him a second look.

Then Gage nearly lost his life while saving mine.

And I learned the truth.

Our real enemy has been pulling the strings all along...

Prologue

GAGE

She wears red tonight.
A complicated color.

Red.

Blood. War. Love.

All meanings entangled, sometimes at odds, but sharing the same inevitability.

Even the heirloom stone she wears around her neck is red, a glittering talisman that serves as a reminder of everything the lost years have cost us.

Dani pretends to ignore me while playing hostess to her guests, the wealthy and politically dominant fuckers who control the purse strings, the scales of justice, and everything in between.

Many of them are known to me, some are not.

I've been away for a long time.

They are curious and welcoming, assuming I'm one of them. This place is their new crowned jewel, years in the making. They are celebrating.

Dani knows I'm watching. She doesn't want to be influenced but she is. It's obvious with every subtle glance

over her shoulder and each conversational pause when she impatiently scans the room in search of my whereabouts.

I refuse to quit greedily drinking in the sight of her. The memory of her face has been the only constant in my life, the only thing keeping the reduced fire in my heart from being extinguished completely.

There's not much of that fire left.

Mostly I live up to my reputation, the ruthless son of a ruthless man. I've helped my father annihilate dreams and do unspeakable things.

This was the deal I had to make.

And I made it without hesitation.

Dani's grace is effortless. There's beauty in every tilt of her head, in every casual step she takes. She was strikingly pretty in high school. She's now a stunningly gorgeous woman.

Yet she does not belong here, in this scene, with these people. She may have adapted but she hasn't changed. She's still the girl I loved, the girl I broke, the girl I left behind for her own sake.

I'm patient, circulating from one pretentious group to the next, never lingering for long, never saying much, keeping her in my sights.

She's the sun. I'll follow where she goes.

Especially now that I'm aware of the danger she's in.

What a fucked up idea to build this fortress atop the bones of another. The place feels cursed from the outset.

The hour grows late and brings with it an echo of another night, long ago, and yet as clear as yesterday. I might have been standing exactly where I'm standing now.

"I can't wait any longer."

"We don't have to wait."

My fingers contract, crushing the glass in my hand. Somehow the sharp fragments don't break the skin.

A woman gasps. "Oh my god, are you all right?"

Within seconds a staff member arrives with a brush and dustpan. He calls me sir and rapidly sweeps up the glass shards.

Faces turn this way and size up the situation. More than one woman shows brazen interest.

I'm used to this. The slightest sign from me would be an invitation.

I will give no such sign. I never do.

A dreaded, compelling itch torments the fingers of my right hand. The urge always manifests at inconvenient times.

I tap out the pattern on my thigh. Once, twice, three times.

Dani is distracted. Her attention has been captured by the man who was, for a little while, my replacement. He whispers in her ear and places his hand possessively on her back. My blood boils.

While I've been watching Dani, someone else watches me.

My aunt forces a phony smile and raises her glass when our eyes meet. The gesture is intended to look friendly. I know that it's not. One sister, always oblivious, copies the move. The other sister spares me a cold glance before pointedly

looking elsewhere. I'm not surprised. She quit being my mother a long time ago.

Eventually, my patience pays off. The overdressed guests begin to filter out in pairs. Even my mother and her sisters are gone. Dani remains because this is her event, her job.

When the staff begins the work of cleanup, Dani finally drops the hostess charade. She delivers a direct stare from ten feet away, arms defensively crossed.

"You shouldn't be here," she says.

"Then tell me to leave," I reply.

Her tender red lips part and then clamp shut. She can't bring herself to give that command.

The uniformed guy who cleaned up my broken glass stops by to murmur something in her ear.

Dani nods. "Thanks, Bradley. I'll take a look."

She spins and walks in the opposite direction. She must hear me following but she doesn't turn around as she briskly exits the side door and through a patio area where strings of twinkling lights crisscross above a three-tiered fountain festooned with swan sculptures.

Dani begins climbing a set of wide stone steps, higher and higher. As I prowl silently on her heels, I don't feel guilty for coveting her body.

A dress becomes a work of art on her, molding to each seductive curve, teasing when the side slit shows a glimpse of bare leg.

I like the dress. And I'd happily tear it to pieces.

An image gallops through my mind.

Dani on her back, wide open for me. She's eager, getting what she begged for. A gasp of shock when I take her too hard. A cry of bliss when she shatters anyway.

My fantasy girl, now and forever.

She stops when we reach the rooftop garden, a maze of tropical flowers and potted trees with broad fanning leaves. An outrageous over-the-top indulgence.

Dani is so close now. I can't stop myself from reaching for her. She faces away and doesn't notice, moving out of range before my hand makes contact. She takes slow steps through the palm fronds and gazes out across the decadent moneyed neighborhoods all the way to the city skyline.

The lights within tall buildings give the illusion that the city is a pretty place. But I've seen many of the world's cities. I know this is one of the ugliest.

"Do you still hate me, Dani?"

She turns her head to the side and her sad profile is lovely. "Why shouldn't I hate you, Gage? Tell me why."

Because I gave you up to protect you.

Because I loved you then and I love you still.

The words won't come easy. They never do.

Dani turns back to the city lights. She doesn't see the way the feathered leaves to her right shiver from a sudden breeze.

No, not a breeze.

Only a shadow, a shadow that moves. The shadow steps out of the garden wilderness and into the moonlight. The dark clothing hides a man. He's broad-shouldered and thickly muscled and wearing a bizarre rubber mask.

He also holds a knife, not a small one. A silver medieval-style dagger.

My primitive instincts don't hesitate.

I lunge, barreling into him. He expels a grunt of surprise. He's big, strong, but he won't be stronger than me. My foot swings out to kick the knife away but he has fighting skills and anticipates this. He dodges, feints to the left and swings his arm, managing to knock over a large ceramic planter.

Dani screams.

Spinning with precision, I deliver a hard kick straight to the center of his chest. Again, he's caught off guard and sways with a grunt. The mask, a caricature of a snarling green witch, slips enough to expose a pale chin.

There is only one option here.

Whoever he is, I'm going to kill him.

"Run!" I yell to Dani. "RUN!"

The pause gives him time to recover. He yanks the mask back in place, likely so he can see better. He laughs behind the witch's toothy rubber sneer. The knife is switched to the other hand and he pivots to charge at Dani, leaving no question about his intended target.

Again, I run straight for him. This time there's a sharp sting, a blade deep in my flesh.

Unimportant, ignored for now.

He yelps when I seize his forearm and twist it backwards, beyond the limits of the elbow joint. The sound of the snap is satisfying.

My own blood runs freely, the hot pressure in my chest a grave warning, but it won't take me down, not until he's finished.

The witch wails in pain when I wrench the knife out of his hand. I would bury it in his soft gut but he has one more surprise. A furious noise rolls from his mouth and his other hand produces a gun. The knife falls when I grab for the pistol. He resists, a strong fucker, a man who has fought this same clash before and won.

He won't win this time.

I seize the gun with ease but it escapes my slippery hands, falling somewhere in the tropical brush. There's no time to search for it. The witch moans, beaten, his weapons gone, his arm useless.

I'll kill him anyway.

Our struggle has taken us to the edge of the roof. My fingers close around his neck, finding defenseless skin beneath the mask's rubber. The witch's sneer is frozen but the human eyes inside bulge and roll back.

"Who the fuck are you?" I growl as I squeeze his life away.

Dani is too close and she keeps screaming for help.

She didn't listen. She didn't run.

He flails, smacks his head on the ground as he tries to break free. A hiss of air escapes the mask, a rattle of desperate words.

"I was paid." Gagging. Gasping. "*Cut her throat.*"

This takes too long, strangling him. My own blood refuses to quit escaping and my strength goes with it.

I need to finish him here. Right fucking now.

For Dani.

We're at least three stories up, perhaps closer to four. It should be enough. The hired killer tries to gulp for air when my hands leave his throat but it'll be his last taste of life.

A roar rips from my throat as I lift him high enough to send him hurtling over the edge of the roof.

A distant thud and he's gone.

Now I feel it, the pressure close to my heart maturing into something more ominous.

I stagger away from the edge, my ears ringing, and I fall to my knees.

"Gage!" Dani drops to my side, gasps sharply when the moonlight shows her the hideous truth of the spreading stain on my white shirt.

I don't need to look down to know that my blood leaks out with terrifying speed. There are footsteps and yelling, the staff drawn by the noise.

"CALL 911!" Dani begs them. "NOW!"

The dizziness is overpowering.

And I sink lower.

I know nothing of knife injuries. This could be minor or it could mean death. The chest is where the heart dwells and it's not a good place to get stabbed.

I do know that.

Dani cries now.

She hovers over me and presses her hands to my heart, plugging the wound, trying to stop my life from leaking away.

“Hold on. Damn you, don’t you dare leave me again! Don’t you fucking dare!”

The edges of my vision blur. I know it’s not the simple cloak of night, not with the bright button of a full moon high above.

While oblivion creeps in, I stay focused on her face. I wish for the sun instead of the moon, just to see her face better.

My hand still works well enough to brush her soft cheek.

“No, please, no.” She bends down to kiss me with urgency. Her lips have always been my sweetest memory.

I love you, Dani.

She may never understand, never know that she’s been my reason for everything.

But even if tonight is the end, I have no regrets.

She’s worth every fucking sacrifice.

Part One

8 Years Ago...

*“You’re not one of us, Dorothy Ann.
And you never will be.”*

Chapter 1

Dani

Here in West Emerald the sunlight touches everything.

It feels very far away from the filthy, pockmarked streets of the city, where the sidewalks are covered with the shadows of scarred grey towers.

But it's not really far, not at all.

City kids laugh at West Emerald, but it is laughter stained with envy, with bitterness. We always spit out the name with anger because West Emerald is separate, a prestigious enclave beyond our reach.

A place we don't belong and never expect to.

Yet before I was one of those city kids, there was a life that I barely remember, a life with a woman whose face grows fainter each year. With her, the season always felt like winter. I know this is impossible but memories are tricky. We lived in a metal box on wheels and there was never enough food, never enough heat.

Sometimes my mother would be kind. Most of the time she wouldn't.

I had no warning the day she packed my clothes in a white plastic laundry basket and told me I was taking an adventure.

When I asked questions she grew annoyed, threatening a slap. The trip was a blur of diesel fumes, uncomfortable bus seats, and hostile faces of strangers.

And at the end, a colorless city, cluttered with people and very hot.

We found a door and my mother pounded on it with her hand. “My brother lives here. You can’t be a brat.”

That’s all she had time to say before a man appeared. He wore silver framed eyeglasses and a look of shock. “Emma Rae?”

My mother pushed the laundry basket into his arms. Then she shoved me forward. “This is your niece. Dorothy Ann, this is your Uncle Henley.”

Henley’s eyes swung to me. He stared at me as if he’d never been in the same room as a child before. Then he broke into a smile, a genuine smile. Even at five years old I could tell the difference. “Hello, Dorothy Ann.”

I clutched the musty furball of a stuffed dog in my arms. “Hello.”

This Uncle Henley person gestured to my mother. He said he didn’t have much money but he could give us a place to stay.

She shook her head.

No, she didn’t need a place to stay. She needed her brother to take care of me from now on.

He blinked, muttered the word “Shit”, and a minute later my mother left with no promises as to when she’d return. Her promises weren’t worth much anyway.

My uncle crouched down to my level and told me he knew nothing about little girls but that I would need to be quiet. If I wasn't quiet, then he wouldn't be able to work and he needed to work because he hadn't finished a book in two years.

"I'll be quiet," I promised.

"Dorothy Ann is a big name for a little girl. Does anyone call you anything else?"

"No."

"Maybe we could think of a nickname."

"Okay."

He smiled again. "Let's go get some dinner. Do you like hamburgers?"

I did like hamburgers.

I still do.

This memory has only drifted back today because I'm thinking about my mother, wondering what she'd say if she could see me here, standing in a sunlit bedroom filled with floor-to-ceiling windows and wearing the green and gold uniform of the exclusive West Emerald Preparatory Academy.

She might be shocked. She might not care.

But I'm shocked. I look like I'm wearing a party costume. I feel like a fraud.

The rest of my wardrobe is a battered collection of oversized graphic tees and relaxed jeans. I've never touched a pleated skirt before this morning but my choices are a pleated skirt or mushroom-colored pants that don't fit right. The skirt wins.

Three months ago, Uncle H's latest book hit the bestseller lists. For the first time, money began pouring in and Uncle H said everything would be different. He keeps offering to send me on the shopping spree of my dreams, like he's trying to make up for so many years of thrift store rummaging.

Uncle H should never worry about giving me things. My uncle has been more of a parent to me than anyone else tries to be. I'm comfortable in my jeans and tees. I've been attending classes online for the past year, thanks to some shitty and awful circumstances at my last school.

Today, for the first time since the Shitty Awful Thing happened, I'll be going to a school that doesn't live inside my computer.

I haven't panicked yet.

I'm trying not to panic at all.

A private academy won't be like the rough and tumble chaos of a packed city high school where you learn to watch your own back as easily as you breathe. Even if you try your best not to get on anyone's bad side you still might get jumped by the fuckers who travel in packs and search for ways to feel important.

That's just the way it is. There's safety in numbers but if you can't find a team of your own to stand with then you're fucked, an easy target.

I never did find a team. That's what happens when you're shy and unremarkable and move around a lot.

My reflection in the gilded vanity mirror is pained. Matilda, Uncle H's new wife, insists that I look perfect in green.

The mirror is less sure.

I should have worn the button down white shirt instead of the forest-colored polo embroidered with the school logo. My hair, a bland shade of brown, appears even more plain. A combination of no makeup and a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of my nose gives the impression of a girl younger than sixteen. My figure might be considered decent, but it's hidden beneath the stuffy uniform.

“Oh, Dani!” Matilda’s bubbly voice drifts through the intercom on the wall. “Are you all right, honey?”

It was a shock to discover that people really do have things like intercoms in their houses. Somehow it seems both extravagant and quaint at the same time. To answer Matilda, I press a black button in the lower left corner and lean in.

“I’m fine. I’ll be right down.” I sound like I’m shouting. I hear a snort of laughter from the other end. Not Matilda. Someone else.

“Hurry, we’re all here in the morning room,” she replies in her singsong way of speaking.

I wonder who might be included in the word ‘all’. Uncle H for sure. He’ll want to see me off to school today. He’s told me over and over that I have no obligation to attend West Emerald Prep. He’s worried. Now that I’m standing here wearing the uniform of an elite private school and facing first day jitters, I wonder if I’ve chosen wrong.

Then I remember the thrilled look on Matilda’s face when I agreed to enroll at her alma mater. Matilda has bent over backwards to make me feel at home. I’d hate to disappoint her. She sends her own son, Micah, to West Emerald Prep.

So far, Micah seems like kind of a prick but I’m trying hard not to judge too early. He’s my age, yet we have nothing

to say to each other. Every time I open my mouth he glares or curses. Sometimes he does both. That might have been him laughing a moment ago.

The romance between Matilda and Uncle H was more than a whirlwind. It was closer to a tornado. Three weeks ago, Matilda Lyonne arrived at a bookstore where Uncle H was signing a mountain of hardcovers. She marched confidently past the line of people, declared that she planned to take her favorite author out to dinner and wouldn't accept a refusal.

Uncle H has always been bashful with women. In all the years since I was dropped into his care I've only seen him with one girlfriend. Her name was Sharon and she sucked. She would raid our fridge and complain that being an author was a job for poor fools. I was glad when Sharon moved six hundred miles away and we never saw her again.

Matilda is nothing like Sharon.

After a deep breath and one final frown at the mirror, I seize the new caramel suede backpack that was a gift from Matilda and exit the bedroom that is larger than some of the apartments Uncle H and I have lived in. I'll need to get used to having a room this size to myself.

Like I'll need to get used to this family, this house.

It's one of those houses that passes down through generations. Built by Matilda's grandfather. Or great grandfather. I forget. Matilda grew up here, in this mansion of nine bedrooms and eleven bathrooms. She gave me a tour and explained that every five years she has the entire house redecorated by a famed interior designer. The current theme is French Provincial. That doesn't mean much to me but everything in sight looks expensive, almost comically ornate.

Yet if gold-framed mirrors and velvet sofas make Matilda happy then I can't complain. Matilda is wonderful. She treats Uncle H like a king and every time he looks at her it's clear he can't believe his luck.

Somehow the toe of my shoe snags the spidery leg of an ornamental table at the top of the stairs. My fingers barely catch a ceramic vase before it falls. The vase is heavy, covered with painted cherubs, likely an antique worth more money than I've ever seen. I'm relieved it's in one piece. Matilda might have second thoughts about her warm welcome if I start breaking her valuable treasures three days after moving in.

"Who's that?" The voice is sharp and clear despite being filtered through a closed door.

"It's just Dani," I answer before realizing she might not remember who I am.

Matilda's mother was introduced to me only once and hardly nodded before complaining that her lunch tray was late. She's blind and spends all of her time in her bedroom, depending on a crew of hired caretakers to bring her whatever she needs.

There's no response from the other side of the closed door and I feel free to move on.

The stairwell is immense with an intricate wrought iron banister, the marble steps broadening through the wide curve that leads to the bottom. It's a staircase designed for drama, for grand entrances. Each footfall produces its own lonely echo and there is no one in sight.

By the time I reach the last step I can pick up the distant murmur of voices and the clatter of dishes. A sudden eruption of nerves speeds up my heartbeat and I flatten my damp palms

to my skirt. For so long it's been just me and Uncle H. Part of me wishes that was still the case.

Instantly, I feel guilty for having selfish thoughts.

My beloved uncle has fallen deeply in love. The house I'm now living in is practically a palace. And I'll be educated at one of the best high schools in the country.

I'm lucky. I'm happy. This could be a new start. This *will* be a new start.

A domed skylight sits high above a large entryway that is furnished with a wide round table. Atop the table sits a massive arrangement of freesias and I brush my fingertips over the soft lavender petals. The wall to my right functions as a massive clock with Roman numerals hung in a precise circle. I watch the minute hand tick one step closer to eight a.m.

My stomach rumbles. For most people, anxiety is an appetite killer. Not for me. I'm starving.

The 'morning room', located in the back of the house, is Matilda's fancy term for an airy, enclosed space that overlooks the vast resort-worthy backyard. I quickly cross an empty sitting room and turn right down a windowed corridor. There are glass doors on one side that open to a vibrant Monet-inspired garden courtyard. I can't pass by without stopping to stare.

There's nothing like this in the city.

No, in the city you're lucky to spot a random struggling tree.

I'm so busy gazing at the gardens that I nearly miss seeing the woman. One of the caretakers for Matilda's mother, she moves in silence while carrying a silver tray containing small

bowls of fresh fruit and dark grainy toast. She looks like she's in a hurry.

“Good morning,” I say, not wanting to be rude but not wanting to hold her up either.

She nods but keeps walking. The only sound in the hallway is the determined swish of her pants. Matilda's gentle laughter drifts from the far end of the hallway and I follow it.

The morning room is a bright explosion of cream and salmon pink. Light pours through enormous windows. Beyond the glass, an epic swimming pool glitters in the center of a deep green lawn the size of a city park.

For a second I just stand in the open doorway and blink away the brilliance. Then I notice the long dining table is packed with people, a lot more people than I was expecting to see.

“Here she is!” Matilda claps her hands and vaults out of her chair. Dressed in a silken pink floor length nightgown and matching robe, her golden curls tumbling halfway to her waist, she is lovely. Her exact age is a mystery but I'm positive she's a bit younger than forty-five-year-old Uncle H.

Matilda smells like the freesias and she folds me in a soft hug before pulling back to conduct an appraisal.

“Dani, you look perfect,” she gushes. “This will be the time of your life.”

Uncle H has risen from his chair and he grins as Matilda links my arm with hers. She steers me toward the crowded table. I recognize Matilda's two sisters, Alta and Edie. They were at Saturday's wedding, a dizzying festival of extravagance at a nearby golf club. The three of them manage the family business, Yellow Brick Property Development. Alta

and Edie live here in the neighborhood, which is a maze of gated estates occupied by people of importance. Or at least people with a wild amount of money. Alta sips coffee and eyes me with cool detachment while Edie munches on a juicy arc of honeydew melon.

To my dismay, Matilda deposits me into an empty chair right beside her son. Micah and I didn't meet until the day of the wedding. I was hopeful we might get along.

That hope has already faded significantly.

Micah behaves like he's tough beneath his tattoos and disrespect. What a joke. Anyone who grew up here in the lap of luxury can't really be all that tough. I doubt he would have lasted ten minutes at my last school. The collar of his school uniform is sloppy with the top three buttons open. It's impossible to miss the hostile glare he throws my way as his mother fusses and pours a glass of orange juice.

With a flourish, Matilda offers up a platter of pastries folded around large red strawberries and dusted with powdered sugar. She calls them crepes and urges me to take more than one. I take two.

Directly across from me sits Edie's son, Conner. Supposedly he has a house of his own but every time I turn around he's here, a testosterone fixture with a mocking smile. All I know about him is that he plays football, has a bullhorn voice that drops endless vulgarity and typically struts around in nothing but a pair of weathered board shorts. Conner is very good looking in a way that is impressive but not intense. His sandy hair, blue eyes and sun kissed muscles remind me of vintage surfing posters.

Conner swallows a lump of food and swipes the back of one beefy hand across his mouth before he notices that I'm

watching him. He winks, glances at his cousin, then cracks up laughing.

I don't know what the joke is.

I have a bad feeling the joke is me.

Matilda stands behind my chair and affectionately fluffs my hair. She gives the top of my head a final fond pat before flitting back to her own seat right beside Uncle H. He watches her with worshipful eyes. They should have had a real honeymoon but with school starting this week Uncle H wanted to postpone a trip.

The sudden rude bump to my right elbow nearly knocks me off my chair. I was trying to edge away from Micah. This, however, put me directly in someone else's space. The one person at the table I haven't been introduced to yet. I know who he is immediately.

He's Alta's son, Micah's other cousin. His summer was spent in Italy visiting his father's family and he missed the wedding.

"You haven't met my nephew, Gage." Matilda gestures with a broad smile. "Gage, this is my beautiful stepdaughter, Dani."

She's being generous. I'm not exactly her stepdaughter. And I'm very aware that I'm not beautiful.

But *he* is.

Gage's eyes are the color of incoming storm clouds and they don't waver as he evaluates me in silence. His face would put any classic movie star to shame with defined cheekbones, a strong chin and a generous, brooding mouth.

Unlike his cousins, Gage is not cultivating the just-rolled-out-of-bed look. His hair, black and thick, isn't as long as Micah's or as closely cropped as Conner's and it appears he spent a moment in front of the mirror combing it back. He did neglect to shave, perhaps on purpose, and the dark scruff along his jaw makes him seem more like a man than other boys his age. His crisp shirt is unwrinkled but also untucked and rolled to the elbows. There's no mistaking the muscled power coiling through his forearms all the way up to his broad shoulders.

He looks the part of steamy daydreams and obsessions.

My skin tingles. I can't stop staring.

He lifts one eyebrow and his mouth curves into smug arrogance, the kind of guy who expects to be noticed and finds all the attention boring.

Gage shifts his eyes first, deliberately turning his head in a manner that makes it clear he'd rather examine the painting of a flowered meadow on the far wall than be polite.

His version of rejection.

Gage hasn't spoken a word.

Neither have I.

Yet our first conversation is over.

Feeling foolish, I run my knife through the nearest crepe, push a large piece into my mouth and chew without really noticing the taste. I fight to keep my eyes on my plate and not on the boy beside me.

Common sense says I can't possibly have developed a crush in the space of a minute.

I want common sense to win.

My knowledge of boys can be best described as...limited. Mostly they don't notice me and mostly I'm relieved to be ignored. Experience has taught me that I'll live longer if I keep a low profile. Today, however, blending into the scenery doesn't feel so good.

Gage's plate is arranged strangely. There are tidy piles of food on the edges while the center is bare. It seems like he might be finished eating because what's left is mostly crumbs and fragments. I don't know why he would take the time to arrange his leftovers so neatly unless he has nothing else to do.

While I'm watching, he drums the pointer finger of his left hand on the table beside the plate. At first, I think he's tapping out a song. After watching for a minute I realize it's more of a pattern than a rhythm. Five taps and a pause. Five taps and a pause. A nervous habit maybe, although I don't know why a guy who looks like Gage would have any reason to be anxious.

Meanwhile, Matilda is hugging Uncle H's arm and treating the table to a cheerful monologue about her schoolgirl days at West Emerald Prep. Lots of drama club productions. Endless cheerleading.

Alta loudly scrapes the blade of a butter knife along a slice of toast and pauses to roll her eyes at no one in particular.

Of Matilda's two sisters, Alta is the less approachable one. Edie strikes me as rather vacant but harmless. Alta, however, gives the impression that she's making constant calculations. Those calculations are not destined to work in your favor.

The three sisters are clearly not far apart in age, although I don't know the exact dynamics.

There's a whole lot about this family that I don't know.

Until now the focus has been on the wedding and then the move to Matilda's house. I didn't want to pester anyone with questions. Matilda's first husband died many years ago, brutally stabbed while on a fishing trip. Uncle H told me this in hushed words before tactfully suggesting that I might not want to mention the tragedy to Matilda.

Sometimes I think Uncle H believes I'm still five years old and in need of obvious instructions. I know better than to torture anyone with a painful past. There are plenty of things about the past that I don't really love talking about either.

As far as Matilda and her sisters go, they seem to have nothing in common. It's hard to imagine them running a large company together.

Edie hiccups loudly. She takes a greedy sip of orange juice. Judging by the glassy look in her blue eyes, it probably includes something a little more powerful.

Conner seizes the last pancake just as Micah reaches for it. Micah responds by flipping his middle finger. Conner snorts and inhales the pancake in one bite. I've noticed they tend to act more like brothers than cousins.

Then again, what do I know about brothers or cousins?

I have neither, at least none that I'm aware of. I used to wish for a large family with all my might. Now that I've been dropped into the middle of a complicated one I'm not sure what to think.

Matilda tries to make me feel at home. She's offered to redecorate my new bedroom any way I'd like and she urges her son to include me in his social activities.

I'll try to be more patient when it comes to Micah. Just like I've been used to having Uncle H to myself for a long time,

Micah has been the primary focus of his mother's attention. We don't have to be best friends overnight. Conner, who comes across as obnoxious but not mean, is likely taking his cues from Micah for now. I'm not worried about him. Alta and Edie might still be a little thrown off balance by their sister's sudden marriage but they will surely also warm up.

As for Gage, he's an unknown factor. I assume he's part of Micah and Conner's crew. He goes to school with them. He lives right here in the same neighborhood. I've heard his name spoken so I know he was missed when he was gone all summer.

Matilda continues to be the only voice at the table. She once starred in West Emerald Prep's production of *Phantom of the Opera*. There was no money for a theater department at my last school.

"Shouldn't you kids be leaving?" Alta cuts right through one of Matilda's sentences with the loud question.

Matilda glances at the time on her phone and sighs. "I didn't realize it was so late. Boys, you should run upstairs and say goodbye to your grandmother first. And Conner, you will need to be more careful about your driving. I heard you received yet another speeding ticket and—"

"I'm driving," Gage declares. "We're taking *my* car to school."

Matilda's pink mouth forms an O of surprise. Then her expression clouds. "*Your* car?"

Alta exhales loudly. "Christo arranged for a Range Rover to be delivered to the house yesterday. No one asked my opinion, that's for sure."

Matilda blinks at her sister. "You didn't tell me."

“So what?” Alta snaps. “I’m telling you now.”

Matilda’s attention switches back to Gage. The wariness on her lovely face is unfamiliar. And surprising. She doesn’t trust this nephew of hers, which makes me uneasy. “Dani also needs to get to school.”

Gage shrugs. “Won’t have the room on the inside. But I’ve got a solid roof rack. Should hold her.”

Conner laughs loudly. Micah scrolls through his phone and yawns.

Matilda balls up a napkin in her slim fingers. “Gage, drop the attitude. Dani is a member of the family now.”

Gage is unimpressed with his aunt’s lecture. “We’ll use some tie down straps. But if she bounces off and hits the pavement, no great loss.”

Conner laughs again. I’m beginning to think that’s all he does.

Gage watches his aunt’s reaction. It’s Alta’s place to reprimand her son but she doesn’t say a thing.

Matilda’s mouth flattens into an angry line.

I have every right to speak up but I’ve never been good at snappy comebacks. My cheeks are on fire and I feel Gage’s cold eyes on me.

He shifts closer, his version of a dare.

I consider knocking my half full glass of orange juice into his lap.

Uncle H pushes back from the table. “You know what? I should be the one to drive Dani on her first day.” He tries to

force a strained smile. “Anyway, I kind of want to get a look at this fancy new school.”

Matilda shoots an irritated glance at Alta and then tosses her hair, still fretting. I wish she wouldn't. The boys are determined to be jerks. That's not her fault. But I'm still tempted to put Gage in his place, even for just a minute.

Two things stop me.

First, I don't want to make a scene at Matilda's table.

Second, this is really Gage's world. His family, his allies. I'm just a guest here.

Uncle H kisses his wife's cheek and her eyelashes flutter. She touches his hand, reluctant to let him go.

My frustration fades. I can swallow my pride and go with the flow for my uncle's sake.

With my orange juice glass undisturbed and a smile on my face, I retrieve my backpack from the floor and get to my feet.

“Let's go,” I tell my uncle, forcing a smile.

Micah suddenly begins roaring with laughter, practically rolling out of his chair.

Gage joins in, shaking his head and saying, “Fucking hell.”

Conner, left out of the laughter for once, is perplexed on the other side of the table. “What?”

“Hey, Matilda!” Gage bangs his hand on the table for emphasis. “Maybe next time you adopt some street creature you should lay some ground rules first. Like how we don't flash our shit at the breakfast table.”

I don't know what the hell he's talking about.

Then I feel it, an inexplicable chill that crawls up my bare legs.

Matilda is still beautifully puzzled.

But Alta shoots out of her chair with a muttered, “For god’s sake.”

I’m already frantically pushing down the back of my skirt, the hem of which had rolled up and exposed my panties when I left my chair. Micah carries on like nothing in the history of the world has ever been funnier than a two second sighting of my blue hip hugger underwear.

Alta darts to my side and smacks hard at my skirt, which is completely unnecessary. I’ve already fixed the problem. And I’m plenty humiliated. No need to commit assault.

Micah starts making gagging sounds like a four-year-old.

Conner has flipped on his laughter switch because of course he did.

Gage observes my every move with obvious contempt.

So that’s how it’s going to be.

I don’t know what they are hoping for but they’re not getting any tears.

With my chin up and my voice steady, I collect the damaged remains of my dignity. “Thank you for breakfast, Matilda. I’m ready to go, Uncle H.”

He nods with a deep frown while I avoid locking eyes with anyone else at the table.

If a pack of spoiled, spoon-fed rich boys want to play games like immature assholes that’s their problem.

They’ll get bored once they realize they’re playing alone.

Chapter 2

Dani

My uncle feels crappy about breakfast.

“We’ll talk to them,” he says, looking straight ahead with his hands tight on the steering wheel. He’s always hated driving. “Matilda and I will speak to the boys. There’s no excuse for their antics. I really don’t know why they are behaving so badly.”

I do. *Because they can.* Same old story.

“Just forget them,” I tell my uncle. “I have.”

He doesn’t like looking away from the road but he glances my way with clear distress. He can probably tell that I’m lying.

After the Shitty Awful Thing happened, I refused to leave the apartment for a while. Once I did step out among people again I didn’t seek the company of anyone my age. Or any other age. I would spend large blocks of time in a remote corner of the city library, paging through large travel books about places I’d never seen and would like to see. Uncle H would occasionally comment on my solitary habits but he knew I’d recover in my own time and I have.

I’m proving it right now.

Maybe I can follow in Matilda's footsteps and join the drama club. I'm no performer but I could help with set design. Or costumes. There's no reason to hide. West Emerald Prep doesn't sound like the kind of place where you might get your head cracked over some bullshit.

The neighborhood gates slowly swing open. There's a very gothic feel to living in a place where you are required to enter and exit through huge metal gates. A long line of pecan trees stands guard on the narrow road bending to a larger avenue. There's so much greenery all around I can hardly believe I'm only twenty miles from the bleak city. I can't even see a shadow of that grim skyline from this neighborhood.

Matilda's neighborhood.

Which is now technically my neighborhood too.

My neighborhood. My home.

The idea doesn't stick with ease.

We pass the immaculate sprawl of the West Emerald Golf Club. I'm feeling a little disoriented because I don't quite know my way around yet. In every direction the landscape is lush and gorgeous, devoid of corner gas stations and brash fast food signs.

Now I'm wondering where the residents of West Emerald get fuel.

And hamburgers.

Rich people probably still eat hamburgers, right?

I haven't even seen a regular grocery store, only the upscale market that sells organic everything in small, pricey portions.

Hugging my backpack in my lap, I watch my uncle, the most serious driver in North America. He rolls to a stop, flips on the right blinker, looks one way, then the other way, and back again with care.

After chewing my lip and screwing up some courage, I ask him the question I need to ask. “You left the forwarding address, right?”

I ask the same question every time we move and he always answers with patience. “I sure did, Dani. And of course my cell number hasn’t changed. She can always call us.”

If she wants to.

It’s the unspoken truth and it stings. My mother could see me anytime she feels like it. Yet she hasn’t even checked in with a postcard in over ten years.

A horn blares directly behind us.

“What the…” Uncle H, startled, peers into the rearview mirror.

A split second later a large silver vehicle zooms past my window and promptly cuts us off before speeding away. I have just enough time to catch a glimpse of Gage behind the wheel.

“Dipshit,” grumbles Uncle H. Since he so rarely curses I can’t help but crack up. He grins. “Am I wrong?”

“Not wrong. Major dipshit.”

Uncle H turns right and I quit laughing because I can see the school now.

My last high school resembled a crumbling industrial factory from the outside. A factory that manufactured something utilitarian yet depressing, like bedpans or drain

cleaner. It wasn't nearly large enough for its three thousand students.

West Emerald Prep looks like a tropical resort. According to their website, student enrollment is just shy of eight hundred. It is known as one of the nation's top high schools. Usually there's a wait list for admission but Matilda called in a favor and I was accepted on short notice. While I expect the classes to be challenging, academics have never been a problem for me and over the last year I've breezed through my advanced online classes.

I crack my knuckles and my stomach flips as Uncle H navigates the visitor parking lot. The muted yellow stucco buildings are softly curved and pristine.

There are students everywhere, clotted together in tight packs in the courtyard, sifting through the parking lot, hypnotized by their phones. The only thing they have in common is that they are all wearing the school uniform. Yet they all look as if they belong here. I'm sure they will recognize that I do not.

Uncle H has to nudge my arm to get me to exit the car. Heads turn in my direction. They coolly look me up and down. None of them smile. I don't smile either. I lower my head and stare at my green knee socks and shiny black flats.

"Henley Gallagher!" The woman glides in this direction with the grace of a swan.

I recognize her as one of the wedding guests but we haven't met. She's strikingly attractive; tall, willowy, wearing a dark green pencil skirt and a white blouse. Her glossy black hair is cut in a sleek bob that frames a pale face with high cheekbones. Her smile shows off a perfect row of capped white teeth.

She extends her hand to my uncle. “We haven’t had much of a chance to speak yet but you remember me, right?”

My uncle nods. “Sure. Olivia Davison. The director of the school.”

Olivia Davison doesn’t let his hand go. No, she pulls him in even closer. “Now that I have you here, I’m going to gush with no shame. You are an exceptionally brilliant writer. I should have remembered to bring my hardcover of *Forester’s Daughter* for an autograph. Funny, I would have expected Matilda to be at your side.” She drops his hand but takes his arm, practically hugging it.

“My wife is at home.” Uncle H looks away, uncomfortable as his arm gets mauled.

She doesn’t take a hint. “I’m sure you’re both enjoying the newlywed life.”

Uncle H sidesteps the comment and motions to me. “My niece, Dani Gallagher. Dani is glad to be joining you this year.”

Olivia Davison’s attitude shifts. She releases my uncle’s arm and her eyes swivel in my direction. An emotion flashes across her face and is gone before I can guess what it is. There is not nearly as much warmth in her voice when she speaks to me.

“Hello, Dani. And welcome to our school. I want you to know that my door is always open to you so please don’t hesitate to reach out.”

I know this is my cue to speak but I freeze. I clear my throat. “Thank you for, uh, making room for me.”

Olivia’s left eyebrow arches up. She seems to be waiting for me to say more but my mind is a blank.

Empty seconds pass by.

From the corner of my right eye I spot three familiar figures walking slowly from the large lot where the students park. They close in like a pack of wolves and I tense, bracing for a rude encounter. Then they veer toward the courtyard without acknowledging me at all. I recognize the laughter in my ears as belonging to Conner.

Turning away, I notice Olivia Davison watching me with a tight smile.

“Naturally we would make room for you, Dani. A request from Matilda would never be denied.” Once again there’s the cold flicker in her eyes. She motions to a girl standing nearby in the shadow of a broad willow tree. “Dani, this is Tess Ballerini. She’ll help you get acclimated to campus. You and Tess have the same schedule. Tess is the junior class president and is familiar with all aspects of student life here.”

Tess is petite and cute with a thick curtain of dark hair primly held back from her forehead by a white headband. Her clear brown eyes size me up with an air of confidence. “Welcome to West Emerald Prep, Dani. Those of us who are lifers affectionately refer to it as West Prep. You will *love* it here. Everyone does.”

She grins, a message that she’s being sarcastic yet friendly. I like her already. The heaviness in my chest lightens a little.

Olivia Davison has already forgotten about me. She’s back to fawning all over my uncle, forcing him to promise he will supply an autograph the next time they meet. Maybe, she says, they can even go for coffee.

“Matilda can’t keep a national treasure all to herself,” Olivia declares with a conspiratorial wink. “Although she’ll

try.”

She’s creepy. And she’s the school principal. This seems like a bad sign.

I look at Tess. She sniffs out a laugh.

Olivia struts away, glancing back to check if my uncle is watching her go. She frowns when she sees he is not.

Instead, my uncle is quietly observing the lavish school grounds. He looks to me with a raised eyebrow that speaks far more than words.

“I’m good,” I assure him. “I swear.”

He nods. “I’ll pick you up at three thirty.”

Tess pipes up. “I can give you a ride, Dani. I’m on Gingham Road too.”

I’m startled that she knows where I live. “Sure, that would be great.”

She nods. “Mine is the house on the corner with all the absurd ivy. I would have stopped by already to introduce myself but until last night I was stuck at a political convention with my dad in Napa.”

Uncle H relaxes a little more and leaves me with Tess. He gives me a very enthusiastic thumbs up as he pulls away.

Tess watches. “Your uncle is overprotective, huh?”

“A little. He’s been taking care of me since I was five.”

“I get it. It’s been just me and my dad since my mom’s death. Don’t look alarmed. She died a long time ago. I don’t even remember her. But my dad runs a very strict household, doesn’t like to let me out of his sight.”

Tess leaves room for me to say more about why I'm living with my uncle but I don't. She takes the hint and changes subjects as we begin to walk toward the courtyard.

"Is Dani short for Danielle?" she asks.

"Dorothy Ann." I make a face. "Stuffy, I know."

She snorts. "Please. I was saddled with Contessa Arabella."

"But that's pretty."

"Maybe if you're a regency romance character secretly descended from royalty. That's not really part of my bio." Tess whips out her phone and notes the time. "First bell is in ten minutes so this tour will be abbreviated but I promise you'll learn your way around by the end of the day."

Tess speaks rapidly, pointing out the gymnasium and the cafeteria. There's also a meditation garden and a tennis court. The sprawling athletic fields are empty right now, but Tess says the first football game is next Friday and everyone is expected to show up.

West Prep looks even more impressive in person than it does in digital photos. I have a surreal feeling of being in a theme park, some bright cinematic version of high school perfection. All the anxious shadows that have been following me for longer than I care to think about are dissolving just a little.

We're running short on time now and Tess hurriedly guides me through the swarms of students. She waves off the ones who greet her and assures me there will be plenty of time for introductions. I'm sure it's a great stroke of luck that I've been paired with her.

“We have Classic Literature first,” Tess tells me. “Did Davison even give you a copy of your schedule? Never mind. I’ll send you a pic of my schedule since it’s the same. We’ll stop by the office later to get your locker assignment. Discipline here is pretty strict, although you don’t give off the vibes of a troublemaker.”

“My vibes are accurate.”

She smiles faintly. “Just don’t be a wiseass because only Davison’s special projects get away with that.”

“Special projects?”

Tess shrugs. “The senior boys she singles out for extra guidance. There are rumors about what really goes on behind closed doors in those counseling sessions but I can’t confirm. I can only repeat gossip.”

“Gross.”

“Yup.”

Tess walks fast. I have to quicken my pace to keep up with her.

“Since we live in the same neighborhood, do you know Matilda, my uncle’s wife?”

She stops walking, very suddenly. She stares across the courtyard.

I follow her gaze and my breath catches.

There they are, all three of them, idly occupying space along a brick wall beyond a marble courtyard fountain in the shape of some mythological goddess. The boys are surrounded by people and yet they seem like a unit, separate from everyone else. Not one of them appears to be planning to move anytime soon.

Micah is leaning against the wall with his head back and his eyes closed, like he's taking a standing nap.

Conner enjoys the attention of two giggling girls who are literally draped all over him.

Gage snubs everyone with a scowl on his face and an air of supreme condescension.

While I'm watching, a leggy blonde prances in front of Gage and playfully touches his chest. He shrugs her off, plainly irritated. Whatever he says must be harsh because she drops her hand with a pout and retreats.

"Of course I know Matilda," Tess says. She rips her eyes away from the boys and gives me a very direct look. "I know them all."

Before I can think of any questions, she drags me off to a shadowy alcove. "I'll come clean. I went to Davison and suggested that she should match your schedule to mine. You need to start out with an ally or you'll get eaten alive."

"Oh." I'm not sure what else to say.

She chews her lip for a second. "By junior year there aren't too many new students and the ones that do show up don't rate much attention. But you're different. You'll be a hot topic. Someone should give you a heads up about what to expect."

I'm getting less excited by the second. "And what is that?"

"Usual rich snob prep school shit. But for you? An added challenge." She leans to the right and looks pointedly past my shoulder. "Them."

I follow her gaze.

The three boys haven't changed positions. Conner still laughs with his girlfriends. Micah leans against the wall and

his eyes are open now. He glowers at the ground.

Gage, however, stares right at me. He doesn't flinch when our eyes meet.

Tess moves closer and lowers her voice. "People will be curious about what kind of girl got thrown into the middle of that notorious circle. Half the school would offer up a limb to be where you're at. The other half would be terrified."

"And which half are you in?"

She chuckles. "An outlier. I can appreciate a good view but I keep my distance."

I mull that over.

Tess adjusts her headband. "I've known those three forever. Micah's a human volcano, perpetually in search of a fight, always a split second away from exploding. As for Conner Wiseman, he will drop his pants for any girl that smiles at him and then forget she exists an hour later."

She pauses, long enough for me to take my eyes off the courtyard scene.

"What about Gage?" I hear my own urgency and instantly wish I'd said nothing.

Tess gives me a searching look, as if detecting something in my voice that I didn't mean to share. Then she sighs, as if I've managed to disappoint her.

"He certainly is gorgeous, isn't he? And he's not like either of his cousins but that's not an endorsement. No one would accuse Gage Silvestro of wearing his heart on his sleeve. There's a theory he has no heart at all. Just a cold void where one ought to be. The boy is weird, that's for sure. His father is terrifying, some kind of international mob boss. Naturally,

Gage has no shortage of fans. Every girl wants to be the one to crack his shell. Gage doesn't have Micah's temper or Conner's party boy wildness but he's unpredictable in a worse way. He's too smart, too impenetrable. He always reminds me of a predator that enjoys taking the time to play with his food. There's no telling what's going on in his head."

Gage, meanwhile, has not budged an inch. He stares intently, without a trace of a smile, as if he's listening to every word from an impossible distance.

It shouldn't be so hard to look away. The sting of this morning's breakfast encounter is still fresh. I'm ashamed of the surge of desire carving up my senses.

When I finally manage to break the spell with Gage, I find Tess watching me with obvious pity.

I hike up the strap of my backpack. "Those details are good to know. But I doubt I need to worry. So far, those three seem determined to treat me like I'm just a fly in the room."

She nods as if she expected as much. "That doesn't mean they'll always play nice, Dani. Keep that in mind. Be on your guard."

What a chilling thought.

A single overhead ding causes everyone in the area to panic.

"Warning bell." Tess yanks me toward the nearest door.

There's now a stampede to reach class on time. I don't look over my shoulder again but I suspect Micah, Conner and Gage haven't moved.

Above the building's entrance, an etched stone plaque says Kingston Humanities Center. Matilda's maiden name is

Kingston. I can't guess how rich a person must be to buy a building. Must be the reason for Olivia Davison's comment that a request from Matilda would never be turned down.

Tess might be short, but she sure does cut through a crowd effectively. I have trouble keeping up with her. She grumbles when we arrive at class too late to score a seat in the first row and motions for me to occupy an empty place in the second row before dropping down into the desk beside me.

I'm in awe of this classroom.

There are floor to ceiling dark wood bookshelves along the back wall, every inch of shelf space occupied by sedate hardcovers. Quotes stenciled in script are all over the remaining walls, with content ranging from Shakespeare to Toni Morrison. Above the door is a quote I don't recognize.

"A heart is not judged by how much you love but by how much you are loved by others."

I'm still staring at the quote when I feel a tap on my shoulder. As I swivel around, I find a girl smiling at me. She's very tall and very blonde and looks like she'd be perfectly cast as a Viking shieldmaiden.

"Cool of you to bring me some fresh meat on the first day of school, Tessie." The girl laughs at her own comment to show she's just teasing.

Tess wags her eyebrows with a snort. "Dani, this is Lita Marchenko. She's a pain in the ass and thinks very highly of herself."

"With good reason." Lita leans forward, sweeping her eyes over me before extending a hand with purple painted nails to adjust the collar of my shirt. Her sharp fingernail tickles my

neck. “Hello there, Dani. Always exciting to meet a cute new girl.”

“Don’t be too eager,” Tess warns. “I don’t think you’re her type.”

Lita rolls her eyes. “Take a step back, mother hen. I’m only being sociable. Besides, I’ve got the girlfriend to think about.”

“I thought you disposed of the girlfriend.”

Lita shrugs and unwraps a red lollipop. “It was a lonely, hot summer. I was weak.” She rolls the lollipop around in her mouth and winks at me. “But I am happy to meet you, Dani. Even if our association is only destined to be platonic. Let’s have lunch. Today’s specialty is tasteless chicken of an unspecified origin. I’ll pick your brain. Flirtation will be held to a minimum. I’ll even keep my hands to myself. It’ll be fun.”

I appreciate her quirky attitude. And right now I’ll gratefully accept any friendship offer that comes my way. “Sounds good to me.”

The other students take their seats and give me the eye. Some of them are bold with their critical expressions. A few give off distinctly unfriendly vibes.

One second before the last bell rings, Micah and Conner saunter into the room. Conner’s shirt is wide open and there’s a smudge of pink lip gloss on his neck. Micah rudely kicks aside a couple of backpacks on his way to the back row. Some kid whines an objection and Micah rears a fist back like he’s about to throw a punch. Neither one of them carries a single book and they ignore my presence, which is a relief. Gage is nowhere in sight, which is also a relief. And, strangely, a disappointment at the same time.

The teacher, Mr. Blumenthal, seems like a cheerful character, although it might take me a while to forgive him for ordering me to stand up and introduce myself.

Tess extends a sympathetic smile from across the aisle.

Mr. Blumenthal waits.

Snuffles of laughter trickle from all directions.

I slide out of my seat, inhale deeply, exhale slowly, and do my best to sound interesting.

I fail.

“Hi, everyone. I’m Dani Gallagher. I’m, uh, new here. I’m sixteen. And...you have a beautiful school. So, that’s it. Bye.”

Bye???

The laughter swells. Some of it comes from the back row. Miserably, I drop back into my seat and receive a shoulder pat of encouragement from Lita.

Mr. Blumenthal glares at the offenders and takes pity on me. “Thank you, Dani. We are very pleased to welcome you to West Emerald Prep.” He smacks his hands together to signal we are moving on. “Class, I have posted the syllabus in the student portal and if you’ve taken an early glance already, you’ll see that we have very full year ahead of us so let’s get started...”

In a school like this it’s no surprise to find that the classes are intense. By third period I’m beginning to feel overwhelmed, especially when I walk into Latin to discover that the other students have already been studying the language for two years and it’s a graduation requirement. Catching up will take some work. That’s fine. I’m not afraid of work. I can take whatever they throw at me.

I'm relieved that the morning passes without being selected to give another biographical speech. Tess, true to her word, remains by my side. I doubt I'll ever be able to thank her enough for taking me under her wing. Each time we cross the path of another student she introduces me like she's throwing down a challenge. The tactic works. Even the girls who give off tons of attitude and the boys who seem like arrogant dicks don't blast any insults to my face.

Good enough.

And there is no complaint from me about having wide, clean hallways to walk through with no fear of running into a violent brawl that got kicked off because someone talked shit or looked somewhere they're not supposed to look.

Micah turns up in my Latin class, this time without Conner. His furious blue eyes stare right through me when he stomps past my desk. Given Tess's comment about Micah's insane temper, I think that's probably a good thing. Steering clear of him at home will be a little tougher. His bedroom is just down the hall from mine.

As for Gage, either he's left the premises or we don't share any morning classes. By the time lunch hour rolls around there's been no sign of him since that last glimpse in the courtyard.

I sort of hate the fact that I keep looking.

My life has already included the lesson that tangling with dangerous boys is a health hazard. No need to study that material again.

When the bell for lunch period rings, Tess runs off to have a quick word with the faculty adviser for student government. She urges me to go ahead to the cafeteria and find Lita.

I wouldn't have minded tagging along with Tess but I don't want to be completely pathetic so I follow a clique of cackling girls in the direction of the cafeteria. One of them turns around, staring, and I smile because she's in my World History class. Her name is Paisley. Or maybe it's Paxton. She guffaws and whispers something to her friend that sends the two of them into peals of insufferable laughter.

Cute.

I swear, before today I've never been the source of so much amusement. But I hold my tongue and lower my head, choosing to stare at my shoes. They're giving me blisters.

The cafeteria is a hive of screechy teen chaos and the overpowering smell of greasy food. I'm relieved to find Lita within three seconds.

"Look, I made it!" I rush over and bump her arm. "I have survived an entire morning as the infamous new girl and now I'm ready to pig out. Please tell me there's dessert available."

I expect Lita to laugh but she doesn't. Her eyes narrow and she crosses her arms. "I don't care what kind of fucking zoo you escaped from, but you should really start crawling back there before someone calls animal control. And take your fleas with you, bitch."

Huh?

Lita smiles.

It's not a Just Kidding smile.

It's more like a Burn In Hell For Eternity smile.

Worse, she was talking so loudly that about a hundred people have overheard. Some of them screech with laughter, others hold their phones up in anticipation of more fireworks.

“Oh my god!” A hand seizes my elbow. A second Lita appears and she challenges the first one. “Haven, you fucking SUCK! Dani, I’m so sorry. The rest of you, fuck off and go eat your disgusting lunches before I get really pissed.”

Lita #2 pulls me away.

No, that’s wrong.

This girl towing me in the direction of the lunch line is the *real* Lita.

The cloud of confusion clears.

“You have a twin,” I announce, as if she didn’t know.

Lita hands me a food tray. “The bane of my existence,” she mutters and scrunches up her pretty face. “Really sorry about that. I should have warned you about the likelihood of encountering pure evil. I would say that Haven’s not as bad as she seems but I try not to lie in the daylight. Hey, grab a plate of those macadamia cookies. They are to die for.”

I take three cookies.

After everything I’ve been through so far today, I’m sure I deserve them.

Chapter 3

Gage

We're not supposed to be out here.

School rules say we need to be stuffed into the cafeteria with everyone else for an equal opportunity feeding frenzy.

Well, I don't have much use for school rules even on a good day and this isn't really a good day. A summer spent on different continents hasn't made my parents any less fucked in the head and I'm sick of being trapped in the middle of their mess.

Today I just want to hang with my boys because they're the only people on this dumb planet who don't drive me batshit crazy.

"Did he get fucking lost?" Micah is lying on his back atop the highest bleacher bench even though it's probably the hottest place he could choose to be.

I prefer to stand in the shade below. "Here he comes."

Conner has just emerged from the building with a lunch tray balanced on each big palm. There's probably enough food piled on there to feed about twelve guys. I bet he'll eat three quarters of it.

Micah responds by reaching for the nearest metal bar, flipping all the way around and vaulting to the ground in a move that could have broken his neck if he'd misjudged. There's no use in telling him that, though. In fact, he'd just take it as an invitation to try the same thing again.

Conner doesn't want to sit on the bleachers and drops the trays on a table over by the empty concession stand. One of the school resource officers is taking a stroll along the perimeter. He notices us and his brow wrinkles but when he sees Conner he brightens and pumps his fist before moving on.

"No escape from the football fans." I take a seat and start sorting through the mess of food on the trays. I flatten out a napkin and put a sandwich in the upper left corner, a soda can in the lower right corner. Three cookies go on the bottom left and a bag of chips on the upper right.

Conner shrugs. "Can't help being totally beloved."

"What the hell took you so long?" Micah snatches a plate of fries, throws two sandwiches right on top and squirts hot sauce all over everything.

If someone were to set a plate like that in front of me then I'd have to throw it the fuck out and start over. But Micah can eat his way and I can eat mine.

That's another reason why I'd rather be out here with only the two of them. I don't want to be examined and peppered with dumbass questions about why I do what I do. It's no one's fucking business.

I take a small bite from the sandwich. The food here should be a hell of a lot better than it is. God knows where they funnel all that tuition money. It doesn't go to teacher

salaries, that's for sure. The faculty parking lot looks like the kingdom of a cheap used car salesman.

Conner drains a can of soda and crushes the metal in one hand. He belches. "I was busy being beloved in a more practical way."

I don't ask him who he was messing with because I don't especially care. Honestly, neither does he. Girls around here see Conner Wiseman as their quarterback hero drug of choice and he's happy to accommodate them.

Anyway, it's not like I have no chances of my own. I've got plenty. I just can't be bothered taking them.

"What about you?" Conner kicks me under the table. "Got any summer stories to tell?"

I take a sip of my drink and put it down. I pick it up and put it down again.

"Saw more than my fair share of skin."

This is a lie.

In reality, I was stuck in a four-hundred-year-old family villa with two senile great aunts who kept calling me by my father's name and there was nothing to look at but the Mediterranean Sea.

Conner grins like he knows I'm bullshitting. But he won't call me on it and neither will Micah. Brothers guard each other's pride and these are my brothers. When you're born into a family as fucked up as ours you count yourself lucky to find any allies. I couldn't ask for better allies than these two.

People forget that Conner is a year older than me and Micah. It's been six years since he fell from a tree and suffered a severe concussion. He was knocked out for twelve hours. He

was all right when he woke up but the ordeal scrambled something inside his head and he'd forgotten everything from schoolwork to his father's name. He even forgot how to read and had to start from scratch. His folks decided to hold him back a year, which is how he ended up in the same class with me and Micah. Sometimes I wonder why he's allowed to play football and risk another concussion but the one time I asked this question he got mad. Conner thinks football is the only thing he'll ever be good at. I've never mentioned it again.

The thing about Conner is that he was really smart before the accident but these days he barely keeps up in school even with all kinds of tutoring. Conner's not touchy about much of anything but he does get bothered about his academic struggles. West Prep usually doesn't hesitate to kick out anyone who can't keep up, even with money and connections. Luckily, those rules don't apply to Conner because the deep pockets of the alumni value the football team and the football team would be nothing without him. Conner is given all kinds of tutors and special testing schedules and definitely a grading bump here and there. Still, it bothers him. If not for us, he'd probably be happier at Xavier, the local public school.

Micah's set of baggage looks entirely different. Anyone who witnesses murder is always going to be a little fucked up. His dad took him on a weekend fishing trip, just the two of them at a cabin in the woods. The two men who broke in were deep in a meth rage, hunting for cash. Micah was just a little kid hiding under a bed during the slaughter. He ended up staring at his father's bloody body for a terrifying hour before crawling out to search for help. He was only six years old but somehow he convinced himself that he should have done something other than hide under the bed, which is crazy.

What six-year-old kid can stop two maniacs with machetes?

But Micah can't be talked out of his guilt for staying alive. I know that's why he's always hell bent on taking risks that make no sense and stepping into fights that don't need to happen.

Conner and I do the best we can to hold him back so he doesn't get into major trouble. It's not like anyone else is going to make the effort. His mother might be even more useless than mine is.

No one is allowed to discuss the murder of Uncle Ethan, Micah's father. Not even Micah, which is not surprising if you understand the theme of our family: Memory hole anything that fucking sucks.

Conner chomps off half his chicken sandwich and stares out at the empty football field. Sitting in class is torture for him. Without the temptation of football, there wouldn't be an easy way to talk him into showing up at school every day.

Micah, on the other hand, is a solid B student when he's not busy screwing up.

My grades are all right, nothing great. I get hauled into the front office at least once every semester to suffer through a lecture about how I could be at the top of my class if I gave a shit, which I don't. I'm putting in my time here and that's all. My folks assume I'll be going to an Ivy League college but I haven't thought that far ahead yet.

The future is a murky place and I don't dwell on it.

"Missed you, man," Micah says, like he's reading my thoughts. He gives me a rare grin.

“Missed both of you dickheads too.” We’re not sentimental types, none of us, and words like that aren’t said just for the hell of it. “Thought the summer would never end.”

Conner nods at me. “At least you got a new ride out of it.”

“True.” I tear open a bag of kettle chips, carefully shaking out five of them before setting aside the bag for the moment.

My folks are a whole other toxic subplot I’d rather not unpack right now. My dad only bought me the car to annoy my mother but what do I care? If they’re not fighting about that they’ll be fighting about something else in a couple of minutes. After I got home yesterday I’m not sure my mother even said hello to me before she started tearing into my father, accusing him of fucking around all summer.

I’m sure he did.

I hardly saw the man at all. He breezed through the villa a couple of times, never staying for long, never giving out clues about where to find him. I’m convinced he only dragged me along to Italy because it was another way to say Fuck You to Alta. It’s likely he spent most of his time out on one of his buddy’s yachts, snorting shit up his nose and getting lap dances from supermodels.

Not that my mother has reason to complain. At home all she does is rub his nose in a new boyfriend every other month.

That’s their pattern; they fight and they fuck other people and they fight some more and they fuck each other and they find something else to fight about.

My parents deserve one another.

I guess that’s why they stay married year after spiteful year. They both feed off the cycle of hatred.

One thing I know for damn sure is that I'll never ever go down that road. The biggest lesson they've taught me is that love turns your blood to poison.

Conner clears his throat and shifts in his chair. "Hey, can we talk about something?"

I shake out five more chips. There are two more left in the bag. I leave them there. "Go for it."

"The team is really short on talent this year and there's a tough season ahead. It's not like you can't play. You're both great athletes when you put in the effort. Come on, our offensive line is pathetic."

Shit, he knows better than to try this pitch. Usually it's Coach Lee who makes the pointless effort to draft me and Micah. If Conner's doing the dirty work, they must really be desperate. Still, he shouldn't have bothered. He knows I'd rather stick my finger in an electric socket than jog out on the field in the school colors like a good little soldier.

Conner thinks he's got our attention so he keeps rolling. "Think of all the rich pricks you can flatten while getting cheered."

"We *are* rich pricks," I remind him.

He crosses his arms and scowls.

Micah shakes his head. "No way. If I want to knock a fucker down I don't need to chase a ball to do it."

Conner looks at me, his last hope.

"Not a team player," I tell him.

Conner's not ready to give up. "*We* are the team. It would be us out there."

I catch Micah's eye. He stares stonily back.

"We'll think about it," I tell Conner, only because it's Conner and I don't like hurting his feelings.

But I won't think about it.

Neither will Micah.

The last thing I'd ever feel like dealing with is being surrounded by a pack of morons who decide I'm a freak.

I was eight when my folks started dragging me to different doctors after they realized screaming at me constantly for dicking around with my food and turning light switches on and off didn't make me stop. I remember the day I first learned why.

We'd just returned from seeing another doctor and my mother left my paperwork casually lying around. The typed paragraphs were loaded with medical jargon.

But I understood plenty.

Diagnosis of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Possible personality disorder as well. More observation recommended. Would likely benefit from a treatment plan.

My father decided he'd seen enough. Nope, he would not accept a substandard heir. He raged on and on that all doctors were quacks and criminals trying to steal from his pocket. No more doctors after that.

Alta didn't argue with him. She's always assumed that I'm just being a brat, that I can turn it all off whenever I choose.

Micah was the one who gave it a different name. It was the day we overheard my mother refer to me as 'defective' in a conversation with her sisters. Micah saw that I felt bad and he felt bad too.

“Look, it’s no big deal, Gage. Sometimes you just need to flex a muscle, you know?”

Yes, that’s how it is. A flex.

Plus it sounds so much simpler, far better than being attached to some mental condition. Sometimes I need to flex and sometimes I don’t. Anyway, it’s a big fat fucking chore to control the flex while sitting in class for seven hours a day.

Every morning I work out in the basement home gym. I can count off my reps in peace and an hour of brutal exercise seems to help take the edge off for a little while. However, I’ll never agree to be on display for weight room workouts and field practices. Right now I just don’t have the energy to explain all of this, not even to Conner.

Conner looks unhappy but drops the subject.

Micah glares out at the football field. His mood’s been even shittier than usual now that his mother is shoving a brand new stepfather down his throat. Since Micah’s dad died, Aunt Matilda has been married two more times but those never lasted more than six months. She gets bored easily and I’m sure this author dude won’t last long either. In the meantime, I suppose Micah has to figure out how to deal with the guy.

Which reminds me...

“Hey.” I toss a balled up napkin at Micah’s head. “Let’s talk about your new roommate.”

Micah scowls. “What for? She’s about as interesting as the fucking chair I’m sitting on.”

That’s probably true. I got the same impression from the nervous girl who showed up for breakfast with all that gross ‘Please Like Me’ eagerness stamped on her face.

But my aunt seems determined to push her into our laps and I always like to know what kind of mess is being shoved my way.

I slide a glance over to Conner. “What do *you* think? You’ve had a front row seat to the drama this summer. You must have an opinion about her.”

Conner shrugs. “I already told you everything.”

“You just said she has great tits.”

“Yeah. What else is there?”

Micah heaves a sigh and leans back in his chair with his arms crossed. “My mom told me she used to go East Glen.”

I wouldn’t have guessed that she comes from a rough neighborhood. “She doesn’t look like she’d survive an hour at East Glen.”

“Yeah well, she didn’t. She left a while back and then hid in her uncle’s crappy apartment to do school on her computer. Now she’s here. In my house. In my school. Up my ass everywhere I turn.”

I think about that. “What happened to her folks?”

Micah snorts. “I don’t fucking care. Somewhere along the way she became Henley’s problem but he’s a clueless tool and thinks she’s perfect. Now my mom’s fussing over her like she’s a goddamn celebrity.”

I cluck my tongue. “Sounds like you’re jealous.”

He kicks my leg. “Fuck that. You don’t like her either.”

“I have no opinion about her at all. She’s nothing.”

He uncrosses his arms and leans forward. “In case you change your mind, I’m supposed to warn you that she’s off

limits.” He nods to Conner. “Actually, I think that message is mostly directed at you.”

Conner is annoyed. “Why me?”

I have to laugh. “Maybe because you’re known for shoving your dick inside anything warm.”

He manages to look offended. “What a bunch of bullshit. Makes it sound like I don’t have fucking standards.”

“You have standards for fucking now?” Micah deadpans. “When did that start?”

With another chuckle, I turn back to Micah. “Not that your mother’s new pet deserves a second look but who the hell says she’s off limits?”

“Who do you think? Matilda made me promise that I’d play bodyguard. She seriously thinks I’m going to spend my time making sure no one gets the virgin Dani dirty.”

That’s actually kind of interesting. Not interesting enough to make a move today, but interesting enough to file the information away for later in case it becomes useful.

Pissing off dear Aunt Matilda is an unofficial hobby of mine.

Conner shoves two cookies into his mouth and starts talking. “I saw her in there. She was sitting with the less bitchy Marchenko twin. And she’s been adopted by Tess Ballerini.”

Micah scoffs and puts his feet up on the table. “The mayor’s daughter ain’t happy unless she’s got some downtrodden project to fix up so she can feel superior to the rest of humanity. Tess has been parading her around all day like a trophy.”

That’s already come to my attention.

Flashing back to the view from the courtyard, it looked like Tess Ballerini had a lot to say to her new friend. She kept carrying on and glaring at us over her shoulder while Dani nodded her head with her eyes wide. She must have been getting an earful about us, which is fucking comical.

Doesn't matter.

There isn't much else to say about the new girl. She may be kind of cute but all signs point to her being boring and needy. Aside from the fact that it would send my crappy aunt into a tailspin, there's nothing to be gained from giving Dani the time of day.

There is still some time left before we need to shuffle back inside. Conner stuffs food in his mouth while babbling about football and upcoming parties. Micah's attitude improves and he even manages to cackle a few times when Conner loudly fills me in on some of the crazier social garbage that happened the summer, like when Jackson Tucci got messed up enough to shit the pool at Rachel Dennis's house.

I never think of Conner and Micah as cousins because it's a lame word, one best reserved for people you only have to see three times a year on holidays.

As for the rest of the crowd around here, it's just a faceless blob that I won't even remember in ten years. Aside from Conner and Micah, these people are all just noise.

If that hurts some feelings then I don't really fucking care.

A shadow at the cafeteria door catches my eye. The pale, pointed face of West Prep's principal stares from behind the glass panel.

Olivia Davison is something of a punchline.

The sign on her office door says Director Davison and I don't know who came up with the nickname Dick Sucker Davison but the joke fits. Will Carpenter, a football player from last year's graduating class, got sloppy drunk at a party once and told Conner that he could count on getting sucked off every time he was called down to her office. In his version, Olivia liked to stay seated in her leather desk chair while he stood in front of her with his pants around his ankles, watching his cock disappear between her thin lips. Sometimes, he said, she just wanted to watch him jerk off while she fingered herself.

He might have been lying about every word, but probably not. He wouldn't be the first one to brag. Those stories have been flying around for ages.

She could come thundering out here and hand out detention slips for breaking the rules. West Prep is very big on rules. But she doesn't. She just disappears from the door, maybe deciding it's too much trouble because lunch will be over in about ninety seconds anyway.

The bell rings and after tossing our trash we go our separate ways.

Next, I've got Advanced Chem and the science labs are clear on the other side of campus.

I'm minding my own business on the walk and still get mauled by three different girls who throw their arms around my neck and exclaim how much they've missed me all summer. They are equally hot and equally uninteresting.

It's a mystery why so many girls are desperate to audition for a starring role in my life. It's not like I'm all flirty like Conner and I'm even more of a sarcastic dick than Micah. I

don't ever make anyone any promises. Yet I'm forever drowning in girls who act like I'm their dream date.

Sometimes I think the world is full of people who are just aching to be part of something dysfunctional. That would explain a lot about my parents.

I'm so busy being hugged by random girls that I don't make it to class until a split second before the late bell rings.

There are only two vacant desks in sight. One of them is in the back row and the other one is in the second row, directly behind that Dani girl. She sits up straight when I walk in and gapes at me with cow eyes.

At first, I veer to the back row seat but I abruptly change my mind, settling in right behind her. Dani swivels in her chair and gives me a strange look. Kind of like she's mad.

Does she think it's *my* fault she flashed her fucking underwear this morning?

I stare right back at her.

Dani lowers her eyes and faces forward. She sinks down in her chair and even though I can't see her face I'm sure she's blushing.

The teacher is Dr. Driscoll, a short woman with bright orange curly hair and gigantic purple eyeglasses. She's got to be in her sixties, always wears the same mint green lab coat and is well known for refusing to ever grade on a curve.

Luckily, I don't stress over my grades and no one looks at them too carefully anyway. Besides, science and math are never a problem for me. My head is full of too many numbers looking for a way out.

The fingers of my right hand twitch and I squeeze them closed.

I hate how I can't control it, the urge to do things that make no sense. No one is watching as I slip my hand under the desk and silently rap out a ritual series of numbers. There's some relief when I'm finished but I know the impulse will return sooner or later.

Dr. Driscoll starts shouting out names from her attendance list. She scribbles with a fat pencil every time someone answers.

“DOROTHY ANN GALLAGHER!” she yells.

“Here,” says the girl seated in front of me. “But it's Dani.”

Dr. Driscoll pauses and squints in this general direction. “WHAT?”

“Please call me Dani.” She plays with her long brown hair as if speaking out loud makes her nervous.

Dr. Driscoll frowns, savagely scribbles something with her pencil, and moves on.

Dani pushes her hair over one shoulder. I can smell her shampoo. Or maybe it's her perfume. It's a nice smell, reminds me of fruit punch.

“GAGE SILVESTRO!”

“Here,” I reply automatically. I've leaned all the way forward without realizing what I was doing. My face is almost touching Dani's hair. She flinches, realizing when she hears my voice that I'm closer than she thought.

I don't move. I just watch as she turns her head slowly to the side.

Honestly, she's more than a tiny bit cute.

Too many girls paste on fake nails and fake eyelashes and fake hair colors until they start to look like demented art projects. At least this girl doesn't look fake. I guess it's a good thing that she has something going for her. Because all that bowing and scraping she was showing off this morning makes me want to puke.

And I'm still not sorry for refusing to give her a ride to school.

Tess Ballerini sits one row over from Dani and she's very obvious about giving me the evil eye. I get the idea that she'd tuck Dani into her purse if that would keep me away.

Well, fuck her.

I think she's still pissed that the boys and I once ruined her birthday party by tearing down the bouncy house slide, knocking the cake off the table and setting the rented ponies free. That was all Micah's idea. I sure did help but seriously, it all happened over eight years ago. She should get over herself.

Dr. Driscoll has stopped yelling out names and now she's screeching each line item of the syllabus, reading from the giant interactive screen that stretches along the front wall. Her back stays to us as she chews out each word.

Already I'm wondering how long it's going to take me to go nuts if I'm forced to listen to this all year.

Dani watches me out of the corner of her eye. It's funny how girls think they're being subtle when they do shit like that.

Hilarious.

About as subtle as a fucking marching band.

“She’s off limits.”

Micah was delivering his mother’s message. He doesn’t actually care. Only Matilda would care if I mess up her shiny new doll.

I flash back to my aunt’s pinched face glaring my way at the breakfast table.

And I smile.

The compulsion hits suddenly and it’s too powerful to ignore.

I reach out and run my knuckle over the bare skin just above Dani’s right elbow.

She stiffens but she doesn’t jerk her arm away. I extend my finger and roll the tip along tender skin. She still doesn’t move.

My dick twitches to life, something I didn’t mean to happen but can’t regulate.

There are thoughts colliding in my head now, thoughts about getting her alone, touching a lot more of that soft skin.

With my mouth inches from her ear I whisper, “Dani.”

Now she looks at me directly.

In the background, Driscoll shouts about an upcoming exam on the periodic tables.

Dani lifts an eyebrow.

I slide my finger up a few inches. “Can I borrow your pen?”

There’s a pen in her left hand. She flexes her fingers, gripping it tightly.

I don't even need a damn pen. There are ten of them in my backpack and it's not like I'm going to take notes.

"Gage," she whispers back. Her lips look soft, ripe for the tasting.

"FRIDAY ARE LAB DAYS!" Driscoll yells.

I wait.

"Get your fucking hand off my arm right now," Dani says in a calm voice that's sort of loud.

Heads spin from all directions, interested in what's going on.

Tess spits out a laugh.

Driscoll whirls around. "WHAT?"

I've already yanked my hand away.

Dani smirks like she's gotten the better of me and clicks her pen. She stares straight ahead for the rest of the class and doesn't even glance back when the bell rings. She files into the hallway with Tess, her new BFF.

Dani probably thinks she won a small battle, or at least a piece of payback for giving her shit this morning.

Maybe she has.

And maybe she's a little less pathetic than I thought.

For a while my hand stays tightly closed in a fist, the hand that touched her and would really like to touch her again.

Dani laughs with Tess on the walk to the mathematics building with no clue that I'm trailing close behind, watching her the whole time.

Chapter 4

Dani

“Let’s go to my house,” Lita suggests after stealing the last carrot stick. She scrapes the stick in what’s left of the bowl of hummus in the center of the table.

“*Your* house?” Tess sweeps a pile of pita bread crumbs into her hand and deposits them on her empty plate. “You never want to go to your house.”

Lita shrugs. “Usually there’s bad energy there. But right now my mom’s in Miami Beach getting fucked by an orthodontist and the terrible twin is playing in a volleyball tournament. The home front will be deserted for at least another three hours.”

Tess looks to me. “What do you say, Dani?”

I pull out a five dollar bill to leave in the tip jar at the front counter. “Count me in. Uncle H and Matilda are at a book signing and won’t be home until late, which leaves me at high risk of encountering the dreadful princes of West Prep.”

I’m happy to go to Lita’s. If I wasn’t hanging out with Tess and Lita, I’d just be lounging in my bedroom.

I did land a job at an upscale coffee house only two miles away and the place seemed like a good fit, especially because

I've worked in a coffee house before. Matilda, however, objected immediately. She persuaded Uncle H that a job is a terrible idea that would get in the way of school and that I should just receive a generous allowance instead.

This doesn't feel right but I haven't complained even though it bothers me. Jobs don't appear to be a priority for the teens around here. Tess is the only person I can think of who has a part time job and she just works in her father's office.

"That settles things." Lita stands and starts gathering the garbage from our after school snack. "It's Friday and the girlfriend has dumped me again so I have absolutely nothing to do. Tess, if I let you go home, you'll just spend the evening plotting your next political campaign. And we simply *cannot* leave sweet Dani at the mercy of awful boys."

I do appreciate being spared the company of awful boys but I was exaggerating.

In the month since school began I've become skilled at maintaining minimal contact with those three.

Naturally, Micah is the one I run into most frequently since we live together but he just glares or mumbles an obscenity whenever we come face to face. I'm thankful that a big family breakfast is not a daily tradition so there hasn't been a repeat of that abominable first day. I should feel comforted by the fact that for the most part, Micah, Conner and Gage prefer to ignore me.

Still, I've learned a few things just by watching from a distance.

Sometimes they accept the company of others for entertainment value but in the end they remain an exclusive club, a club that accepts no new members. I don't want to be a

member. I'm just happy to stay off their radar as much as possible.

Well, mostly happy.

Sometimes I lock eyes with Gage and I shiver over the confusing thrill. At times like that I start to wonder what would happen if I *didn't* make an effort to stay out of his way.

On the whole, I try not to spend an excessive amount of time worrying about those three.

There are plenty of other more pleasant things to focus on.

Home life is still an adjustment but seeing Uncle H enjoying newlywed bliss with Matilda is worth any angst. And school has proven to be a lot less terrifying than I feared. I'm aware that Tess and Lita are owed a lot of thanks for that.

Around here, Tess gets automatic respect for being the daughter of West Emerald's mayor. Plus, the girl is a bold powerhouse in her own right.

And while Lita is far different than her sister, the universally dreaded Haven, no one wants to be on her bad side either. I learned this lesson in the second week of school when a pair of stereotypical rude cheerleaders muscled me off the track while running in gym class. They had a phone ready to record the way I fell on my ass and scraped my palms. Lita stepped in, seized the phone and smashed it on the concrete before anyone had time to blink. Then she stood in front of me and glowered at the two girls who were so rattled they didn't even complain when the teacher jogged over, blowing her whistle. The girl who owned the phone, a snob with artificial red hair named Ashton, scooped it off the ground, stuck it in her shorts and shot Lita a fearful look before retreating.

The following week I spotted Ashton sucking face with Micah in the courtyard and now they are apparently a thing. I've even seen her at the house a couple of times. Whenever our paths cross she shoots me dirty looks but says nothing.

Tess drives us over to Lita's house, which is in a neighborhood on the other side of West Emerald. Lita used to live in a mansion close to school until her parents' bitter divorce three years ago.

Now her father lives the city and her mother fucks orthodontists. She shares a car with her sister but today Haven has custody of it.

Uncle H has offered to buy me my own car, however first I have to acquire a license. I didn't have much use for driving while I lived in the city and have only been behind the wheel on a handful of occasions. In the meantime, I'm happy to accept rides from Tess.

Lita's house is very crowded with furniture. She explains that their last house was far larger and her mother refused to part with any of the designer pieces she received in the divorce settlement.

Lita tosses her backpack on a fat red chair that looks hideous to me but is probably considered a work of art somewhere in the world. She motions for us to follow her upstairs.

The stairwell is decorated with framed photos of two identical blonde girls as they grew from chubby toddlerhood to grinning grade schoolers and finally to lovely teens. In the early years they are clearly the best of friends, standing with their arms around each other and smiling.

The more recent shots are different.

The twins stand apart and look like they are posing for entirely separate photos.

“Up here, Dani,” Lita calls when I dawdle too long in the stairwell.

I run up the remaining stairs and it occurs to me that I have real friends now.

In the past, any friendships I had were always short lived. One of us would move and that was that. I know Uncle H always did the best he could for me and I shudder to think where I might have ended up if he hadn't taken me in. Yet I've also missed out on things that other kids take for granted.

It's a nice feeling to be accepted into a circle, to be in the company of people who are happy to see you.

“Sit anywhere,” Lita says grandly as she climbs into an unmade bed that's raised three feet above the floor.

She pushes aside the wrinkled bedding and kicks her shoes off while Tess chooses a cushioned white chair in the shape of a giant scallop shell. The empty bench in front of the mirrored vanity looks to be the best remaining option.

As I take a seat, I notice a ripped photo among the messy makeup containers and random school papers.

“Didn't feel like looking at the ex,” Lita explains when she notices where my attention is. “That was taken at her school's spring dance last year. The theme was steam punk.” She rolls to her back and covers her face with a pillow. “God, it sucks to be dumped.”

The photo was torn in half and a smiling Lita faces up. The other ragged half is a few inches away and I flip it over to see a stunning girl with a dark complexion and an enviable mass

of curls. Her name is Bree and I've never met her in person. She attends nearby Xavier High.

According to Lita's dramatic version, the yearlong romance between them has been tumultuous. Tess thinks they might be broken up for good this time and I don't know about that but I do feel sorry for Lita, who is obviously upset beneath her pillow.

She suddenly flings the pillow away and sits up on her elbows. "Do you see my iPad anywhere?"

"No." Tess gets up and stretches. "Be right back. I've got to pee." She disappears into the hallway.

Lita sits all the way up. "She's always stealing my shit."

I'm confused. "Tess?"

She laughs. "No, the bad seed. It's probably sitting on her freaking desk again."

Lita's phone begins playing *Pocketful of Sunshine* and she snatches it from the creases of her comforter. "It's Bree. Shit, I shouldn't even answer it. Does she really think I want to hear about how she's talking to some slut from the soccer team? Fuck that." Lita gazes down at the ringing phone and chews her lip.

"Maybe she doesn't want to talk about the soccer girl."

Lita becomes hopeful. "You think?"

"You'll never know unless you talk to her." I stand up and edge closer to the door. "I'm just going to step out and give you some privacy."

She nods. "Hey, while you're out there, Haven's room is across the hall. Do me a favor and see if you can spot my iPad."

“Will do.” Even though I worry that setting foot in Haven’s room might equal a death sentence if she somehow finds out I was in there.

Then I remind myself Haven is miles away and can’t possibly beat the living shit out of me right now.

The door to Haven’s room is open. The furniture and even the black and white striped bedspread are identical to Lita’s. However, while every flat surface in Lita’s room is cluttered with trinkets and makeup and papers, Haven’s space is pristine. Even the bulletin board above her desk is bare except for a green and gold West Emerald Prep pennant.

Lita’s iPad is the lone object sitting on the narrow white desk. I pick it up and prepare to make a hasty exit.

“What the actual FUCK are you doing?”

This time there’s no mistaking her for her twin sister. She wears green shorts and a white polo embroidered with the school logo. Her face is flushed and contorted with cold fury as she blocks the exit from her room.

“Sorry, I was just-“

But before I can stammer out another word, Haven crosses the room, snatches the iPad out of my hands and shoves me hard.

My thigh slams into the sharp corner of the desk.

Haven, easily five inches taller, looms over me like a vengeful siren. “Your cheap little ass picked the wrong bitch to steal from.”

A memory shakes loose in my head.

It’s one I usually manage to keep at bay.

My stomach clenches and my breath stalls. That moment and this one blend together.

“If the fucking whore wants to eat shit then let’s make her eat shit.”

“Get away from me,” I whisper.

Haven laughs and doesn’t budge.

“GET AWAY FROM ME!” I hardly recognize my own voice.

“What the hell?” Lita crashes into the room. She looks at me, then to Haven, then back at me. Her expression shifts to anger.

Haven fumes. “Your trashy little gal pal suffers from a case of sticky fingers. That’s what.”

Lita tosses her hair. “Give me a break. I asked Dani to come in here and get my iPad. Petty theft happens to be a bullet point on *your* resumé, sis, so quit projecting.”

Haven is still furious but her mood is now directed at her sister. “Just keep your garbage people out of my damn room.”

Lita leans against the door frame and sizes up her sister. “Maybe you could have some friends of your own if you would quit being a bad trip for five minutes. But seriously, you should really be nice to Dani. Given where she lives, maybe she could put in a good word for you with Conner.”

To my surprise, instead of firing a sarcastic comeback, Haven’s face goes slack with horror.

Lita sees this too and sighs. “Come on, ice queen. You’ll have to melt just a little if you want the guy of your dreams to take notice. But you will want to double up on the rubbers when the time comes. The boy gets around and-”

“BITCH!!!” Haven shrieks and barrels straight into her sister.

They collide hard with a tall dresser. The thing wobbles and tips over on its side, spitting out drawers in the process.

“Fucking psycho!” Lita pushes back but Haven is in the middle of a full blown rage.

She wildly swings a fist and clips Lita on the side of the head. Lita staggers, curses again and sweeps Haven’s legs out from under her. Haven collapses on her knees but she’s not done. She reaches up and yanks a big handful of Lita’s hair.

The two of them are on the floor now in a brawling mess of slapping and kicking. It’s a real life Clash of the Titans and all I can do is stand in a corner, trying not to catch an elbow to the eye.

“Shit.” Tess appears in the doorway.

She takes in the sight of the Marchenko sisters fighting to the death and rolls her eyes. Then she opens her mouth to unleash a blood curdling scream that would animate the dead.

At least it stops the twins in their tracks. They pause in the middle of their hair pulling mania and stare at Tess.

“Ladies.” Tess smacks her hands together like an impatient teacher. “Stand up and separate.”

“Fuck you,” Haven mutters as she crawls away to the opposite corner.

“Charming, as always,” Lita mutters as she gets to her feet. She touches her jaw and winces. An angry red scratch runs down her right cheek.

Tess gives me a look. “We should get going anyway. I promised my dad I’d be home before dinner.”

Lita walks us to the front door. She's sad now as she glances over her shoulder at the stairs and swallows hard. "Sorry, Dani."

"It's not your fault."

Lita remains miserable. She bites her lip. "You shouldn't have to put up with her abuse."

I hug her because she looks like she needs a hug. "It's all right."

Lita nods and manages a smile. "I swear she wasn't always like this."

She remains in the doorway with a forlorn expression as we drive away.

Tess waits until we make a right turn off the twins' street before she explains what Lita meant. "Haven was always wound up a little too tight but she only tipped the scales to villainy three years ago."

"What happened?"

Tess squints at the windshield as she thinks back. "The way I remember it, Haven was absolutely crushed when their dad left. She was a lot closer to him than Lita. I guess he promised that she could live with him but that was a lie. He's somewhere in the city, runs a nightclub or something and according to my own dad he has all kinds of criminal connections so he's not exactly a model parent. He pays the hefty school tuition price tag but he's not involved in their lives anymore. He never visits, doesn't call."

"An old story," I mutter, somewhat sourly, thinking of my own situation.

Tess shoots over a sympathetic look. “I know. But I suppose that kind of rejection just breaks some people.”

“Is it true that Haven has a thing for Conner?”

“Oh yeah. Major. Always has. I doubt he has any clue and anyway she’d never act on it.”

The idea of Conner Wiseman and Haven Marchenko getting together is somewhat hilarious. I’d give the boneheaded, oversexed Conner about thirty seconds before saying something that would trip Haven’s hellraiser switch.

“Are you all right, Dani?” Tess asks suddenly as she navigates the wide residential streets of West Emerald.

“I’m fine.” My reply is automatic. Uncle H has asked that question often over the past year. He always receives the same answer.

“The boys haven’t been making your life miserable, have they?”

Right now I’m not even thinking about the boys. “No. They don’t even talk to me.”

Tess pauses at a stop sign and slides over a worried look. “But you seem upset. Is it because of Haven? Don’t let her get to you.”

“It’s nothing.” It’s only now that I realize my hands are clenched in my lap. Slowly, I relax my fingers. A memory pricks at the edges of my mind, the same one that threatened to invade in Haven’s room. With effort, I banish it again.

Tess lets a moment go by. “Just keep in mind that if it ever *isn’t* nothing, I’m around if you want to talk.”

I’m no fan of dissecting my most humiliating moment. Still, I’m touched that Tess actually cares. “Noted.”

Tess asks me if I want to have dinner at her house but I don't feel right intruding with no notice. Besides, I've met her father a couple of times and I always leave the conversation feeling as if I've just survived an interrogation.

She slows to a stop in front of Matilda's house and asks if I want to take a ride to the botanical gardens tomorrow. To most people it's probably no big deal, making Saturday plans with a friend. But to me it's everything.

"I'll be ready," I promise when she says she'll be here to pick me up at ten.

She smiles and waves before driving down the street to her own house and I start the lonely trek up the circular driveway.

There are no cars in sight, which shouldn't be surprising since the eight car garage has plenty of room, but it's a sign that the boys aren't around. They prefer parking their vehicles sloppily beside the curb or on Matilda's carefully tended front lawn.

I still can't shake the imposter sensation as I approach the forbidding front door that's made of iron and bears a strong resemblance to an impenetrable castle gate.

This feels like a place I shouldn't have permission to enter. The keypad beeps each time I punch a number for the six digit security code and a distinctive click unlocks the door.

For now, the standard arrangement of freesias on the entryway table have been replaced with dark pink roses but these aren't from Matilda's extensive gardens.

Every week a florist visits to fulfill Matilda's order for fresh flowers. I don't know how much that kind of luxury costs, but I would assume the dollar amount would make my eyes bug out.

Matilda seems to have a staggering amount of money. She and her sisters inherited the property development firm started by their grandfather decades ago. Matilda met her first husband in high school. Micah's father. His death was especially gruesome. Hacked to death in a mountain cabin by a couple of guys who were high and looking for money.

There are no pictures of Matilda's murdered husband displayed at the house. None of Micah either, which is kind of odd.

Inside, the house is hushed and eerie with everyone gone.

Well, almost everyone.

It seems Cecile, Matilda's mother, never leaves. Her caregivers typically vanish for the day in the early evening so they must be gone already.

After a quick detour to the kitchen I slap together my favorite snack of peanut butter on celery sticks and carry it up to my room.

The tinny echo of a laugh track reaches my ears when I reach the top of the stairs. A real life dry cackle adds another layer to the laughter. Cecile is watching her old sitcoms again. Sometimes she does this at odd hours of the night but I guess when you have nothing to do all day you can be picky about your sleeping hours.

The second I open the door to my bedroom I can tell the maid service has been in here. The place smells strongly of lemons, the book I left on the bed has been filed in the floating shelf above the desk and the whereabouts of the pajamas dropped on the floor this morning are unknown.

I'm not annoyed, not really.

Even if it is true that I've asked for my room to be spared the attention of the biweekly maid invasions. Micah triple padlocks his door, which is obnoxious, but that's Micah.

The shutters are all open and I stand closest to the huge window that overlooks the backyard. The sun is rapidly dropping toward the horizon and we're weeks past the first day of fall, yet the heat remains.

The heat never bothers me.

I have no good memories of the early years I spent in a cold place. To me, winter is hunger and flat scenery and emptiness.

There's no sign of winter here, never will be. The rich greenery of the wide lawn stretches for acres and in the middle is a pool oasis that belongs in an upscale resort, complete with a waterfall at one end and a diving board at the other.

I don't exactly know how to swim.

I can float, at least I could float when I was eight and took two weeks of lessons at the city pool before Uncle H couldn't afford it anymore. Matilda has invited me to use the pool anytime I please and even bought me a new swimsuit that remains in its shopping bag on the floor of my closet.

The reason I've never tried the pool is because the boys have claimed it as their territory. They hang out there often and strutting outside for a swim would be a violation of my Avoid Them Indefinitely plan for peaceful living.

But today the boys are not here. The pool is empty.

Making a snap decision, I lick the last drop of peanut butter from my thumb and start shedding my school uniform.

The suit Matilda picked out is an expensively tasteful black one piece. A look in the bathroom vanity mirror confirms that the shape suits my figure. The flush of heat on my cheeks is pleasant. It's nice, this unfamiliar feeling of sexiness. With a fluffy pink bath towel in hand, I leave the sound of television laugh tracks behind and head outside.

The fences surrounding the large property are obscured by enormous oleander hedges.

There is an overpowering sense of being alone. Not even the rooftops of neighboring houses are visible from the ground.

My towel is dropped on one of the lounge chairs along the pool's perimeter. I take a careful step onto a shallow shelf that starts out submerged by a few inches of water and gradually lowers to the full depth of four feet. As long as I don't venture past the pool's midway point, the water won't be over my head. The waterfall feature always runs and the noise is a pleasant soundtrack.

When I've waded out to water reaching my waist, I sink down and stretch my arms out. The temperature of the small city pool was always unpleasantly cold, no matter how hot it was outside. The temperature of this water is perfect; cool enough without being chilly.

As my long hair fans out around me in the water I realize I should have tied it up but I'm not running back inside for a clip.

It's been years since I've done this. My stomach tightens as I screw up the nerve to let my feet leave the pool floor. But it's not like I can drown over here. The water isn't deep. If I panic, I can just stand right up.

My pounding heart doesn't agree with this logic.

I think of my favorite meditation app and close my eyes, breathing slowly in and out. Then I straighten out my legs, keep my arms level, and hold my breath as I wait to sink.

After a terrifying bobble when my face nearly dips below the surface, I force my limbs to remain extended.

Then, as if by magic, I'm floating.

The cloudless sky overhead has begun to pinken with the approach of sunset and I'm free to admire it with nothing in the way between us. I could stay out here for hours and not mind.

Why didn't I ever make more of an effort to visit the public pool?

I could have learned how to swim without formal lessons. Hell, there's no reason why I can't learn how to swim even now. I'm halfway there already.

There's no work required to just keep floating.

I'm aware that minutes are passing, that the colors of the sky are changing, that far above a tiny airplane flies a straight line across the sky toward an unknown destination. It's a welcome episode of serenity after witnessing the Battle of the Marchenkos.

"That kind of rejection just breaks some people."

Tess's comment about Haven really hit me in the gut. I'd rather not have any sympathy for Lita's shitshow of a sister but some creeps in anyway.

I know what it is to be abandoned. Thrown away. Rejected.

It absolutely fucking sucks.

Maybe it's enough to turn you into a brutal bully. Different people handle their heartache in different ways.

“CANNONBALL, BITCHES!”

The shout comes a split second before a tidal wave of water falls on my face, getting in my nose, my mouth, leaving me sputtering and flailing in the water. I'm coughing and my legs pedal wildly in search of solid ground.

To my horror, there is no ground.

There is no ground and I'm sinking. I'm sinking because I've been careless. I've floated all the way to the deep end of the pool.

I barely have the presence of mind to hold my breath before going under, finding nothing but bubbles and confusion. After what feels like eternity, my toes touch the tiled pool floor and I flex my foot hard, zooming back to the surface.

My head breaks through the water and I see people around the pool, all of them familiar, none of them friendly. I want to scream for help but all I can do is cough and thrash my arms around like a drowning victim, which I suppose is what I'm about to become.

“Fucking hell,” someone says in a deep voice of disgust right before I go under again.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Seconds can feel infinite when fear takes over.

A whisper of logic promises that this is crazy.

I will not drown.

The pool is large but it isn't the ocean for crying out loud.

And I'm not helpless.

All I need to do is keep calm, reach the bottom and look to see which edge I'm closest to. That's the one I will walk toward. Then I can push to the surface and grab onto the side. And if I can't, if I'm still struggling, the boys will do something.

Won't they?

Unfortunately, I've managed to inhale some water and my lungs are desperate to cough it out. I can't see anything. Just blurry turquoise purgatory in every direction.

And then a sudden shadow...

A strong arm seizes me around the waist. I've barely had time to register the fact that my head is now above water when I'm lifted up, shoved over the pool's edge and deposited on my back on the travertine deck.

Gasping, I roll to my side and gag out a few ounces of water. I gulp in fresh air, cough some more and feel my pounding heart begin to slow down.

I'm all right. Definitely not dead.

But I do wish the pool deck would open up and transport me somewhere else, anywhere else.

This is going to be humiliating.

There's utter silence around the pool but I feel their eyes.

My hair falls over my face in sodden, messy ropes and I push it back before sitting up to face them.

Conner grins at me from where he treads water just beyond the diving board. He was the one who thought he was being cute with his cannonball jump.

Micah stands on the deck on the opposite side of the pool. His school uniform is soaking wet, his shirt fabric sticking to his chest. He looks angry, which is the standard expression stamped on his face, but right now that anger is unmistakably being sent in my direction.

It's not Micah who speaks first, though.

“What the *fuck* were you doing in the pool if you can't fucking swim?”

I spin around to find Gage standing right behind me.

Like Micah, he is also dripping wet. But he isn't wearing clothes, just a pair of black boxer shorts that show off the fact that his body would put 99.9% of high school boys to shame.

Despite my very recent brush with a watery grave, I hungrily scan the sight of six pack abs and muscled shoulders. There is no hint of any tan lines and every inch is sculpted.

This boy is unfairly flawless.

“Hey!” Gage yells and snaps his fingers right in my face. “Did you hit your goddamn head or what?”

Conner laughs. “Come on, dude, the girl is ready to cry.”

“Good,” Micah grumbles from across the pool. He yanks his wet shirt over his head. “Serves her fucking right.”

Gage looks me up and down, then shakes his head and pushes past me. He jumps into the pool without another word and stays underwater, rocketing away like a shark.

Meanwhile, Micah keeps dropping his soaked clothes on the ground. He's all wiry muscle sprinkled with tattoos. He notices that I'm watching, then he smirks and hooks his thumbs into his sodden blue briefs, the threat unmistakable.

I lower my head in horror.

Conner whines, “Seriously? No one wants to see your junk, Micah.”

There’s a splat of wet clothing landing on concrete. “Like I give a shit. I wasn’t even planning on going in. Blame that drowned rat over there.”

A fresh splash indicates Micah has jumped in, but I’d rather not look that way and see something that’s only going to make this experience more mortifying.

A sudden cool breeze brings goosebumps to my arms. I spot my towel in a heap on the lounge chair and grab it, hoping I can dash back to the house as quietly as possible.

But Conner has other ideas. He makes his way over, props his elbows on the side of the pool and gives me a blue-eyed golden grin.

“Dani.” He winks as he says my name. “Why don’t you come back in the water?”

I rub my messy wet hair with the towel. “No thanks.”

“Why not? It’s nice in here. And I don’t bite. Not unless you ask me to.”

In the background I see Gage climb out of the pool. He steps up onto the diving board, glances over, and executes a perfect flip into the water.

My chest still tickles and I cough. “Thanks, but I think I’ve swallowed enough chlorine for today.” I drape the towel over my shoulders and reach under the lounge chair for my flip flops. “No more swimming.”

“Hey now, you don’t have to swallow anything you don’t want to swallow,” Conner says. His expression is disarmingly

innocent but the sexual undertones are clear.

Micah has now paddled over to join his cousin. He keeps one hand on the ladder bar but doesn't climb up, which is good because he's naked. He eyes me. "But you *can't* swim."

I bite my lip. "No, not exactly. I know how to float on my back but that's all."

"That's all." Micah shakes his head. "Jesus."

Conner elbows him. His eyes slowly skim over my body. "Come here," he says, his voice changing to something that's more than friendly. "Don't be scared. I promise I'll hold onto you the whole time."

I'm not a moron. I've seen enough to understand this is the kind of game he plays with every girl. Conner Wiseman is the ultimate flirt. Still, I can't quite dislike him. He's overconfident and obnoxious and yet he still manages to be charming.

Instead of taking Conner up on his offer, I take a seat on the edge of the lounge chair and pull the ends of my towel closer.

"Which one of you came to my rescue?" I ask because I really want to know.

"Not me." Conner shrugs.

I nod to Micah. "You? You were still in your clothes when you jumped in. Sorry."

Micah grips the ladder bar like a piece of gym equipment and raises himself halfway out of the water. He watches for my reaction, chuckles, and then drops back down. "I'm not your fucking hero. Someone else beat me to it."

Gage is now swimming laps and ignoring the rest of us. He slices through the water with impressive speed, abruptly goes under, flips to push off the far wall and continues his swim.

“Gage!” I call.

Nothing. He doesn’t even pause.

“Scream it louder,” Conner suggests. “He probably has water in his ears.”

“GAGE!”

He’s fast as hell. He’s already crossed the entire pool and he repeats his underwater flip move before doing the same thing again.

Conner nods at me. “How about it, Dani? Will you come back in if this wannabe stud over here covers his tiny dick?”

“No,” I tell him.

Micah shoots his cousin a deadly glare. “You want to be the one to drown today, fuckface?”

Conner snorts out a laugh. “Calm down, kid. I’ll just put that in the box with all the other empty threats.”

In spite of myself, I’m fascinated, listening to the way these boys interact with each other. All my knowledge of boys could fit on a post-it note. A small one.

Gage keeps swimming. His rhythm is fast and seamless, an exhibition of strength and power. He’s completely focused on his task. It’s doubtful he’s looking for gratitude but I still owe him some thanks.

I stand up, cup my hands over my mouth and shriek, “GAAAAAGE!” at the top of my lungs.

His stroke falters. His head pops up and he punches at the water in anger.

“Ah shit, you stepped in it now,” Micah says.

I have no idea what he means. “Huh?”

“The boy has a thing about his laps,” Conner explains. “Gage has to do exactly twenty of them in a row or else.”

“Or else what?”

He thinks about it. “I don’t know.”

I’m starting to feel exasperated. “Then why in the world did you tell me to interrupt him by screaming louder?”

Conner thinks about that too. “I guess because it’s funny.” He props his chin on his hands and his devilish grin returns. “You look pretty hot in that suit, Dani.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, hoping my cheeks aren’t turning pink.

He takes that as a cue to continue. “You’d look even hotter in a bikini. Or less.”

I roll my eyes and huff out a sigh.

Gage has abandoned his tantrum and his laps and he’s climbing out of the pool. He shakes the water out of his hair and takes a seat on the edge directly opposite but stares moodily to his right where there’s nothing to see.

“Thank you, Gage,” I call to him. “Thank you for jumping in after me.”

He turns his head and our eyes meet.

And there it is, the electric thrill that ignites my blood.

The first day of school, when he seductively stroked my arm in chemistry class, it was like he knew exactly how to

push my buttons. I thought I would melt right into my chair.

And I'm glad I told him to back the fuck off.

Tess's warning was still echoing in my head. I knew Gage was messing with me. I don't like to play games. I've never learned how to win.

And Gage is too wildly good looking, too sure of himself.

Gorgeous. Smart. Impenetrable.

Yes, he's all those things.

Gage's fingers tap against his bare thigh. He sees me notice this, grimaces, and moves his hand behind his back.

I've heard enough school gossip to know Gage doesn't waste time being nice. Naturally, that doesn't stop girls from swooning every time he walks by.

I can't actually blame them.

There's something confusingly magnetic about this guy. I feel it every time I look at him, whether I want to or not.

Gage eyes me rather coldly. "Learn how to swim, Dorothy Ann." He barks the words like an order.

The sound of my full name from him is a jolt. Only in the wispy fringes of my memory do I remember being called that, by my mother.

Gage doesn't await a response. He rolls back into the pool and immediately resumes his laps.

"Oh, Dannnee," Conner singsongs. "I'm over here waiting on you, pretty girl."

Micah throws him an irritated glare. "Do you really have to jump on every available piece of ass you see?"

I straighten my spine. “I’m not a piece of ass, Micah. And I’d appreciate it if you’d watch your fucking mouth.”

Conner throws back his head and howls with laughter. “That’s telling him, sweetheart!”

Micah is startled into silence but then he shoves his shaggy, wet hair out of his eyes and looks at me more carefully, this time with something like grudging respect. There’s an appalling hickey covering the right side of his neck, no doubt the work of the detestable Ashton.

“Seriously, come on.” Conner reaches out a big hand. “I’ll take care of you. You can hold onto me as *hard* as you want.”

“Some other time, Conner.” I’m bluffing. I really would like to learn how to swim but I have no plans to become the center of Conner’s frisky attention.

Suddenly Micah stiffens, grunts out a muffled curse and then dives under water.

“Yooohoo, kids!” Matilda calls from somewhere behind me.

I turn to see her strolling across the lawn toward the pool. Her pink sequined evening gown dazzles in the twilight and her heels wobble in the grass. She waves excitedly.

Even Conner huffs out an irritated sigh before disappearing from the edge in order to escape greeting his aunt. I don’t know what their problem is, especially Micah. He doesn’t know how lucky he is to have a mother like Matilda.

“You’re back early.” I stand and meet her halfway, greeting her with a smile to make up for the boys’ rudeness.

“Yes.” She pecks my cheek. “You look so adorable. That event was tedious. So many of these book people just never stop talking about themselves and they kept trying to steal

your uncle away. I did receive a lot of compliments on my dress, which I don't mind admitting hasn't fit me properly in a decade but when you're happy and in love everything else just kind of comes together." She links her arm through mine and squeezes. "I'm glad to see that you've become more friendly with the boys."

I wouldn't exactly say that but she seems so pleased that I'd hate to burst her bubble so I choose a diplomatic comment. "Your yard is so beautiful. And that pool is a dream."

"Isn't it? Though I am thinking of remodeling that eyesore of a pool house. I'm feeling tons of Mediterranean inspiration these days and it might be time to consider the next home makeover. By the way, you should really make it a point to spend some time in the east courtyard. The orchids are still blooming. Dani, it's so nice to have a child around who appreciates things. Boys appreciate nothing."

She pulls me through the wide open back door and we find my uncle approaching with a food container in his hand. "Henley, guess what? All the kids were hanging out together." She drops my arm and hugs him around the waist, pressing her cheek to his chest. "I knew it would happen, all of us one big happy family."

Uncle H smiles down at her and then shifts his gaze to me. "Hey, kiddo. Ordered you a takeout plate of chicken alfredo." He hands over the box.

"Thanks." I accept the food with gratitude.

Even through all the years when we didn't have much, Uncle H always did stuff like this, going out of his way to get me the little extras whenever he got the chance.

He gives me a fond grin. “Dani, we haven’t had a chance to talk much lately. Why don’t you go dry off and meet me in the kitchen? I’ll make us some milkshakes.”

I would love that. The one downside of this new life is I don’t get to spend much time with my uncle. It seems like the two of them always have plans in the evenings so we only have dinner together once or twice a week.

Matilda jumps into the conversation. “Hen, I thought we were going to watch that documentary tonight.”

Uncle H glances at me. “Well...”

Matilda hooks her arms around his neck and presses close. “You said it should help with your book research and I’ve already set up the screening in the theater room. I doubt Dani would be interested in sitting through two hours on the Russian Revolution. Let’s not force her to join us.”

I never mind watching historical documentaries. I love history. But Uncle H’s eyebrows are now pinched together as he tries to think of an answer that will please everyone.

I throw him a lifeline. “Actually, I would like to get a jump start on my homework. I’m still trying to catch up, especially in Latin. I’ll just go up in my room and eat if that’s okay.”

Matilda looks over her shoulder. “Of course it’s okay, honey. There’s also some orange sherbet from Emerald Glaze in the fridge so help yourself to some dessert.”

They disappear down the hall with their arms wrapped around each other and it really is adorable and I truly don’t mind eating alone in my room at all.

The empty feeling in the pit of my stomach is surely just a delayed reaction to my swimming mishap.

Before leaving the room with my dinner, I return to the gaping back door and look outside.

The pool is now deserted, with only a couple of puddles of water on the deck to indicate the boys were ever there.

Chapter 5

Gage

More than once I've learned a hard lesson; when monsters fight it's better to just stand the fuck back.

If you don't, you are just asking to get clobbered in the crossfire.

Usually, I have no problem with steering clear of their lunacy. It's no big deal to stick in my ear buds, crank up the music, and power up my biggest screen to go fight a virtual battle instead of the one inside my house. I'm not a huge gamer but it's a way to pass the time and smother out all the other fuckery.

They were yelling last night and they're yelling again today.

Not exactly newsworthy.

This is the part of the game where they really go for the throat. Before I can take steps to drown them out, they get louder.

My mother laughs, mean and artificial. "You have such a high opinion of your cock, Christo."

He sounds indifferent. "Funny, for quite some time you haven't been too particular about cocks, Alta."

Born in Naples and educated in the U.K., he still has a detectable Italian accent. It was my father's choice to keep me from learning his native tongue, although I picked up some of the bare bones of the language this past summer.

Many years ago, even before he ever traveled to the states and met Alta Kingston, his own father died in a plane crash and left him the fleet of cargo ships and a struggling freight company that had been the backbone of the family's wealth for a century. On paper, my dad's the executive owner of that company.

But I've heard the talk, enough to understand that my father's real business involves the kind of sordid activities that would horrify decent people.

Gun running. Drug trafficking. Even people are products ripe for smuggling.

If I asked, which I won't, he wouldn't tell me the truth so I don't bother.

"Such an arrogant bastard," my mother swears.

His laughter echoes. "Says the cold hearted bitch."

"Why don't you go back to your own damn continent to fuck around with your whores and gangsters?"

"Soon. I heard you found a new piece of candy to suck on. College boy, huh? Picking them a little young these days."

"As if you can talk. Gage told me everything about your summer escapades. He says you make him sick."

Lies. I didn't tell her a goddamn thing.

The moment of silence from my father isn't a good sign. He's angry. And when he does speak again the venom in his voice is unmistakable. "I know what you're doing."

“You and your goons don’t frighten me, Christo. I could cut off your balls in your sleep.”

“You won’t. You enjoy them too much. You know I don’t care how you entertain yourself, Alta. I do the same. But if you attempt to use my son against me, you’ll suffer in ways you haven’t even thought of.”

She cackles. “*Your* son? Are you sure?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t be standing here breathing if I wasn’t sure. I took him for a blood test years ago.”

This time she’s the one who gets quiet.

With a sick twinge of recognition, I know what he’s talking about.

One day, I think it was in first grade, he showed up at school to pick me up early, something that never happened. He said we would go out for ice cream but first we visited a tall building in the city where a woman in a white lab coat greeted my father by his first name. I remember hating the sight of my own blood filling the glass vial while the lady in the lab coat murmured a promise to my father that she would personally obtain the results by the end of the day.

When my emotions go wild, the urge to flex intensifies.

Almost like my brain is inventing a distraction in order to escape from reality.

I count off on my fingers in groups of five.

If I do this ten times they will shut the fuck up.

Alta sniffs. “He knows you don’t give a damn about him.”

“And I suppose you think you’re the loving mother of the year.”

If I can't finish ten more taps before my goddamn mother speaks again then I'll never get the hell out of here.

“I hate you,” she spits out. “And Gage hates you. He says so all the time.”

My father wastes no time opening his mouth and screaming my name. “GAGE!!!”

If I count off fifteen more times they'll both disappear.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

My father's furious footsteps close in. The door to my bedroom is thrown open and all six foot five inches of Christo Silvestro storms inside. He stops in the middle of the room and observes me coldly.

“Your mother says you enjoy telling the world that you hate your father. Is she lying about that?”

I look him in the eye. He would never accept anything less. “Yes, sir. She's lying.”

He smiles. He knew the answer before he asked the question. Of course she's lying. It's what she does. But it's not like he's some prize in the parent lottery. He forgets to speak to me for weeks at a time, remembering he has a son only when he needs a chess piece to play in his never ending marital war.

I can't fucking stand either one of them.

Alta stalks into the room and throws me a look that could freeze fire.

The older she gets, the more her patience fades. I have a handful of good memories of her, all from a long time ago. She used to read stories at bedtime. Not often, but sometimes.

I try not to take my mother's disgust personally. As far as I can tell, she doesn't really like anyone. Not her husband, not her sisters, not even her mother, who she refers to as 'that senile harpy'. Even the men she selects for periodic entertainment always earn her scorn in short order.

Then there's Christo.

A big, powerful man who is used to forcing other men to make way, he destroys people for fun and then brags about it at dinner parties. I hear more than he thinks I do. Last year he blackmailed a longtime friend and business associate into relinquishing some lucrative contracts. The guy's company went under and he jumped to his death from a Chicago high rise.

My father laughed at the news. He joked that it was proof that fat man don't bounce.

What a prince.

There must have been love between my parents in the beginning. I've seen their wedding photos, both of them young and radiant. She'd recently graduated from Emerald State University and he had only moved to the states six months earlier.

I was born the year after they married.

One of my most vivid memories is the sight of them dancing in the twilight beside the deep waters of Lake Poppy way back when the whole family used to vacation there together every summer.

Maybe they wouldn't have ended up this way if they'd married different people.

Or better yet, married no one.

This endless household feud only drives their worst qualities, turning them both a little more awful each year.

“Sometimes I pray you’ll get killed in a plane crash,” she says, which is particularly cruel because that’s exactly how my grandfather died. “That’s what I hoped for this summer.”

His expression is inscrutable and a few seconds of deadly silence pass. When he does speak, his voice is mild, perhaps even a little bored.

“I didn’t have time to die in a plane crash, Alta. I was too busy sucking on pussy that doesn’t taste as bitter as yours.”

She screams, a single primal shriek of rage. There’s an object in her hand and she fires it at his head. He ducks and an instant later it feels like my right cheek has just been smashed by a sharp brick.

“Oh my god!” my mother gasps.

The pain is immediate and while I’m not knocked out of my chair, I’m not in great shape either. I blink my eyes and the right side is blurry. I blink again and touch the rapidly swelling area beneath my eye. There are streaks of blood on my fingers when I take them away.

My father hisses out some choice Italian profanity and my mother begins to cry.

“It’s broken,” she wails.

“You’re goddamn right it’s broken!” he yells back.

I’m about to tell everyone to calm the fuck down because although it’s guaranteed I’ll be sporting an ugly shiner in the morning, nothing is actually broken. At least, I don’t think so.

Then I realize they’re not talking about me at all.

With a grunt of irritation, my father bends down to scoop something off the floor and I see half of the small statue he'd acquired over the summer and smuggled back here. It must be worth a shitload of money because it's about a thousand years old. Knowing him, it's probably a museum artifact or something. He gave it to my mother the day we returned from Italy.

Funny how something that's only a foot high and must have been painstakingly carved by some dude in a toga can survive against all odds for a freaking millennium but can't last two months in this house.

In fact, I think this idea so funny that I start laughing. Once I start laughing, I can't stop.

Alta finally notices that I'm in the room. "This isn't a joke, Gage Antonio."

Perfect. Now we have the middle name being thrown around, as if I'm the one who fucked up.

I'm still laughing as my dad locates the other half of the broken statue and examines the pieces with a grimace.

He looks up and frowns when he sees the way my cheek is swelling up.

"Crazy woman. You and your murderous temper. You hit the boy in the face."

She begins to cry again. A manipulation tactic. She only ever cries for him.

"I didn't hit him!" She sniffles. "It was an accident. He's fine."

"Are you fine?" my father asks.

I've stopped laughing and now I'm exploring my face with more care. I've been in some fights in my time, usually because I'm playing backup to Micah's crazy ass. The bruise won't bother me but the cut kind of pisses me off. I touch the wound and see more blood on my fingers. The sight of blood is still something that makes me feel like throwing up and now I'm extra pissed off.

My dad isn't even looking at me.

No surprise. He doesn't actually care.

I wipe the blood on my pants. "I'll be fine when you two assholes get out of my room and leave me the fuck alone."

That's all it takes for my father to drop his fleeting display of concerned parenting and stomp away.

He's followed by Alta, who doesn't look my way again before trailing after him with fluttery shouts of "Christo! Christo!"

I want to punch something or flip furniture or say far something far worse than what I've already said.

It sucks feeling this way, as if there's a dormant vortex at the center of my brain that threatens to activate at any time and turn me into those two hateful bastards.

I'd rather not see the damage to my face. What I need to do is get the hell out of here before I lose my shit. It's not like anyone will stop me.

They're carrying on in their distant bedroom now and I refuse to listen to the words they scream at each other. I pocket my phone and run down the stairs as if I'm being chased by a demon, not even bothering to close the front door behind me.

Conner's house is just across the street. Even if his mother is around she'll act like she doesn't notice anything is wrong because Alta can scare her stupid with one dirty look.

The shutters are open and the sky is now dark so I can see inside Conner's house, which looks nothing like the forbidding Victorian monstrosity I just exited or the modern castle of endless windows where Micah lives two streets over.

Conner's place looks like an old fashioned farmhouse, designed by his dad who grew up somewhere in a Kansas small town. Uncle Dennis doesn't live here anymore so I should probably stop thinking of him as Uncle Dennis. Aunt Edie didn't seem to mind the divorce but Conner says she's been a little weepy ever since hearing that his dad is planning to get remarried to the woman who gives the weather reports on Channel Three.

My mother's younger sister is propped up on the living room sofa with a half empty wine bottle while light from the big screen television fills the room. She can't see me out here in the darkness. While I pause to debate whether I want to be bothered knocking on the door and dealing with her, she chugs from the bottle. Some wine leaks out of her mouth and onto her fluffy pink robe.

I'm about to sidestep this hot mess and go around back to Conner's window when I remember he's at his dad's house this weekend. He wouldn't care one bit if I crashed in his room while he was gone but the thought of running into my lonely aunt and being guilted into watching her get drunk on the living room sofa is just too fucking depressing.

Fine, I'll go to Micah's.

His mother's gone for a weekend getaway in wine country with her empty headed husband.

No one will miss me if I hide out there.

It's easier to just take a walk to Micah's rather than make a bunch of noise getting my car out of the garage. I could hop a couple of high fences and be there in twenty seconds but then I'd certainly set off someone's alarm and I've got enough to worry about.

It cracks me up the way some of these people go the extreme on the security, locking themselves into a high tech fortress as if they're the freaking president or prepping for The Purge.

Speaking of paranoia, I'm walking past the mayor's house when I manage to trip a motion sensor. Instantly, the sidewalk is bathed in a spotlight bright enough to hurt my eyes, which is obnoxious as fuck.

Does the mayor believe he owns the goddamn sidewalk?

I'm probably visible on some kind of security camera so I hold up my middle finger and keep it up until I'm back in the shadows. I hope he saw it.

Or better yet, I hope his stuck-up daughter saw it.

Tess was easily ignored for years but now she's back in our orbit. She must have been searching for a sidekick and then along came Dani, a new girl, a blank slate. Since the first day of school, Tess has appointed herself as Dani's guardian.

This shouldn't annoy me.

What the fuck do I care?

I don't even talk to the girl.

I'm just going to blame my OCD on the fact that I spend any brain energy at all thinking about who Dani Gallagher is hanging out with.

We haven't exchanged two words since the day I fished her out of the pool last month.

Conner, who has a powerfully perceptive antenna about some things, gave me some grief about that whole episode. He said I should just hook up with Dani and get it out of my system.

When I told him to go choke on a football he laughed and hinted that he just might mess around with her himself.

Micah got in the middle and told us to quit being fucking disgusting before he kicks both of our asses. That outburst made Conner feel obligated to put Micah in a headlock until he couldn't breathe because Micah gets a little full of himself sometimes.

For a second, I wonder what's happening at my house right now.

Either they're about to kill each other or they've called a rage truce and tumbled into bed.

That's their pattern, nothing but extremes.

Fuck love if that's what it looks like. Fuck love and everything it does to you.

Within a minute I'm standing in front of Micah's house. I fire off a text.

Coming up. Folks are a hot box of crazy tonight.

A minute goes by.

Then another.

I know the keypad code and I'm debating just using it when he finally answers.

Out with Ash. Go in anyway.

Figures. It's Saturday night so of course he's with his girlfriend.

Frankly, I don't know what the hell he sees in Ashton. She's a good body with a fucking nightmare personality.

Maybe that's all he wants.

I could always double back to get my car and go find a hotel but my face is fucked up and the last thing I feel like dealing with is some concerned citizen who decides to get involved.

Without thinking about the matter anymore, I punch in the key code. The code is Matilda's birthday, because she's a fucking idiot who does things like installs an expensive security system and then sets the code as her own birthday.

The door plays a three note musical chime when I push it open.

I have no clue if Dani is here. If she comes running, I'll just let her know she needs to run back the other way and return to whatever she was doing.

My face doesn't seem to be bleeding any longer but it's swollen and throbs like a son of a bitch. There's a huge gilded mirror on the opposite wall and my reflection glares back at me.

I look like I just got jumped.

Beneath my right eye is a mess of dried blood and the area is puffy. It's not like I need to go to the hospital but staring at my reflection makes me feel kind of sick so I stop looking. Maybe I'll feel better after I find some ice in the kitchen.

Instead, what I find is Dani Gallagher.

She's standing beside the open fridge, her nose in a book, chewing on a celery stick that looks like it's been dipped in earwax. Her hair hangs down in a very loose ponytail and she wears a long sweater that falls open, showing off a pair of micro gym shorts and a black tank top with no bra.

And I'm into it, all of it, the whole sexy picture.

Maybe I start breathing too hard because she looks up from her book and her eyes widen. "Gage! My god."

She sets her book face down on the counter and watches me as I open the freezer drawer in search of something to use on my face. She's still watching when I pick up a bag of peas and slap it on my cheek as I take a seat on one of the counter stools.

I feel sick again.

A long moment of silence follows.

Dani finally shuts the fridge and tosses her snack in the trash. She pulls her sweater closed and stares at me, waiting.

"It's no big deal," I tell her because it's making me feel weird to see the sympathy all over her face.

"It *is* a big deal," she says. "And I'm sure it hurts."

It hurts a little. It hurts more when I think about the way my parents didn't even flinch over the damage.

Nah, too busy tearing each other to shreds.

This isn't even the first time. The first time was when I was six and broke my wrist after falling out of a golf cart. My father was driving and my mother lost her mind over something he said so she grabbed the wheel and the whole thing tipped over. My mother was furious that I didn't manage

to jump out and land on my feet. My father told me to do better next time.

Crazy motherfuckers, both of them.

“Nope,” I say to Dani and hope she’ll just go away.

She doesn’t go away. She takes a step closer and frowns. “You really should clean that cut out.”

I don’t need advice. I need to be left alone. My free hand starts tapping on the counter.

Five. Five. Five. Five. Five.

Dani begins rummaging through the cabinets. There are *a lot* of cabinets in Matilda’s kitchen. Inside cabinet number seventeen she finds a small first aid kit. I have a bad feeling what’s coming next and I need to escape from the pity in her eyes. I should just go sprint up to Micah’s room and wash the bloody mess off in the shower.

Dani sets the first aid kit on the counter. She washes her hands in the sink and rolls up her sleeves. “It really does look bad. I’ll help you.”

“No need.”

This is what I say through clenched teeth.

And yet I don’t leave.

All I do is remove the bag of peas from my face.

She raises an eyebrow. “Let me help you, Gage. That cut might get infected.” Her soft lips bend into a little smirk. “Wouldn’t want to spoil those perfect looks, right?”

Dani accepts my silence as permission and sits on the stool beside me. She sifts through the contents of the first aid box and finds what she’s looking for.

“This will sting.” She reaches for my face with a piece of cotton soaked in antiseptic. “Hold still.”

Her hand is inches away when I grab her wrist. Suddenly, the thought of her touching me seems like a really bad idea. Like once I get a taste of that I’ll want more and this isn’t a good time. My head’s all messed up and I’m not really in control.

She freezes.

But she doesn’t try to yank her hand away, which she could do with ease. She just looks at me strangely as my hand remains circled over the delicate bones of her wrist.

“Better let me do it.” I release her.

She shakes her head. Stubborn, this girl. “Don’t move.”

This time I don’t stop her.

She leans in and carefully cleans the dried blood away. Then she gets another cotton ball and very gently applies antiseptic to the cut. She doesn’t seem to notice when her knee touches mine. She also doesn’t seem to notice when her sweater slides off her left shoulder.

I notice both of these things.

And I can’t blame the fucking flex on the fact that I’m dying to haul her into my lap.

Dani moves back to examine her handiwork. “It’s not deep. No guarantee you won’t have a small scar, though. And that bruise won’t look great tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” I can’t remember the last time I uttered that word.

She smiles faintly and pulls an elastic band from her long hair. “Who were you in a fight with?”

“No one.”

She rolls her eyes. “Okay. Who hit you in the face?”

“My mother.”

It’s not the answer she’s expecting. She takes a moment to process her shock before her brows pinch together with worry. “Really?”

No point in lying. “Really.”

“Does Alta hit you often?”

“It was an accident.”

“How could it be an accident?”

“She threw a statue. She was aiming for my father.”

Dani is even more startled now. “Shit.”

I don’t want to talk about this anymore.

I don’t want this girl gazing at me with extreme sympathy for another second.

This isn’t my thing, spilling my guts.

In fact if I have a thing at all, this is the exact opposite.

But now I’ve opened a door that I didn’t mean to open and Dani looks kind of upset. This bothers me enough to stick around.

Or maybe it’s more than that.

Maybe I don’t mind being with her, talking to her, sitting mere inches away from her and saying things that I don’t even admit out loud to Conner and Micah.

She stares at her lap and rubs her palms on her thighs. Then she sighs and raises her head. There's sadness in her eyes, pain, lots of it.

“My mother used to lock me in the bathroom. Sometimes for days. We lived in a run down trailer park and she'd just leave me with a bag of snacks and juice boxes and take off. I never knew how long she'd be gone. One day a neighbor called the police after seeing me standing outside in the frigid cold with no jacket. A few months later she left me with her older brother, who I'd never even met before. I haven't seen her since that day.”

Dani's face changes, softening, when she starts talking about her uncle. “Uncle H wasn't yet a successful writer and he couldn't really afford to take me in but he did anyway. We moved around a lot, different crappy apartments. No place ever really felt like a home. But he always tried to make our lives an adventure. He's really all I have. If my mother has any idea who my father is, she never shared that information. For a long time it was just me and my uncle. Then his last book hit the charts and everything changed so quickly, especially after he met Matilda. Now we're here. I'm under no illusions about the fact that I don't fit in. But I can still admit this is the best my life has ever been.”

Damn.

It's not often that I hang on someone's every word. I don't know a single other girl who would be able to relate to anything Dani just said.

I have no doubt it's all true.

“Why did you just tell me all that, Dani?”

Her shoulders lift in a tiny shrug. “I don’t know. I guess because you trusted me enough to tell me something personal. I wanted to do the same.”

This is turning into a real greeting card mushy moment. Yet somehow I don’t want to gag or escape.

Not even a little.

“They hate each other,” I tell her. “My parents. I think they *need* to hate each other.”

She nods. “That’s the way it is for some people. They thrive on the ugly.” Her brown eyes are warm and curious as they scan my face. “How do you feel? Do you hate them, Gage?”

“Not really. They’re fucked in the head and I get stuck in the middle.” I don’t know where my next sentence comes from. “But sometimes I feel like I *should* hate them, like it’s something I’m supposed to do, something that would be easy to give in on.”

She’s playing with a piece of her hair now, sifting it through her fingers. “I get the impression you don’t give in easily on anything.”

That kind of throws me for a loop. Mostly because it’s true.

But what the fuck is up with her?

No teenage girl should have the ability to see people this clearly. A switch in my head turns off and a brick wall goes up.

Suddenly I’m not in the mood to do this anymore.

Tap the table counter five times and you don’t have to.

I clear my throat. “I’m going upstairs to wait for Micah.”

Her face falls. I’ve disappointed her. Now I feel like a jackass.

Five taps. And five more taps. Or she’ll know.

Dani sees the movements of my right hand. But she asks no questions. She pulls her sweater closed and wraps her arms around herself. I get the impression she’s battling with something, trying to come to a decision.

“At my last school...” She trails off, shuts her eyes, sucks her lower lip between her teeth.

Whatever her story is, it must suck. Micah didn’t know much about why she left her last school and wasn’t interested in learning more.

But I’m interested.

More than I want to be.

“MATILDA!”

That’s not Dani’s voice. Strident and commanding, it comes from the intercom on the wall and belongs to my grandmother.

Dani’s head whips around in a panic. “Crap. The caretaker staff are all gone. And I think she forgot that Matilda is away this weekend.”

Or Matilda didn’t bother to tell her, which is more likely.

Dani is now gazing at the intercom with unmistakable dread. I can’t really blame her. My grandmother is a piece of work.

After sliding off the stool I walk over to the intercom. “Hey, Cecile. It’s Gage. What do you need?”

“Gage! I’m glad you’re here. No one brought me my mineral water tonight.”

“Hold on. I’ll find it.”

My grandmother continues her tirade. “I cannot take my evening medication without my mineral water! And without my evening medication I cannot sleep at all. Incompetent people. I don’t know how many times I need to explain that two bottles of rose flavored mineral water need to be included on my evening meal tray. And they’ve also given me a plate of crackers. Crackers! As if I’m a grubby school child. Where are my dried apricots?”

While my grandmother shouts through the intercom I’m busy searching the fridge for her special rose water.

Dani helps by scanning the shelves of the walk-in pantry and triumphantly announces, “Found them!” She holds up a large unopened bag of dried apricots.

I’ve got two bottles of cold water in one hand and I accept the bag from Dani with the other.

Dani smiles at me. “You all call your grandmother Cecile.” She continues to smile.

Some people have smiles that look like an odd face crack.

But not her.

No, Dani’s smile is as brilliant as a cloudless morning beside the Mediterranean Sea.

Or maybe I just have a motherfucking concussion.

“I’ll bring these up.” I turn my back and head for the stairs.

The room at the top of the stairs has belonged to my grandmother for as long as I can remember. There’s nothing in

my memory about my grandfather. He died when I was an infant, shot by a contractor he'd cheated, and Yellow Brick Property Development ended up in the hands of his wife.

My grandmother's time in charge of the company didn't last long.

One day she stepped outside the building on her way to a lunch meeting and a man leapt from an alley and threw acid in her face. Then he ran into the street and got flattened by a truck so no one ever did figure out why he did what he did.

The damage could have been a lot worse but Cecile lost all vision in one eye and ninety percent of her vision in the other. Cosmetic surgery couldn't fix all the scarring. People who aren't used to the sight will gasp when they see her without her huge sunglasses in place to cover the raw, melted skin that has reduced her eyes to little more than dark gashes imbedded in her face.

After that, Matilda moved in here, taking over the house, the company. Edie and Alta have high level positions as well but Matilda is really the one in charge. My mother is allergic to actual work and Edie hardly knows what day it is.

I rap my knuckles on the door.

"Who's that?" she bellows.

I grin, which ends up hurting my face. "It's your secret admirer, Cecile."

"Oh, it's you, Gage. Come in."

She's sitting up in the adjustable bed where she spends most of her time. The television is on full blast, playing some old show with one of those static laugh tracks. A large crystal vase on her dresser is filled with badly wilted pink roses, although I guess this doesn't bother her because she can't see

them. The sunglasses she usually wears are in her hand and her head snaps in my direction even though I know I'm nothing but a shadow, if that.

At least I won't have to explain how my face got trashed.

As I set the water and apricots down on the bed beside her, metallic laughter explodes on the screen behind me. It's a show she often watches, or at least listens to, about a group of Florida women who live together in a house with a lot of ugly pastel furniture. Nothing exciting ever seems to happen but some of the jokes are really funny and I don't find many things funny. She likes to turn on stuff she remembers watching back when she could see what was happening on the screen.

"Thank you, Gage," says my grandmother, not without affection. She offers her cheek and I drop a quick peck there like I'm supposed to.

"Your water and your snacks are all here." I open the two bottles and the bag of dried apricots, then make sure they are within her reach.

She turns her head back to the huge mounted television screen on the wall where one of the characters tells a story about some weird neighbors back in her Minnesota hometown.

The women laugh.

The audience laughs.

My grandmother laughs.

Many years ago, she looked exactly like Matilda. She used to keep a framed photo on her nightstand. In the photo, Cecile's blonde hair was crowned with roses and she smiled in her red sundress as her daughters were scattered around her legs.

There were four of them back then, four Kingston sisters.

Matilda, the oldest, stood beside my mother, who was the second daughter. On Cecile's other side were Edie and little Lynette, the youngest. Lynette and her husband were vacationing in Costa Rica when they went on a hike and never came back. Eventually the two of them were declared dead.

That's about all I know about Lynette because her Costa Rica tragedy happened when I was still wearing diapers and this is the kind of family that doesn't dwell on messy things like lost relatives.

Anyway, it was a big deal when that old beach picture disappeared one day and Matilda finally decided it must have been thrown away by someone from the maid service.

That might be true but I never believe a thing Matilda says.

I just don't.

This isn't a feeling I share with Micah. Even though he's well aware that his mother is an asshole, she's still his mother.

"Gage," my grandmother says when she's finished laughing, "what on earth does she want?"

The question makes no sense. At first I think she's talking about one of the television characters. But no matter what my mother says, Cecile is not senile at all.

"Her." My grandmother points.

I turn around and see Dani hovering just outside the open doorway. It's a puzzle to me how my grandmother was able to sense Dani's presence all the way over there. Then again, I've heard the remaining senses of blind people become sharper to compensate.

“I heard you coming up the stairs,” Cecile sniffs. “You always walk extremely loudly, young lady.”

Rather than run off, Dani steps inside the room. “If I’ve been disturbing you, I’m very sorry, Mrs. Kingston.”

“Don’t call me that. Don’t *ever* call me that. Call me Cecile.”

“All right. Cecile.”

My grandmother raises her chin and her nostrils quiver like an animal sniffing the air. “How old are you, Dani?”

“I’ll be seventeen in November.”

“Seventeen.” She nods with a frown. “I married when I was eighteen. My parents had recently died in a car accident and Franklin was fourteen years older, very charming.”

Dani looks to me like she’s hoping I’ll help her escape this conversation. “You must miss him. Your husband.”

Cecile chuckles. “No. Horrid man who showed his true colors soon enough. I wasn’t sorry when he ate a bullet.” She tilts her head and her dry lips press into a frown. “It’s too quiet. It’s been too quiet all evening.”

While she’s talking, her right hand explores the nightstand with uncertainty. I push one of the open water bottles into her palm.

“Micah is out but he’ll be back later. Matilda and Henley went away for the weekend.”

Cecile drinks daintily, one tiny sip at a time. After a moment she holds the bottle out and I make sure it’s returned to the table without spilling.

Dani clears her throat. “I don’t have any plans this weekend.”

“How thrilling,” mutters my grandmother. “Everyone here cares so very much about your *plans*.”

Dani’s politeness, however, doesn’t waver. “What I’m saying is that if you need anything, Cecile, just let me know. I’d be glad to help.”

My grandmother is silent for a moment and her shriveled eyes point in Dani’s direction. “That’s kind of you, sixteen-year-old Dani. Even if kindness is usually insincere. Please make sure my nightgown and robe are hanging on the bathroom hook where they are supposed to be. And then you may both leave. I’m tired of talking to you.”

Dani obediently visits the adjoining bathroom and confirms that a red satin nightgown and robe are indeed on the hook beside the door. I double check that the television remote is within reach and remind Cecile that her snack is two feet away on the table. She waves me away with impatience and I motion to Dani that now is the time to exit.

I close the door behind me and Dani stands three feet away with her arms folded. She’s looking me over thoughtfully.

“What?” I say this a little more sharply than I meant to. I’m just not a fan of scrutiny, not from anyone.

She tilts her head. “It’s really cute, the way you are with your grandmother. It’s a different side of you.”

I have nothing to say to that.

Cecile, however, bellows from inside her bedroom.

“I CAN HEAR YOU TALKING OUT THERE, CHILDREN!”

Dani looks down the hall, in the direction of the room that used to be a guest suite where I would stay sometimes.

That room now belongs to her.

Micah's room is at the other end of the hall and Matilda forced him to quit padlocking it so I'm free to go hide out in there. There's no reason for us not to go our separate ways.

"Come on," Dani says. She starts heading for the stairs, glancing over her shoulder to see if I'm following. I'm tempted to just march to Micah's room and leave her hanging. It's starting to really sink in that I've bared my soul tonight a lot more than I ever planned to.

I've kissed girls before.

Not many, but a few. It was nothing, meant nothing.

A girlfriend isn't on my wish list. Just melodrama and breakups and hassles and feelings.

One big fat fucking roller coaster. No thanks.

In spite of all that, I follow her.

I follow her all the way down the stairs and through the house and out to the backyard.

The lights are all on and the ceiling fans twirl slowly over the outdoor kitchen.

Dani pauses at the threshold of the tiled patio and then glides barefoot over the lush cropped grass. The pool lighting is a shifting color palette, blending from blue to purple, then green. I prefer the pool in my own backyard. It's not as large or fancy, but the simple rectangle is better for swimming laps, which is really the only reason why I like to go in at all.

Dani wanders to the edge of the water and it's not clear what she's planning. She's standing on the exact spot where I threw her out of the pool last month. The water depth drops steeply at the center, going from four feet to ten feet with no warning.

Micah was the one who first realized she was in trouble. He was still wearing his clothes when he jumped in. But he can't beat me when it comes to speed so I got to her first.

There's no telling what would have happened if we hadn't been around that day. She might have drowned.

I've had some nightmares about it.

My chest gets kind of tight when I see her fall to her knees and drop a hand in the water. "Be careful."

She moves her hand over the water's surface. "It's warm," she says with surprise. "Even though the air is getting a little cool at night."

Maybe she never heard of a heated pool before. Anyway, I don't trust that she won't do something stupid like fall in face first or try to reenact her dramatic rescue.

I crouch down beside her and test the water with my own hand. "Dani, don't go swimming by yourself anymore."

As soon as I say that, I wish I hadn't.

Makes me sounds like a teacher, or a parent.

She'll think that I spend my time sitting around all worried about her. And I'm not worried about her. But someone should tell her not to do dumb shit like play in water over her head when she doesn't know how to swim.

She turns her head to face me.

I wish she wasn't this pretty. Or this close.

"I would like to learn," she says. "I never really had much access to pools."

There I go, feeling like a dick again.

Sometimes I forget that most people don't grow up in a place like this with a variety of resort pools at their disposal.

I move away from her, just slightly. "You should learn then. It'll come in handy."

She continues to stare at me. "You're right, Gage. I should learn."

I take my hand out of the water.

I put it back in.

FUCK.

Take it out. Put it back in.

Take it out. Put it back in.

Curl my fingers into a fist and hide it behind my back.

She doesn't laugh.

Or ask questions.

Or give any sign that she's noticed that I do things normal people don't do.

"What?" I challenge her, daring her to say what she's thinking.

To my surprise, she does.

"Gage, when I first met you, I assumed you were ridiculously lucky. All three of you. I thought you were typical spoiled rich boys who take the good life for granted and have no real problems."

“And now you don’t?”

“Now I think I should never be so quick to judge anyone.”

“Even rich assholes like us?”

A sweet hint of a smile. “Even rich assholes like you.”

“Good to know.” I’ve stopped hiding my hand behind my back. The need to flex, for now, has faded. It’ll be back.

Dani withdraws from the edge of the pool. The pool lights mutate from blue to green.

“You don’t like Matilda much, do you?” she asks.

“Nope.”

She’s a little taken aback. “I don’t get it. Matilda is incredible. She’s kind and caring and I’ve never met anyone like her.”

Oh boy.

I practically crack a rib to avoid laughing in her face.

Dani is truly puzzled.

Holy hell, Matilda has her fooled.

That’s not on Dani, I guess.

Matilda fools a lot of people.

If my aunt spent a little bit more time thinking about her son instead of her wardrobe and her social status then maybe Micah wouldn’t be constantly spoiling for a fight.

Micah didn’t speak for a full year after his father was killed. Matilda, annoyed that her kid was requiring so much work, sent him to go live at Edie’s for a while. She threw herself into the family business, spent a lot of time at the golf

club, and splurged on a Caribbean cruise where she met her next temporary husband.

But Dani seems upset that I'm not duped into believing Matilda is the queen of West Emerald.

I won't be telling her anything that's none of her business, nothing about Micah, but I still feel like I need to explain.

"Look, something you should know about this family is that we don't talk about the things that really fucking matter."

"Like what?"

"Didn't you hear me? I just said we don't talk about that shit."

Her brow furrows. "You don't need to be rude."

I pause. "I didn't mean to be."

She mulls that over and finally nods. "I get it. Most people don't like to talk about the things that have hurt them. They don't like to tell their secrets."

Truth.

I'll bet Dani Gallagher has some secrets.

And I bet she'd tell me if I asked. In fact, I think she's *waiting* for me to ask.

But I won't be asking tonight.

Just like I won't be touching her tonight.

Or doing anything that would get me tangled up in something that I won't be able to untangle from.

Girls are too intricate.

They have complicated intentions and constant emotions. I tend to steer clear of them most of the time, especially if they

want more than a few minutes of attention. Dani would definitely want more than a few minutes.

“Just don’t expect too much,” I tell her. This is good advice. On a lot of levels. “Not from Matilda or anyone else around here.”

“Even you?”

Especially me.

“Yup.”

She tips her head back and gazes up at the sky. “I didn’t know about Conner’s accident,” she says, somewhat sadly. “I had no idea. Not until Tess told me. She also told me that Micah actually saw his father get murdered. How horrible for him. It was something else I didn’t know.”

“Now you do know.”

The uneasiness in my gut grows as I wonder what Tess has told her about me.

Maybe nothing, or at least nothing that’s accurate.

Dani pulls her knees up and hugs them. With her chin propped atop her knees, her thoughtful amber eyes scan my bruised face and roam down over my chest before meeting my stare. “You’re not at all how you seem at first, Gage. Why don’t you let people see that?”

“You don’t know much about me.”

“I’d like to. Please.”

A gust of wind blows through without warning, a cool reminder that summer is officially gone.

My bare arms prickle and Dani changes position, wrapping her sweater around her body.

Her long hair falls across her face and she pushes it back but misses a section that flaps against her cheek.

Without thinking, I reach out and pluck the section of hair between my fingers. She's motionless as she waits to see what I'll do next. Her hair is thick and soft and she shivers as I give the piece in my grip a little tug.

Kiss her. Kiss her. FUCKING KISS HER!

It's nothing like the usual internal command that demands obedience.

No, this came from somewhere else.

The same place that got excited when her sweater slipped from her shoulder.

The same place that creeps into my dreams in a way that makes me unable to look her in the eye the next morning.

My hand moves to her cheek and slides to the back of her neck.

Dani doesn't stop me.

She cooperates, parting her sweet lips as I guide her face closer.

And closer...

“What the actual FUCK?”

Great timing, Micah.

He's home and he's walked through the back door and halfway across the yard without either me or Dani hearing a thing.

I drop my hand like I've accidentally touched lava. I'm already on my feet by the time Micah reaches the pool.

He blinks and whatever he was going to say is cut short when he notices the damage to my face. Immediately, his eyes narrow and his shoulders tense.

“Who do I need to kill?”

I take a big step away from Dani. “No one.”

“Did a ghost pound on your face?”

“I walked into a door.”

He snorts. “Right.”

“He did.” Dani stands up and brushes her hands over her shorts. “Gage walked into a door. The kitchen door. I saw it.”

Micah glances at her. Then swivels back to me.

He scowls, clearly pissed off.

I don’t often lie to him. But it’s necessary when lying will stop him from flying off the handle and doing something insane. He might very well go thundering down to my house to make a scene. Nobody needs another fucking scene tonight.

Dani yawns. “I’m tired.” She stretches for effect. “Hey, thanks for stopping me from jumping into the pool again, Gage. You guys have a good night.”

She crosses her arms and walks straight into the house. She never looks back and doesn’t notice when my gaze flicks hungrily over her bare legs.

Later, in the darkness, I’ll be thinking about them.

I’ll be thinking about a lot of things.

The back door shuts behind Dani and I’m left on my own to deal with Micah, who isn’t going to let me escape so easily.

“Really?” he says like he absolutely can’t make heads or tails out of everything he’s just seen in the past minute. “Are you fucking serious?”

My answer is a shrug.

It’s the only answer he’s getting.

Chapter 6

Dani

The set design called for giant colorful flowers, each one bigger than my head.

It sounded like a simple project, which is why I volunteered to climb the ladder and fill in some of the top space for the background of the tea scene.

However, my artistic talents are proving inadequate.

The sunflowers in particular look more like radioactive dandelions.

On the stage below, the rehearsal for the musical production of *Alice in Wonderland* carries on.

I have no desire to be among them. I did not even try out for a speaking role.

Tess tried to coax me into joining student government but arguing over whether to put an extra vending machine in the cafeteria just didn't sound like a good time so I joined the drama club instead. Since getting a job is frowned upon, I've got to do something with my time.

"Fuck it all," whines the Mad Hatter, which is not supposed to be his line.

"Get it right, Ryan!" complains an exasperated Alice, a very melodramatic sophomore whose real name is Katya. She

massages her temples. “God, I need a break.”

“All right!” The long suffering student director unwraps a pastel roll of antacid tablets. “Everyone take a ten minute break.”

It’s been a rough first week of rehearsals.

Lots of arguing, some tears.

Tweedledum got into a shoving match with the Cheshire Cat. Alice’s understudy and the White Rabbit were caught dry humping backstage and knocked over a false wall.

At this rate, the show will never be ready for its January performance.

I dip the paintbrush in a small can of green paint and add gnarly leaves to my deformed flowers. This is not an improvement.

Micah must have been sitting in the auditorium the whole time, watching his girlfriend flub her way through her part as the Red Queen.

Ashton has the air of homicidal maniac down but the quality of her acting has much in common with her personality, which is crappy. She and Micah have now erupted into an argument and they don’t seem to notice how loudly their voices carry.

Ashton waves her arms around. “But I’ve got at least another hour of rehearsal left!”

Micah looks like he’d rather be taking a nap. “Not my problem. I’m getting the hell out of here.”

She sniffs. “Asshole. I can’t believe you won’t stay and support me.”

“I stuck around to watch yesterday. It’s even more fucking boring today.”

“God, you’re always such a selfish prick. I don’t know why I bother.”

Ashton stalks up the aisle of the auditorium and bangs through the double doors.

Micah watches her go without any emotion.

Those two are always hot and cold.

One day they’ll be having hideously loud sex in Micah’s room and the next they won’t even be speaking.

He might have a superpower that tells him when he’s being watched because all of a sudden he spins around and zones in on me.

I don’t bother to pretend that I wasn’t listening to his latest lover’s quarrel. I stare right back.

Micah takes a step forward and makes a point of checking out my artwork. “That looks like crap.”

A streak of green paint is smeared across the back of my hand. I wipe it on my jeans, an ancient, patchy pair that was rescued from a thrift store two years ago. These jeans have probably seen more years of life than I have. But there is no dress code in place for after school activities so I’ve been changing into sloppy old clothes in order to climb on ladders and paint flowers that look ‘like crap’.

Micah jerks his chin up and fires his best arrogant glare, as if I’m supposed to be intimidated.

I climb down the ladder, careful not to trip over my own feet, strut to the edge of the stage and offer the paintbrush. “Why don’t you show me how it’s done then?”

I'm not trying to pick a fight.

Micah is actually a talented artist. He designs his own tattoos, although he pays a guy in the city to slap the ink on. Every inch of wall space in his bedroom has been painstakingly covered with various levels of his artwork. Not that he invites me inside to show it off, but now and then he leaves his door open just long enough to catch a glimpse.

Micah looks at the paintbrush. I expect him to just grumble out something profane and start walking the other way but he surprises me. He hops on the stage, plucks the brush from my fingers and steps up on the ladder.

“Get me some orange,” he barks. “And some brown.”

The jars of paint are all cluttered into a large plastic bin at the base of the ladder. It doesn't take long to find the colors he asked for and he goes right to work. He doesn't stop when the cast resumes their painfully blooper-packed rehearsal.

Even Ashton eventually reappears. She stops short at the sight of Micah carefully redoing all the giant flowers and breaks into a smile. Her smile quickly drops off when she spots me nearby. I can almost see the angry gears inside her head smoking as her eyes dart back to her boyfriend.

I'd be the first one to enlighten the Red Queen that she's got nothing to worry about from me. I have zero romantic interest in Micah and I will eat my own left shoe if the feeling isn't mutual.

There is a boy who keeps me up at night and makes my heart race but he isn't here right now.

Still, even if Gage was standing right in front of me he'd say nothing and give no sign that he has been at all affected by the fact that we nearly kissed by the pool last week.

We shared a real connection that night.

I know he felt it as much as I did.

To go from that breakthrough to being completely ignored the next morning stings a little.

Okay, it stings *a lot*.

I'm very aware that Gage is not a typical guy.

It's more than his intelligence, more than his looks, more than his screwed up family life. The boy has a lot of layers and those layers aren't easy to get to.

But the brief moments we've spent together leaves me craving more of him.

Yes, he's hot, but he's interesting and he's complicated and his unexpectedly raw honesty makes me want to give him something in return. Which is why it hurts to pass him in the hallway and see those cool gray eyes bore straight ahead without so much as a glimmer.

While I've become sidetracked with thoughts of Gage, Ashton huffs and stomps over to the far side of the stage. She gets yelled at by the student director when she starts furiously texting. The one strict rule of drama club is that phones must stay out of sight. Ashton shoves her phone into her tiny designer purse and glares daggers at Micah, who seems oblivious to the fact that she is even in the room.

Micah is creating quite the floral tapestry.

I can't help but feel some awe as I watch him casually splash a striking variety of flowered shapes on the colorless set. When he finishes with one section he shoves the ladder over and continues painting. Now and then he issues a terse order for a new paint color.

“Great job.” I admire his work from the floor, where I’m sorting through the crude set sketches that were handed over by the director with very little instruction on how to turn them into reality. “Do you think you could put a tree over there?”

To my surprise, Micah doesn’t sneer or refuse.

He jumps off the ladder, stands back to stare at the space for a moment, then grabs a fat black marker from the art supply box. It takes him approximately ninety seconds to outline the shape and then he sends me off to hunt down a larger can of green paint.

The auditorium door opens and West Prep’s principal surveys the scene on stage. She floats through the empty rows and takes the seat at the end of an aisle. She’s not looking at the cast.

In fact, I could swear she’s watching Micah.

Ashton seethes as I walk by and now she’s been joined by a friend whose name is unknown to me. There’s no doubt I’m the object of their anger and suddenly my stomach curdles.

Breathe. This isn’t East Glen.

I have yet to hear of anyone getting jumped in the bathroom here at West Prep. Still, I can’t help but wish Lita and Tess were at my side.

There are plenty of art supplies in the overstocked prop room and I’m relieved to find a large can of green paint within seconds of searching.

Micah nods with approval when I return quickly and he gets right back to work. He pays no attention to the action on the stage and doesn’t even look up when his girlfriend’s turn comes to screech ‘OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!’

Olivia Davison, I notice, is no longer sitting in the audience.

“That’s a wrap for today, people,” announces the director and now she’s shaking aspirin into her palm. She swallows her pills with no water. “Next rehearsal is Monday. Instead of going to the game tomorrow night, I would highly recommend staying home and actually learning your lines because today’s effort kind of sucked.”

Some cast members, especially Alice, are unhappy to hear this and stalk offstage in a huff.

Micah is putting the finishing touches on his tree and pays no mind to Ashton when she kicks a paint can over on her way out. Luckily, the lid was on. Otherwise I’d be the one cleaning up that mess.

“Hello, beautiful.” A low voice purrs in my ear. A thick arm circles my waist. I smell soap and cologne and feel the playful nuzzle of a scruffy chin on my neck.

“Hi, Conner.” I pat his arm and extricate myself from his grip.

Everyone’s favorite quarterback flashes his naughty grin. His hair is wet and he does look damn good in a blue tee shirt and faded jeans.

“Shouldn’t you be out on the field?” I ask. “Tomorrow’s the big game.”

“Practice ended early.” He flexes and openly admires his own muscles. “Besides, I’ve got this covered. Xavier High is zero for four this season and their QB doesn’t know his ass from his elbow.” He drops his arm and raises an eyebrow. “You’ll be at the game, right?”

“Apparently. Tess promised to take yearbook photos and I’ve been drafted as her unofficial assistant.”

He nods. “That’s cool. Tess is super cute when she doesn’t talk. You can both come over after.”

“Come over where?”

“To my house.”

“What for?”

“I have a brand new mattress. I need a couple of volunteers to bounce on the springs and break it in.”

“You’re disgusting,” I inform him. “Genuinely disgusting.”

Conner takes this as a compliment and grins.

Micah hops down from the ladder. He pushes his shaggy brown hair aside and nods to his cousin. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Conner slides an arm around my shoulders. “Dani just needs to be reassured that she can have me all to herself anytime she says the word.”

Micah’s attention shifts to me. His expression is unreadable. Although he has said nothing, I have no doubt he saw how Gage and I were on the verge of kissing before he thundered on the scene. Maybe Conner hasn’t heard that story. I’d love to know what Gage had to say about it.

I twist away from the canopy of Conner’s bulky arm. “Trust me, I won’t be saying the word.”

Conner acts hurt. “No?”

“No. Not tempted in the least.”

He falls to his knees and smacks a hand to his heart. “Ouch, baby. I think that blow was fatal.”

I can't stop myself from giggling. "I have faith you'll find someone to comfort you."

"Sure, sure." He remains on the floor. "Hey, be an angel and help me up."

It's preposterous to believe that Conner Wiseman would need my help getting off the floor but I give him my hand anyway and he climbs to his feet.

Micah doesn't smile as he observes us but he doesn't seem irritated either, which is a stellar mood improvement.

"That's a nice tree you painted," Conner says. "It's making me hungry."

Micah throws him a withered look. "The fake painted tree is making you hungry?"

"Yeah, but I was hungry before that. Let's go to Munchie's. They give me free food on game weeks."

Micah checks his phone, frowns, and then pushed it in his back pocket. "Fine."

Conner nods to me. "Are you coming, Dani?"

"To Munchie's?" I just want to clarify that we're off the subject of breaking in Conner's mattress.

"YES," Micah replies like I've got some screws loose. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Um...

Don't ask. Don't ask. Don't ask!!!

"Do you think Gage might want to meet us there?"

Micah rolls his eyes and exhales loudly.

But Conner gets excited. “Ahhh, that’s so fucking cute. You do love Gage. See, Micah? I told you that Dani loves Gage and you didn’t believe me. But I know about these things.”

My cheeks are burning. “Wait, I don’t-”

“Gage doesn’t like to do shit like that,” Micah cuts me off.

“Shit like what?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Hang out in public for no good reason.”

Conner snorts. “That asshole hasn’t even been to a single one of my games this season.” Then he gets struck by a brilliant idea. “But I bet our little Dani could get him to show up. Let’s talk strategy. We’ll start with wardrobe choices. I liked that swimsuit you wore. It’s way sexier than what you’re wearing now.”

Micah, finished with the conversation, is already on his way out. Conner seizes my hand and drags me out the door in a hurry, like we’re little kids on a field trip trying to catch up.

Conner’s truck is filled with garbage. Literal garbage. Empty fast food bags and flattened drink cups and wadded napkins. He shoves Micah aside and orders him to get in the back before physically depositing me in the front seat. Then he reaches around way (WAY!) too close and grabs the seatbelt.

“I’ve got it.” I snatch the seatbelt out of his hands before he manages to ‘accidentally’ brush a hand across my chest.

He’s inches away, his eyes wide and innocent. “Safety first.”

I buckle the thing myself and keep a straight face. “Right.”

Micah slams the door closed in the back and Conner yells at him to quit behaving like a lunatic. He hops into the driver’s

seat and backs up immediately without looking.

“Sorry about the mess.” He drives excessively fast. “It’s bad luck to clean my truck between games.”

I look around at the piles of trash. “Was your last game six months ago?”

“Haha! No. My teammates have been here. They are all slobs.”

“*You’re* the slob,” Micah mutters.

Conner hits the brakes hard.

Micah’s face smacks into the back of my seat.

Conner wags a serious finger. “See? That’s what happens when you don’t wear your seatbelt.”

I cover my mouth to smother a laugh.

Despite the fact that I’ve been in their midst for two months, I haven’t had much opportunity to really get to know the boys.

Conner is both funny and blunt.

He cheerfully tells me that he lost half his IQ points thanks to his long ago accident. But then he says those IQ points were not the important ones so it doesn’t matter.

Micah remains sullen and grumpy, although I’ve seen more than enough of that at home. But he doesn’t take his attitude out on me and even holds the door open as we walk into Munchie’s, a large sandwich shop where I’ve been before with Tess and Lita.

Conner is greeted like the crown prince.

The owners, a husband and wife team, come running out to embrace him. They ask about his mother. They insist on giving

us a full appetizer tray on the house.

I recognize a couple of kids from school but nobody I know well enough to say hello to. Every one of them shouts greetings to Conner.

There are other kids here too, some of them wearing varsity jackets from Xavier High, West Emerald's only public high school. My understanding is that there's some heavy rivalry between Xavier and West Emerald.

Apparently, Conner is immune to this rivalry. He gives an enthusiastic wave to the trio of beefy linebacker types watching from their counter seats. Not one of them cracks a smile but their answering nods indicate mutual respect.

"Chill out," Conner warns in a very low voice and I realize he's speaking to Micah.

Micah is in the process of staring down the Xavier players.

Two of them smirk and return to their food. The boy on the right, however, doesn't waver. The kid has dirty blonde hair that hangs past his chin and he's almost as big and muscled as Conner. He and Micah remain locked in a death stare until Conner kicks Micah's chair to distract him.

"You're not my fucking guardian," Micah growls, although he hunches over the menu instead of issuing combat threats.

"Then don't act like you fucking need one," Conner mutters back with a rare flash of annoyance.

The Xavier boy doesn't look away but he doesn't make a move either. Slowly, his eyes shift over to me. He pushes his hair back. He smiles.

It's the kind of smile that makes you feel like you just dipped your hand in mud.

Whoever he is, he's no friend to anyone at this table.

"Motherfucking plug," Micah says and jerks his head at me. "You keep your distance from that piece of shit, you hear me?"

Before I can open my mouth, Conner chimes in helpfully. "Dani, what Micah means is the guy is a dealer. A *drug* dealer."

"I know what he meant. I didn't grow up in a cave."

"Yeah, well this one mixes his product with other garbage. Used to be on the Xavier offensive line. He was kicked off the team because he got busted when a couple of girls landed in the hospital last year after they bought his junk at a party."

"That sucks," I say and it does. It's also a sadly common tale. At my last school a boy overdosed in the bathroom in the middle of the day and was carted away in an ambulance. I never did know if he lived or not.

"Ashton was one of those girls," Conner explains. "So that's why junior over here is feeling extra salty."

That explains things, and it raises Micah's stock a little in my eyes. "Micah, it's only natural that you would feel protective of your girlfriend."

"That crazy girl can do what she wants." He shoots another glare at the Xavier asshole. "And this limp dick would be on my shit list no matter who had to get their stomachs pumped."

In an effort to sidetrack him from any violent ideas, I change the subject. "You know, you really are a talented artist. Is that what you want to do someday?"

He squirms at the praise but does seem pleased. “Maybe. If the powers that be didn’t have other plans.”

“What powers?”

“Our mothers,” Conner replies as if it should be obvious. “Didn’t you know that we are the executive future of Yellow Brick Property Development? Which is good because I look excellent in a suit.”

“I’m sure Matilda will understand if you decide to do something else.”

Micah snorts out a laugh and leans back in his chair with a head shake. “No. She definitely would *not* understand.”

“See?” Conner leans closer. “I’m stuck with Mr. Personality forever. I’m stuck with your boyfriend too.”

“Gage is *not* my boyfriend,” I correct him.

Conner waves a hand over this technicality.

A server named Meadow stops by the table and diffuses the tension by dropping off drinks and a large platter of assorted appetizers. I’m not very hungry and plan to just nibble on some pita bread but Conner insists that I’m way too thin and need to eat more so he orders me a foot long meat lover’s hero sandwich.

I don’t bother to object.

It’s a relief to see the Xavier boys finish at the counter and head for the door.

Micah is looking at his phone and doesn’t notice when his enemy pauses two feet behind his chair. The guy winks at me before finally leaving.

Not three seconds later someone else walks in and I'm on the verge of yelling out her name.

However, I've learned to tell them apart.

Lita is not the Marchenko twin who stalks up to the takeout register, long blonde ponytail swinging.

It's Haven.

"You really need to stop thinking." Conner selects three mozzarella sticks and shoves them into his mouth. He gulps back half his soda and then pokes me in the arm. "Dani, I'm talking to you."

My straw pops out of my mouth. "What do I need to stop thinking about, Conner?"

"Probably a lot of things. Too much thinking is bad for your health. But I mean you need to stop thinking about Gage and take action. It's really boring, watching the two of you ignore each other and pretend like you don't want to fuck. I know you want him. You know you want him. Hell, everyone knows. Even Micah knows."

"What?" Micah makes a face of pure disgust. "Leave me out of this shit."

Conner ignores his cousin and briefly loses his train of thought when he reaches for some jalapeno poppers. He chews, wonders aloud if there will be a thunderstorm tonight, then offers to help me pick out some lingerie, presumably to assist with my impending seduction of Gage.

At this point, I've stopped listening to him.

It's undeniable that I have a crush on Gage.

A big one.

It's also a little disturbing to hear that even Conner is perceptive enough to see through me.

Meanwhile, Haven places an order and steps aside to wait. She keeps looking this way, her eyes hungrily fastened on Conner. She removes the elastic band from her hair and fluffs out the long layers. Then she stares at Conner with puppy dog eyes.

Haven has never given me any reason to like her. No reason at all. But I still have sympathy for a girl who's suffered some hard knocks.

Maybe Haven's attitude would change if something positive came her way.

My hand shoots up. "Haven, over here!"

She flinches with surprise. Then becomes wary.

But now Conner has stopped speaking and he turns to look at her.

"Come over," I urge, waving for emphasis.

Haven stares at me for a second, glances a little fearfully at Conner, then slowly walks this way. She's nervous, tucking her hair behind her ears and then crossing her arms. Her green eyes challenge me, expecting this to be some kind of trick.

"Take a seat," I say in the friendliest tone imaginable.

Again, she's surprised.

After all, we've had a rather checkered past.

She's accused me of having fleas. She practically tried to kill me for standing in her room. Her eyebrows knit together as she tries to make sense of this puzzle.

Conner grins at her and pats the empty seat. “What are you waiting for?” He holds out his cup. “Want some of my soda?”

She melts and falls into the empty chair. Spots of pink appear on her cheeks and her eyelashes flutter. She smiles shyly at Conner and accepts a sip of his drink.

“What are you up to?” I ask her.

For the very first time, Haven Marchenko doesn’t bite my head off. “Nothing exciting. Just getting some takeout for my mom. Her boyfriend dumped her. She’s feeling kind of down.”

“Sorry to hear that,” I say.

She nods.

Conner gives her a playful nudge. “You’re coming to my game tomorrow, right?”

Haven’s blush deepens. “I’m not sure yet.”

“But you’ve got to be there. How about if I promise to score the first touchdown just for you?”

Haven actually giggles. The sound is shocking. Like hearing a cat sing.

“I’ll try,” she says.

“Haven, your order is ready,” calls the girl at the counter.

Reluctantly, Haven stands up. She flashes a hopeful gaze at Conner once more. When she’s not threatening homicide she looks exactly like Lita.

“Are you sure you can’t stay?” I ask her.

She blinks, then looks a bit pained. “No, I can’t. I told my mom I’d be right back.”

“That’s too bad.” I say this as if we’re honest to goodness friends. “See you at school tomorrow, right?”

Haven bobs her head eagerly. “Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow, Dani. Bye, you guys.”

“Bye.” Conner watches her walk away.

She turns once to look back, nearly stumbles into a table and finally makes her way to the counter to collect her bag of food. There’s a broad smile on her face as she hurries out of Munchie’s.

Micah, who has been silent, now gives me a funny look. “It’s a good thing you’re not in the play. You’re a shitty actress.”

“And why would that stop me?” I fire back. “After all, it doesn’t stop your redheaded fuck buddy.”

“OH, SHIT!” Conner dissolves into laughter.

Micah stares at me. Then he shakes his head and joins in the laughter.

We stay at Munchie’s for the next hour and it’s a lot of fun, bantering back and forth and finally getting to know these two.

However, I lose track of the number of times my mind wanders.

Each time I find myself thinking about Gage, wondering what he might be doing now.

And whether he obsesses half as much as I do over that moment beside the pool.

Chapter 7

Gage

Game day at Xavier High might be one of the circles of hell.

There's marching band music and a hormonal crush of teenagers and a never ending concession stand line.

Seems like hell to me.

"I'm not waiting in that mess," Micah complains when he gets a load of the gaggle of people who require stacks of nachos and chili corn dogs in order to watch a stupid football game.

"The line will thin out later." I nod to the bleachers. "Let's just go sit down. Players are already on the field."

On the way to the visitor's section we wade through some of the Xavier High shitheads.

One heavily acned kid shoulder checks me. His four buddies immediately gather behind him in the hopes that something exciting is about to happen.

"Watch your ass," says the kid. His friends snicker in the background.

Micah immediately gets worked up. "You want to leave in a box?" he seethes.

The kid's nostrils flare but now he's taking stock of the situation. He's got as much muscle as a flagpole. A cheerleader could probably beat him up.

But I'm no featherweight and neither is Micah.

We could handle him and his crew with ease. Not that I'm looking for a fight. I'm here to watch Conner play and keep Micah out of trouble.

"Rich ass prep school bitches," the kid whines but he retreats.

Micah laughs at his back. "Who do these fuckers think they're kidding? Acting all oppressed."

"Yeah, yeah." I push Micah, encouraging him to move along.

Micah, however, keeps loudly carrying on. "They're just rich kids that go to public school and we're rich kids that go to private school. Big fucking difference. The only reason why these clowns aren't at West Prep is because they can't hack the academics."

Everyone within earshot knows this is true. Yet some unfriendly glares are now being thrown our way.

Xavier High probably has twice as many students as West Prep but they're not a sports powerhouse. We're still getting to our seats when Conner throws a long pass that ends in the first touchdown of the game.

"Look who it is." Micah points.

He doesn't need to point. I spotted Dani immediately.

Her hair is in a single loose braid draped over her right shoulder and she wears a worn black leather jacket that looks like it was just shrugged off the back of a biker. Her taste in

clothes is different than the other girls from school. Most of them take any out-of-uniform opportunity to look ready to hit the high end clubs. Dani, on the other hand, appears comfortable in her old sneakers and jeans.

I like that. I like how she doesn't try to imitate everyone else.

Fuck. I like way too many things about her.

"There's some space up in the back row." I try to steer Micah in another direction, away from where Dani idly plays with her braid and listens to Tess Ballerini chattering in her ear.

But Dani zeroes in on us and stands up. "Guys, we saved you some seats!"

Micah looks to me. He shrugs but he's got a grin on his face.

Yeah, I heard all about yesterday's social hour at Munchie's.

This morning Conner had the balls to ask me when I was going to 'man up' and get the girl. Micah just stood by grinning like a fool, kind of like he's doing now.

I'm starting to wish I'd stayed home.

Right now I could be powering through a fierce workout on the weight bench until my arms shake and my brain decides it's done flexing for the day.

I don't have to stay.

I don't have to stay.

I don't have to stay.

Five words stuck on repeat inside my head, fingers tapping out the syllables like Morse Code on my thigh.

Dani smiles at me. I haven't given her much reason lately to smile at me but she does it anyway.

Micah shoves me in that direction and I don't resist, even though I could.

I don't have to stay.

Tess, however, looks less than pleased by our arrival. She moodily slides down the bench, giving us room to sit down.

Micah hangs back on purpose so I have no choice but to drop right down beside Dani.

Dani zips her jacket. "It's getting cool out, isn't it?"

I answer her with a grunt.

On the field, Xavier High has the ball. The quarterback looks around for a receiver and then trips over his own feet. The ball rolls away. Six guys fall on top of it. When they are peeled off, the ball is now West Prep's.

"Hi." Dani talks in a near whisper and bumps me with her elbow.

She's chewing cinnamon gum. She scans my face, paying special attention to the fading wound on my cheek. Everyone assumed I was in a fight and I let them assume.

Dani is the only one who knows the truth. I never asked her to keep it to herself but she has.

"How's everything going, Gage?"

It's a blow to the senses, having her so close. I'm positive that if I'd kissed her that night by the pool then we wouldn't have stopped at kissing.

No, not a fucking chance we would have stopped.

“Can’t complain.” My voice is cold and I move to the right, deliberately away from her.

Her eyes cloud. She’s hurt, sticking her hands in her pockets and turning her head.

I doubt it would help to let her know that if I liked her less then I’d have more to say. Maybe we’d even hook up. She gives every sign that she’d be willing. But with Dani, anything physical would turn out to be more than fun.

That’s the problem.

Starting something with her would mean going all in and I already know the way it would be, how it would end.

It would end how it always fucking ends...

Sure, we’d get along for a little while.

Then we wouldn’t.

There’d be arguments and tears and shouting and then one of us, probably her, would say, “I hate you”.

And that would be the complete truth.

On the field, Conner is busy being phenomenal. He throws another touchdown pass and the West Prep side explodes into cheers.

Behind us, a girl shrieks his name like he’s a rock star.

“CONNER! WOOHOO! YAY, CONNER! WOOOO!”

How fucking annoying.

I look back and see one of the Marchenko twins standing on the bleachers and screaming like a manic fangirl.

One minute later a timely interception puts the ball back in West Prep's hands and is immediately ferried to the end zone.

Another round of screaming erupts behind my head.

Micah yawns. "This is gonna be a slaughter. I need a snack to stay awake." He stands up. "You want anything?"

"Nah, but I'll tag along."

He stops, looks at me and then at Dani, who's now deep in conversation with Tess.

"Why don't you stay here?" he suggests and it's a very un-Micah thing to say.

If I didn't know better, I'd think that overnight he'd turned into such a drip that he was now playing matchmaker.

Rather than answer, I squeeze past him and head down the bleachers.

He can follow if he wants to. Or he can stay where he is and give dating advice to Dani.

Micah catches up to me at the bottom of the bleachers.

"What the hell was that?" I ask him.

"Calm down," says Micah, who can go from neutral to murderous in three seconds if someone looks at him sideways.

Before I can challenge him any further we're mobbed by a pack of girls who want to tell us about a party after the game.

"We're meeting up at Gabby's." Tana Pratt hangs onto my arm. "Her folks are in Jamaica so there's no closing hour. It'll be lit. You guys are coming, right?"

Fuck no.

“Sure,” Micah says, looking not at all unhappy to be the object of affection as Tana’s two BFF’s drape themselves all over him. He’s obviously ready to move on from the revolting Ashton.

“Yay!” Tana squeals and throws her arms around my neck.

I shouldn’t be irritated.

Tana’s all right. She’s cute, a free spirit, forever unattached, always in good humor. Last year we sort of made out after a football game. It was no big deal. She didn’t mind when I never called her.

On instinct, I look over my shoulder.

Dani is staring right at me. She moves her head, but not before I catch the look of hurt in her eyes.

Yeah, that’s exactly the kind of shit I try to avoid.

West Prep scores another touchdown. Some angry Xavier fans throw concession stand cups onto the field.

Tana abruptly quits clinging to me when she spots someone else she’d rather talk to. She blows kisses before she and her minions scamper away.

“Don’t ask,” I tell Micah as we resume our journey to the concession stand. “I don’t feel like going.”

He huffs with annoyance. “What, is your dick retiring?”

I’m not even going to answer that question. He knows how it is. Sometimes I just feel like I’m on overload and I need to step back.

For the rest of the night I’ll be thinking about Dani’s face when she saw me with another girl.

I don’t want to think about that, but I will.

Micah waits until we're standing in line with the rest of the slobs before saying another word.

He sighs. "Did I tell you my damn mother has been hassling me about Henley?"

"Hassling you how?"

"She says I should treat him more like a dad."

"That's messed up." And it is, even for Matilda, who decided to delete her murdered husband from everyone's memories before the man was even cold in the ground.

Micah shifts his weight. "Fuck, I don't feel like sleeping at home tonight."

"Then don't. You could crash at my house. I'm the only one there." It's true. My parents are having one of their honeymoon phases. They're in Paris for the next three weeks.

"I know." Micah slides over a glance that tells me something is up.

"No." I shake my head because I can already guess what it is.

He rolls his eyes. "It won't be like last time."

"Bullshit."

'Last time' refers to spring break when I allowed a party to happen at my house while my folks were on a cruise.

The door to the massive custom fridge was ripped off. Part of my dad's antique book collection wound up in the firepit. Some fucker pissed on the hand woven area rug in the study.

Then to cap it all off, a big fight broke out in the front yard and Micah ended the night with a pair of cracked ribs. The cops showed up.

When Alta got home she screamed her head off for weeks. It all added up to one giant headache.

“Conner’s planning to make the push himself,” Micah says. “He’s sure he can talk you into it.”

“He can push all he wants. Why doesn’t he host at his place?”

“The backyard’s all torn up because the pool needs to be resurfaced. Besides, his mother can’t deal with people in her house and would get hysterical.”

“And she won’t get hysterical when she sees three hundred teenagers show up across the street?”

“We’ll keep it small. Besides, you know Edie enjoys indirectly giving Alta the middle finger even if she’d never have the guts to do it for real.”

“No shit.”

I swear, my mother and her sisters shouldn’t live in the same zip code. It’s even stranger that they run the billion dollar family business together, although Alta shows up at the office just to bust everyone’s nuts and Edie is nothing more than window dressing.

Sometimes I wonder why Matilda doesn’t just fire them.

Micah senses a crumbling of the resistance. “So, what do you say?”

“Never known you to be a party planner.”

He shrugs. “I need something else to think about.”

“You mean other than Ashton?”

“Fuck Ashton.”

“You did. A lot.”

He smirks. But then he rubs his eyes and when he takes his hand away I can see the shadows on his face.

Micah is a chronic insomniac. He hates sleeping, has terrible nightmares, and can never seem to catch more than an hour or two at a time. I'm sure there's a doctor out there who could help with that. Matilda used to try to feed him sleeping pills but he couldn't handle the way his brain would fog up. He would flush the pills when she wasn't watching and he stopped mentioning anything about sleeping issues to his mother.

It always gets really bad whenever the anniversary of his dad's death comes up.

And now I remember that the anniversary will be next week.

No wonder why he's looking for something else to focus on.

"All right," I tell him. "It's on you to make sure the quarterback doesn't invite the world."

The quarterback in question is busy high fiving players on the sidelines. The score has West Prep leading at thirty-five to three and we're not even at halftime.

Micah breaks into a crooked grin. "I'll do my best." He gets a weird look on his face and gestures in the direction of the bleachers. "You know what? Dani's all right. Still kind of a suck up and it drives me nuts the way she worships my mother, but you could do worse, Gage."

That's practically a queenly coronation in Micah terms.

I'm careful to give him no sign that anything he said has sunk in.

This must be the slowest moving food line on planet earth.

We inch forward at the rate of one step every five minutes.

I start scrolling through trivial shit on my phone to keep my brain from flexing in a direction that will command me to do something bizarre. If only I hadn't left my ear buds in the car. Some white noise from my sound app would be ideal right now. I feel like I'm drowning in the glare of the field lights and the tuneless hum of a thousand random voices.

It's times like this that my brain begins to drift and that's a bad thing because all kinds of unwanted thoughts show up. I start thinking that if the line doesn't move by the time my phone reads a quarter past the hour then I'm going to scream. And if I have the idea then it *needs* to be done or there will never again be the opportunity to scream in this place at this time and I should take it.

None of it makes sense and I know it but that doesn't stop the thoughts from tumbling through my head anyway.

I should have been paying closer attention to Micah. It takes me a few seconds to catch up when he sprints out of line.

"Fuck!" I can see where he's heading and I know what will happen when he gets there.

I'm already racing after him but I won't be in time.

The low life's name is Gregory and he's a dealer, mostly weed and pills, which he probably buys at a bargain at some hellhole in the city and sells here in West Emerald for a monster profit. He doesn't need the money; his dad owns a chain of appliance stores. He sells for kicks and his product is dangerous junk.

At the moment, Gregory has his arm around Micah's girlfriend.

Or ex-girlfriend.

Whatever she is, Ashton's sucking the creep's neck so I guess she's forgiven him for selling her laced goods that left her exiting a party in an ambulance.

Ashton shouts Micah's name when he grabs Gregory by the collar of his jacket and hurls him into the cinderblock wall of the concession stand.

Micah can stand his ground in any fight with no help from me but we're in Xavier territory. This will either turn into a dogpile or else he'll get hauled away by cops.

The last time he got busted for fighting, Matilda made some threats about shipping him off to reform school. While she's likely just blowing hot air, nothing good can come out of rearranging Gregory's face tonight.

Gregory bounces off the wall.

Micah doesn't let him get his bearings before throwing two punches to his ribs.

But Gregory used to play offense for Xavier football and he's no pushover. He clocks Micah in the jaw with a right hook.

Ashton screams.

Micah's mouth is bleeding and he's about to charge again but some dad-type middle aged guy gets in the middle.

"BREAK IT UP!" the guy roars with his arms out to keep the two apart. "That's enough."

I get behind Micah, ready to dive into the fray if this isn't over. Some Xavier boys have taken interest, edging to Gregory's side.

“I MEAN IT!” yells the dad.

Gregory, breathing hard, pushes his greasy hair back and breaks into an ugly smile. “Too bad you couldn’t put up a fight when it counted, Lyonne.”

Some tall dude wearing a teacher’s badge joins the dad. When he speaks it sounds like he’s holding his nose. “Now everyone just calm down.”

But Gregory isn’t finished. “Did your dad beg for help while being gutted?”

Micah releases a sound of primal rage and launches at Gregory like a bullet.

I can’t stop him.

The random dad can’t stop him.

The Xavier teacher can’t stop him.

He tackles Gregory to the ground and pummels the stuffing out of him until the dad and the teacher join forces to grab Micah’s arms and haul him off.

Micah thrashes but can’t break free.

“It’s all right, let him go.” I step up and try to pull Micah out of the teacher’s grip. “I’ll get him out of here right now.”

The man glowers with disgust and doesn’t budge. “This little punk should be in a cage.”

Diplomacy isn’t my strength but I bite back my sarcasm for Micah’s sake. “Look, my cousin is sorry for disturbing the peace. He won’t do it again. Let me just take him home.”

The dad is a little more understanding. He nods to the teacher and pushes Micah at me. “Fine, get out of here. And stay out of trouble.”

“Fuck this place,” Micah grumbles but he allows me to steer him toward the exit. He swipes at his mouth, which is still trickling blood.

It’s a good thing we’re not far from the parking lot because I can hear some of Gregory’s crowd regrouping from somewhere behind us.

“Go hide under a bed!” taunts a male voice.

I know Micah didn’t hear because if he had then I wouldn’t have been able to restrain him.

Takes a special kind of evil to mock a kid who narrowly escaped being murdered himself.

Then again, people generally suck so nothing should surprise me.

“Keep walking,” I warn Micah and grab hold of his arm in case he’s tempted to return to combat.

He shakes me off and lowers his head but at least he doesn’t slow down.

A collective groan goes up from the crowd so West Prep must have scored again.

At least Conner is destroying Xavier’s night.

Micah tosses over a grumpy look. “Didn’t need to be rescued.”

“I know,” I say even though I know the opposite.

Micah’s crushing need to prove he’s the ultimate badass will get him in real trouble one of these days. But for now I just need to get him the hell out of here before he gets riled up again.

I click my key fob, unlocking the doors to my car.

It's a small miracle that no one has followed us. Micah sure doesn't need more fighting but he doesn't need anyone's shitty sympathy either.

“Gage!”

She must move fast. I don't even know how she saw what was happening from way over in the visitor section.

Micah scowls as Dani hurries over. “No way,” he mutters and climbs into the passenger seat, slamming the door behind him.

I get it.

After the adrenaline of a fight wears off, Micah always gets quiet.

And when that happens he has little patience for other people. The only exceptions are Conner and me.

“Hey.” Dani's eyes are wide. She tries to peer into the tinted window. “Is he all right?”

“He's fine. And we're leaving.”

She nods and reaches for the door handle to the backseat. “I'm coming with you.”

I get in her way, blocking her. “You're not invited.”

She straightens up. Blinks. “Gage, I just want to help.”

“Then go back to the game and mind your own fucking business, Dani.”

She flinches but then stands her ground, raising her chin and looking me right in the eye. “Knock off this tough guy act. You can't just dismiss me like I'm one of your random admirers.”

This isn't the time to have some deep discussion about her feelings. Nearby, a pack of Xavier kids hop out of the bed of a pickup truck. They eye us with suspicion.

"Get lost," I say to her in a low voice. "I mean it."

"No." She tries again to reach for the door to the backseat.

I press the key fob and the door locks click.

Dani crosses her arms and glares. "I'm just worried about him."

"Nobody here needs you to worry about anything."

Her arms fall and her chin wobbles. "That's not fair. I'm part of the family and that family includes Micah."

"The hell you are. You're not one of us, Dorothy Ann, and you never will be."

All I wanted to do was irritate her enough to make her walk away.

But even in the bad lighting I can see the flash of intense pain on her face.

Never in my life have I wished this badly that I'd kept my fucking mouth shut.

"What's *wrong* with you?" She's now on the verge of tears. "Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with you, Gage?"

"A lot of things," I tell her, which is very true. "So it's better if you keep your distance."

"You're such an asshole." She chokes on the last word and covers her mouth with her hand, which doesn't hide the fact that she's about to cry.

"I know." If I was a normal person I could probably think of a better response.

“Dani?” Tess has followed her friend out here and she waits ten yards away.

Dani throws me one final wounded look and runs off to be comforted by Tess.

I climb into the driver’s seat, fire up the engine and peel out of this scene without a second glance.

When I’m off Xavier grounds and heading for the main road I notice that Micah is staring at me.

“We should have let her in,” he says softly.

I could tell him that I agree, that I feel like an absolute villain right now and I wish I could fix it.

But I say nothing and flip on some music.

Chapter 8

Dani

Just as I've settled on which pair of flannel pajama pants I'd like to lounge around in for the rest of the night, there's a knock on my bedroom door.

Assuming the visitor is Uncle H, I call out, "It's unlocked!"

But it's not my uncle who slowly pushes the door open and pokes his head in.

"Hey," says Micah.

"Uh, hi." I unable to hide my surprise. Never once has he knocked on my door. "Come in."

He steps inside and leaves the door partially open. He looks around like he's just found himself behind enemy lines and isn't sure how to behave.

"You can sit down," I tell him because he's just standing there awkwardly with his hands in his pockets.

He stares at the plush rose-colored armchair that has become my favorite reading location. I drop down on the bed and wait for him to make up his mind about what to do next. Micah moves closer to the chair. He doesn't sit down but he does take his hands out of his pockets.

"I'm leaving for the party," he finally says.

The party. *Gage's* party. It's tonight and it's all anyone's been talking about all week at school.

"Have a good time," I mutter.

He lifts an eyebrow. "You'll be there later, right?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?"

Because I haven't spoken to Gage since the night of the game. The night he told me I'll never *ever* be part of the family.

Lita will be at the party. She's been on cloud nine all week after getting back together with her girlfriend. Tess is stuck going to some political function where she'll be required to stand in the background and look interested while her father gives a boring speech.

"Don't play dumb," I tell Micah. "You heard when your delightful cousin told me I'm not part of the family and should keep my distance. That's what I'm doing. Keeping my distance."

Micah winces and falls into the chair with a sigh. He thinks for a minute and his eyes become earnest as they scan my face. "He didn't mean it, Dani."

"That must be why he apologized. Oh, wait. No, he didn't apologize. Gage Silvestro apologizes for nothing, does he?"

Micah is silent for a long moment. "He wants you to be there."

"Then let him tell me himself."

Micah rakes a hand through his hair. "He's just bad at..."

"Manners? Humanity?"

He shrugs. “Yeah, maybe.”

I take a thick hardcover book from my nightstand and hug it to my chest. “I’m busy tonight.”

He rolls his eyes. “Doing what? Reading?”

“Yes. It’s just me and Stephen King this evening. Drink a shot in my honor or whatever it is you people do at parties like that.”

He shifts in the chair and opens his mouth to argue but a door opens in the hallway and Cecile hollers, “DANI!”

“I’m here, Cecile.” I throw the book down and go to her. Micah falls in right behind me.

Cecile stands in the doorway of her bedroom. She wears a shiny gold robe with lavish leopard print trim. The thing would probably look ridiculous on just about anyone else but Cecile manages to make the getup appear glamorous.

One recent positive development is that Matilda’s mother has decided I’m not so bad. She regularly calls me to her room to help with small errands or read to her. Sometimes she asks me questions about school and about her grandsons.

I’m careful to tell her only positive things.

“Do you need something?” I offer her my arm and her slim hand catches my elbow.

Cecile turns her face to me. “What day is this?”

“It’s Saturday.”

“Don’t you have anything to do?”

“Not really. I can read to you if you want.”

She sighs with impatience. “No, not tonight. Micah, I know you’re over there slumped against the wall like a slug.

Have you nothing to say to your grandmother?"

Micah cracks a smile. Sometimes I forget that he's extremely good looking in his own right.

"Hi, Cecile. Sorry I haven't stopped in all week."

"More like two weeks. Luckily, Dani is not so neglectful." She reaches into the pocket of her robe and pulls out a remote control. "This is out of batteries."

Micah makes a move to take the remote but I beat him to it.

"I'll take care of this," I tell her. "After all, Micah has a party to get to."

"And he didn't invite you? How rude."

I fight a smile. "It's fine. I'm happier alone in my room."

Cecile issues a disgusted noise. "What a ridiculous child you are. Do you know how quickly life passes you by? No, of course you don't know that. At your age you couldn't possibly know that. Go to the party. After you fix my television remote."

She abruptly withdraws her hand from my arm and shuts her door.

Micah snorts out a laugh and heads for the stairs. "You've got your orders," he says.

"I'm not going to Gage's damn party," I say to his back.

He keeps walking. "Yes, you are. See you there."

A minute later I hear the front door open and close with Micah's exit.

I remember seeing a neatly stacked supply of batteries downstairs in one of the kitchen cabinets. I saw it the night

Gage showed up here with furious eyes and a battered face.

Before going to the kitchen I take a detour to Uncle H's room. The large suite he shares with Matilda is on the first floor and well positioned for privacy away from any common areas. There is a strip of light under the door and I hear the faint sound of water running. Tentatively, I rap my knuckles on the door but there is no answer.

My bare feet quickly feel the cold of the marble floor as I tiptoe toward the kitchen.

It's not quite eight o'clock.

Two blocks away, the party is probably not in full swing yet.

Gage seems like the last person who would be willing to play the role of gracious host. I've never been inside his house but I'm picturing it filling up with West Prep's top social tier. I'd have to be blind to never notice the way so many girls openly drool over Gage at school. He's not often seen at parties and social events but he does appear sometimes.

While Gage is nowhere near on the level of lover boy Conner or even careless Micah, he's no angel either. Gage is capable of letting his icy attitude thaw when he wants to.

I know that already.

But the idea that he might have allowed other girls see another side of him, a passionate side, is enough to stab a dagger of jealousy through my heart and wonder who might rate his notice tonight.

"Oh, shit!" I gasp as I narrowly miss colliding with Matilda at the kitchen entrance.

She laughs and catches me with a hug. “Princess Dani. Fancy meeting you here.” She wears a black and pink polka dot swing dress and her eyes are sparkling. She twirls me around until I nearly spin into the counter.

“Missed you both at dinner,” I say when I’m released from her grip.

“Oh, that’s right.” A remorseful shadow skates across her face. “And it is so sweet that you volunteered to cook. We didn’t mean to spend a whole Saturday at the office but I can’t seem to rely on anyone else to get a single thing done at that place and your uncle used my office to write because he’s fantastically more productive there. We ended up ordering takeout Thai food and it was so delicious, especially because we had reason to celebrate. In fact, I just walked down here to visit the wine closet and grab a pair of glasses.”

Matilda often says so many things at once it’s difficult to keep track.

“What were you celebrating?” I ask her.

She grabs my arms and bounces with a little squeal. “Henley has finished his first draft. And it’s brilliant!”

This is good news. I shouldn’t feel deflated that I had no idea he was even close to finishing. He spends so many hours working and it feels like I rarely get a chance to talk to him about anything.

“That’s great.” I force a smile. “I know he felt some pressure, especially after receiving such a large advance.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “Who cares about the money? My husband will never need to worry about money again. But I’m sure it’s a relief that he’ll always have more than enough to send to your mother.”

I'm sure I must have heard wrong. "My mother?"

"Of course."

"Uncle H sends money to my mother?"

She tilts her head and her face switches to sympathy. "Dani, you're old enough to understand how difficult it was for him to care for you all those years as he struggled for his highly deserved big break. He scraped by writing freelance articles just so he'd be able to send his sister enough to keep her off the streets. Your uncle is truly a god among men. But I don't need to tell you that."

I feel like I've been dropped into a very confusing dream. What Matilda said can't be true. If it's true, then...

"You're saying that Uncle H knows where my mother is? That he's always known?"

Finally, she realizes her mistake. Her eyes widen and her hand floats up to cover her mouth. "He must have told you all about this."

I swallow hard. With a sick feeling, I hold onto the counter to keep from falling. "No. I thought he hadn't heard anything from her in years."

"Oh no," Matilda breathes. Her lovely eyes mist over and she traps me in her fragrant arms. "Dani, I had no idea. Whatever he's told you or hasn't told you I'm sure it's only because he loves you so much, so very *very* much. We both do."

I'd really like to shove her away and go back to my room to deal with this revelation alone. Uncle H was the one person in the world who would never lie to me. Even if he was trying to spare my feelings...

He should have told me anyway.

Matilda continues to coo nice words and pat my hair. It's not her fault and yet I don't really want to be around her right now.

I take a deliberate step back out of her arms. "Look, it's all right. I'm not mad. I know my mother is a horror show."

"Sweetheart." Her face crumples. "You're upset. This is terrible. I hate to see you distressed. Your uncle would hate it even more."

"Then I guess I won't tell him."

Matilda catches the hard edge in my voice and her eyes flash with uncertainty. In an instant it's gone, replaced with a veneer of compassion. "Dani, I know these past months have been an adjustment for you. But you are doing so beautifully. You've proven that this is exactly where you belong. I knew from the moment Henley introduced us that you were special and I was right. It's not just anyone who can come from such a difficult background and thrive at West Prep. But you are achieving excellent grades and finding social success. Your teachers are very impressed with you. Henley and I couldn't be prouder."

I don't really feel like listening to compliments right now. I'm about to mumble something just to make her stop rambling when a piece of her speech hits me the wrong way. "How do you know what goes on at school? Does Micah tell you?"

"Micah." A dramatic sigh. "No, that boy never tells me anything about anything. But Olivia and I go way back."

"Right, I forgot you were friends." But it is news to me that the school principal takes much notice of my status at all.

Matilda smiles. “Yes, we’ve been friends forever. Inseparable in high school.”

“Really?” I have difficulty picturing this.

Her smile fades. “Okay, what I’m about to say is a scandal, Dani, so share it with no one.” She presses a finger to her lips for emphasis. “Olivia and I did have a horrible falling out back then. We’ve moved past it, of course. Not everyone would have forgiven her. But I consider grudges to be unhealthy so I don’t keep them.”

Matilda pauses, like she’s expecting praise.

There are times when I don’t know what to make of her.

On one hand she comes across as endlessly good-hearted and friendly.

But right now I get the impression every word she seems to carelessly toss out has been chosen with precision.

It’s an uncomfortable feeling, like I’ve been drafted into a performance I wasn’t expecting to star in.

“Matilda, I was thinking I might go out tonight. Is that okay?”

She bobs her head eagerly. “Absolutely. And I love that you ask for permission. Unlike Micah, who just does whatever he wants without a care about how I might feel.”

It’s odd she should say that when I’ve never seen her put in the slightest effort to interact with her son.

“Will you let Uncle H know? I don’t want to bother him.”

“Of course. Kisses.” She pecks at the air around my head, selects a gold-labeled bottle of wine from the locked closet where she keeps her collection and pulls two crystal glasses

from the cabinet. “Have a wonderful night. We’ll make a date to go on a shopping spree soon.” With a wink and a toss of her hair, she’s gone.

I’m tempted to go bang on Uncle H’s door and demand some answers. If what Matilda says is true, he didn’t just keep a secret. He has lied to me for years. Even if he thought he had his reasons, I’m shaken.

Shaken enough to fear the truth, at least for tonight.

Pushing a parade of new, unpleasant questions aside, I find the batteries and fix Cecile’s remote. As I double back to the stairs I hear the tinkling echo of Matilda’s laughter, followed by the low rumble of Uncle H’s chuckle.

Irritation jabs at me.

First, they never showed up for dinner even after Matilda applauded my plan to cook homemade lasagna for the family.

Then I hear that my beloved uncle, who couldn’t even bother to knock on my door this evening, has deliberately deceived me in a very terrible way.

And now the two of them are having a grand evening without a thought for anyone else.

Cecile is sitting up in bed when I return to her room. “What in god’s name are you so angry about? I could hear you stomping up the stairs like a bear.”

“I’m not angry.” I turn on the television and place the remote carefully in Cecile’s hand. “But I think I’d like to get out of this house for a little while. I’m going to that party after all.”

“It’s Gage’s party.” She chuckles at my shocked silence. “Yes, I know all about the forbidden party. I hear more than

you think I do. And I completely approve of my grandson disrespecting his wretched parents in their absence. Dani, there is a small silver jewelry box in the top drawer of my dresser. Bring it here.”

The jewelry box looks like an antique and is surprisingly heavy. Cecile flips open the lid when I place it in her hands. She only needs a few seconds to find the object she’s looking for.

“I’m giving this to you.”

I stare at the necklace dangling from her fingers. A bright red pendant hangs from a long gold chain. “It’s beautiful. But why would you give it to me?”

“Your birthday is coming up, isn’t it?”

“Two weeks.” I haven’t given a thought to my birthday. I’m surprised Cecile remembers.

“Consider this an early birthday present. My dead husband once bought me an emerald necklace to compensate for his many affairs. I detest emeralds. I sold the ugly thing and bought this instead. Yes, it’s a real ruby, a gemstone that is linked to love and passion. I never found either one but I hope you do. Take it.”

I don’t have the heart to refuse. Besides, I’m truly honored at her thoughtfulness.

“Thank you. I promise I’ll take good care of it. And if you ever want it back, I’ll understand.”

“I won’t ever want it back. Now go to the party and I don’t want to hear you sadly wandering back here in an hour.”

She feels for the proper button on the remote and begins rapidly flipping channels. The volume is turned way up, a sign

that I have been officially dismissed.

The ruby glitters in my palm and feels strangely warm.

I close my fingers around it.

Impulsively, I bend down and gently hug the old woman.

“Thanks again, Cecile,” I whisper to her.

She pats my back and doesn't reply. But I catch sight of the smile tilting her lips before I leave the room.

Twenty minutes later, I'm dressed in my best pair of dark jeans, a low cut black top and my old leather jacket. I've left my hair loose and the addition of some dramatic makeup and Cecile's necklace complete the sexy picture.

There's no denying that I look hot. If Gage ignores me then screw him. I'll have fun anyway.

Let him watch from a distance and eat his heart out.

If he has one.

Chapter 9

Dani

Though the moon is bright, lightning flashes in the sky to the east and a number of houses have yet to remove their Halloween decorations.

This makes the two block journey feel a little spooky even if I am walking in one of the safest neighborhoods in the world.

I wonder if Matilda would have any objection to what's going on tonight at her sister's house.

Doubt it.

She and Alta are oil and water. It's a sore point that Alta holds a top management position yet dodges her duties at work and takes off on frequent vacations whenever she pleases.

Meanwhile, Edie appears to be kind of a hapless ping pong ball batted around between her two more strong willed sisters. She drinks a lot. Her divorce sounds like a messy one. I've heard Matilda chewing her out on speaker phone for failing to meet some deadline.

Alta is to be avoided but Edie is someone worth feeling sorry for.

The properties here are so large and spread out that it feels like I've walked for ages by the time I turn a corner and land

on Gage's street. There are about thirty cars parked haphazardly at the end.

Gage's house is enormous, all sharp peaks and stone veneers, even larger than Matilda's. A tall wrought iron fence borders the multi-acre property and a gothic style entrance gate has been propped open by a rock. More vehicles are jammed on every square foot of the circular driveway. Lights are blazing in almost all the windows and the steady thud of music is bound to piss off a neighbor or two.

Remembering that Conner lives just across the street, I glance behind me and see Edie standing in front of her open door. She doesn't appear bothered by the hive of activity. She notices me, waves gaily, gulps back the remains of her wine glass and disappears into her house.

On my way to Gage's door I try to shake the feeling that I'm trespassing.

This is a party. Teenagers throw parties. Teenagers randomly show up at parties. There's no formal admissions process.

At least, I hope not.

I've never actually been to a party.

But now I realize I should have braced myself for some new experiences, such as the sight of energetic backseat car sex.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" A complaint from the unknown naked guy being straddled by an unknown naked girl.

She's preoccupied, holding up a phone and smiling as she records herself bouncing around.

“Sorry.” I avert my eyes before dashing to the door.

Four boys wearing West Emerald Prep varsity jackets are casually passing around a blunt. The closest one grips it between two fingers and extends his arm as he nods to me.

“Take it.”

I shake my head. “No thanks, I’m good.”

He finds this funny. “You’re missing out, nerdy new girl.”

I know he’s a senior but I’ve never caught his name. I have seen him napping atop a cafeteria table during lunch hour.

“I can live with the regret,” I assure him.

He lazily checks me out and takes a long drag. “Your name’s Dot, right?”

I don’t care enough to correct him. “Yup.”

“Dot, you should hang out with us,” he says but I’m already walking through the partially open front door.

There are people everywhere. They’re leaning against walls, they’re draped over the furniture, they’re sitting in a circle on the floor and arguing over some alcoholic version of strip poker.

“You have to take off *both* socks, Schafer!”

Schafer disagrees. “Fuck that. You didn’t even swallow your whole shot and you only took off one earring on your last turn.”

The chanting starts. “Both socks! Both socks! Both socks!”

“Fuck all of you!” Schafer howls.

“MOVE, I HAVE TO FUCKING PUKE!” A girl pushes past me and careens into the night.

There's no Micah in sight, no Conner, no Gage. No one pays me the slightest bit of attention as I carefully step around bodies.

When I find a clear spot I pull my phone out of my pocket and text Lita. She answers within seconds with a grinning emoji and a friendly order.

Kitchen. Find us.

I'd be glad to. I just have to figure out where the kitchen is.

The interior of Gage's house is very different from the exterior. It's sparsely decorated with boxy, modern-looking furniture and the walls are all painted either white or black. Even filled with people the house has a very icy feel, not a comfortable place that you could imagine relaxing in. Someone, probably Gage, made an attempt to block the stairs by stretching a rope across the bottom. While I'm watching, four people step over the rope and traipse upstairs anyway.

I can now see the kitchen but the easiest path is blocked by a thick crowd waiting in line for a turn at the keg. Turning left, I hope to have more luck finding an alternate route.

Instead, I find Ashton. She's gained about three inches in extreme heels and peers down at me through narrowed eyes.

"Dani. Wasn't expecting to see *you* here."

Her pack hovers right behind her. Like any proper squad of mean girl accessories, they sneer and wait for excitement. By herself, Ashton isn't worth worrying about. She's only brave when she has extensive backup.

Right now I'm sure wishing I had some backup of my own.

I stand tall and meet her eye. “Well, here I am. Now excuse me.”

She gets in my face, bats her false eyelashes. “On the hunt?”

I don’t know what she’s talking about. “What? No.”

“Yeah, you are.” She unscrews a tube of bright pink lip gloss and rolls it on. “But you’re wasting your time. Micah’s already had his fill once and when he sobers up for round two it’s not your fat ass he’ll be looking for.”

Nothing but class, this Ashton.

She smacks her freshly glossed lips. “A goddamn sick joke the way you’re always thirsting after him.”

She’s out of her neurotic little head. There is absolutely no romantic chemistry at all between me and Micah.

I doubt there’s much point in explaining that but I’m tired of her attitude and I’ll take my chances with the mean girl pack. “You know what, Ashton? Go to hell. Be sure to take your shitty acting and your pathetic insecurity along for the hot ride.”

After that mic drop I try to shove my way around her. She blocks the way with a skinny arm, which turns out to be surprisingly strong.

“We’re not done here, slut.”

Some faces turn this way.

Ashton flashes an evil grin. Her friends edge closer.

I wonder if she plans to cave my head in with the point of her stiletto heels.

Just when I'm about to make a run for it, help arrives in the form of Bree Lambeau. Lita's girlfriend is six foot two and the star of the Xavier High girls' tennis team. I'm exceptionally happy to see her.

"Dani, there you are. My girl was afraid you'd gotten lost. I can see what's taking so long with all this garbage clogging up the hallway."

She stares down Ashton and Company, delivering the message she's referring to them and daring anyone to talk back.

Ashton crumbles instantly. She pulls out her phone and pretends to be fascinated with the screen. Her friends shoot glances at each other but ultimately fall back.

Bree snorts out laughter and pulls at my jacket. "This way."

She leads me on a meandering journey that ends in the largest kitchen I've ever seen. It's like a setting of a gourmet cooking show with an island the size of a small swimming pool and built-in mammoth appliances.

Lita hails us from where she sits at a table in a spacious nook with floor to ceiling windows. She's got company. Conner and one of his buddies from the football team are competing to land quarters in a row of shot glasses. Incredibly, Haven sits on Conner's lap and he's got one arm snaked around her waist.

"Nailed it," declares Conner when he bounces a coin on the table and it rolls off, hitting the floor.

"You nailed nothing, drunken dick," grumbles the football player, a barrel-chested offensive lineman named Jared.

“You’re blind,” Conner protests. “That was a total score.” He nuzzles Haven. “Right, babe?”

She giggles and wraps her arms around him. To my knowledge, this is the first time they’ve ever gotten so cozy.

Haven gazes at Conner like he’s her prince and savior. Conner belches and reaches for another quarter.

I catch Lita’s eye and she wiggles her eyebrows, a sign that she might be having second thoughts about seeing her sister tangled up with the school’s most notorious playboy, especially when he’s been drinking.

Bree slides onto the bench seat beside Lita and motions to me. “There’s room here, Dani.”

There’s really not. But Jared crushes his beer can between his thick palms and rises from his chair.

“Had enough of this scene,” Jared says and nods to Conner. “Waltz and Pacer say they’re driving up to the lake. How about it?”

Conner can’t answer right away because Haven is in the middle of whispering something in his ear. He’s extremely interested in what she’s saying.

Finally, he shakes his head at his teammate. “Nah, I’m good here.”

Jared shrugs and goes elsewhere. I’m glad to take his empty seat.

“What changed your mind?” Lita asks me. She and Bree are holding hands. “You said you weren’t coming.”

“I decided to be impulsive.”

It's warm in here, too warm to be wearing a jacket. I slip it off and hang it on the back of the chair. I try to imagine Gage sitting here in this chair, at this table, staring out these huge windows at his endless backyard.

"You ready?" Conner says to his date, who looks ecstatic with current events.

"Yup." Haven shoots me a dizzy grin before jumping off Conner's lap.

But the worry lines in Lita's forehead have deepened. She leaps out of her seat and grabs her sister for a whispered chat a few feet away.

I take this opportunity to collar the quarterback for a short talk.

"Conner," I hiss at him.

He gives me his best alcohol-soaked smile. "Hello there, Dani. Your hair looks nice."

I lean closer to his ear and keep my voice low. "You need to be a good guy tonight."

"What will you do to me if I'm not?" he whispers.

"Nothing good." I whisper back.

He grins. I doubt he'll remember this conversation in five minutes.

Over in the Marchenko huddle, Haven rolls her eyes at her twin and mutters something I can't hear.

Conner stands abruptly, scoops up Haven in his arms and shouts, "Everyone, make way for the motherfucking king and queen!"

Meanwhile, a hungry horde with the munchies has discovered the kitchen. They are currently raiding Gage's massive fridge, shoveling out all the food in sight and tossing it on the counter before deciding what they'd like to devour first. Conner barrels right through them all while a delighted Haven clings to his neck.

Lita is now scowling as she retakes her seat. "I'll take Things That Won't End Well for a thousand."

Bree comforts her with a kiss. Lita's forlorn eyes remain focused on the table.

"Be optimistic," I say. "Maybe they're destined to be the new West Prep power couple."

Lita wrinkles her nose. "No, Haven doesn't do this. And she doesn't know that party hookups are forgotten by the first period bell on Monday. Especially when they include Conner Wiseman."

She's probably right. But I'm going to hope that Conner will prove himself to be better than his reputation.

The music has been turned down, probably to avoid provoking the neighbors. A large sliding glass door that leads to the backyard has been thrown wide open and there's a lot of splashing sounds coming from the pool.

It's possible Gage is out there, swimming his laps as he does every day.

Or maybe he's talking to girls who wouldn't mind being one of those party hookups that are forgotten by Monday morning.

My fingers stray to the ruby locket around my neck.

The truth is, I have no claim on Gage and he has none on me. I am quite free to go find some sordid experiences of my own.

Bree and Lita are discussing plans to get tickets for an upcoming concert. When Lita asks me if I want to go with them I nod even though I've never heard of the band.

The next time I look up I notice the guy who stands slightly apart from everyone else. He was among the seniors who were out front smoking weed when I arrived. With his dark hair and striking eyes, he could pass for Gage's brother.

He's been watching me. He winks. I look away.

"I haven't seen Gage yet," I blurt out.

Lita and Bree stop talking and exchange a meaningful glance. My friends are not fools. Even if I've never admitted to my confusing feelings for Gage Silvestro, I haven't denied them either.

"I'm sure he's around here somewhere," Lita says. "Should we take a walk?"

Before I can decide, the pot-smoking, winking Gage look alike takes the empty seat beside me. "Your name isn't Dot," he tells me.

"Nope."

He grins. "Your name is Dani. See? I pay more attention than my friend does."

"I don't know your name," I admit.

He's got a killer smile. "It's Hamlin."

Lita clears her throat very loudly. It's not a natural sound. She jerks her chin and looks pointedly past my shoulder.

No matter how many times I see him it's always startling.

Gage wears black jeans and a grey shirt, which sounds simple, but on him the look is so hot that my breath catches and my pulse speeds up.

This Hamlin kid can't really compete with Gage. No other boy can.

Gage grumpily shoos the fridge raiders out of the kitchen. They've made a mess, pigging out and leaving the remnants strewn all over the counter in various half eaten stages. There's also a hefty supply of empty or nearly empty bottles of alcohol. Gage is clearly mad. He gets a trash bag out from underneath the sink and starts throwing everything in there, whether it's still any good or not.

Hamlin brushes a hand over my knee. "You want to go somewhere, Dani?"

I push his hand away. "I'm not allowed."

"Why not?"

"There's a full moon," I say as if that makes sense. Then I decide I don't care if it makes sense. "Sorry, I'll see you around. Maybe."

Poor Hamlin doesn't even have time to argue before I roll out of my chair and leave him behind.

Gage grabs an open container of cheese spread, looks at it with disgust and savagely stuffs it into the bag. He looks up as I approach.

"Didn't know you were here," he mumbles.

I open the cabinet beneath the sink, fish out another garbage bag and join him in the great food throwaway. "Is it okay that I'm here?"

Gage tosses a box of crackers. “Everyone else is here. You might as well be too.”

No one would ever accuse Gage of handing out warm greetings. “You sure you want to dump all of this? Some of the food was hardly touched.”

He sighs and drops his bag. He opens the fridge. Closes it. Opens it again. Closes it again. Goes to open it a third time, sees me watching and winces. “Yeah, get rid of it.”

It seems like a hell of a waste to me but I toss a half empty bag of beef jerky into the bag. “Whatever you say.”

The sounds of happy poolside screaming drifts in from the backyard. Two girls run into the kitchen. They are both in their underwear and they are both soaking wet.

“Does anyone have a towel?” yells the girl on the right. She’s shivering and bouncing from one foot to another while clutching her dress to her chest.

“Closet at the top of the stairs,” Gage says. “Take whatever you need.”

“You’re such a sweetheart, Gage.” She blows him a kiss and the two of them scamper away, leaving a trail of water in their wake.

Gage shakes his head. “Fucking Micah.”

“What about him?”

“He told everyone it was okay to go in the pool.”

“Why is it not okay?”

He opens the fridge. Closes it. “All that activity will screw up the chemical levels. I’ll have to fix it.”

“How terrible. You might miss doing your laps. I know how important your laps are to you.”

I really don't mean to sound sarcastic. But right now I'm flashing back to the humiliating scene at the game. The one where he told me to get lost and said I'll never be part of the family. The one he hasn't apologized for.

And I'm pissed off all over again. Then I'm pissed off that I'm pissed off.

Why can't I just decide not to care about Gage's mood swings? Why can't I just go flirt with stupid Hamlin instead?

Gage straightens up and shoots me a long, steady look. I stare right back at him. His eyes, always a turbulent bluish grey, swing down over my body. He shifts his weight, swallows. Then we lock eyes again and everyone else in the room fades away into scenery.

It's always like this with him.

This unwanted intensity, even when we're not exchanging words. *Especially* when we're not exchanging words. I'm not an idiot. I understand the power of physical attraction. But whatever connects me to Gage is more than that. I'm helpless to stop it.

Gage keeps examining my face. He says nothing. He just stares with a vague air of disapproval.

I pop my hip and make a wisecrack. “Haven't you seen makeup before? I just don't usually wear this much.”

“I know,” he says. “I was confused because Halloween was *last* week.”

I throw the bag of food down. “Do you rehearse all the ways you can be a dick? Like, do you practice in front of a

mirror every morning?”

All the other conversations in the room have stopped. Out of the corner of my eye I see Lita stand up, perhaps thinking she needs to come to my rescue.

Gage ignores my outburst. He calmly ties the string of his bag closed and stalks out to the backyard.

Fuck this.

He’s not calling the shots this time.

I don’t even care if I’m making a scene or if the whole school will be talking about the pathetic new girl chasing after the lordly Gage Silvestro. Lita calls my name but she doesn’t try to stop me from galloping outside.

Someone has flipped on all the backyard lights so the circus of activity in the pool is on display. It’s not ideal weather for swimming but I’m sure Gage’s pool is as nicely heated as Matilda’s. Right now Micah is on the diving board. He performs a backflip into the pool.

“Gage!”

He doesn’t stop. He turns a corner before his shape fades into the darkness.

The night has never bothered me but there’s something unsettling about pitching straight into unknown shadows.

The chilly night air is prickly on my skin. This part of Gage’s property is wide and densely wooded. Even though the bright moon winks above I feel like I’m marching into a deep forest.

I can hear his steps somewhere ahead, the crunch, crunch, crunch of his quick pace over ground that feels like it’s covered with rocky gravel. I reach for my phone with the

intention of using the flashlight but a sudden hissing noise from nearby brush startles me and on instinct I break into a run.

I don't get far before colliding hard with Gage's back.

"Jesus." He tosses his bag of garbage aside, the bottles within clinking together. "What do you want?"

I cross my arms over my chest. I wish I hadn't taken my jacket off. Not only is my flimsy top no match for the cool night air but I feel so much more exposed without a layer of leather armor. "Cut the drama. I'm just trying to talk to you."

"You should stop trying." The words final. Shot from him like bullets. "Never goes well."

"Answer a question first."

"Ask away. But don't expect an answer."

"Do you enjoy being hateful?"

He takes his time. "No."

I wish I could see his expression. Or maybe I don't. Maybe it's better like this, the details hidden by the cloak of night. Maybe we can both be more truthful.

"Do you know that it hurts, Gage? To get these short glimpses of you, only to be pushed away. Do you care at all?"

He exhales loudly. It sounds like he takes a couple of steps in the opposite direction and then returns. "I'm sorry. I don't expect you to believe that but it's true. I have no excuse. I'm just an asshole. It's a lifelong habit but I swear I don't mean to hurt your feelings, Dani. I really am sorry."

I'm momentarily startled to hear such a sincere apology. "I believe you. But now what?"

“That’s it. There’s nothing more. I don’t know how to be any different.”

“I’m not asking you to be different. I don’t *want* you to be different. I just want you to be you.”

“Dani.” He sighs out my name and then says the most devastating words. “You’ll hate me in the end.”

“Why in the hell would you think that?”

“Because I already know that the end is the same for everyone.”

“I don’t know what that means. What *end* are you talking about?”

“Love.” He spits out the word like profanity. “No matter who falls for who and no matter how good it seems, it turns into something twisted. Violent. Fucking unbearable.”

He sounds so sure, so miserable. He’s thinking of his parents, of all the fury and bitterness he’s been imprisoned by for his entire life.

The world I started out in looks nothing like his and yet we’ve suffered the same damage.

We’ve known rejection, seen the worst from the people who are supposed to love us.

But we still have choices.

We can choose not to be ruined by our invisible scars.

“Gage.” Reaching for him in the darkness, my hand finds his chest and stays there. “There’s a lot I don’t know about life, but I know there’s no pattern to love. Because there are no rules for the heart. There’s no programmed fate. There’s only

what we make of the time we have and the people we care about.”

Gage is silent. He remains completely still as I slide my palm up to cover his heart.

He has one, a heart. I can feel every strong beat.

“What are you thinking now?” I ask him. “Please tell me.”

He covers my hand with his own. His free arm finds my waist and draws me closer.

“You are so crazy beautiful. That’s what I’m thinking.”

“It’s dark over here. You can’t even see me.”

“I can see you, Dorothy Ann. I can always see you. Even when I pretend like I don’t.”

“Then stop talking and kiss me, you jerk.”

Even though I gave the order I’m not prepared for the feel of his mouth colliding with mine.

Gage is a powerful kisser.

His tongue instantly demands attention while he lifts me off my feet and takes me backwards until my back is pressed into the nearest wall. He parts my knees and holds me up. His hand slips under my shirt. His mouth moves to my neck and the moan I hear comes from my throat.

A deep, rising need obscures all else but the desire for more, for everything, for all of him.

“I want to be alone with you,” I whisper and he nods, pulling back but taking my hand.

We circle the dark edge of the yard, out of sight from the rest of the shrieking partiers. I can’t see but I trust him to safely lead me.

“Guest house,” he explains when we reach a square building in the most secluded part of the yard, tucked inside a grove of fruit trees. He pulls a set of keys from his pocket. “I locked it so no one would go in and trash the place.”

“But *we* can go in.” In the dark my lips find his neck, the strong line of his jaw. “Right?”

“Yes.” Gage plugs the key in the door, twists the knob. He puts his arm around my shoulders and guides me inside.

It’s completely dark in here, the shapes of the furniture barely visible in the scant moonlight that filters through the blinds.

“Don’t turn on the lights,” he warns.

“Why not?”

Gage pulls me in, circling his arms around my waist. “Because then all those stupid fuckers will see us.”

I’m smiling as I hook my arms over his shoulders and press against him. “Do you know how many times I’ve fantasized about kissing you?”

His tongue darts out to tease my lips. “Is it just kissing you think about?”

“No.” I lean into him, marveling over the hard feel of his body, so different from mine. “It’s definitely *not* just kissing I think about.”

He touches me, running his hands over the curve of my hips and then up to my breasts as our mouths meet again.

We’re moving now, Gage directing me backwards until my leg bumps a soft surface.

He eases me down and I sit on the edge of the bed while he stands between my knees.

Gage pulls his shirt up over his head. I take the opportunity to get rid of mine as well.

I slip my shoes off and slide backwards, my pulse thudding in my ears. When it comes to being on a bed with an insanely hot guy, my experience level is nonexistent.

But Gage is gentle. He leans down and moves a hand across the back of my neck, sinking his fingers into my hair, kissing me softly.

My mouth parts, my tongue finds his, and the kiss escalates quickly from sweetness to steamy passion.

His fingers find my bra clasp, flicking it open.

And I'm lost in him, sinking down, down, and down some more until I'm flat on my back.

My loose bra is discarded and he covers me, his full weight a shock, but a nice one.

We're skin to skin, my hands touching his back, his mouth on my neck, then working lower, lower, between my breasts, sucking each aching nipple in turn, before moving lower still, his tongue tasting my belly.

I'm taken by surprise, inhaling sharply, when his hand cups between my legs.

Gage stops instantly. "Is this okay, Dani? You can tell me if it's not."

"Yes." I'm hardly able to speak, overcome by the way he makes my body feel. I grab his hand and put it back where it was to make my point. "It's way more than okay, Gage. It's what I want."

Very true, but I love that he asks, that he moves slowly, that he touches me with respect, almost reverence.

I remember this time back at East Glen when I overheard a conversation in the locker room about some weekend party that I wasn't invited to. One girl was showing her friend some marks on her neck and complaining that the guy she'd been with at the party choked her without permission. Her friend laughed and said to quit being so fucking uptight because *all guys* did shit like that and they couldn't be changed so just go with it.

I'm so glad to discover how wrong she was.

Gage doesn't treat me that way. He never would.

He drops tender kisses on my breasts as he strokes more urgently between my legs and it's unlike the vague waves of pleasure I find when I touch myself there. This is intense enough to make my hips rock and my back arch.

He opens my jeans, slowly.

I'm ready to charge ahead of him, pushing them off with impatience, leaving only my cotton panties in place.

Gage issues a low groan when I pull him back down on top of me, my knees braced on either side of his hips. He's getting more worked up, breathing harder, positioning himself between my legs.

Nothing in history has ever felt this good.

He moves with a rhythm, grinding against me. I spiral higher.

His breath is hot on my neck as our bodies rock together in sync. "You know how fucking bad I've been wanting this?"

Yes, I know that because I can feel him, how hard he is. And I want more, to get closer, as close as I can. “Gage, I’ve wanted you from the beginning.”

A low groan rips from his throat when I reach for his pants and my palm meets a fascinating huge bulge.

I work his zipper down and he curses, shoving his pants out of the way.

We’re almost there and I’m ready, I’m so *absolutely ready* for what comes next.

With frenzied eagerness, I find the elastic band of his boxer shorts and reach inside.

“Dani, wait.” He backs off and catches my hand. “I don’t have anything.”

I freeze, confused, with no idea what he could be referring to.

And then...

Oh.

OH!!!

We don’t have a condom. That’s what he means.

“Do we need to stop?” I ask, hating the thought and feeling kind of foolish.

He sighs. “Yeah, I think we better. Don’t trust myself.”

Gage rolls away and sits up.

I find my bra and put it back on. My shirt is elusive in the darkness but my jeans are located and hurriedly restored.

He swings his legs around to the other side of the bed and faces away, breathing deeply as he gets control of himself.

I touch the smooth lines of his back. I kiss his spine.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

His head whips around and he gathers me in his arms.
“Why the hell are you sorry?”

I chew my lip, struggling to put emotions into words. “I wanted to be with you so badly and I just...I didn’t think.”

“Hey.” He tips my chin up, soothes me with a soft kiss.
“You’re perfect. Don’t forget that. Don’t be sorry.”

We almost had sex. We almost had sex. WE ALMOST HAD SEX!

It’s good that he stopped because I wasn’t going to. And I’m not sure how I would have felt about that tomorrow.

I feel the need to make a confession, although I’m sure he’s figured it out already. “Gage, I, uh, I never have...”

He tightens his arms around me. “Me neither.”

“You? Really?” I wouldn’t have guessed this. “You haven’t done it with anyone?”

“Never. I swear.” There’s a teasing smile in his voice. He tugs on a strand of my hair. “Don’t rat me out.”

I snuggle against his bare chest and he lets me. He runs his fingers through my long hair and we listen to the sounds of wild laughter echoing from the party.

There’s a thud and then a burst of drunken cackling as someone smacks into the wall of the guest house.

“Fucking idiots,” Gage grumbles.

I giggle and kiss his cheek.

He rests his chin on the top of my head. “I need to get back out there and make sure they’re not burning the house down.”

Instantly I’m nervous, fearful that the time we’ve just shared was nothing but a momentary lapse and he’ll immediately rebuild his walls.

We finish dressing in silence and I wait for him just outside the door.

He locks it and drapes one strong arm possessively around my waist before steering us straight across the lawn and back to the house, back to the party, where everyone we know will see us together.

Together.

“Gage.” I stop him when we reach the patio. I can see his face now and I need to get a burning question answered right away. “This is not just for tonight, right?”

Not just a hookup like Conner and Haven.

Not a wild moment to be set aside once it’s finished.

But something meaningful. *Us.*

Gage’s name is shouted from somewhere by the pool but he doesn’t even glance in that direction.

He knows what I’m asking and he holds me in his arms as he touches his forehead to mine. “This is real, Dani.”

Chapter 10

Gage

““**Y**ou can change your mind,” Conner says while killing legions of snake-headed alien monsters. “It’s a special occasion. Makes more sense that you’d want to keep your girl all to yourself.”

“It’s not up to me. Dani decided she wants her friends at her birthday dinner.”

He bangs on the keyboard, his eyes on the riot of graphics on the computer screen. A mesh cup containing five sharpened pencils and one pair of scissors is knocked from its constant home on the right upper corner of the desk and falls to the floor.

Conner doesn’t even notice. He shoves away from the desk.

“Fuck, I’m dead. I never get past level three.” He spins around in the chair. “How come her uncle’s not rolling out the red carpet for her birthday? Can’t remember the last time I even saw the guy. Is Matilda holding him captive?”

“Nah. He and Matilda have something better to do. They’re going to the city because she’s receiving another phony humanitarian award. They spared an hour to take Dani out to lunch but that’s it.”

Dani's not happy with her uncle lately. She told me about her talk with Matilda and while I trust my aunt as much as I'd trust the average serial killer, Dani believes she was telling the truth about Henley. It's not really my place to tell Dani to confront the lying sack of shit. I just listen when she wants to talk about it.

"What a pair of dicks," Conner grumbles, never a fan of Matilda in the first place.

"Fuck them. We'll make sure Dani's birthday is amazing."

Conner leans back in the chair and folds his arms over his chest, wearing a superior grin.

"What's your problem?" I challenge him when he just keeps sitting there and smiling like a jackass.

"It's good to see you losing your shit."

"I'm not losing my shit, whatever that means."

"Yeah you are losing your shit and why not? Dani's awesome. She's now one of my favorite people. She's like family. But you can't think of her as family. No, that would be sick. No one wants to get naked with family."

I can't stop staring at the fallen pencils. They annoy the absolute living hell out of me. "Know what, Con? If I ran a statistical analysis, I'm sure you'd be talking about either football or sex one nearly one hundred percent of the time."

"That can't be true. Sometimes I talk about food. We're going for pizza, right? By the way, Micah won't tell me if you and Dani are already fucking."

"Because it's not your business and it's not Micah's business."

No, Dani and I haven't had sex, although we've come damn close. But I'm not sharing that information with anyone.

Conner is indignant. "I tell you everything! All the filthy details."

I can't fucking deal with the mess anymore.

Conner watches as I clean up the pencils, placing each one point side up and sticking the pair of scissors in the middle. It takes me a few seconds to get the cup back in exactly the correct place on the corner of my desk.

"Maybe you should keep some things to yourself," I tell him when I'm done. "Speaking of which, Dani invited Tess and the Marchenko twins to dinner. Lita will be there. Haven won't."

An unusual hint of guilt pinches Conner's face. He even looks a little sad. "Yeah, she won't talk to me."

"What happened?"

"We partied. Had a good time. That's not news to you. Anyway, I thought Haven and I were cool but that went sideways when she asked me to the Emerald Ball and I had to tell her I'd already agreed to go with Kalia Chibani. Now she's decided she hates my guts."

I'm not sure that's any great loss. Conner, however, seems a little bummed.

"You're really going to the freaking Emerald Ball?" I ask him. The annual event at the West Emerald Golf Club is always held on New Year's Eve.

"Sure. I'm even forcing Micah to dig up a date. You're taking Dani, right?"

It hadn't occurred to me that Dani might want to go. Just doesn't seem like her speed, a pretentious spectacle of spoiled upper class brats preening like royalty.

“GAGE!” My mother's voice is like a wailing banshee.

Unlike Matilda's house, we don't use a genteel intercom system. That's mostly due to the fact that we're not big on communicating. But if the need does arise, the best idea is to stand at the bottom of the stairs and scream your fucking head off.

“GAGE! I'M WAITING!”

Conner snorts out a laugh.

We need to be leaving anyway. Dani's expecting us at six. Conner knows the drill and waits in the hall while I check the position of the pencil cup, roll the chair back to its ideal position where it just touches the desk, and verify twice that the bathroom light is off.

My mother resembles a character from *The Great Gatsby* in her shiny black evening gown and slicked back hair, her neck draped with diamonds. It's not like she could have fancy plans with her husband. No, she left him in Paris, which is where they were vacationing when their fragile truce broke into pieces yet again.

No one told me the specifics but it doesn't matter.

The shit hit the fan and Alta's been in a rage ever since returning home ten days ago. Her mood was not improved after figuring out her house was the scene of a teenage social orgy in her absence. She's barely said a word to me in a week, which suits me just fine.

Conner acts like he's going to slide down the banister, which makes my mother scream again, so he casually saunters

to the bottom and lands right at her feet.

“Auntie Alta! I’ve missed you. Have you missed me?”

From the sour face she makes you’d think she was staring at a stray dog who wandered in and crapped on her couch.

Conner throws his arms open like he intends to hug her. She ignores him and turns cold eyes to me.

“You weren’t planning to be here tonight, right?”

“Well, I live here so I’ll be back at some point.”

She touches her diamond earrings to make sure they’re in place. “I’m hosting a very important meeting here later and it will run late. You can stay with your cousin. Edie won’t mind.”

She’s such a fucking liar. There’s no meeting. She’s found someone new to party with.

“Is Dad still in Paris?” I ask.

“How should I know? But don’t worry. I’m sure Christo Silvestro isn’t lonely.”

“Not worried.” I feel in my pockets for my phone and keys even though I just checked for them five minutes ago. “We’re out of here. I guess I won’t expect an introduction to your new boy toy. Not that I want one.”

She bristles. “You really have no idea what your goddamn father puts me through.”

Maniacs, both of them.

But I feel no need to have the last word. I leave her there in the foyer with her self pity and revenge plans.

I’ve already quit thinking about my shitty parents by the time we take a ride two blocks away. The lights are on in

Dani's window. I'm still adapting to the surge of excitement that hits when I'm about to see her.

Being with Dani is like finding something I never realized I've been missing. She's got it all. She's hot and she's funny and she doesn't take any crap. There's also a depth to her, a wisdom that's unknown to the vapid fools around here. Dani knows what it means to struggle and she doesn't take anything for granted. She doesn't sit up on a high horse and hand down judgements.

On the perverted front, I hope we get a chance to be alone later tonight. After that initial near-sex-experience in the guest house, we've been taking things slower. I'm not expecting that this will be the night to change our status but I won't complain about inching a little closer to the goal.

Conner rings the bell and yells into the camera.

Micah shouts through the speaker that we damn well know the security code and he's not running downstairs to play butler.

When Conner hesitates, I know it's because he doesn't remember the code.

Sometimes that happens. Things that he knows or should know just float out of reach for a little while.

I'm quick to punch in the numbers on the keypad myself.

We find Dani and Micah in Cecile's room. Dani looks completely sexy in a pair of tight black jeans and a v-neck blue sweater that gives me endless excuses to get horny.

While Conner and Micah are temporarily trapped by one of my grandmother's lectures, I pull Dani into the hall.

She throws her arms around my neck the second we're alone. "Hi."

"Happy birthday," I tell her even though I've already said it today.

Earlier this afternoon we spent a steamy hour alone in my bedroom. But the best part came when her face lit up as she opened her birthday gift. A pricey sterling silver fountain pen engraved with her initials, it's also a nod to the day when we met. I touched her arm and asked her for a pen. She told me to keep my fucking hands to myself.

I like that memory.

Dani tilts her head back and smiles up at me. "Do I get a wish?"

"Anything you want."

She appreciates that answer. She gets extra flirty, pressing closer, sliding her lips along my neck. "Anything?"

I fight the urge to moan out loud. It's not easy. My hand slides up her back and tangles in her hair. She moves her head in search of my mouth and she gets it, along with my tongue.

"Ahem."

Instead of really clearing her throat, Matilda coughs up the word, *AHEM*, because she's a creep.

She stands in the hallway, arm in arm with Dani's uncle, who looks uncomfortable in a starchy suit that had to be handpicked by his wife.

The man fires the sternest of dirty looks at me but fuck him. He didn't like me even before I kissed his niece.

“We’re leaving now,” Matilda announces. “We’ll be home very late.”

I slide my arm around Dani’s shoulders. “Bye. And don’t worry. The rest of us will make sure Dani has a great birthday.”

Henley flinches at the comment and stares at Dani, who pointedly looks down rather than at her uncle.

“Seventeen,” Henley says softly with a wistful smile. “Seems like just yesterday you were this tiny child who found my old encyclopedias and demanded to be taught how to read. You would pick a different page every day and-“

“Henley, we really do need to get going,” Matilda rudely cuts him off. She blows a kiss to Dani. “Happy birthday, darling. And have a lovely evening.”

Dani’s uncle looks annoyed as his wife tugs on his arm but Matilda murmurs in his ear and he allows himself to be shepherded down the stairs and out the door.

I don’t want to tell Dani that I think Henley’s a pathetic loser whose balls have fallen off but I definitely *do* think he’s a pathetic loser whose balls have fallen off.

Once the brainless Stepford couple is out of sight, Dani sighs and it’s a sad sigh.

She can’t be sad. I won’t let her be sad.

Dani raises her eyes when I switch positions and put my hands on her shoulders. She knows she’s about to be kissed and she smiles before I dip my head to give her what she wants. She lets me have her tongue while releasing this soft little moan that drives me up the wall.

We don't get to have more than a few seconds of fun before Micah and Conner spill into the hallway. Cecile has kicked them out of her room because her favorite show is on and she'd like us all to leave her alone now.

"And close my door!" my grandmother yells, which is her way of saying goodbye.

Dani hugs me around the waist and points out that it's time to leave anyway. Tess and Lita are meeting us at the Pizza Cage, which is a raucous combination of an arcade and a pizzeria located just outside the West Emerald limits.

We all pile into my car and I'm glad that Micah and Conner have adjusted to the fact that they no longer get to fight over the shotgun seat. The honor goes to Dani, always, no argument.

Conner's goofiness comes in handy sometimes and he has Dani laughing so hard she can't catch her breath by the time we roll up to the Pizza Cage. Once inside, we find that Tess, Lita and Lita's girlfriend are already seated and pigging out on breadsticks. They make a big fuss over Dani and shower her with gifts so I'm glad they're here.

There is a chilly moment when Conner asks Lita what Haven is up to tonight. Lita shoots him a vaguely hostile look and loudly claims her twin is busy with a date this evening, which sounds like pure crap, but Conner doesn't seem upset.

Meanwhile, Tess, who spent years scowling in our direction every chance she got, has grudgingly become more friendly in the last few weeks. Between bites of pizza, Tess even cracks a few jokes about her uptight phony of a father, Mayor Ballerini, who sells real estate and spends the rest of his time courting West Emerald's deepest pockets to fund his

reelection campaign. Matilda is one of his biggest campaign contributors.

Tess doesn't even get mad when Micah refers to the man as a 'walking turd with a plaid tie'.

The place is chaotic and noisy and grates on my nerves.

I always try to resist flexing when out in public.

People stare.

That furrow of confusion appears between their brows and they start watching me for other odd signs.

It's not that I feel the need to hide in front of Dani. But I also haven't flatly admitted the way things stand.

I'm sure she notices when I separate my food and fold my napkin repeatedly and tap out number sequences on the bench between us, but she doesn't ask questions or show that she's weirded out. She just accepts that this is me.

And that's another reason why I'm absolutely over the moon about this girl.

It's not even nine when Tess starts saying that she needs to go home and stick her face back in her chemistry book. Lita and her girlfriend Bree leave with Tess and the rest of us try to figure out what to do next.

"Let's go see a movie." Conner talks with his mouth full. "There's the new slasher flick with that blonde actress who's always showing off her huge tits." He keeps chewing until he notices that no one is jumping on his suggestion. Then it dawns on him to be ashamed. "Sorry, Dani. We could go see something without tits instead."

Micah shakes his head in exasperation and throws a packet of red pepper flakes at our cousin.

I nudge Dani with my elbow. “What do *you* want to do, birthday girl? It’s your night.”

She smiles and stretches her arms. My eyes drop to her chest because I’m that much of a degenerate.

She notices. And smirks.

“The pool water is extra warm at my house,” she says. “Let’s go swimming. Hey Micah, how pissed will your mother be if we liberate a bottle from her wine collection?”

“Extremely.” He grins. “Let’s do it.”

Happily, there’s no sign of Matilda and her husband at the house. Micah says he doesn’t expect they’ll return before midnight.

I jump right in and start swimming my laps. It’s been bugging me that I haven’t gotten around to doing this today.

I’m on lap ten when I hear Dani’s voice and see the underwater pool lights switch to a kaleidoscope pattern. I pick up my pace but I don’t stop. Though I tend to stay in a zone of concentration when I’m swimming, I still catch snippets of conversation when I resurface.

Conner howls out a joke. Dani laughs. Micah snorts out profanity.

At the end of lap number twenty I touch the far wall of the pool, turn around and zoom back to the shallow end. When I pop my head up, Dani is sitting on the edge right in front of me. She’s all kinds of sexy in her black one piece that shows off her body yet leaves plenty to my imagination. Her soft hair falls forward over her shoulders and she smiles down at me.

“Come in,” I urge.

She nods. “In a minute.”

Over on the diving board, Micah bounces lightly. Then he jumps high, springs off the board and flips into the pool. As usual, he overdoes it and hits the water with a hard slap.

“That had to hurt.” Conner cheerfully dog paddles in our direction.

Micah hauls himself out of the pool, glares at the diving board as if it just insulted him, then takes a flying leap back into the water.

He stays at the bottom long enough for Dani to get worried. She begs me to do something but I know Micah can hold his breath for ages.

Seconds later, he breaks the surface just like I knew he would.

It’s not cold out, but it’s not warm either. Dani rubs her arms but she only continues to dangle her feet in the heated pool water.

“Where are you going?” she asks when I jump out.

Not far. Just over to the lounge chair where there’s a pile of towels waiting.

Dani keeps looking as I pick one out. She’s pleased when I carefully drape it over her shoulders.

“Dannnnneeee.” Conner keeps paddling back and forth like a first grader. “Why don’t you just get in the water?”

“She doesn’t have to do anything,” Micah snaps. “Leave her alone.” He grabs an open wine bottle that was sitting on the tiled deck and gulps back a hearty swallow.

Conner seizes it the second he’s finished and keeps drinking until he needs to come up for air. He motions to me

with the bottle but I shake my head and jump back in the water at Dani's feet.

I don't give a fuck if they drink but I'm not one to get shitfaced, not ever.

Dani, on the other hand, is eager to accept the bottle from Conner. She guzzles a healthy amount before passing it back to Micah.

Conner makes a racket with his cheering and clapping. Dani hiccups and giggles.

She's a beauty in any light but right now as the softly changing colors play on her face I'm unable to take my eyes off her.

Dani pulls the edges of the towel closer around her shoulders and tips her head back to view the inked tapestry of the night sky.

"Can I tell you guys something?"

"Of course," I say.

"I've never admitted why I left East Glen High. Not even Uncle H knows the whole story."

Dani pauses, still gazing up at the stars.

Micah and Conner get closer, giving her their full attention.

She sighs, closes her eyes, opens them again and looks down at the lights shifting in the water.

"East Glen was a rough place, even more so than the other schools I'd been to. But I was used to keeping quiet, blending into the background. And even though I didn't really have friends, no one hassled me either. But I was lonely. I can see

that now. That's why when the guy who sat next to me in math class started making conversation, I was glad to be noticed. Trevor wasn't a good student and his failing grade in math meant he was in danger of being kicked off the wrestling team. He saw that I got A's on every test and asked me to tutor him. A couple of times we met in the library after school but he complained the library was too loud and he couldn't concentrate. Trevor wanted to go to his apartment, which was just around the corner. He didn't give me any reason to be suspicious so I agreed. But the second we were alone in his apartment he grabbed me and kissed me hard. I pushed him away. He got annoyed and I left. The next day in class he pretended like I didn't exist. I told myself it was no great loss. Nothing out of the ordinary happened that day until I went to the restroom after lunch. That's where I was followed by a group of girls."

Dani takes a deep breath. Her hands are clenched and she grimaces.

"It turns out that Trevor had a girlfriend. Her name was Krista and I'd never even met her before but she was ready to kill me. Two of her friends held my arms while she got right in my face. Trevor lied, told her that I'd been trying to mess around with him for awhile. He even told her that I should be taught a lesson since I couldn't keep my hands to myself. That's what they planned to do, teach me a lesson. I tried to scream but there were always fights at East Glen and no one would pay attention to this one. Krista punched me a couple of times before growing bored with that. She and her friends dragged me over to the nearest toilet and shoved my face in the filthy water while they laughed, called me a slut and kicked me in the ribs. Someone came in the bathroom and yelled at them to stop so they let me up but they weren't

finished. They ripped my shirt off, along with my bra, and pushed me into the crowded hallway. Then things got kind of blurry for a little while. I remember all the laughing, the hands on my body, the filthy comments. I remember a teacher finally dragging me into her classroom and covering me with a blazer. I remember that I kept screaming. I remember the shame.”

She pauses. Not one of us speaks a word. The only sound is the steady flow of the pool waterfall.

Dani reaches down and rolls her fingertips through the water. “There was a no tolerance policy for fighting. The principal was going to suspend me along with the rest of them but Uncle H talked him out of it. I switched to online classes and never went back to school. It’s not like anyone missed me. I stopped showing up to my after school job because I was afraid those girls would find me there. Months went by and I hardly left the apartment. I know that makes me a coward but-”

“No, it doesn’t,” Micah cuts in sharply. “You’re not a coward for trying to survive, Dani.”

Dani smiles faintly. “No?”

“No,” I assure her. “Absolutely not.”

Her smile vanishes. “I wish I didn’t feel like one.”

“So do I,” Micah says, shocking us all for a couple of seconds. “Honestly, I don’t even know how much of my father’s murder is part of my real memory or just shit I’ve heard along the way. But I know that I hid while he was butchered. I know there had to have been another choice I could have made, some way to save him. And I know that this fucks me up every day of my life. It always will.”

I knew he felt this way, even if he’s never put it into words.

I knew and yet it's still a gut punch to hear the raw agony in his voice.

“Shit, you guys.” Conner sniffs. “This is one of those times when I wish I had something smart to say instead of having scrambled eggs for brains.”

Micah shakes his head. “Don't ever say that, man.”

Conner shrugs. “Hey, I'm not feeling sorry for myself but it's true. The doctors told my folks not to let me play football. One hit to the head and it's lights out. But they know I'm not good for much else so they're not standing in the way. Most of the time in school I don't even understand what's going on. You all know I get extra time to take tests, away from everyone else. Sometimes I leave entire sections blank and yet I always seem to pass. What a fucking lie. I'm a dumbass who can barely read a page out of a book.”

I splash him. “You're no dumbass. Con, you've got more heart than the best of them.”

He stares at me. “So do you, Gage. No matter how much you try to hide it.”

No, I'll never think of myself as being all heart. But I do hide. And on a rare night like this when secrets are being shared, I owe it to all of them to quit hiding.

Dani watches me as I hop up on the deck beside her and let my feet fall in the water next to hers.

I take her hand, lacing our fingers together.

“You know what it's called? The reason why I can't stop doing things that don't make much sense?”

She nods. “I've heard of it.”

“Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.”

“Yes.”

“Dani, I deserve my reputation as a coldhearted bastard. I do keep people away. I can’t stand the idea of being thought of as a freak.”

“Stop.” Dani plants a kiss on my lips. “If you’re a freak, then so am I.”

Conner raises a fist to the sky. “Let’s all admit we’re freaks.”

“Total freaks.” Micah hops out of the pool to sit on the edge. “Count me in. The wicked West Emerald reject club.”

“That’s it. That’s our gang name.” Conner shakes the water out of his hair and yells at the sky. “WICKED WEST REJECTS!”

Dani laughs and jumps into the warm pool. I jump in with her.

She holds onto me in the water, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Even rejects deserve to be kissed, right?”

“No need to ask.” I’d kiss her forever.

She melts into the kiss but then pulls back. “I have one more birthday wish.”

This could get exciting. “Name it.”

“Teach me how to swim.”

Chapter 11

Dani

There's a full length mirror in Cecile's bedroom and I'm using it to take a critical look at the dress I ordered online for the Emerald Ball.

"I think it might be too revealing." With a self-conscious grimace, I try to tug the spaghetti straps higher.

Cecile shakes her head. "Nonsense. And don't point out that I wouldn't know because I can't see. You look lovely."

Strangely, her praise erases my doubts. The dress, with its fitted bodice and plunging neckline, shows off more than I'm used to showing off, but I'm pleased by the reflection in the mirrored closet doors.

I swivel my hips this way and that, admiring the red satin folds of the dress and how it molds to my body. Then I imagine the way Gage's expression will heat up when he sees me wearing it on the night of the ball, which is just two weeks away.

We've already made a decision. We'll be losing our virginity to each other that night.

Cecile chuckles from her bed and I wonder if somehow she's clued into my thoughts. In the background her latest audio book plays. When she mentioned that she was an avid

reader, and a big fan of Nora Roberts before losing her sight, I suggested giving audio books a try. She balked at first but when I set up a tablet and began playing one of Nora's newer releases, she was hooked immediately. Now, instead of listening to the old shows she watched decades earlier, she devours audio books.

There's a knock on the door and Cecile sighs. "What is it?"

A brassy blonde head appears. "It's time for your lunch, Mrs. Kingston."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that? What have you brought me?"

"Watercress and cucumber sandwiches just like you asked."

"Put it on my vanity table and go. Dani will help me."

The woman carries the tray in and carefully sets it down on the table where Cecile likes to eat her meals. "Your blood pressure medication is in the small cup. Don't forget to take it with water. I will help you with your shower when you're finished eating."

"No. I can operate the shower myself."

"But I was told-"

"I don't care what my daughter says. I'm not as incapable as she'd like me to be. Now go. Take the rest of the day off with pay. I'm sure you have something more amusing to do than bother an old lady."

The woman looks to me. The photo on her name badge had to be taken at least a decade ago. Her name is Laura. "I'm not supposed to leave before three."

Cecile sits up straighter and grows impatient. “I’ve just told you to go!”

Laura’s chin quivers.

“It’s all right,” I assure the woman. “We’ll make sure you don’t get into trouble. If anyone asks me, I’ll insist you were right here the whole time.”

Laura hesitates and glances back at Cecile, who manages to glower through her sightless eyes. It’s enough to send Laura scurrying for the exit. She practically runs down the stairs.

“Please be nice,” I tell Cecile as I pull out her chair and help her get settled. “I’m sure she needs her job.”

“Nice,” Cecile scoffs. She downs the two pills I place in her palm and accepts the bottle of mineral water. “What an overrated concept. Probably invented by a politician.”

While she takes dainty bites out of the small tower of tiny sandwiches, I fluff her pillows and smooth out the wrinkles in her comforter. I also make sure there’s nothing on the floor that would obstruct her path to the bathroom. That’s where I notice a floral patterned robe sitting half in and half out of the shallow mesh wastebasket.

“Cecile.” I pull the thing out, shaking off a couple of tissues. “I think you accidentally threw away one of your silk robes.”

She sets her sandwich down and shoves the plate aside. “Alta thinks I am too feeble to know the difference between luxury silk and a polyester blend. She claimed she bought it in a Paris boutique. She lied. It’s bargain department store trash. Three out of my four daughters are awful liars. Lying never shows strength. Lying is always a show of weakness. But you,

Dani? You remind me of my youngest daughter. Lynette was both gentle and fearless.”

Cecile quits talking abruptly and sits motionless. It was Gage who explained to me that Lynette has been presumed dead for many years and is never mentioned by her sisters. There’s no shortage of painful stories in this odd family, that’s for sure.

I’m still struggling with how to comfort Cecile when an argument breaks out in the hallway.

A door slams and there’s Matilda’s voice, abnormally cold and furious. “And what is it you think you’re going to do with your life? Since you cannot manage to keep your ridiculous temper in check your options will be limited.”

“Whatever I do, it won’t involve working for you,” Micah fires back. “That’s for damn sure.”

“It’s your birthright, Micah! You and your cousins are the future of the company.”

“Fuck that. I have no plans to become a stuffed suit and I’m sure as hell not going to be stuck listening to you forever.”

“Micah, you will pull yourself together, go to college and learn how to be useful to your family.”

“By becoming your little corporate minion? No fucking thanks, Ma. Stick your boss status where the sun don’t shine. I quit.”

He thuds down the stairs. Matilda shouts his name as she follows.

When I look at Cecile, I’m shocked to see her smiling broadly. Her laugh is joyful and she even claps her hands together.

“That grandson of mine has got some sand. He gives his silly mother a run for her money.”

“You and Matilda don’t get along, do you?”

“Matilda was born first, then assumed she ought to come first in everything. She molds the world to suit herself. Don’t allow her to mold you, Dani. But never mind that. I’ve missed hearing an entire chapter. Replay it.”

The tablet is propped up on her nightstand. It only takes seconds to select the last chapter.

“Should I take your tray?”

“No, I’m not finished. What you should do is go rescue my grandson from his mother’s clutches.”

She turns her chair around, a clear signal that I’ve been dismissed. I leave the room quietly and listen in the hallway for the sound of angry voices but there are none.

After stopping in my own bedroom for a casual wardrobe change, I carefully hang the dress in the cavernous closet that will always have far more rack space than I will ever need. A delicious shiver licks my skin when I take a final look at the dress and imagine the night I’ll be wearing it for real.

I have no clue where Micah would have gone. He was in such a hurry to escape from Matilda he left the door to his room open. I peek inside and ignore the sensation of being an intruder.

The walls are a mix of sketches secured with thumbtacks and more intricate art that has been directly painted on the walls. After repeatedly painting over his efforts, Matilda eventually gave up trying to stop him.

Micah's style is stark and mostly colorless. He prefers working in black, white, and gray. Yet he has a gift for making his creations seem more vibrant than if they contained every color of the rainbow. Much of the work is incomplete, as if he uses the wall space for practice, as a sketchpad.

Maybe this is what he does at night when he can't sleep.

There are unfinished landscapes, random Celtic symbols, elaborate skulls, fierce animals. The overall effect is unsettling. The large face of an angry lion stares at me from the wall above Micah's unmade bed. The animal's eyes are defiant, furiously accusing, disturbingly human.

I stare back, strangely overcome with sadness.

Why doesn't Matilda see that her son is troubled? That he lashes out with foolish bravado because he's in so much pain on the inside?

I close the door with a sigh.

These boys.

Micah, wracked with survivor's guilt, is being eaten alive by the need to constantly prove his courage.

Conner, ashamed of his academic struggles in the aftermath of his head injury, hides behind a goofy player persona.

And Gage...

Gage.

My heart thumps even at the internal whisper of his name.

Gage, neglected and used as a weapon by his own parents, has lived alongside a very ugly version of love. No wonder why he closed off his own heart for so long.

Downstairs, there are no echoes of angry voices. It's possible they've moved to the backyard.

I know I have no business getting in the middle of a mother and son fight. But I don't want to leave Micah on his own. If Matilda notices that she has an audience she'll watch what she says.

The flowers that bloomed in the courtyard a few months back have withered, although Matilda has just added a dozen large potted poinsettias. Uncle H is seated on the wide stone bench in the courtyard and he looks up as I pass the glass doors.

I can't really ignore when he beckons so I slide the door open and step out.

My uncle smiles at me and closes the thick book he was reading. "King's latest. Feel free to borrow it when I'm finished."

"Sure." I cross my arms to guard against a sudden breeze. It's always roughly ten degrees colder here in this shadowy alcove than in the huge backyard. "Have you seen Micah?"

Uncle H shakes his head. Before marrying Matilda, he showed spots of gray around his temples. They grey is now gone, his hair once more uniformly black. I could swear the laugh lines around his eyes have also disappeared.

"No, I haven't laid eyes on Micah in days." He moves over on the bench. "Care to sit down?"

I lean against a nearby stone pillar. "I'm good."

Uncle H examines his hands, shifts slightly, runs a hand over his jaw. "So you've been keeping company with Matilda's nephew."

“Gage. You know his name. And you know we’ve been seeing each other for well over a month.”

He blinks. “That long?”

“Yes. I suppose you’ve been too busy to notice.”

He winces. “I deserve that. I haven’t made nearly enough time for you, Dani.”

“Luckily I have other people in my life to fill the void.”

Uncle H sighs unhappily. “You’re angry with me. Can we talk about it?”

“Yes, let’s do that. Let’s talk about my anger. And then we can talk about the fact that you’ve been deceiving me in a very calculated fashion for a long time.”

His eyes widen. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, please. Don’t pretend as if you haven’t always known exactly where my mother is. You’ve even sent her money, haven’t you? And then you lied to me. For years you lied to me, Henley.” My fists ball up, my throat feels thick and I’m now shouting. “YOU WERE ALL I HAD AND YOU FUCKING LIED TO ME!”

My uncle’s face goes slack with shock. And guilt.

“Dani.”

“How could you?” I whisper.

“I’m so very sorry. But things, they aren’t always simple.”

“Then explain it to me! Without lies. Without bullshit. Without sparing my feelings. Where the hell has she been for the last twelve years?”

He shuts his eyes and hangs his head. “When your mother left you in my care, it was because she understood that she was

unable to look after you. Not only did she struggle with addiction, but she couldn't manage to hold down a job for longer than a week and she began....doing things to make ends meet."

"You mean she was having sex for money."

He doesn't flinch. "Yes. But her breaking point came when a man offered her five hundred dollars for access to *you*. She realized she had to get you out of that environment. It may not seem like it, Dani, but when she left you, it was an act of love."

"Love? Are you fucking kidding? She had so much *love* that she refused to visit me, or call, or write for ALL THESE YEARS?"

"She didn't want you to see her like that."

"And where can I find her now? Is there a particular street corner she likes best?"

He sighs heavily. "I did used to send her money but then she disappeared for a while. About three years ago she contacted me to say that she's finally clean, living in California, and getting her life together."

"But she didn't want me back, did she?"

"No. She didn't."

A wave of grief and rage loosens in my chest. I can hardly choke out the next word. "WHY?"

My uncle's face is warped with sorrow. He doesn't want to tell me this part. This is what he's been dreading. "She had also recently gotten married. Her new husband did not know about you. She had no plans to tell him. I don't think she's told him even now."

I expected the reason would be difficult to hear.

But this is worse than I guessed.

I wrap my arms around the pillar, in need of something to help me stand.

“First, my mother abandons me. Then she doesn’t want me back because I don’t fit into her new life.” I press my cheek to the cold stone and swallow the wail of agony threatening to erupt. “Fine, I’ll learn to live with that. I have no choice. But don’t you fucking dare ever tell me that her actions have anything to do with love. My mother never loved me.”

He rises, chin quivering. “Dani, I just never knew how to tell you. I would have given anything to spare you this pain.”

I shut my eyes so I don’t have to look at him. “You owed me the truth. I don’t know how to trust you anymore.”

“Dani, please.”

“Just leave me the fuck alone!”

Through a haze of tears, I run out of the courtyard, down the hall and out the front door. I keep running until I’m on the other side of the front gate and then the impact of the last few minutes hits me.

In my mind I see a woman with long brown hair, much like my hair. She’s very thin and cries often. I draw her pictures and try to make as little noise as possible so she doesn’t get upset. I don’t even complain when my stomach rumbles because she’s forgotten to feed me.

I wish I didn’t love her but I do.

Even now, knowing what I know.

Even if she will never ever love me in return.

The buzzing in my pocket is from my phone.

There's only one person in the world I want right now and miraculously he's the one calling.

I know he can hear me crying. "Gage, come get me."

He doesn't hesitate. "I'll be right there."

Thirty seconds later, Gage's car screeches to a halt at the curb. He jumps out. "What's wrong?"

I leap into his arms. He's warm and solid and strong. Gage holds me tightly, murmurs my name, calms me in seconds.

"Just get me out of here," I whisper.

Gage doesn't ask questions. He loads me into his car with care and starts driving.

"Where to?" he asks when we're outside the gates of our neighborhood.

"It doesn't matter. You choose."

He says Lake Poppy is only a two hour drive. It's the weekend. There shouldn't be any traffic.

I nod, agreeing.

And then I just stare listlessly out the window for a long time. The verdant, affluent landscape of West Emerald is left behind. We pass through normal cookie cutter suburbs with stucco houses topped with beige tile roofs. This gives way to the less picturesque neighborhoods closer to the city.

Even though we're zooming down an asphalt freeway at seventy miles per hour, I'm struck by a collision of feelings as I watch the urban skyline pass by the window. Most of my life has been spent in the city. Yet when I see it I feel no sense of belonging, no pull of longing for home.

Maybe no place will ever feel like home, not for me.

Gage doesn't push me to talk, something I greatly appreciate.

When we finally leave the city limits I tell him everything.

The argument between Micah and Matilda. The confrontation with my uncle.

My memories.

My fears.

He listens. He doesn't offer bad advice or repeat silly cliches. Gage hears me and that's all I need.

We stop for food when we're a few miles away from Lake Poppy. I wish I'd thought to bring a jacket.

Gage, however, is never caught unprepared. He plucks a clean oversized hoodie from a gym bag he keeps under the backseat. I slip it over my head, happy to be wearing anything that belongs to him.

Gage presses the door locks and we hear the double beep. He checks all four doors anyway. Then he starts to walk away and checks them all again before becoming satisfied enough to take my hand for the short walk from the parking lot to the building.

There are no booths available so we sit on creaky chairs at a chipped table and devour burgers, fries and milkshakes.

Gage has a complex method of eating his food and keeps everything separate. I'm always pleased when he doesn't feel the need to hide this from me.

"Fries in West Emerald never taste this good." I shove a handful in my mouth.

Gage sets his burger down. “Pretty sure deep frying has been outlawed in the boundaries of West Emerald since the seventies.”

“You could change that. Run for mayor in a few years, replace Tess’s dad and bring back the good shit.”

He chuckles but shakes his head. “Nah. I have no plans to be a West Emerald legacy.”

I touch his knee under the table. “Then what are your plans?”

He folds his napkin and frowns. “None. But I’ve decided I want to earn my success, not inherit it. Same with Micah and Conner. We agree that we can’t really see ourselves adding to the empire of a cutthroat property developer that knocks down historic city blocks and builds overpriced luxury condos. The thing is, I have my choice of which tug of war to be in the middle of. My dad’s made it clear he expects me to play a role in his business.”

I ask the next question carefully, mindful of the stories I’ve heard. “What does your father do exactly?”

Gage rubs his chin and his expression becomes troubled. “Nothing that would make me proud to join him.” His eyes meet mine. “Guess I sound like a spoiled prick being offered the golden keys to the kingdom and refusing to take them.”

I shake my head. “Not even close. There’s honor in wanting to earn what you have. And in refusing to do things that bother your conscience.”

Gage doesn’t comment. He continues to watch me and it’s one of those times when I can’t tell what’s going on inside his head.

“I tried on my dress today,” I tell him in order to change the subject. “For the Emerald Ball.”

That brings a smile to his face.

I swear, a smile from this boy stops my breath every single time.

“When do I get to see this dress?” he asks.

“Two weeks. It’s bad luck for the date to see the ball gown before the ball.”

His eyes roam over my body very slowly, very deliberately.

Heat rises to my cheeks.

“I can wait,” he says. “If I have to.”

“You’re in luck.” I give him a coy smile. “You won’t have to wait for very long. Then you’ll get to see *everything*.”

Gage hooks his leg firmly around mine.

The sexual tension in the room becomes electric. The girl punching in orders at the front counter can probably feel it.

The winter sky has already begun to dim.

And I’m reminded that no matter how angry I am with Uncle H, I owe him an update of my whereabouts. I turned my phone off shortly after we left West Emerald.

“I should at least text my uncle. He’ll be worried.”

Gage releases my leg. “I’ll give you some privacy. “

He rolls out of his chair and bends down to land a sweet kiss on my cheek before heading to the restroom.

When Gage is not busy being the sexiest guy in the history of high school he’s proving that he really does have a heart of

gold.

I switch my phone on and find that Uncle H has texted four times.

He's so very sorry.

He hopes to be forgiven.

He loves me and he wishes he'd been honest.

Even though the hurt remains, I feel rotten for keeping him on pins and needles for hours after storming out.

I am fine. Gage is with me. I promise I won't be home too late.

My fingers hover over the alphabet keys and I sort out what I need to say.

I will forgive you, Uncle H. It might not happen today but I will forgive you.

He must have been sitting there with his phone in his hand, waiting to hear from me. He answers immediately.

I understand. Please come home safe.

The phone gets shoved back in my pocket and Gage returns seconds later. I'm already gathering all the garbage at our table.

"I guess we should head back soon. It'll be getting dark and the drive is long."

He raises an eyebrow. "We can start back if you want. But we drove all the way up here. Let's go sit by the lake for a little while first."

"Isn't it too cold out?"

"We'll stay in the car with the heat on."

Gage has been here many times before. He knows the area and drives to a secluded spot on the north side of the lake just as the last rays of a December sun sink below the horizon. The front seat is not ideal for cuddling so we climb into the back.

I'm enchanted by the view of the tranquil water. The sky is clear and the moon plays on the rippled surface. "It's beautiful."

"No." He wraps his arms around me. "You're beautiful."

I'll never get used to hearing those words from him. "Want to know something pathetic?"

"Definitely."

"This is actually the largest body of water I've ever seen."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"We used to take family trips up here every summer. But that was a long time ago."

I lean into his chest and he gently strokes my hair. Any other time we'd be all over each other if we were alone like this. But Gage doesn't push. He understands that I'm still shaken up.

I've always known my mother was out there somewhere.

For some reason I never assumed she was dead. However, I always imagined she'd be back someday. I was kidding myself.

She's never coming back for me.

Yet being in the arms of the boy I'm falling madly in love with makes that hurt a little less.

Maybe this is the turning point in my life and only good things will follow from now on.

When Gage holds me, I can believe that's true, that I deserve happiness.

My fingertip traces the hard muscles beneath his shirt. "Make me a promise."

"Sure."

"Include me in your plans."

"What plans?"

"The ones you haven't made yet. I want to go where you go."

The instant the words leave my mouth I wish I hadn't said them. It's too much to ask, too needy.

But Gage doesn't mock me or shy away.

No, he tenderly kisses my mouth, cups my chin in his palm and gazes directly into my eyes.

"I promise, Dani. I'm not going anywhere without you."

Chapter 12

Gage

Nothing but a wish to make Dani happy could have dragged me here.

The annual New Year's Eve ball held at the West Emerald Golf Club isn't just for raucous teens.

In fact, we're lucky to be allowed in at all and we're expected to be on our best behavior while the adults waltz and schmooze and gulp champagne.

The tables and chairs have all been draped in black cloth with gold accents, which I guess is someone's idea of high glamour, but I wish they'd turn up the lights a little. I feel like I'm sitting in a cave in this corner of the room.

This is where all the underage guests have been assigned tables, probably so we don't bother anyone with our bad manners. Hundreds of gold balloons wait above the dance floor for the chance to be dropped on our heads at midnight.

Dani and I plan to be gone long before then.

Her attention has been temporarily stolen by Tess, who's in the middle of some long story about the trials and tribulations of student government. Tess's date, the college-aged pre-approved son of one of her father's friends, slumps in his chair with a bored expression.

Dani giggles at one of Tess's unfunny jokes and I slide my chair closer to her.

She's a goddess tonight in a slinky red floor length gown that leaves me both drooling and ready to fight all the guys who keep staring at her while clearly thinking things they've got no right to be thinking.

Dani, for her part, is oblivious to how outrageously sexy she is in that dress. She smiles and absently fiddles with the gleaming ruby pendant around her neck.

I sling my arm over the back of her chair and throw a death glare at this bottom feeding senior named Hamlin. He's been watching Dani all night. At one point he even poked his friends and cracked some shitty comment that had them all smirking.

Dinner has already been cleared away and people are drifting back to the dance floor. Typically, I like dancing about as much as I like cleaning toilets but I'll suck it up if Dani wants to take a turn. Besides, I'll take any excuse to be close to her.

We're planning to get a lot closer before the sun comes up.

She has an alibi planned; she told her uncle she's staying at Tess's house.

I don't need an alibi because no one cares where I stay. My house is empty with my mother out partying in the city and my dad in London for the week, but I don't want to bring Dani there. There are just too many bad feelings that come with that house and tonight is all about me and her.

There's a room booked at the Palace Hotel in the city. I already checked in earlier today. The room key is in my pocket.

While my own parents aren't here, there's plenty of family representation.

Edie has tagged along with Matilda and her husband. She wears a gauzy pink dress that makes her look like a piece of pastry and she's been hogging the open bar.

Meanwhile, Matilda has been parading Dani's uncle around all night, showing him off like a bejeweled trophy. She has one of those tediously loud voices that forever sounds like she's projecting from a stage and I can't avoid hearing it even all the way over here. "Have you met my fabulously brilliant husband, world famous author Henley Gallagher?"

Barf.

The man always appears dazed and confused while Matilda leads him around by the nose. Now and then he looks over at Dani like he's hoping she'll wave at him.

When my chair is bumped from behind, I chalk it up to an accident. Until I swivel around and see that waste of oxygen Gregory giving me the evil eye as he strolls away with Ashton on his arm.

A huge negative factor to the Emerald Ball is the uneasy mix of Xavier High and West Prep.

Micah had nothing to say when he noticed his ex-girlfriend slobbering all over his nemesis but that doesn't mean he won't erupt before the party's over, especially if Gregory decides to provoke him.

Tess allows Dani to take a break from the conversation and Dani notices the look on my face.

She touches my leg. "Something wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing." I curl my arm around her.

She smiles and tilts her face toward me, expecting a kiss.

She gets one.

My free hand sifts through her hair as the crowd and the music all disappear.

I'm glad I never settled for having sex with someone who meant nothing to me. I'm glad she didn't either.

We don't stop kissing, not even when some obnoxious fucker hollers an obscene comment in the background.

Then a big hand lands on top of my head and I know who it belongs to.

We look up to find Conner grinning down at us.

He's more than halfway drunk and wearing an absurd gold crown made of paper. It's anyone's guess where he got it.

As for the alcohol, I wouldn't be surprised if his own mother handed it off to him. Aunt Edie isn't known for her spectacular judgment and she lets Conner get away with murder so he stays at her house instead of going to live with his dad.

Conner's other hand rests on Dani's head and judging by the glassy look in his eyes, he might be using us as crutches so he doesn't fall over.

I smack his hands away. "Knock it off. We're not your pets. And if anyone catches you drinking you'll get thrown out on your ass."

Conner pushes our chairs apart and crouches down between us. "No way. I'm the Emerald Ball King."

"No such thing."

He pouts. "There is now. I just made it up."

Dani laughs. “Where’s your date, Conner?”

He blinks. “Who?”

“Kalia. The very pretty girl who graciously agreed to accompany you here.”

“Oh yeah. I think she went to the bathroom. Like an hour ago.” He yawns and leans against Dani’s legs. “Is it midnight yet?”

Lita and her girlfriend come crashing back on the scene after tearing up the dance floor. They laugh wildly while holding onto each other and then collapse breathlessly into their chairs.

Lita tosses her long blonde hair and fans herself with a gold napkin. “I think I got burned by some of those searing looks of disapproval.”

Bree winks. “They’re just jealous of our dance moves.”

Lita throws her an air kiss. They lace their fingers together and grin at each other.

Conner kneels and rests his chin on the table while gazing at Lita. “Where did Haven go?”

Lita’s face dims a little and she gives him a rather cold look. “Haven’s not here.”

“Yeah, she is. I saw her.”

“You did not. That was me.”

Conner, drunkenly confused by the mystery of identical twins, sighs. “I was thinking about her.”

Lita rolls her eyes and mutters something to Bree. I have the feeling Conner is treading on thin ice right now. I can’t blame Lita for being fiercely loyal to her sister. It’s likely even

the West Prep teachers have heard the Haven/Conner gossip by now.

Conner sits back on his heels and nearly falls over. Dani and Tess exchange looks.

The mayor of West Emerald cuts through the dance floor and stops a short distance from our table. He gestures impatiently at his daughter. Tess, ever obedient, yanks her date up by the arm and they go running off to do her father's bidding.

The room is enormous and it's impossible to see everyone but I get a bad feeling and turn to Conner.

"Where the hell is Micah? He disappeared in the middle of dinner and I haven't seen him since."

Conner frowns and pulls off his wrinkled paper crown. "He went to go check things out on the roof."

"Check out *what* things on the roof?"

"Something about fireworks. You know how much he likes shit that explodes."

"You must have heard wrong. There are no fireworks on the roof. That would be a huge safety hazard." I pause and the bad feeling intensifies. "Wait, does Micah plan to set off fireworks?"

"No. Wait, maybe. No. No, he's not."

I shoot a glance at the dance floor, where Ashton clings to Gregory's neck while her ass gets squeezed in his hands. "We should go find Micah before someone else does."

Conner sees where I'm looking and abruptly becomes sober. He gets to his feet. "Okay, I'll hunt him down."

He doesn't get to take one step before being stopped by a throaty voice that always makes my skin crawl.

"My students clean up so nicely."

Olivia Davison slips her arm through Conner's elbow and flashes a glamorous smile. My mother once muttered that Olivia must have sold her soul to Satan to keep her youthful beauty intact.

Conner glances around for help while our principal fondles his arm.

"I like your dress," Dani says to her, a little flatly. "An exact match for our school colors."

"It's Carolina Herrera." Olivia doesn't bother glancing at Dani. Instead, her smoky eyes linger on me. "What a treat to see the big bad Gage Silvestro at an event like this. I was beginning to believe the rumors that you're antisocial."

"Guess what?" Dani pipes up. "I've also heard a few rumors." She plants herself in my lap. "West Prep, after all, is BIG on rumors. You're a fan of BIG things, right?"

Across the table, Lita chokes on her laughter.

Olivia can't avoid noticing Dani now. She's also beginning to look slightly off balance. "I don't seem to enjoy as much variety as you do, Dorothy Ann. From what I've heard, anyway."

"Weak," Dani clucks. "Very weak." She decides to go for broke and locks her lips to mine. Her tongue takes action and we really get into it, a borderline R-rated make out session three feet from the seething high school principal.

Dani finally breaks the kiss and looks up. "Oh, you're still here? I would think you'd prefer to hang around people your

own age. Before some more of those rumors start flying around.”

It’s a good thing dirty looks can’t really kill. Olivia Davison is reduced to simmering in silence.

She stiffly disentangles her arm from Conner’s. “Excuse me, but I should get back to my friends.”

“Good idea.” Dani plays with my tie. “Might want to take a moment to freshen up the lip gloss first. Looks like it might have rubbed off somehow. But I guess you’re used to that.”

Olivia stalks toward the main exit.

Lita and Bree continue to rock with laughter.

“Oh Dani girl, you just might get kicked out of school now,” Lita sings, although she keeps laughing.

Dani shrugs. “I think not.”

She still on my lap and I wrap my arms tightly around her while nuzzling her soft neck. “I fucking love you.”

I really do, Dani.

I’ll say the words again later, and I’ll be completely serious when I do.

Dani leaps from my lap and holds out her hand. “Dance with me, Gage Silvestro.”

I look at Conner, who’s retrieving his paper crown from the floor. “You got the Micah situation handled?”

He nods. “Count on it.”

“Drag him down here so we can keep an eye on him,” I shout while Dani pulls me toward the dance floor.

There's a slow song playing, something from Celine Dion to please the older generation.

As Dani fits into my arms, my ears pick up an unmistakable overhead thud but I don't see anything out of order. Maybe someone dropped a brick on the roof. I'm sure the talk of fireworks was just Conner's alcohol-fueled imagination.

Dani smiles when I kiss her forehead.

We're not excellent dancers, either of us, but there's no talent needed to get close and sway to some slow music.

The dance floor is dim and crowded and reeks of expensive perfume. Normally that combination would bother the crap out of me but right now I'm not bothered by anything. It's a moment when I'm just completely, unconditionally happy.

"It's the start of a brand new year," Dani says.

"Almost. We still have two hours of this one left."

She tightens her arms around me. "Tonight has already been amazing."

"It'll get more amazing real soon."

"I know."

I slide my hand up her back. "Dani, this is just the beginning for us."

She stops moving and pulls back a little. "Gage."

I'm not sure what to make of the sudden grave look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She shakes her head and shuts her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Absolutely nothing. It's just that I've spent my

whole life never really belonging anywhere. Never feeling comfortable with where I was and who I was.”

“I hope you don’t feel that way now.”

“I don’t. That’s what I’m saying. For the first time I have true friends and I have a real family.” Her eyes soften and she draws closer. “And I have you. It’s almost too good to be true.”

“It is true, Dani. You deserve it all and more.”

I’m not a charming guy and I’ve never been good at baring my soul but Dani brings out something new in me, something that makes me think of possibilities and the future.

Something that permits me to set my guard down and be sincere.

Dani lets me hold her closer.

With her soft body pressing against mine, a sharp spike of lust forces me to bite back a groan. My arms wrap around her waist and I push my hips into hers, knowing that she’s got to feel every inch of how bad I want her.

Hell, I’m ready to bust through my pants right here and now.

And yes, she does feel it. Her breath catches and her lips touch my neck.

“I can’t wait any longer,” she whispers.

“We don’t have to wait.”

She’s taller in her heels right now and she trails kisses over my jaw. “Can we leave now?”

FUCK YEAH!!!

We can absolutely leave now.

We can leave as soon as I'm sure that Micah won't be marching into battle and that Conner isn't getting so drunk that he'll end up passing out in the cold somewhere.

Matilda can't be counted on to help and Edie is fumbling around drunk herself so I'll have to think of something else. Maybe I could ask Tess to keep an eye on them. Hell, she'll probably revel in the job. She loves ordering people around.

There's another overhead boom, this one louder than the first. An icy tingle travels up my spine for no reason.

I ignore it.

"We'll leave very soon," I promise. "Then the night is all ours. It's you and me, Dorothy Ann."

Her breath tickles my neck. "Gage, I love--"

A scream pierces the music. It's immediately joined by another one.

And a shouted word, single and terrifying.

"FIRE!"

The effect is electric.

People trip over each other and overturn tables as they dash to the main exit.

Dani looks up and gasps.

Sure enough, high above us the ceiling is smoking. One of the nets of celebratory balloons falls. Some of the balloons pop from the surge of overhead heat and the rest get in the way of the fleeing partygoers.

A shrewdly calm part of my brain warns that the worst thing anyone can do in a crisis is to panic and there's already

plenty of panic to go around. My arm stays firmly around Dani as I rapidly assess the situation.

With so many bodies running this way and that it's impossible to get a clear view in any direction but there is a crush of people trying to charge through the wide double doors so there's got to be a better way.

"Let's go!" Dani tries to pull me in the direction of the crowd.

"Wait."

The flames burst to life overhead.

Scanning the walls, my eye lands on a bright red EXIT sign clear across the room.

Below the sign, a man pushes on a door and escapes outside. Two people follow him while everyone else continues to jam up the main exit.

"This way."

With Dani's hand tightly in mine, I kick aside gold balloons and navigate around toppled furniture.

The room rapidly fills with smoke, obscuring my vision.

I nearly trip over a woman sprawled on the floor in a blue evening gown.

"Help," she begs. "My foot!"

She's petite enough that I'm able to lift her with no trouble. I just hate letting go of Dani's hand.

"Hold onto me," I shout to Dani over the noise of curses and screams.

Another more ominous sound becomes louder overhead. It's the greedy roar of a rapidly growing fire.

Dani seizes a handful of my shirt.

I kick aside a fallen chair.

A sizeable force shoves against my right arm and I nearly drop the weeping woman hugging my neck.

Even through the smoke I recognize the powerful figure of West Emerald's mayor as he makes a beeline for the emergency door without looking back.

"DANI!" I scream, spinning around madly when I realize I can no longer feel her gripping my shirt. "DANI!"

"I'm here!" She coughs and stumbles into my back. Her hand clutches my shirt again.

We're less than ten feet from the door.

Other than the fleeing mayor, I haven't seen anyone I know. I think of Conner and Micah and our friends and even my batty aunts. If not for the fact that I need to get Dani the hell out of here and help the sobbing woman in my arms, I wouldn't leave without making sure they aren't trapped in the room somewhere.

With a cough and a bitter taste of worry, I lurch for the door. "We're almost there," I shout, going slowly to make sure I don't lose her again. "Almost."

Then we're out, stumbling through the door, away from the fire and into a scene of shouting, frightened people as they run around the area like brainless chickens.

Sirens bleat in the background and within seconds the first flashing red lights of an army of firetrucks appears.

"Constance!" A man nearly trips over his own feet as he runs in our direction. "Thank god." The man's face rapidly

changes from fear to relief and he reaches for her. “I was in the bathroom. I couldn’t find you.”

“Richie,” she sobs as I transfer her to him. “We’re still going to Cabo tomorrow, right?”

“Of course, baby,” he coos as he carries her away.

Idiots. I don’t even care that neither of them says a word of thanks.

I wrap my arms around Dani and hold her tightly. “You all right?”

She coughs, nods, and then looks around wildly. “Gage, we have to find everyone.”

“We will.”

“Need all of you folks to move away from the building.” A man in full fire gear shepherds us across the parking lot to the grass with the mass of people in their New Year’s Eve finery.

Some of them pace.

Others yell into their phones.

Mostly they just look shaken and disoriented.

Olivia Davison stands alone, gazing at the building as flames lick the roof and smoke pours out the doors. Since she’s the first recognizable person in sight she’s the first one I ask.

“Have you seen Micah and Conner?”

She doesn’t blink, just keeps staring at the building as if hypnotized. “No.”

“Edie!” Dani spots my aunt before I do. She’s sitting on a large flat rock and scowling down at her phone.

“Conner and Micah!” I shout. “Where are they?”

Eddie seems surprised at the question. “I saw them but then I didn’t. I don’t know where they went.”

I exhale with relief. “You mean you’ve seen them outside the building?”

“Yes, outside the building.” Her face scrunches up and she holds up her phone. “Look at that cracked screen. I’ve only had it for two days.”

“What about my uncle?” Dani asks. “And Matilda?”

I squeeze her hand for comfort while we wait for my ditzy aunt to sort through her thoughts.

Eddie lowers her phone and sulks. “They’re not here. I’m here. My phone is broken.”

It’s no surprise that she’s out of it. She was already drunk and now she might be in shock. I just want to make sure she doesn’t need help.

I kneel down in front of her. “Are you all right, Aunt Eddie?”

My aunt actually gives me a smile. “You can be a nice boy when you want to be, Gage. Don’t let everyone know.”

Weird. But she’s okay. I stand up and sturdy arms envelope both me and Dani in a joint bear hug.

Conner.

“Shit, there you guys are. I was freaking out.”

I shrug out of his grip and slap his back. “Never been so glad to see your ugly ass.”

Micah, also safe and sound, gives me a relieved fist bump. He even accepts a hug from Dani.

Tess and her frat boy date stand nearby. Tess is fretting because she hasn't seen her father but relaxes when I assure her that I saw him get out.

I don't add that he shoved me aside and ran for the exit without a care about anyone else, including her.

"Dani!" Henley Gallagher hails our growing group and charges this way as Matilda clutches on his arm.

He's barely allowed the chance to hug his niece before Matilda whines that she needs to go lie down somewhere. Henley reluctantly releases Dani and helps his wife over to one of the waiting ambulances that are assisting with injuries and smoke inhalation.

"LITA? LITA MARCHENKO!" Bree, crying and terrified, pitches through the crowd. "We got separated!" she wails when she sees us. "Some of these fuckers pushed." She straightens up and glowers at a couple of random men. "Yeah, you! You pushed us!"

"Look!" Dani points and we all turn to see a dazed Lita being steered away from the rapidly burning building by the same firefighter who helped us earlier.

He asks Lita a question and she nods. He dashes back to the rest of his crew.

Lita sways and blinks at us. Aside from a dark smudge of dirt on her left cheek she doesn't look any worse for the wear. Just a little shocked. "I got lost on the other side."

"You scared the shit out of me." Bree grabs her and holds on.

But as soon as she's released, Lita takes a wobbly step backwards and nearly falls down.

Bree rests her hands on Lita's shoulders. "What is it, sweetie? Are you hurt?"

Lita shakes her head. "It's just..."

She never finishes her thought.

She falls into Bree's arms and no matter how hard we try we can't wake her up again.

Chapter 13

Dani

Tess is parked outside and waiting but I can't leave without checking on Cecile.

There's silence when I put my cheek to the door.

The whole house has been eerily silent for the last three days, ever since the horrible morning Micah was arrested.

"Cecile?" My knuckles rap lightly on the wood. "It's me."

"Dani." She sighs my name but doesn't invite me in. The news of her grandson's arrest has left her devastated.

"I'm going to the hospital. I won't be gone long."

A shadow darkens the stairwell and I brace myself for a confrontation.

There have been many of those in the last couple of days.

But no, it's only Laura, one of Cecile's caregivers. She carries a lunch tray that has been designed for Cecile's picky tastes and nods to me with polite sympathy as we pass each other.

I deliberately avert my eyes away from Micah's door even though I know it's shut. What I don't know is when it will be open again.

The spasm in my chest is real and painful.

I've grown to think of Micah as my brother.

Right now he sits in a jail cell and faces a terrifying future for a crime he didn't commit.

Descending the stairs slowly to cut down on the noise, I cross my fingers that no one sees and tries to stop me. I get all the way to the door and my hand is already twisting the knob.

"Dani." The tone of his voice is sad exhaustion. "Will you talk to me please?"

For a split second I almost leave without acknowledging him. Then I can't quite do it.

My uncle wears flannel pants and a seriously faded old t-shirt from his university days. The shirt was always one of his favorites but I haven't noticed him wearing it since he married Matilda.

"Tess is here," I tell him. "We're going to the hospital."

He sighs and leans against the wall. It looks like he hasn't shaved lately. "How is she?"

"Lita had more surgery yesterday to repair the blood clot but she's still in a coma and still in intensive care. You know that. Just like you know that Micah sits in a jail cell because his mother can't be bothered to get him a decent lawyer."

"Dani, of course Micah has a lawyer."

"No, he has a third rate quack who wouldn't even argue for Micah to be released on bail. Gage says it's insane."

"And I suppose *Gage* thinks he knows everything about the legal system."

"He knows this is bullshit. And so do I. And so do you. There's no proof that Micah did anything. Has anyone even

looked at his texts? He said he received a message from a number he didn't recognize offering to let him buy some fireworks. They were supposed to meet on the roof. Those fireworks weren't his and he definitely didn't set them off."

Uncle H stares down at the floor. "There was accelerant poured on a pile of illegal fireworks and then set ablaze on top of a heavily occupied building. People were injured and could have easily died."

This is all unreal. "If he's charged as an adult and found guilty, he could spend years in prison."

While Micah and Uncle H don't share a close relationship, my uncle has always felt a keen sense of justice.

I don't know what in the hell is going on inside Matilda's head but I do know my uncle.

His philosophy is to consider the best in people, not to assume the worst.

I refuse to believe that his marriage to Matilda has changed him so much that he won't give Micah every chance to defend himself.

He raises his head. There's an unfamiliar brand of stubbornness on his face. "Dani, I know why you feel like you have to stick up for Micah. But sometimes people don't turn out to be who you thought they were. Sometimes they lie."

It's awful, this abrupt fading of respect for the man I have always idolized. The taste in my mouth becomes bitter.

"Not everyone is as much of a liar as you are, Henley."

It's a brutal comment to depart with and I don't give him a chance to argue. I leave him behind, swallow my anger and stalk through a light drizzle of rain to Tess's idling hatchback.

Sensing my sour mood, Tess tries to be extra positive. She immediately reminds me that Lita's prognosis is good, that she could wake up anytime.

Right now, the only reality worse than Micah in jail is Lita lying unconscious in a hospital bed.

"Wait, is that Conner?" She squints through the rain.

He walks slowly, head down, hands jammed in the pockets of his dark green hoodie.

I lower the window. "Conner!"

He must have been lost in thought because he doesn't respond immediately. He pushes the folds of his hood back and peers at us without smiling.

We're only a few yards from the neighborhood gates and Tess rolls to a stop.

Conner takes his time walking over. Everything from the slump of his shoulders to the way he seems oblivious to the rain on his head implies dejection and misery.

With a stab of guilt, I realize I should have reached out to him more over the last few days. Gage warned that Conner is extremely busted up about Micah's arrest and now he's got something else to worry about. After interviewing everyone present at the ball, the police learned that Conner was seen with the prime suspect only a moment after the blaze began. The two of them emerged from the service stairs and escaped through the kitchen with the staff.

He bends down to the window. "Hey."

"Is your truck broken?"

He sniffs, shakes his head. "Nah. I was just taking a walk to clear my head."

“Hey, Conner,” Tess greets him. “Why don’t you come to the hospital with us?”

The rain starts to fall more heavily. Conner doesn’t appear to notice. He looks down. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Yes, it is,” Tess insists. “We won’t be allowed to see Lita because she’s still in intensive care. But Bree’s there. And Haven. They could use some support.”

“Come on.” I tug on his sweatshirt. “You can have the shotgun seat.” Without waiting for an answer, I climb into the back.

Maybe Conner has second thoughts about wandering aimlessly in the rain. He climbs into the car.

Tess fixes the rearview mirror to look at me. “Should we pick up Gage too?”

“No, his dad’s flying home today and Gage wants to work on him. He’s counting on the family connections, thinking maybe there’s a way to help Micah since Matilda isn’t exactly trying her best.”

“Christo got in a little while ago,” Conner says. “I saw when he pulled up. About thirty seconds later he and Alta started another of their fucked up shouting matches.”

I chew my lip and check my phone.

Gage promised to make contact as soon as he had a chance to talk to his dad. I hope he’s not setting his expectations too high. I get the feeling Christo Silvestro isn’t a man who will be moved by a moral argument.

Tess assigns herself the job of cheering us up.

Conner, usually full of jokes and laughter, nods along in silence while Tess describes the fundraiser she’s organizing for

Lita. At the very least, Lita's medical expenses will be enormous and I don't know what the deal is with her father, but her mother doesn't have that kind of money.

A tear leaks out of my eye to match the grey January day as I think of my friend and her uncertain fate.

This is so goddamn fucking unfair.

Lita is one of the best people I know. She shouldn't be lying in a sterile room, hooked up to machines indefinitely.

The hospital is huge but Tess knows exactly where to go. After securing three visitor's badges she leads us to the elevator.

We ascend to the sixth floor and step into a scene far more hushed than the busy lobby.

Bree looks up and manages to smile at the sight of us. She stands beside Haven, who appears pale and angry.

Nearby, a pair of doctors are speaking to a woman who is a glamorously older version of her twin daughters. Haven and Lita's mother follows the doctors down the hall.

Bree warmly embraces each of us, even Conner. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you guys."

"Any news?" Tess asks.

Bree sighs. "Not really. The surgery went well. But there's no telling when she'll wake up."

"But she *will* wake up," I say.

Bree manages a brave smile. "Of course she will."

Haven had been standing back but now she stiffly joins us. Her hair hangs in a limp ponytail. The shadows beneath her green eyes are deep. Her glare is an accusation.

“You’ve all got a lot of nerve showing up here after your little friend group almost killed my sister.”

“Haven.” Bree’s tone is sharp. “Cut it out. Lita had a blood clot in her brain. It just happened to occur on New Year’s Eve. There’s no one to blame.”

Haven scowls. Conner takes a step in her direction. She moves away and turns her back.

Tess, ever the diplomat, changes the subject. “You both must be exhausted. Have you been here the whole time?”

“No.” Bree stifles a yawn. “My folks make me leave at night. Haven stays, even when their mother goes home to rest.”

Haven keeps her back turned.

“When was the last time you ate?” Tess asks.

Bree rubs her eyes. “This morning. Chips from the vending machine.”

“What about you, Haven?”

Haven swivels and stares at her. “I don’t know.”

“Can I buy you lunch at the cafeteria? I volunteered at this hospital last summer so I know the club sandwiches are decent.”

Bree’s mouth forms a smile. “Yeah, I’d like that.” She gestures to Haven. “Come on. I haven’t seen you eat once.”

Haven shakes her head.

Bree won’t take no for an answer. She walks right up to Haven and stands toe to toe with her. “Please, Haven? For Lita. She’ll never forgive me if I let anything happen to you.”

At the mention of her sister, Haven slumps. For a second I'm sure she'll cry but she takes a deep breath and says, "Whatever."

Tess looks to me with eyebrows raised. "What do you say?"

"We'll stay here," I say, speaking for Conner too. "In case there's any news."

Tess looks relieved, understanding that the tension with Haven would be more than anyone needs right now.

Once they're gone, we move into a nearby room furnished with cushy chairs and tables piled high with magazines. The empty row of chairs closest to the door seems the best place to stay without getting in anyone's way.

Conner drops down into the seat beside me and spreads out in the way that boys tend to do. His knee bumps mine.

"You're soaked," I notice when I take a good look at him. "How long were you roaming out there in the rain?"

He pulls the green hoodie over his head. Underneath, he wears a white tee that isn't exactly dry either. The fabric sticks to his considerable muscles.

"I was out there for a while, I guess."

"Do you have any news about Micah? No one tells me a thing at my house."

He grunts. "My mother's not exactly on top of shit. My dad hired a lawyer in case the cops want to talk to me again. I don't know why they would. I don't know nothing."

"What happened that night, Conner?"

He plants his elbows on his knees and curls his hands into big fists. “I went to go find Micah. Ran into him outside the men’s room. Then we got this bright idea that it would be easy to snatch some vodka bottles from the kitchen so we went to try out that plan. Micah asked me if I smelled smoke. We heard a loud bang. Then the screaming started.”

He breaks off and cuts a sharp glance in my direction.

“He didn’t do it, Dani. He didn’t set the fire. He’s not a fucking psycho and he’d never hurt anyone.”

“I know he wouldn’t.”

Still, *someone* is responsible.

The same someone who might have set it up to look like Micah was at fault.

“Did anyone check Gregory’s alibi?” I ask “He was there. He and Micah aren’t exactly on good terms.”

“Thought of that. But he was seen on the dance floor when the fire broke out. And I heard he got hysterical about the fire, screaming and pushing people out of the way. Even left Ashton behind. She dumped him already.”

I don’t bring up the fact that I’ve had nightmares about the fire. I wake up sweating and breathless.

And then I think of Gage, calm and commanding, leading me to safety.

Once my mind goes there I can always get back to sleep again.

Two women stroll down the hallway laughing. They are laughing a little too loudly considering we’re in a hospital.

When they come closer, I recognize the woman on the left. She shows up at school events and I think she's someone's mother. She looks over, stops, nudges her companion.

They openly stare at Conner, rudely and with some hostility.

He notices. "Why don't you take a fucking picture?"

The women are startled enough to move on quickly.

"Hey." I touch his arm. "Take it easy."

With a sigh he leans back against the wall. "I'm sorry."

"It's been a rough week."

Conner closes his eyes. "Wherever I go around here, people look at me like I'm a criminal. I know they believe Micah's guilty."

He stares dully at the wall. Then he laughs bitterly.

"Fuck, the name was supposed to be a joke."

I'm confused. "What name?"

"You remember. Wicked West Rejects."

Of course I remember.

That night in the pool.

The four of us.

Sharing painful secrets and listening as we each spoke in turn.

Cementing a permanent bond.

"WICKED WEST REJECTS!"

"Our gang name."

Yes, a joke.

“Everything will work out, Conner.”

I shouldn't promise this. I have no way of knowing if it's true.

There are no guarantees. No one is owed a happy ending.

He lowers his head. “I'm leaving West Prep.”

“What? Why?”

“My dad wants me to transfer to Castle High.”

“That's, like, twenty miles away.”

“Yeah, but it's got a way better football program. I'm not really making the cut in my classes at West Prep and everyone knows it. Might as well focus on football.”

I can't imagine the halls of West Prep without Conner Wiseman. “You'll be very missed, Conner.”

The comment seems to please him. He swings an arm around my shoulders. “I'm not going far. One way or another, you're stuck with me, my little Reject friend, so get used to it.”

Conner jokingly tugs on a section of my hair. He's not flirting now. He's just being a friend.

Which is why I think nothing of pulling him closer for a hug.

It's unfortunate that I do this just as Haven returns.

She stands in the middle of the empty hallway, her mouth pulled tight, her eyes flashing with anger. “So this is how it is, huh? The two of you.”

Conner, confused, looks from her to me and back again. “What?”

Haven snorts. “Yeah, I was warned that you like to fuck everything in sight. I should have listened.”

He stands up. “Haven, there’s nothing going on here. I’ve tried to talk to you a hundred times. And you know Dani’s with Gage.”

“The only thing I know is that ever since your girlfriend got to town everything has turned to shit. It’s like she’s an evil witch who curses everyone she sees.”

This is becoming a bit much, even if she is going through some bad times right now. “Haven, calm down. You’re being ridiculous.”

“You can’t blame Dani for everything that’s gone wrong in your life.” Conner’s voice softens. “Look, I know what’s happening with Lita must be awful for you. And I know you’re still pissed off at me, but it would be cool if we could just sit down and have a conversation. I think we could sort this out.”

She chuckles. “I’m not angry at you, Conner. I don’t give a damn about you, not anymore.” Her focus returns to me. “As for you, you fucking backstabbing bitch, you’ll get what’s coming to you. One way or another. And when you least expect it.”

She pivots, stalks back down the hall and bangs through a pair of double doors.

“Shit.” Conner scratches his head and sinks back down into his chair. “I don’t know what to do about her.”

“Run the other way,” I mutter and pull my knees up to my chest. Haven may just be blowing off steam but I won’t be too excited to encounter her again anytime soon. I elbow Conner. “You think there’s room at Castle High for me too?”

I'm only halfway kidding.

We don't stay at the hospital for too long.

There's nothing we can do there anyway.

Tess drops Conner off first and while he's getting out of the car I stare at Gage's house. He still hasn't called or texted. From the outside, there's no sign of anyone.

"Come over later?" Tess asks when she stops in front of my house. "My dad promised he'll use his political resources to help with Lita's fundraiser. I need to brainstorm the planning." She waits while I climb to the front to get out of the car. "Of course, I'll understand if you already have boyfriend obligations."

In spite of all the crap that's gone on lately, it gives me a thrill to think of Gage as my boyfriend. "Can we play it by ear? I should hear from him soon."

"Sure." She eyes me with curiosity. "I've been watching you two. I'm happy to say that I was wrong about Gage. He's good to you."

"I'm so in love with him, Tess."

"I figured that out." Tess smiles. "I really am happy for you, Dani." She looks past me at the house and stops smiling. "I can't picture Micah in prison."

"Me either." I open the door. "I'll talk to you later."

If not for Cecile, I'd have a tough time dragging myself into this house right now. I remember my angry words to Uncle H earlier.

Lashing out isn't doing anyone any good, least of all Micah.

I need to speak to Uncle H again, this time without yelling. It's high time to have a real talk with Matilda too.

After a long exhale, I punch in the security code and push through the front door. In room after room there's no sign of anyone. Even their bedroom is empty. It's possible they went out.

Then I hear low murmuring coming from somewhere down the hall. I'd know Uncle H's voice anywhere, even if I can't make out the words.

I follow the sound.

"This room will be perfect, Henley," insists Matilda's chirpy voice. No one would ever guess that her only child is currently languishing in a jail cell.

They're in one of the guest bedrooms. I've never been inside this room before and never known anyone to occupy it. The place is a pink floral explosion and the two of them are embracing in the middle of it.

"We'll redecorate of course." Matilda sounds excited as she cuddles with my uncle.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I knock gently on the open door to announce my arrival.

"Dani!" Matilda beams. "Come in."

Uncle H looks relieved to see me. He gives me a hesitant smile and I nod to let him know we're okay.

I clear my throat. "I was just at the hospital. I didn't get to see Lita but her surgery went well and the doctors are hoping she'll wake up soon."

"That poor child," Matilda coos. "Tomorrow I'll have my assistant sent another flower arrangement."

I'm pretty sure flower arrangements aren't allowed in intensive care hospital units but there's no point in bringing this up.

I clear my throat. "Any news on when Micah might be released?"

She sighs loudly. "He's being formally charged. They'll probably offer a plea deal. He should take it."

"What about bail? Can't he be released on bail while this gets sorted out? It's not like he's going anywhere."

Her expression shifts, ever so slightly, to annoyance. Then her lovely face swings to distress. I get the same odd feeling I've had before, that I'm being treated to an elaborate acting exercise.

"Sweetheart, I'm afraid I've done everything I can for Micah. Whatever happens now isn't up to me. Believe me, I'm more heartbroken than I can say." She lets her eyes pool with tears.

So that's that. Matilda is washing her hands of her son.

I can feel my temper flaring, my cheeks growing hot. *How dare she!* The absolute fucking nerve.

"Dani," Uncle H says with gentleness. "I promise we will continue to do whatever we can for Micah."

I look at my uncle. He is truly pained, and maybe a little fearful over what I'll say next. I don't get a chance to say anything because Matilda drops a bombshell.

"Dani, we have something to tell you. I hope you'll be happy to hear it. Oh, I know you will be! Your uncle and I are expecting a baby. We were shocked, but ecstatic. Think of it,

Dani. This baby will be a bridge to a new beginning. You'll get to be a big sister!"

"This is good news." My uncle's words come out like a plea. He's begging me to be happy for him. "We all needed some good news."

Matilda's gaze is triumphant. "We love you *so much*. We know that you'll want to be part of our family, part of this new adventure. And someday, if we're truly blessed, we'll be able to welcome Micah back as well."

Matilda cradles her belly with one arm. She firmly holds onto my uncle with the other.

The message is clear.

She has my uncle.

She has my uncle's child.

She dangles Micah's fate on a string.

Matilda holds all the cards.

"Don't let her mold you, Dani."

I won't. But I still have to play her game.

"Congratulations." I force my face into a smile. "You're right, that is wonderful news. I assume this room will be the nursery? What a great choice. I hope you'll let me help you with the redecorating."

"Of course!" Matilda folds me into an unwanted satin hug.

She continues to babble about baby nonsense but I excuse myself with the claim that I have plans with Tess.

In reality, I need to get the hell out of here for a little while or I might start screaming and never stop.

Once I'm outside, I shoot a text over to Gage, hoping he'll answer and say the coast is clear, that he's spoken to his dad and he has a plan.

My head spins. I'm nauseous.

But I'm also sure the comfort of Gage's arms will help me calm down and think straight. Together we can find a way to get through all of this.

I just need Gage.

When he holds me, I know everything will be all right.

Chapter 14

Gage

My mother slams out of the house after an epic hourlong session of screaming that was mostly drowned out with my headphones. I peer out the window just in time to see her roar out of the driveway in her gold Jag and burn rubber down the street.

I don't even know what they were fighting about this time.

It doesn't fucking matter.

If it's not one thing, it's another.

There are no lights on in the hallway and the grim, rainy skies don't add any sunlight.

I did not see my father leave.

The dash of anxiety is annoying but not unfamiliar.

Christo Silvestro is a difficult man. He's not going to help anyone unless there's something in it for him and somehow I need to convince him to help Micah.

Anger replaces nerves as I think about how Matilda has hardly lifted a finger for Micah since his arrest. She flutters around and says all the right words to make herself look like an anguished mother but it's another one of her fucking acts. Either she believes he's guilty of setting the fire or she just wants him out of her hair.

My father stands in the cavernous bedroom my parents share when they're on speaking terms, which isn't often. The lights are off and his back is to me as he rummages through an open suitcase on the bed.

At first, I think he's unpacking from his trip.

Then I realize he's doing the opposite.

He takes a stack of folded shirts from the bottom drawer of the dresser and dumps it all in the suitcase.

I clear my throat because I know he's not a fan of being surprised.

He turns, looks me over with no warmth. "Turn on the light, would you?"

The light switch is on the wall to my right and I flip it on. Then I flip it off. And on again.

STOP!!!!

My father's face hardens into a deep frown. Any evidence of weakness infuriates him and that's what he thinks this is, just weakness.

I lock my hands together behind my back to stifle the flex.

He won't take me seriously if I start doing weird shit all over the place and I really need him to take me seriously.

"I'm glad you're back, Dad."

He zips the suitcase closed. "I'm not staying."

I need to keep my voice firm and even, no hint of emotion.

No fucking flexing allowed.

"I'm sure you heard about what happened on New Year's Eve."

“Yes, of course.” He’s impatient, fiddling with the suitcase lock.

“And you’ve heard that Micah’s in jail. He doesn’t belong there. He’s innocent. You know a ton of lawyers and it would mean so much to Micah and to me if you could just-”

“We’re not getting involved,” he snaps. He heaves the suitcase off the bed. “Nothing good comes from that damn family. Nothing.”

It’s no secret that my father has always held everyone in my mother’s family in low regard. He may have cause to feel that way about his wife and her sisters but Micah and Conner never did a damn thing to him.

Still, I know my father. It’s important to tread carefully.

“So, where are you going?” I try to sound interested. “Is this a business trip?”

“A permanent one. And you’re coming with me so go pack what you need. Anything else can be purchased once we get settled.”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve chosen London as my headquarters. That’s where we’ll be.”

“Dad, I can’t go visit London right now. Micah’s in fucking jail. I can’t just leave. Besides, school starts again on Monday.”

He heaves a sigh and stands up straight, showing off his full imposing height. “Forget about school, Gage. There’s nothing useful for you to learn at any school. The valuable

lessons are in the real world. Those are the only lessons worth knowing and you'll start learning them now."

What he's saying makes so little sense that I laugh. "You're saying I should drop out of high school?"

He shrugs. "Diplomas can be bought. So can university degrees. I'll buy you the pieces of paper if you like, even if it isn't necessary."

Holy shit. He's serious. He expects me to leave with him and go live on the other side of the world.

"Dad, I know you and Mom were fighting again but you always work it out."

"Not anymore. We're finished with them. Finished, Gage! Poison, the whole cursed lot of the Kingston family. And yes, I mean your mother too. *Especially* your mother."

He takes stock of the look on my face and gets irritated.

"Do you think your mother cares if you leave? She doesn't. She didn't even blink when I said I was taking you with me. You're *my* son. You're the future. I haven't taken enough of an interest in you and I've let you get too soft but I know you are extremely intelligent. You're old enough to put that to use. I have a lot of plans and you'll be part of them all."

He says this as if he's a king handing out favors.

"I'm not going," I tell him. "And that's that."

He shrugs. "Our flight leaves in three hours."

"You plan to drag me on the plane? I'm *not* fucking going. Even if I wanted to leave school and jet around the world with you doing sketchy shit, I wouldn't abandon my cousins and my girlfriend."

He sighs, annoyed that I'm making any argument at all.

Then he looks at me more carefully and a shrewdly cold glint flashes in his eyes.

“Apparently, your cousin Conner is under the police microscope as well. He just turned eighteen last month, didn't he? He'd be charged as an adult.”

“Conner didn't set that fire. Neither did Micah.”

This makes no difference to my father.

“If I make some calls,” he says, “they'll be sharing a cell by sunset.”

“You don't have that kind of fucking power.”

I don't know if this is true. I have a bad feeling it's not.

His mouth bends into a half smile. “Just wait and see.”

The hair-raising sensation turns to a cold sweat. “You're saying that if I don't do what you want then you'll make sure Conner goes to prison for a crime he didn't commit?”

“I'm saying that if you stubbornly refuse to cooperate, then your cousins' fate, both of them, will be on your head.”

While I stand there in stunned silence, he gives the matter some more thought.

“And you'll break things off with that tacky girl. I did my homework. Born of hooker stock, eh? She's already dragging you down.”

I could punch him. “FUCK YOU!”

His eyes flicker with surprise. Then irritation.

“Don't be irrational, Gage. You know I'm right.”

“You’re as wrong as you can be. And I can get by without you.”

He laughs. “How? You’re still a kid. And you won’t get a dime from your trust fund.”

“I’ll figure something out. Like you said, I’m *highly* intelligent.”

“Your mother won’t let you stay here. If you defy me, *both* your crazy cousins will end up in prison. And that girl? I know all about her history. Born in a trailer park, father unknown. You’re young and you need to learn a thing or two so in the future you’ll know better than to get taken in by some trashy little slut who would spread her legs for a meal.”

Oh, HELL no!

No one, FUCKING NO ONE, is going to talk about Dani like that while I’m in the room.

With pure, blinding rage I charge straight at my father.

But Christo Silvestro is a big man, bigger than me, at least for now.

He catches my arms and slams me against the wall.

“Stop it!” He slams me into the wall again. “You hear me? Stop it!”

I push him away, breathing hard, still ready to commit violence. “You’re a vile son of a bitch.”

He’s unimpressed. “And you’re acting like a child.” He rakes a hand through his black hair. “You’re better than this, son. But she’s not.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

He rolls his eyes. “That girl has nowhere to go but down, no matter how it pains you to hear it.”

I don’t fucking care what he says. I won’t even listen. I’m walking out of the room with no intention of returning.

But my father won’t let that happen. “You think she’ll enjoy getting passed around on the streets?”

I want to keep walking.

I want to keep walking all the way out of this house with no plans to return.

Instead, I stop in my tracks and turn around.

Now that he has my full attention he taunts with no pity.

“Matilda’s pregnant now, did you know that? She’s building a new family. If she figures her own son is too much trouble, what are the chances she’ll continue to feed and house the wayward niece of her idiot husband? It’s not like he’ll help the girl. He’s got his dream career and his trophy wife. Your girlfriend is just some old baggage that he probably can’t wait to unload.”

I try to order my feet to move. I don’t want a single word he’s saying to sink in.

“Do you know how easy it would be for me to arrange? To get a stupid teenager addicted to the worst kind of street candy? Just lock her in a room and force feed her. Your little Dani would be turned into a desperate junkie within a month. It’s in her blood for god’s sake.”

He advances, eyes narrowed.

“You have no idea, Gage, what a woman would be willing to do if you send her down that road. But I *do* know. And I’ll show you. In fact, I’ll *make* you watch. You’ll watch as she

becomes a cheap plaything used by a thousand filthy men. I think I'll help myself to the first turn. Are you listening, son? If that's what it takes, then you'll witness what can become of her. She'll be a lesson for you, a lesson in how foul the world really is."

"Never," I croak but the threat has stolen the air from my lungs.

"Don't say that." My father wags a finger. "It's a silly word, and never true."

As I face my father, for the first time I see him as he really is.

Not just a callous businessman with some questionable criminal ties.

But an actual fucking monster.

A monster who means what he says and has the influence to carry out his threats.

Micah and Conner will both end up behind bars on some phony charge.

And Dani?

He will pull out every stop to destroy her in order to teach me whatever sick lesson he thinks I need to learn.

He'll enjoy ruining her. Hell, he'll probably get off on it.

Rapidly, my head spinning, I sort through my options.

I don't have many.

My mother is a lost cause.

As for my aunts, Matilda will be thrilled to see me exiled to another continent.

Edie might have some sympathy but she's afraid of her own shadow.

My grandmother would take my side but she's fragile and completely under Matilda's control. Matilda has power of attorney and could easily banish Cecile to a crappy nursing home if she causes any trouble.

"The cops don't really have anything on Conner," I tell my father. "Or they would have arrested him by now. You make sure it stays that way. And you do what you can for Micah."

He's ready with an answer. "I have top notch defense attorneys at my disposal. I will call today."

"As for Dani..."

He lifts an eyebrow, waits.

"You will not speak her name again. You will not even *think* about her. You keep that deal, Dad, and I'll stay at your side. You break it and I'll fucking kill you."

Instead of being alarmed, he seems pleased.

Why shouldn't he be?

He's getting what he really wants. He knew he would.

"You will leave all of them behind for good, Gage." He checks his watch. "Go say your goodbyes if you must. And in case you think there's an expiration date on the scenario I just shared, let me assure you that there's not."

I leave him there to bask in his victory. I don't know if he was always this way. Or if it's just what he became, maybe what I too will become in time.

Never. Never. NEVER!

My father is wrong.

That word can be true.

I'll play along for now. But I'll *never* turn into him.

When my phone buzzes in my pocket I know it's Dani.

She's outside. She wants to know if everything is okay.

I tell her I'll be right down.

And then I trudge down the stairs because I have a job to do.

She waits out on the sidewalk, beyond the front gate.

Rather than buzzing her in, I go to her.

She's pink-cheeked and a little breathless, her long brown hair curling in the rainy mist. She smiles when she sees me, expecting that I'll take her in my arms and kiss her mouth as I always do.

It's excruciating to realize I won't be getting another chance to hold her, to touch her, to kiss her. This will be the last time.

And then I understand an important fact.

I've already done all of those things for the last time.

Because if I kiss her now, hold her, touch her, then I won't be able to let her go.

I imagine an internal switch being deliberately shut off. Every emotion ejected.

I step through the gate.

"Hey you." Dani reaches for me eagerly but I sidestep, brushing her off. Confusion wrinkles her forehead. "Gage?"

Her soft brown eyes grow worried. I deserve no mercy for what I'm about to do to her.

“I’ve got to keep this short. I’m out of here in a few hours.”

“Out of here?” She breathes a nervous laugh. “What does that mean?”

Across the street, I see Conner walk out of his house. He gets as far as the sidewalk, notices that something is off and stops, watching us from there.

“I’m leaving. My folks are finally splitting and my dad gave me the choice to move to London with him so I’m going. We’re leaving for the airport soon and I’ve got a lot of shit to do so let’s wrap this up.”

Her mouth falls open. “London? You can’t be serious. Gage, what the hell is going on?”

I shrug, going out of my way to look bored. “This whole situation here has just become a dumpster fire. I don’t want any fucking part of it. I’ve got a chance to cut this bullshit loose and I’m taking it.”

“What are you talking about? What about Micah? And Conner?”

“They’re on their own. And so are you.”

“Gage.” She tries to touch me. “I know you don’t mean that. I know it! Please talk to me.”

No, I can’t let her come near me or I won’t be able to finish this.

I turn my heart to stone, my voice to ice. I need to make sure she won’t look back, that she’ll forget about me.

I raise my voice, making sure Conner will hear every word. “Quit being so fucking pathetic, Dani. The whole neighborhood will hear you standing in the front yard and

begging. It's not my fault you fooled yourself into thinking we had something special."

Her pretty eyes fill with tears.

I meant to hurt her and I have. I can't take the chance she'll try to follow me.

She'll end up in my father's clutches if she does.

"You make me sick," I tell her. Then I gesture to Conner. "Same goes for the rest of you fucking losers."

"Gage." Her voice cracks with despair. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I genuinely don't give a fuck."

"You promised that whatever happened, we'd be together."

"No. You just hear what you want to hear. The truth is, other than wishing I'd followed through with being the first to fuck the daylights out of that hot body of yours, I don't feel a thing. Not a goddamn thing. I'm getting a chance to make a clean break. I'm taking it."

She covers her mouth. Then quickly lets her hand drop. "It's true. You really are heartless."

I roll my eyes. "Shit, go wallow in the gutter with your tears. They don't fucking interest me."

"I hate you," Dani whispers. Then she screams it. "I HATE YOU!"

I'm silent, letting her know I can't even be bothered to reply.

Conner has now crossed halfway into the street. Gently, he says her name and she runs to him, crashing into his chest. He

wraps his arms around her and gives me a look of fury mixed with betrayal.

I stare back at him. Then I shrug, a message that I don't care what he thinks.

Dani clings to Conner and sobs loudly. The sound would break my heart if I still had one that functioned.

But I don't.

I know this because I have no trouble leaving them behind without looking back once.

Part Two

*“I would have spent forever in exiled purgatory to protect
her...”*

Chapter 15

Dani

I'm running late but I still manage to arrive first.

"Booth for two, please," I tell the young orange-haired waitress who cheerfully leads me to an empty place along the back wall and hands over a pair of laminated menus.

The air blasting out of the overhead vent is a cool break from the soaring temperature outside. On the other side of the tinted window the pavement soaks up the July heat and city pedestrians rush to the next air conditioned refuge.

My blouse, woven from quality silk, sticks to my skin after the two block trek from the parking garage. I lift my thick curtain of hair to give my sweaty neck some relief.

Bree Lambeau breezes through the glass doors, removes her oversized sunglasses and scans the lunch crowd. More than a few eyes swing in her direction, perhaps recognizing the nationally ranked tennis player. Or perhaps they've seen clips of her interviewing all the big name athletes now that she works for a popular sports news site.

She smiles when she sees my hand waving in the air.

"Apologies for the fashionable lateness." She squeezes me in a warm hug.

“I only beat you here by two minutes.”

This is one of my favorite lunch spots and I don't need to look at the menu before ordering a Reuben sandwich with slices of fresh melon.

Bree sips a raspberry lemonade and swings her sleek black ponytail over one shoulder. “A shame Tess couldn't join us.”

“I asked her but she couldn't get away, not even for an hour. I don't know if you heard, but her father is running for Congress now. Lately she spends so much time at his campaign headquarters it's easy to forget we're still roommates.”

“You're living in that new high rise on Apple Avenue, right?”

“The Tower. Just finished six months ago, it's a company-owned building. As a perk I received a fantastic deal on an apartment.”

I say this with some pride. After all, I had a big role in managing construction of the luxury building. Each time I take the elevator to my tenth floor apartment I'm reminded that I've come a long way from the little girl who haunted the worst city streets during the day and slept uneasily at night while gunshots, shouting and sirens raged outside.

Bree's attitude shifts to concern. “By the way, Tess told me about what happened. They still haven't caught the bastard?”

A chunk of my good mood evaporates. I try to hide it and speak matter-of-factly.

“The one who tried to run me over in the parking garage? No. I didn't see the license plate number and the cameras were out of order so no video was recorded. He missed me and I hid

behind a concrete pillar and ran for the door while he turned around. Good thing I'm fast in heels."

I force out a laugh even though the memory of what happened three weeks ago fills me with anxiety.

I'd been working late and the parking garage was nearly empty when I finally made my way to my car.

The black sedan came out of nowhere.

I only escaped because I reacted on instinct. It was such a surreal thing to happen and although the investigation remains open, the police have come up empty on leads.

As if that wasn't enough to make me feel paranoid about city life, a week later I was nearly assaulted not far from my apartment. A Good Samaritan happened to be there and chased the mugger away but then he disappeared too, leaving me with the dreamlike feeling that I'd imagined the entire thing. A glass vial had been dropped on the sidewalk by the would-be attacker. *Drugs? Chloroform?* I pocketed it with the intent to bring it to the police station for examination. I must have dropped it somewhere because the next day the vial was nowhere to be found. I've been a little jumpy ever since, hoping that old warning about bad things happening in threes is untrue.

Bree tilts her head and studies me with affection. "Why do I feel like I haven't seen you in ages?"

I think back. "It was January. The day before you left to go cover the Super Bowl."

"Right." She nods. "I guess between all my traveling and your work schedule it's been a busy year so far." She pauses and sips her drink. "How is work going, by the way?"

“Busy.” I think of seventy hour weeks on the clock and my boss’s never ending demands. “The brand new West Emerald Golf Club is a huge project and it’s finally nearing completion so I’ll have some breathing room.”

“Will Matilda allow that?” Bree asks, somewhat sarcastically. Then she winces. “Sorry. Sometimes my filter fails.”

I laugh anyway. “No one understands Matilda’s flaws better than me.”

Working at Matilda’s company was never my career goal. But after interning there during my last year of college I found that I enjoyed the job.

Managing a large construction project is like piecing together a gigantic puzzle. Lose one fragment and the picture won’t be complete. I take satisfaction in being good at what I do.

Despite my enduring distrust of Matilda, staying close to her means it’s easier to watch over the people I care about the most.

Uncle H has just published yet another bestseller and though we never did repair our relationship completely, he’s still my Uncle H, still the man who stepped up to care for me when no one else would.

And Cecile is always glad for my frequent visits to the house. Even if Cecile is at the point where she forgets some other details of her life, she always remembers me.

“How’s little Charlotte?” Bree asks. “She was in diapers the last time I saw her.”

“She starts third grade in the fall.”

My smile is automatic as I fish out my phone to show off photos of the feisty, dark-haired little girl who captured my heart the day she was born. She came along at a time when my soul felt like it was in pieces and the world looked bleak. When I held her for the first time a fierce surge of love blotted out all else.

Charlotte is the biggest reason why I choose to keep myself in Matilda's immediate circle. I try to make up for the fact that she gets very little attention from her mother. Charlotte's childhood is unlike mine. She's safe and protected and showered with expensive material possessions. However, Matilda only seems to notice her daughter when she needs a prop to enhance the illusion of a picture perfect family.

"My goodness, what a doll," Bree gushes as she admires the photos.

"She really is. And smart too. She's been reading since she was three."

Bree hands my phone back. "She reminds me of you." She unfolds a linen napkin and flattens it across her lap. "So, is Micah still fighting? Mixed martial arts, right?"

"Yes." I sigh out the word. "He trains at a gym on the east side. In fact, I'm going over there later today to pay him a visit. Charlotte wants her big brother at her birthday party tomorrow but Matilda won't go out of her way to invite him. She hardly acknowledges Micah exists."

Bree makes a disgusted sound. She's aware of how Matilda failed her son, allowing him to make a preposterous plea deal for a crime he was innocent of. He was expected to only be sentenced to sixty days but bad luck sent him before an uncompromising judge who gave him a year. A few

skirmishes inside prison extended his sentence and by the time he was released he was over eighteen.

The time Micah spent incarcerated changed him.

Understandably. And irrevocably.

I hate to admit it, but if Micah was just a strange man I passed on the street, he would probably make me nervous. Not because of his heavy ink or his thick muscles or his distinctly tough appearance.

No, it's the constant challenge in his eyes, like he wants to die fighting, like he's searching for the opportunity.

Bree's face abruptly falls. "Speaking of birthdays, hers was last Saturday."

I shut my eyes for a few seconds. "Yes, I remember."

Not a day goes by that I forget my dear friend is trapped in a suspended state while my own life marches on. Eight years have passed and Lita is still lost; alive and eating and breathing on her own but without any awareness. A waking sleep.

"I was going to stop by this weekend," I say.

Bree lowers her head. "I went that day. Lita's birthday. Haven was there but she left as soon as I arrived."

I give no signal that hearing Haven's name is a source of tension.

Haven Marchenko might have turned out differently if her twin hadn't been lying unconscious in a hospital bed for the last eight years. Lita would have been the one person with the power to steer her volatile sister away from getting tangled up in their father's organized crime ventures.

On the surface, Haven manages a string of nightclubs owned by her father and his brothers. But it wasn't long after moving to the city that I began hearing Haven's name connected to more sinister activities.

Drug trade. Underground gambling rings. Human trafficking.

Tess, being in political circles, knows more about these reports than I do.

The Marchenko family has quickly risen to the status of local crime bosses. Most politicians are already in their pocket.

"Ayla and I are broken up for good." Bree's sudden news jars me out of my brooding.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear that."

The two of them seemed like a good fit, both former tennis stars, both now in the world of sports broadcasting. They had some rocky moments but appeared to be happy together.

Our food is deposited on the table.

Bree picks over her Caprese salad with a fork and sighs. "She grew frustrated because we were never really progressing. I think she could sense that I've never gotten over Lita."

I would never tell her she should just move on. I'm aware of how pointless such instructions are.

Bree sets her fork down. "It's just...she was my first love and there's no closure. Just endless limbo, hoping she'll wake up. Lita wasn't given a choice. It's not like she turned her back on me, walked away from everything we had."

Two seconds after the words leave her mouth, Bree's face pinches with distress. "God, I'm such a jerk, Dani. I don't

know where my head is. What I said was insensitive.”

Naturally, my friends witnessed how I was left inconsolable after Gage cruelly ended our relationship and walked out on the whole family. For a long time I fantasized that there had to be a reason, that he’d come back any day and explain.

That never happened.

Not only did Gage drop me, but he severed all ties with Micah and Conner.

He’s still based in London as far as I know.

Sometimes in weak moments I’m tempted to check up on him but I always stop myself.

If Conner and Micah know more about Gage’s life than I do then they’re kind enough to keep that information to themselves.

Bree watches me anxiously. I smile at her.

“No worries. I can’t remember the last time Gage Silvestro crossed my mind.”

Wishful thinking. After eight long years, Gage still lives in my head rent free.

She returns the smile, although the sympathy in her eyes remains.

Then she asks about Conner, a topic I’m much happier to discuss.

Though he started his pro career in Denver as a backup quarterback, he’s now been traded to a team where he’ll get to be the starter. Local sports fans are ecstatic. Conner Wiseman is coming home.

“I thought he might want to buy a house in West Emerald but no, he says he’d rather stay in the city. With his new contract, money is no object but he hasn’t found a place yet. I’m not even sure he’s looking. His room at the Palace Hotel is a penthouse suite and must be costing him a fortune but he doesn’t seem interested in leaving.”

Her expression grows a little sly. “You think he might be willing to grant an interview to an old friend? I know he’s selective when it comes to interviews and he’s sure got his pick. Everyone in the sports world is scheming to get access to the hot new quarterback for the Emerald City Cyclones. Growing up in West Emerald, he’s practically a hometown boy. Readers eat up stories like that.”

“He might. Fair warning, though. He dislikes talking about the past. The fire. His accident.”

“I understand. And I would never blindside him.”

I wink at her. “I can’t promise anything, but I’ll put in a good word. I happen to have some influence.”

She smirks. “I know you do. In fact, I’m going to pry right now and ask about the extent of your influence. I remember when you’d fly out to visit him during the years he played for Kansas State. And you’ve been seen at some of the Denver games. To be honest, the two of you have always struck me as extremely cozy.”

I shake my head with a laugh. “Objectively, I can admit that Conner Wiseman deserved being named the sexiest player in pro football. But no, there’s nothing romantic between us. We’ll never be anything other than best friends.”

“Well, you must be thrilled he’ll be here in town.”

“I am.”

When my phone buzzes, I assume it's work.

But Bree hears my sigh and lifts an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

I shove the phone back into my purse. "The ex is trying to make a comeback."

She wrinkles her nose. "Not Hamlin? I thought you didn't keep in touch."

I finish chewing on a sweet melon wedge. "For a while we didn't. We ended on a sour note and he moved to New York after college but he moved back here a few months ago to take a job in his father's law firm. He keeps asking to meet for a friendly drink and I keep putting him off." I take a sip of my own lemonade, mulling over the idea. "I think I've grown too used to my independent single status."

When I ran into Hamlin Walsh during my first week at Emerald State University, it was nice to see a familiar face from high school. In the months after Gage left, Hamlin had tried to ask me out about a dozen times but I wasn't ready. But once I was in college, I decided to give him a chance.

Hamlin was good looking and smart and in the beginning he seemed nice enough, if a little bland. I lost my virginity to him, a bumpily unpleasant experience on a pathetically narrow dorm bed while I gazed over his shoulder at the glow-in-the-dark stars someone had stuck to the ceiling.

I didn't love Hamlin and didn't pretend to. We got along and that was it.

But eventually his jealous side won out.

Hamlin was jealous of the way I cared about Micah.

He was even more jealous of my close friendship with Conner.

He was *extremely* jealous of Gage's ever-present shadow.

Since I didn't have much patience for Hamlin's insecure antics I broke things off.

He begged me to take him back.

Four months later, we broke up again.

That was the pattern for two long years before I finally ended our relationship for good.

Hamlin didn't take the news well and it's true that we didn't communicate for a long time. It's possible the time he spent in New York helped him grow up a little.

I'm just not sure if I care enough to find out.

"Nothing wrong with being single," Bree points out.

"No, there's not," I agree.

Of course there is nothing wrong with being single.

It just gets lonely.

Hamlin was the closest I've ever gotten to a long term relationship and yet I never felt a deep connection with him. He was a way to pass the time.

That deep level of emotion has only come around once. I have no guarantee I'll ever find it again.

Sometimes I wonder if Gage Silvestro broke something permanent in my heart the day he decided to shred it.

"Go wallow in the gutter with your tears. They don't interest me."

Every now and then the echo of that rainy afternoon returns. I always smother it immediately.

After a pleasant hour of catching up, both Bree and I both need to get back to work. She argues when I insist on paying the bill but I tell her I'm going to hold the favor over her head to make sure we have lunch again in the near future.

She gives up and agrees that we have a deal.

Before stepping back out into the searing summer day I check my phone and find a series of texts from Hamlin. He has scored two tickets to a popular comedy show tonight and wants to know if I'm interested. He sweetens the offer with dinner at a new Korean restaurant.

I turn him down, claiming that I already have plans.

This is partially true.

Right now I need to return to the office for a few hours.

Then I'll be dropping by Micah's gym in the hopes that if I catch him off guard he'll say yes to Charlotte's birthday party.

Technically, my evening is open after that. Hamlin would be a little dejected to hear that I'm choosing takeout food and couch time with my work laptop over a night out with him, so I leave the details blank.

Speaking Gage's name today has stirred something unsettling and I'm just not in a flirty mood.

Another time, I promise Hamlin to soften the blow.

Then I brace myself for a return to blistering outdoor heat and the midday chaos of downtown Emerald City.

Chapter 16

Dani

Em City, as we locals refer to it, is a sprawling creature with many arms but downtown is the glittering heart.

Investment in new infrastructure has revitalized the area, replacing many of the sagging, crumbling buildings that had seen far better days.

Many years ago, someone had the bright idea that adding sidewalks topped with pale brick pavers would enhance downtown's visual appeal. Those pavers have withstood the decades and are now considered a quaint feature.

Honestly, I'm not a fan of the yellow bricks. I've lost count of the number of times I've wrenched a heel between the cracks.

For the longest time it never occurred to me that the name of Matilda's company must have come from the buttery ribbons of ground beneath my feet.

Then I felt stupid for not realizing it sooner.

The security guard keeping watch just inside the entrance sees me coming and holds the door open. He's young and eye-catching with thick, dark hair and a toned physique. He gives

me a polite smile but today a smile from a dark-haired man with striking eyes delivers a stab of pain.

I point my head down instead of smiling back.

This building, completed during the reign of Matilda's father, is a modern architecture marvel of glass and bright, open spaces.

I pass the garden atrium that brims with real tropical vegetation beneath a glass ceiling. Yellow Brick isn't the only company in the building but it does occupy the prime real estate on the top three floors.

I'm relieved to have the elevator to myself on the ride up. My phone pings with a reminder that the mandatory monthly management meeting begins in just five minutes.

Like Matilda, I'm a stickler for punctuality. I can only spare a quick visit to my office to drop off my purse and collect my notes for the meeting. This office once belonged to Matilda, back in the days when she first started out, working for her father.

The windowed back wall of my office overlooks the eclectic western side of the city, a far more pleasant view than the seedy eastern side or the industrial sections to the north and south. The greenery of West Emerald is barely visible on the horizon if you squint.

With an eye on the ticking seconds, I rush out of my office and nearly collide with Stuart Ballerini, longtime mayor of West Emerald.

"Hey there, Dani." Tess's father issues a booming greeting and smiles through his beard. He's a big man and always stands a little too close. "I was in the neighborhood and

stopped by to collect a check. We're down to the final weeks, I hear."

"I thought the election wasn't until next year."

He chuckles and rocks on his heels. "I meant the club. What an invaluable asset for West Emerald. Sure appreciate the part you played."

He extends a hand, leaving me no choice but to shake it. He nearly crushes my fingers.

The new West Emerald Golf Club has been a long time coming. After the fire destroyed the original it took years to get construction underway. Then came a series of problems and delays. Matilda became impatient and handed the project over to me last fall.

"I think you will appreciate the final results," I say.

A flashback races through my mind.

The night of the fire.

And our fearless mayor bolting for the door.

He pops a mint from a foiled roll into his mouth. "You're handling the grand opening? Olivia was asking."

He offers me a mint.

I take one so I don't gag, which is my usual response to any mention of his wife.

Olivia Davison is no longer the principal at West Emerald Prep. She left during my senior year, the year she married the widowed mayor.

At the time, Tess was not pleased with her new stepmother. Tess is still not pleased.

“It’ll be quite the event,” I promise. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me, Mr. Ballerini. I have a meeting to get to.”

“You never call me Stuart,” he complains.

“Stuart,” I repeat, already moving away.

I turn my back on him and hurry to the conference room. Though I’d never tell Tess, every conversation with her father leaves me feeling creeped out.

The conference room is immense, furnished with a twenty foot long slab of a table made of thick glass and rolling chairs with uncomfortably high, solid backs. Whenever I sit down in here I feel like I’m being swallowed.

The department heads of marketing, finance, and logistics are already present, nervously twirling fountain pens in their fingers and fidgeting.

No phones are permitted in the room for meetings.

Edie shows up next and waves before taking her seat beside mine.

Alta enters with her sunglasses on and acknowledges no one before sliding into her chair directly across from her sister.

The other seats are not assigned but Edie always occupies the chair to Matilda’s right and Alta sits to her left.

Alta stares straight ahead, eyes obscured by dark lenses, her mouth pressed in a flat line. If not for the fact that she enjoys using her salary for shopping sprees to New York and Paris, she wouldn’t put in any effort at all. Her title is Director of Sales. Edie is Director of Operations. At least Edie shows up and works. Or tries to. Right now Edie doodles smiling suns and rainbows on a yellow legal pad.

Most of the eyes in the room nervously watch the giant screen on the wall behind Matilda's empty chair.

She and my uncle will be returning tomorrow from their trip to New York. He was plugging his new book on a national morning show and though I missed the live broadcast I'm sure I could find a clip if I want to. The public appearances he used to shun are now happily accepted. Sometimes I don't recognize the polished celebrity author he's become. And Matilda always accompanies her husband on his travels, leaving Charlotte in the care of a revolving door of nannies.

Matilda's face fills the screen the second the wall clock strikes two. She conducts a rapid inventory of everyone in the room and then smiles.

She must have treated to herself to some Botox while in New York. The small lines on her forehead have been smoothed out.

“Good afternoon, Team.”

“Hello, Matilda,” we all respond in unison.

Matilda, despite her many faults, is sharp when it comes to business. She demands updates from each department head.

The information is nervously supplied, the speaker sighing with relief when Matilda finishes asking questions and moves on.

There's a small moment of tension when Alta's turn comes. She has not come prepared, as usual. She tells Matilda that the figures of the new sales bids will be in her inbox by tomorrow morning.

Then a moment later, Edie fumbles when Matilda fires a direct question regarding the schedule for the new sports

arena. Edie flips through her legal pad doodles and mumbles that she will work it all out this weekend.

Sometimes I wonder why Matilda doesn't fire her sisters.

"Dani." Matilda finally calls on me and her smile returns. "Tell me some good news. I presume we are on track for the golf club opening?"

"We are. The last punch lists are being completed this week. I was there this morning. Final inspection is scheduled for Monday and I don't anticipate any issues."

Matilda is pleased. "You always come through, Dani. There's a reason why I brag to everyone I meet that you are my right arm. My one indispensable employee."

Alta's dark glasses focus on me. I can feel the steam of her glare.

Beside me, Edie wilts.

The meeting doesn't last long. Matilda reminds us that she'll be back in the office on Monday morning and expects all issues will be resolved by then. Just before her face disappears from the screen, I think I hear Uncle H's voice.

Alta is the first to stalk out the door.

I do not understand her at all. In eight years I have not heard her utter the name of her only son, not once.

Edie remains seated, fussing with her pen and staring dully at the glass tabletop while the others start to file out.

"I have some free time this weekend," I tell her. "If you need any help on the arena project."

This might be a sore point. Matilda has already shifted a number of Edie's duties over to me. But Edie looks so pitiful

sitting there that I feel compelled to make the offer.

Edie sighs. I understand she's lonely. She's not terribly close with her son, her sisters are mostly awful and her mother often forgets her name these days. This job is probably all she has.

"Thank you, Dani," she says. "But that's not what I need."

She begins writing on her legal pad, tilting it away so I can't see.

"Dani." Bella Hassan, the head of marketing, hasn't exited the room with the others. She clasps her hands together and waits for me to stand before continuing. "My youngest son just started playing football and he's the biggest Conner Wiseman fan. Is there any chance Conner would be willing to sign an autograph?"

Funny, but when it comes to gaining access to Conner, people always look to me. Even if his mother is sitting right here at the table.

If Edie is annoyed by this she doesn't let on. She doesn't even seem to be listening.

Luckily, Conner is always delighted to sign autographs, especially for his young fans.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," I say. "His name is Nate, right?"

"Excellent memory. Thank you, Nate will be thrilled."

Bella leaves and Edie says nothing.

"Edie, I'm afraid I'll need to leave early today." Theoretically, she's in charge when Matilda's not here. "Is that all right?"

Edie stops writing, flips her notepad face down on the table. She looks up at me, her wide blue eyes the same vibrant shade as her son's. Edie's are noticeably more bloodshot. "Sure, Dani."

Another twinge of sympathy strikes. Edie might not want me to feel sorry for her but it's difficult not to. "Isn't it nice having Conner back in town? Maybe we could have lunch one day next week, the three of us."

She mulls that over with a nod. "I'd like to go to that new French restaurant across the street. I majored in French in college. I planned to study in Paris."

I give her a smile. "I didn't know that. You'll have to tell me what to order."

She gnaws her lip. "My Paris semester was cancelled. I got married instead."

"You can always go to Paris now," I remind her.

Edie is suddenly in a hurry, snatching her notepad and pen and bolting from her chair. "I'm so busy."

She apparently means this to be a goodbye because she says nothing else before exiting in a rush.

I pay a visit to my office to answer some emails and tie up some loose ends before packing up my laptop and a briefcase full of weekend work.

Matilda is demanding for sure. Yet I can't fault her for my workaholic habits.

Sometimes I think I use work as an excuse to avoid the messier parts of life, a reason to say no. To Hamlin or to anyone else who might turn my head.

There are many hours of daylight left and plenty of security around. I shouldn't break out into a cold sweat when the elevator opens and spits me out into the parking garage.

Earlier, I was distracted, rushed, and the lunch crowd was still returning.

Now the *clack clack* of my heels on concrete becomes a horror movie soundtrack. It was right here, on this level, twenty feet away from my assigned parking space when I heard the squeal of tires...

A folder slides from the crook of my elbow and spills on the floor.

With my pulse thudding and my throat tight, I scramble to pick up the spilled papers. A shadow catches on my peripheral vision and I gasp but with a blink it's gone, just my imagination. I saw nothing that night, just a flash of chrome and the dim outline of a figure that could have been either male or female.

The elevator opens at my back and a woman wearing the dark green uniform of the building's security team steps out. She pauses, brow furrowed, at the sight of me crouched with a fistful of papers. I give her a nod and dash to my car, exhaling with relief as I click the door lock button.

At lunch with Bree, I'd laughed about the garage incident, pretending that a deep, disquieting fear hasn't taken root and refused to leave.

This is something I've admitted to no one.

Shaking off the sense of doom, I leave the wide avenues of downtown behind and navigate the winding confusion of the densely packed neighborhoods to the east.

Micah's gym, the one where he works and trains, is flanked by a bar and a sex shop. There's more parking available in the sex shop lot. As I pull in, a man wearing a candy cane striped dildo costume waves at me merrily.

The gym, called Golden Wings, is a no-frills, grubby kind of establishment for serious fighters and those intent on becoming serious fighters. It's also the scene of a lot of backroom sports betting but that's none of my business.

I push open the glass door, covered with dirt and fingerprint smudges, and instantly my nostrils flare at the sour odor of male sweat and old dirt. A shallow wooden desk is the first thing in sight and a man sits there playing a video game on a tablet.

"Hey, Elijah," I say to the old man who was once a legendary champion. "Is Micah around?"

He looks up, grins, his two gold front teeth catching the light from the naked bulb overhead. He jerks his head. "Might be in the weight room. He know you're coming?"

"No."

Micah thinks the neighborhood is too rough for me. He forgets where I grew up.

Elijah's chuckle is a smooth rumble. "Go ahead, then. Surprise him."

"Thanks."

"Through the arena and to the left!" He shouts this after I start walking.

The large sparring room is filled with shouts and grunts, peppered with the smacking noise of skin hitting skin. I've

never been to one of Micah's fights, mostly because he doesn't want me there.

Some sideline conversations pause as I cross the room. Many of these men are regulars, Micah's friends, a few going back to his time in prison.

I'm aware that they might make some disgusting suggestions if I was someone else, but right now all they do is stare in silence. Maybe this is a show of respect for Micah. Maybe it's fear.

I keep my head up and walk briskly. One left turn later and there he is, facing away, a broad, muscled back that has been attacked with ink. Beneath his right shoulder blade is a tattoo I haven't seen before. It looks incomplete, a pair of knowing eyes shaped like an animal's yet somehow human as well.

A memory pulls at me, a memory of the face he once painted on the wall above his bed.

Despite my begging, Matilda covered all the artwork on the walls of his room with a coat of paint shortly after his conviction, like she was trying to erase Micah as well as his art. I wish I'd thought to snap a photo of that one, the lion. I still think about it.

When Micah fights in the ring he calls himself War Lion.

A black punching bag hangs from the ceiling and Micah punches it savagely, again and again. His knuckles are taped but I wince at the impact.

The bag is his worst enemy right now.

He kicks. He punches. He beats the thing into submission.

"I think you've killed it," I say.

He whirls around at the sound of my voice.

The angry lines in his face vanish and he manages a crooked grin.

“Dani.” Then a sterner look prevails. “Why the hell didn’t you warn me you were stopping by?”

“Because you’d tell me not to bother.”

He doesn’t argue. He steps away from the bag, squirts some water from a plastic bottle into his mouth and seizes a t-shirt that had been left in a ball on the floor. Micah pulls the shirt over his head and motions to me.

“Let’s talk in the back office. I can’t deal with any of these scumbags eyeballing you and getting ideas.”

He leads me to a windowless room furnished with a cluttered desk and a single chair. The canned lighting gives everything a yellow glow and it’s depressing to think of anyone spending a lot of time in here.

That person wouldn’t be Micah anyway.

I’m not sure what his exact job description is but it seems to be a mix of teaching lethal fighting skills and maintenance chores. The tiny basement apartment where he lives alone is two streets away.

Micah doesn’t need to stay here. At this gym, at his crummy apartment.

It’s a source of supreme frustration to Conner that Micah balks at every job offer Conner sends his way. Conner knows better than to offer cash. Micah doesn’t want money. Micah doesn’t want a job with a future either. It seems what Micah wants is to fight and screw around and forget where he comes from.

Micah perches on the edge of the desk, leaving me free to take the battered lone chair. Sweaty clumps of hair fall into his eyes and he pushes them back.

“What brings you here? You could have called.”

I fold my hands in my lap. “I wanted to make it hard for you to say no.”

“To what?”

“You know that Charlotte’s birthday is tomorrow. There’s a party at the house. She keeps asking if you’ll be there.”

“A party at my mother’s house?” He’s already shaking his head. “Shit, as much as I hate to disappoint the kid, I’m gonna have to pass on a West Emerald reunion.”

“This has nothing to do with Matilda or West Emerald. Cecile would also love to have you there. And Charlotte worships her big brother. It would mean the world to her if you showed up.”

He swipes a hand across his face. “I’m not much of a big brother.”

“You’re the only one she’s got. And she loves you, Micah.”

He looks at me, stubbornness battling with guilt. “I hardly know her.”

“No better time to start changing than right now.”

He’s still thinking.

I take the opportunity to pull out my phone and flip to a recent picture of Charlotte. It’s one of my favorites. She was reading in the courtyard amid an explosion of spring flowers and looked up in surprise when I called her name.

Micah stares at the image of his little sister and begins to soften. I can see it in his face.

“Please?” I beg. “Cecile will be happy. Conner will be happy. I’ll be happy. And Charlotte will be ecstatic.”

Finally, he sighs as he passes my phone back. “What time?”

I feel like clapping in triumph. “The party starts at five.”

“What does she want for her birthday?”

“Charlotte is easy to please. She loves books. Arts and crafts. Stuffed animals. You name it. And she just wants to see you.”

“Got it.”

“Thanks, Micah.”

He stands up. “Hate to cut this visit short but I’ve got a client coming for a training session in five minutes. Come on, I’ll walk you to your car.”

The human candy cane dildo still waves his arms in front of the sex shop.

Micah stays close to me as we cross the parking lot. He keeps looking this way and that, glancing over his shoulder as if he’s expecting an enemy to pounce at any second. This constant wariness was something that prison did to him. He doesn’t talk about his time behind bars. I don’t know if he ever truly relaxes. Micah opens the driver’s side door when I unlock it.

I poke him playfully in the arm. “See you tomorrow. Fair warning, if you don’t show, I’ll come looking for you. And I’ll bring reinforcements.”

“By reinforcements, you mean Conner.”

“He has special powers. He can annoy you to death.”

Micah breaks into a smile and it's easy to see why there's never a shortage of women campaigning for his attention. “Yeah, I'll be there. You have my word. Now don't go stopping for gas or anything else around here.”

“Give me a break.” I roll my eyes as I duck behind the wheel. “I didn't hatch in West Emerald, you know.”

He snorts and shuts the door. He stands in place with his arms crossed, watching as I pull away. I'm sure he remains in the same spot until my taillights are out of sight.

Rush hour has arrived and traffic is thick as I inch back to downtown. The silver cylinder shape of The Tower is in my sights long before I manage to reach it. Just beyond the downtown district, on the west side of town close to the new football stadium, the location is perfect.

When I purchased the two bedroom unit earlier this year I was glad when Tess agreed to move in with me. We've been roommates since college.

A surreal giddy feeling always hits me whenever I set foot into The Tower.

I helped build this. And I live here.

I've come a hell of a long way from the shy girl hiding in the shadows of a hostile city.

The enormous lighting fixture hovering just over the lobby is a custom commissioned work of art with a hundred limbs, each terminating in a soft white light. Looking up, you feel like you're staring into a constellation.

In fact, I'm so busy admiring the lights that I nearly trip over a quarterback.

"It's about time you showed up," Conner complains when I accidentally step on his foot. He sits on a white leather sofa and eats a chocolate ice cream cone. "I've been waiting forever."

"Waiting for what? We didn't have plans today."

He takes a large bite of the sugar cone. "I went to your office to surprise you. But my mom said you took the afternoon off so I decided to surprise you here. I even bought you ice cream. Here."

He holds out the rapidly melting, half eaten cone. A dribble of chocolate lands on the sofa.

I try to keep a straight face. "You go ahead and finish it for me. By the way, that sofa costs ten grand."

He shrugs. "I'll buy you another one."

My feet hurt after a long day spent in pinching heels. I plop down on the sofa beside him. "How'd you get into the building? You need a card key to access the door."

Conner pushes the rest of the cone into his mouth. "Some nice lady let me in. She's a big football fan. Her husband's away on a business trip. She says I should come over later to look at her private art collection. She lives in 2B. Or maybe it was 6F. I think she said her name is Jessica. So where have you been?"

"I went to go see Micah. And please don't have sex with my neighbors, Conner."

"Okay," he agrees merrily, then grows serious. "What's going on with Micah? He got pissed at me last week because I

tried to get him to take an interview with the team's athletic trainer. Stubborn as hell, that guy."

"I know he is. But it turns out he can be won over sometimes. Micah agreed to come to Charlotte's birthday party tomorrow. She'll be so excited. She loves to draw and wants him to show her his art skills."

"No kidding?" Conner grins. "Hell of a win. By the way, what time does that party start? I want to make sure the dragon is delivered on time."

"It starts at five. When you say the word 'dragon' you mean a stuffed animal or something, right?"

"No." He stands and stretches. "Let's go order a pile of fattening Italian food and watch the original Star Wars trilogy. We'll force Tess to hang out with us too, but she's not allowed to talk about political shit. What an appetite killer."

I get to my feet. "Sounds like an awesome plan."

And it does.

An evening of pigging out and laughing with friends is far better than lonely hours spent with spreadsheets and blueprints.

For a second, I feel some guilt for turning down Hamlin and then accepting a better offer.

Then I remind myself that I don't owe Hamlin a blessed thing.

Conner insists on carrying my laptop bag. While we're waiting for the elevator to arrive, he babbles about how *The Empire Strikes Back* is the best movie in all of Star Wars history and then wonders if Darth Vader's original helmet is

for sale. If so, he would like to buy it and keep it on top of his dresser.

With my back to the lobby, an eerie sensation tingles up and down my spine and I turn around, half expecting to find someone watching nearby.

There's nothing to see but an empty room.

Chapter 17

Gage

He died in agony.

But before my father wheezed out his final raw exhale, I told him the truth.

“I’m going to take it all apart, you fucking bastard. This empire you thought you were creating is finished. Right now, under my orders, the company is being cut up, sold off in pieces. There will be nothing left of you and I’ll never speak your name without cursing. I’m your son and I fucking hate you. You’ve wasted your sorry ass life.”

The cancer that had formed years ago in his lungs and had slowly turned him from a robust middle aged man into a struggling husk was just about finished with its job.

His eyes, like two dull pebbles pressed into parchment, rolled to me. Though he’d lost the power of speech days earlier, he had one final thing left to say.

“Alta,” he gasped. Then his head drooped sideways on the rumpled pillow and it was over.

For eight years I’d wished for his death. For a while I’d planned to kill him myself but I needed to make sure he hadn’t placed land mines of revenge in his wake. Anyway, forcing

him to endure the slow, excruciating decline of his body seemed like a more fitting punishment.

When the nurse who'd been hired to oversee his final days returned to the room moments later, she gently covered my father's face and asked if I needed help making arrangements.

I did not.

The only arrangements would be immediate cremation. His ashes could be thrown down a garbage chute for all I fucking cared. When I shared these thoughts, the nurse gaped at me in horror while I laughed, a dry bark with no humor.

Christo Silvestro was dead.

And I was free.

Two months after that late spring afternoon, I have done exactly as I promised.

I've reduced much of my father's grand ambitions to marketable fragments. Those fragments will be disposed of.

I don't feel guilty in the slightest.

He cost me a lot of years. He cost me any happiness I might have known in those years.

Fuck him.

In the beginning, my father would often remind me what was at stake, what he could do if crossed the line, who he could hurt. Having that power pleased him and in time he relaxed, sure that I'd been converted, his loyal apprentice.

In truth, I was just waiting, watching, wearing the mask of the dutiful, cooperative son.

A fucking act, all of it.

I'm not innocent. I did my part. I helped carry out actions that were unethical, often illegal.

We crushed competitors, dabbled in arms trafficking, conducted business with the world's most heinous smugglers. Sometimes authorities would need to be bought off. Other times money didn't do the trick. But Christo had people to call when extra persuasion was needed and those people weren't squeamish.

Behind the scenes, I did what I could to intervene when he veered toward brutality. Those who were spared had no idea how close they came to death, or to fates worse than death. My father became obsessed with the idea of building a vast legacy and didn't care whose bones were used for the bricks.

It never occurred to him he'd face an early end to his life.

An early end came for him anyway.

At that end, Christo Silvestro was just a pathetic shell that all the wealth and power in the world couldn't fix.

Still, the last moment he spent in this world eats at me.

As Christo's brain switched off he had one thought. It was not for himself or for me or for all the people he'd fucked over for money, power and entertainment.

No, his last breath was reserved for the woman he'd once loved.

I did not see that coming.

He hadn't mentioned my mother in years. It's possible that in his own warped, demented way he still loved her.

After we left the states, my parents never saw each other again, at least not that I know of.

I'm the one who called Alta to break the news that her ex-husband was dead.

She screamed.

Just a lengthy, piercing, wordless scream.

Then she hung up on me.

When I called back she didn't answer.

And I thought of all the fights and the violence and the furious words highlighting the years of my childhood.

But I also thought about that moonlit moment beside Lake Poppy when my parents waltzed to unheard music in each other's arms.

Shit is complicated. Life, love, hate, regret. All melted together and entwined in a chaotic mess.

Then again, I knew that already.

Being back in my own country after so many years comes with a bitter flavor.

Two days ago, I touched down in the Em City Airport. I never liked this city much and feel no nostalgia for the place. I expect to be hated. Everyone I've ever crossed paths with while doing my father's bidding could name a reason to hate me.

This, however, is not in the same league as being hated by *them*.

Micah. Conner.

And her.

HER.

I've spent a lot of effort trying to keep her name from creeping into my thoughts.

It was enough to know that she was safe.

Not trusting my father at all, I skated around him with care, always keeping tabs on Dani and my cousins behind a loyal facade. The private detective secretly on my payroll has nothing to do with the sordid world I'm used to. The monthly reports I received were skimmed and discarded.

By my orders, only her initials were used in those reports. Not her name, never her name.

Once her name slides into my mind it doesn't want to leave. It becomes a mantra, a method of torture, flaring behind my closed eyelids when I try to escape into sleep, or the syllables tapped out staccato-like on the fingers of my right hand.

DOR.O.THY. ANN.

My phone trills in my pocket and I answer the call from my realtor.

"Hi, Gage. Just checking in to make sure all is well." Lauren Cantor speaks like she's singing a nursery rhyme but she's highly effective at her job, a quality I respect above all else.

When I contacted Lauren with my mission to buy *this particular apartment*, no substitutes acceptable, she didn't attempt to talk me out of it. I was willing to pay any price and wanted to offer triple the market value as an opener.

She thought twice the market value would be more than enough incentive. She was right.

The only contract conditions for the previous owner were to vacate the premises within a week and maintain discretion. The paperwork was filed under the name of a newly created shell company. No one looking at the public records could guess my name is behind the purchase, which is just how I want it.

For now.

“Everything looks good,” I tell her.

“You know, the place is practically brand new. The prior owners only occupied the residence for four months. Still, I hired a deep clean crew to ensure every room would be absolutely spotless. I really hope you’re satisfied with the results.”

I look around the gleaming kitchen. Little does she know that the condition of the apartment is irrelevant. I would have offered ten times what I paid. A hundred times. I’m sure Laura wonders about my motivations but is smart enough not to ask.

“All is well,” I assure her. “Thanks a lot.”

“And the furniture is to your liking? If not, I can arrange for-”

“It’s fine.”

She takes the hint. “Well, if you need anything else, please reach out.”

“Will do.” I end the call and mute my phone before plunking it facedown on the black quartz counter.

With my hands curled into fists, I leaned on the countertop and take an impassive look at my surroundings.

The old owners threw in their furniture as a bonus. I suppose with the sale windfall they could afford all new crap.

They were fans of the color grey.

Grey suede furniture, grey plush area rug, grey painted walls. It's not appealing but I have no interest in redecorating.

I can't guess how long I'll be here.

Long enough to set a few things straight. Long enough to figure out what the fuck is going on.

Maybe I'll get to stay for good. It's not like there's a life waiting for me overseas.

My fists tighten as I rehash a recent conversation.

Jen Sullivan is a retired detective who spent twenty years on the Em City police force before opening up her private shop. She's worked for me for ages, always impeccably discreet. She's honest, thorough and measured. Her conclusions are cautious. This is why I listened good when she followed up her report with a phone call.

"As of this time there are no leads," she said in reference to Dani's brush with death in the parking garage. "Frankly, I'm suspicious that the video cameras had been disabled less than twenty-four hours prior but the incident is assumed to be random rather than targeted to her specifically."

Random my ass.

I don't fucking believe in 'random', not in my family.

And not when it involves a speeding car aimed at a single target late at night in an otherwise empty parking structure when all the surveillance equipment had been knocked out.

That's not random. That's someone who prepares. That's someone who lies in wait.

Christo Silvestro is in his grave. Dani's new enemy isn't him.

"Keep on it," I told Jen.

"Absolutely," she replied, obviously not minding the extra task. Why would she? I pay damn generously.

All that night I paced and brooded and was even tempted to call Conner and Micah.

Neither has any reason to want to hear from me. To them, I'm just the asshole who jumped ship when the waters got rough.

Micah is unaware of how I've paid off his parole officer to look the other way when he flirts with questionable activities or how I manipulate the betting market for his fights to make sure he gets the opportunities he deserves.

Conner has no idea that when he got into a frat house scuffle that might have endangered his spot on the university football team, I found out who could be enticed to drop the charges and made it happen.

Even without knowing all this, they'd still listen if I said Dani might be in trouble. They remain devoted to her.

It's a consolation of sorts. At least they all still have each other.

As for Dani, she'd would see me coming a mile away. And she'd run in the other direction.

In the end, I didn't call Conner or Micah.

When the sun came up, I phoned Jen to ask if she knew a bodyguard for hire, one who has a talent for operating in the shadows. I wanted a local guy, someone with integrity.

I'd never think of involving the fucking brutes connected to my father. You don't want a man who carves out eyeballs in exchange for a paycheck to come within a hundred miles of any woman you care about. Men like that are more volatile than wild animals and they turn on a dime.

Jen's younger brother works with her, a former Marine who doesn't ask questions. The last time I heard from him was an early morning text today after he watched Dani go to work. He's confident that she's oblivious to being tailed.

This doesn't make me feel any better.

She's not paying enough attention to what's going on around her. She's walking the streets of Em City without looking over her shoulder.

Slowly, as if animated by their own will, the fingers of my right hand unroll. An insistent scrap of my brain taps out the rhythm.

DOR.O.THY. ANN.

We had less than one season together.

It wasn't enough, not nearly fucking enough. And I've never found anyone else who comes close to measuring up to her.

No one is even given a chance to try.

I'm here because I'm worried about her.

And because I'm selfish.

My father is dead and it's time to try to reclaim my life.

I close my fist again and bang it once on the counter.

For all I know, this might be the hour when we come face to face again. I haven't made a plan. This morning there was a

near miss when Tess Ballerini headed out of the building just as I was about to walk in. Luckily, Dani's roommate was too busy ferociously texting to notice when I passed within two feet of her.

Every time I try to imagine what should be said when Dorothy Ann Gallagher and I see each other again, I come up blank.

My stomach reminds me that I haven't eaten in a while. I toss around the thought of ordering food but restlessness thrums through my blood. I could use a solid hour of gym time to work that off. There's a decent fitness center on the first floor. There's also a pool on the roof. However, neither of these ideas are appealing.

I step over to the glass wall and note the thunderheads rolling in from the east. My view is populated by the peaks of the downtown business district. In the center is a narrow building with a sharply slanted roof, the legacy of my mother's family.

I feel no inclination to give Alta a heads up that I'm back.

After checking the time, I decide to take a walk and grab some food. I'll use the stairs to get down and exit out the rear door. This is not a small building but I'd rather not have a run in just yet so I make sure the coast is clear in the hallway before jogging down ten flights. The stairwell door opens just on the other side of the lobby and I've barely slipped through it when I freeze.

"I went to go see Micah. And please don't have sex with my neighbors, Conner."

FUCK.

Her voice is the same.

A dose of sexy sweetness, a punch to my chest like nothing else.

I lean against the wall and listen as Conner asks about Micah.

Then Dani mentions a birthday party. Charlotte's birthday party. The little cousin I've never met.

Next it sounds like Conner yawns and suggests a Star Wars marathon.

Nothing about their exchange sounds flirtatious.

They are what they have always been. Friends who became family.

The sense of loss is acute and my lungs empty of air. I should have been better prepared for this.

Me, the man with a reputation as a vicious bastard with the morals of a cockroach, has to lean against the wall like a fucking wimp after listening to a conversation.

Their footsteps go in the opposite direction, toward the elevators. I can't stop myself from taking a step and peering around the corner.

Conner has already disappeared but Dani walks more slowly in her red heels. The black skirt she wears hugs the gentle curve of her hips and ends above her knee, showing off her shapely legs. Her long brown hair hangs down her back, just like always. There's an air of sensual confidence in her movements that didn't used to be there.

And I've missed it all, missed watching her become the woman she is now, missed the brotherhood bond I once shared with Micah and Conner.

I've fucking missed everything.

There's little point in hating the dead but that doesn't stop the surge of rage at the man who took away everyone I cared about, the man who turned me into his motherfucking automaton sidekick.

If not for him, I might have turned out normal.

Finished high school, gone to college, taken an ordinary job.

I would have had people in my life instead of too much money, a long list of enemies and a shitload of unhealthy bitterness.

Conner's voice echoes and the elevator dings.

But Dani suddenly stops where she is.

I know how she's going to move before her head starts to turn. I step back out of sight before hustling down the empty corridor, past the fitness facility and out the back door.

At least there's some energy in my steps. Now I do have a plan.

Tomorrow.

I'm going to that party. I'll stroll right into Matilda's stupid backyard like I never fucking left.

Might as well shock the whole damn pack of them at once.

Chapter 18

Dani

“My gift is on the entry table.” Tess dumps a heaping spoonful of protein powder into her matcha iced tea. “And tell the little munchkin I’m sorry I couldn’t be there today.”

I hold a crumb-covered breakfast plate under the faucet stream. “You’re sure you can’t make it?”

She gulps her tea like it’s a shot of hard liquor and shakes her head. “There are three rallies planned over the next two weeks and I need to make sure the venues are all squared away.”

My mouth stays shut as I slide the plate into the lower dishwasher rack.

Tess’s father takes advantage of her, paying her peanuts to manage both his real estate ventures and his campaign while rarely showing any appreciation for the time she puts in.

I’d be the first one to call myself a workaholic. Tess, however, is essentially married to her job.

She drains her tea and I hold my hand out for the glass so I can add it to the dishwasher. As roommates, we’ve always been perfectly in sync like that.

“By the way,” she says as she winds her hair into a knot and secures it with a clawed clip, “the evil stepmother is battle hunting. It’s worse now that she and my dad are having daily marital spats. I’m keeping my fingers crossed he’s finally seeing the light when it comes to her. But since I won’t be at the party, Olivia might be looking for alternative provocation. You know she doesn’t exactly love you.”

My hip shoves the dishwasher closed with a bang. “So ridiculous that Matilda even invited her.”

“You know how they are.”

“Best frenemies to the end.”

She grins. “Not like us.”

“*Nothing* like us.”

Her smile falls. “You’re still going to visit Lita before the party?”

“Yeah.” I turn around to check the oven clock. “I should get going. I also promised Charlotte I’d arrive before anyone else.”

“Give Princess Charlotte a kiss for me. You need help carrying everything?”

“Nope. And I’ll send you party pics.” With my purse on my shoulder and my arms loaded with prettily wrapped gifts, I wait as Tess runs over to hold the door open.

Strange, but I could swear the door across the hall whispers shut the instant I step outside my apartment.

It might have been my imagination.

The pair of young lawyers who lived there were seen hastily moving out last week. They only purchased the place a

few months ago and made no mention of selling it. To my knowledge, no one else has moved in.

The peculiar tingle down my spine must be old fashioned paranoia. It doesn't take much to rattle me these days.

That ominous feeling has been dismissed by the time I get on the road to the Queen Valley Care Home. The facility is top notch, one of the finest in the country. Lita receives the best care possible. With her mother now out of state and her twin sister dabbling in the criminal underworld, it's really the best option.

Each time I visit, I push aside a grim shadow of despair as I walk the bright, sterile hallways. Lita's condition isn't hopeless. But the odds are stacked against her.

Eight years in a persistent vegetative state.

Eight years of being alive yet entombed in a dreamy twilight.

We all know the chances that Lita will wake up are faint and growing more unlikely with each passing year.

The nurse behind the reception desk makes a copy of my ID and offers a laminated visitor's badge. "Room nineteen."

"Does she have any other visitors today?"

She peers at her screen and crunches a mint. "No, nobody yet today."

What a relief. "Thanks."

It's not that I'm afraid of Haven Marchenko.

It's just that I'd rather lick a city bus bench than run into her.

Time has not softened her edges. Quite the opposite.

She's never seen in West Emerald anymore. She stays on the east side now, expanding the realm of violence and depravity ruled by her brutal family. She seems to despise most people, yet she likes to remind me that I occupy a place of honor at the top of her shit list.

This is the first time I've ever come alone. A gift bag hangs from my fingers, a little keepsake because I didn't want to arrive empty handed. There's no way to know if Lita is aware of anything happening around her.

Behind each closed door in this long corridor is a story, an interrupted life.

At number nineteen I take a deep breath and look through the door's square window. The bed has been adjusted to prop Lita up into a sitting position and the television mounted on the wall is in the middle of showing the movie *Grease*.

I open the door slowly, quietly. "Hello! It's Dani."

Lita's doctors have said it's best to speak to her in a conversational manner, just in case the words are able to penetrate. I push one of the soft armchairs over to the side of the bed and sit down.

She doesn't look sick or tragic in the slightest. Her hair is kept short and she wears a dark pink track suit that she'd surely laugh at if she were conscious. Her lips are slightly parted and it's easy to imagine she's just sleeping.

Or waiting.

A princess of legend perhaps, ready to be awakened with a timely kiss.

"I brought you a new friend." I remove the teddy bear from the gift bag and tuck it in beside her. "I've named him Usher because I'm in the middle of a mad, completely one-

sided affair with Edgar Allan Poe. I've grown attached to this little guy and I doubt I could have sacrificed his company for anyone else."

The bear's beady plastic eyes stare vacantly at the ceiling. Lita's eyes are often open, gazing out with a dull absence of focus. Today, however, they are shut.

I have no gift for one sided conversations. To my own ears I sound stiff, artificial.

Her hands are posed limply at her sides. I reach for the closest one. Her skin is clammy and she doesn't react when I gently squeeze. "I miss you. We all do. The world is a less colorful place without our Lita." I swallow hard to chase away the thickness in my throat. In the background, the characters dance on a car.

I clear my throat and pitch my voice higher. "Guess what? Today is Charlotte's birthday. I can't believe she's eight. She's so smart, so funny. You would adore her."

I tell her about Charlotte's party, about my apartment, about Conner's return and Tess's job and the sinfully delicious rugelach I discovered at a kosher bakery down the street from my building.

Unpleasant subjects are skipped. The parking garage. The street attack.

A persistent, troubled feeling that conjures old memories and grows stronger each day.

"Next time I promise I'll stay longer." I push the chair back where it belongs. "But right now there's a little girl waiting for me." I bend down and gently peck Lita's soft cheek.

Lita's eyelids flip open. This is startling, not unusual. A piece of her brain has stirred, that's all. She'll blink, sometimes even grunt. But she's not really here. Even if she seems to be staring directly at me.

I'm having trouble turning away with Lita's eyes on me. I know it's futile, silly, but I sharply snap my fingers inches from her nose.

Nothing, not even a flicker. A handful of seconds pass and she blinks again.

"Looks to me like you're the one with brain damage." The voice at my back is barbed wire and rage.

I straighten up and force my jaw to quit clenching before turning around. "I was just leaving."

Haven Marchenko bears little resemblance to the fresh-faced girl she used to be.

Her blonde hair has been dyed an unnatural shade of red, closer to a lustrous burgundy. Her face is thinner, her makeup heavy. A diamond stud gleams on the left side of her nose and she wears a tight black dress with a deeply plunging V down the middle. A combination of smoke and overpowering perfume rolls off her in waves. She looks like she just dropped by after a long night of club hopping, which makes little sense because it's early afternoon.

The pointer finger of her right hand is decorated with a huge silver ring. She keeps her hand on the door and rhythmically taps her ring against the metal lever, over and over.

The sound is somehow menacing.

I'm not too worried about her causing a scene, not here. Still, it's better to defuse than escalate. "Haven, I didn't know

you'd be here today. If I had, I would have postponed my visit. I'm aware that I'm not your favorite person."

"I'm here *every* weekend," she bites back. Her gaze shifts to the bed behind me and in a split second she goes from badass bitch to anguished sister.

Lita impassively observes the drama. She blinks.

"Okay, I'll leave you alone now." I push the skinny strap of my leather purse over my shoulder and move forward.

Haven doesn't budge. "You do that, Dani. Go and leave us alone."

We're practically standing toe to toe at this point, although Haven has the advantage. She's at least six inches taller. The edge of a tattoo, a serpent head, peeks from the neckline of her dress while Haven's kohl-rimmed steely eyes glower down.

"Look, I have somewhere to be," I tell her because she shows no sign of moving.

I might have been wrong to assume she wouldn't throw a tantrum in her sister's hospital room.

"Is that right?" She arches a brow. "Yeah, I bet your life is all fake flowers and fucking glitter rainbows. Everything just works out for you, doesn't it, princess?" She's now one decibel away from shouting.

This is bullshit.

I cross my arms and lift my chin. "Aren't you getting a little old for this angry girl act? Grow the fuck up, Haven. Or don't. Whatever. Just get the hell out of my way."

A spark lights up her eyes and I realize I've made a mistake.

Haven likes the fight. She doesn't need an excuse, but I've given her one.

My hand-to-hand combat skills don't exist. She's bigger, undoubtedly stronger. If gossip can be believed, she's also in bed with a long list of unsavory characters. Haven could probably impale my brain on an icepick and burn my body in an east side scrap yard without batting an eye. No sane person would choose her as an enemy.

"Excuse me." A woman in powder blue scrubs is paused behind Haven in the doorway. "Haven, so glad to see you. Just in time for Lita's physical therapy."

Haven's fury conveniently vanishes. She steps aside and smiles at the woman. "Hi, Vinca. I hoped you'd be working today. I'll help with my sister as soon as I take the garbage out."

Vinca finds nothing odd about this statement. She happily wheels the chair into the room and begins fussing over Lita.

This time, Haven makes no effort to stop me when I edge into the hallway. I keep my mouth shut instead of pressing my luck and head for the exit.

"Hey, Dani?"

With a sigh, I turn around, not expecting an apology.

And not receiving one.

She's watching, leaning nonchalantly against the wall with her arms folded. "Another time," Haven says.

A promise. A threat. Not worth answering.

Even though I don't hear her following, I'm creeped out on the walk back to my car. I don't properly exhale until I'm behind the wheel with the doors locked.

Chapter 19

Dani

West Emerald and I share an erratic relationship.
I love the town and I hate the town.

On one hand, this is effectively my touchstone, the home of my family, the place I'm guaranteed to return to.

On the other, it's a hostile reservoir of old reminders.

I was at my happiest here. I was at my most miserable here.

The rolling greenery of celebrated golf courses pass by my window. Tree lined sidewalks tower over lush ground cover, defying the sentence of a parched desert reality. There is currently a drought, a bad one. The skimpy urban parks of Em City wither, the grass dying of thirst amid municipal water restrictions. No one is allowed to notice that the same rules don't apply here.

I refuse to glance to the left when the West Prep campus beckons. There's nothing worth seeing there.

But less than a mile down the road, I slow down to take a critical look at my handiwork.

The West Emerald Golf Club has been built over the site of its predecessor and the two have nothing in common. While

the old version was an aging grand nod to yesteryear glamor, its replacement was inspired by Byzantine architecture, accessorizing the hundred acre property like a palace mirage. It's as showy and pretentious as a theme park exhibit. I'll be glad when the grand opening is out of the way, leaving me free to move on to more meaningful projects.

The imposing bronze gates at the threshold of Matilda's neighborhood are shut, as always.

I roll to a stop beside a metal box and punch in the six digit code, which is the same one Matilda uses for her home security system. Most people change their codes periodically but she stubbornly keeps hers the same.

The gates take an excessive amount of time to inch open. A silver car sits on my rear bumper, trying to piggyback a way in. The car follows closely until I'm well inside the community but the second I try to peer at the driver in the rearview mirror it turns sharply right.

A shiny pink catering van is the only vehicle parked in front of Matilda's house when I take a spot in the vast driveway. I'm still unloading the trunk when a larger truck joins the catering van, the bubbly purple words Emerald Star Party Rentals embellished along the length.

I went overboard on gifts and feel no shame. Three hefty giftbags swing from one arm, four from the other, and my arms are stacked with boxes.

A door slams on the newly arrived party truck.

“Yo Tony!”

“WHAT?”

“Where's the big dragon? I only see the little dragon.”

“Front of your face, dickhead.”

Some grunting ensues. Yards of pink and green vinyl are hauled out of the back bay. Tony and Tony’s partner haggle over who should carry the most weight.

A man strolls by on the sidewalk and takes in the sights, a blue ball cap pushed down low enough to touch the frames of his sunglasses. He freezes when he sees me watching, then raises an arm in greeting.

He looks familiar. One of the neighbors maybe. I don’t keep up with who lives here now.

A faded Emerald City Cyclones shirt stretches over his thick chest so it’s possible he expects Conner to be here and is trying to catch a glimpse of the team’s new quarterback. I’d wave back if my arms weren’t loaded but he moves on down the sidewalk at a slow pace like he’s just out enjoying the afternoon weather.

Matilda’s house used to inspire a sense of awe but that ended a long time ago.

After all these years I still don’t think of this as Uncle H’s house. Just Matilda’s. Chalk it up to stubbornness.

The front door is unlocked and I wrangle my way inside with my gift wrapped burdens. Freesias are back in season and dominating the foyer, radiating an excessive sweetness that tickles my nostrils.

The current decorative theme is Italian Renaissance with lots of dark wood and dramatic draperies. I have trouble seeing over the birthday gift tower and my knee smacks a hand carved bench that Matilda bought at a New York City auction following the death of a prominent art collector. The reason I know that is because I was required to fly there, bid on the

stupid thing in person and then figure out a way to ship it home.

Mingled female voices drift from somewhere deep in the house. I track the sound and find the catering crew in the kitchen.

Two of the women, similar enough in looks to be sisters, were belly laughing but abruptly quit at the sight of me. They quickly busy themselves by adding tiny sandwiches to serving trays.

I don't want to bother them so I say nothing and head for the back door, which has mercifully been propped open. A balloon arch that includes every shade of pink welcomes me to the party and the patio misting system blasts my skin with a cool spray. Flowers spill out of large ceramic pots and a trio of swans float lazily in the pool.

I hardly have time to get my bearings before an eight-year-old tornado wearing organza butterfly wings nearly bowls me over.

"You're here!" Charlotte squeals and aggressively hugs my waist.

"Whoa." I laugh and try to keep my balance. "Let's put these down first. There's at least one breakable gift in here."

Charlotte trails me as I take a short walk over to the white table already loaded with presents. I add mine to the collection and turn around to give my birthday girl a real hug.

She pulls back first and examines me. "Dani, I missed you." Her tone is a little too serious, a worry line appearing between her brows.

I tweak her nose. "I missed you too, angel. Sorry I've been working so much. That's a new dress, isn't it?"

She brightens and twirls. The full pink skirt flares. “I wanted the red one but Mother says red is not my color and makes my complexion look washed out.”

MOTHER doesn't know what the hell she's talking about.

Naturally, I don't say this. I smile at the little girl who owns my heart and say, “Every color is your color, honey.”

“Dani.” Uncle H strolls across the lawn looking like an old-fashioned gentleman of leisure in a lightweight beige linen suit with purple freesias in the lapel. His smile broadcasts a set of luminous white teeth that have been expensively capped. He doesn't hesitate to offer a gentle hug. “So glad to see you. This little one's been watching the door with impatience.”

I detach from his hug and rest my hands on Charlotte's small shoulders. “Nothing could keep me away from my Charlotte.”

Smile lines crinkle around his eyes and his expression grows wistful. “One of these days our schedules will match and we'll get to have that lunch, just the two of us.”

Right. He's been making the same promise since I graduated from college. He'd never admit that his wife stands in the way.

A few months back he showed up unexpectedly at my office door with an offer to treat me to lunch at my favorite deli but Matilda swooped in, cancelling her own plans, and inserted herself into the lunch equation. Our private lunch became a long hour of listening to Matilda babble about herself.

Charlotte leans against me. “Where's the cake, Daddy?”

My uncle's eyes soften with love as he gazes down at his daughter. No matter Uncle H's flaws he really does adore her.

“I think it was already delivered, sweetheart. It must be in the kitchen.”

“It’s lemon, right? I told Mother I wanted lemon filling with blue buttercream frosting.”

His smile broadens. “Then I’m sure that’s what it is.”

“Oh, there you are!” Matilda’s dress is an adult version of Charlotte’s. She glides over the lush green grass in low heeled sandals. A gauzy pink shawl is rolled into the crook of her elbows and she presses into my uncle’s shoulder. “Henley, just look at our beautiful girls!”

He looks. He beams.

Matilda eats it up when people tell her she’s aging backwards. She looks younger now than she did eight years ago. “Listen, we need to get the photos finished before the guests arrive.”

“What photos?” I ask.

She tosses her carefully curled hair and nods to a man setting up camera equipment in front of the pool in order to capture the swans in the background. “The photographer will be taking a few family shots.” Her gaze cuts to her daughter. Her lips flatten into a line. “Sweetheart, didn’t I ask you to leave those absurd wings in your room?”

“But I love my wings. Please can I wear them? I want to show my friends.”

Matilda’s tone indicates she is getting annoyed but she keeps a smile pasted on. “You can wear your wings after the party is finished. And where is your birthday tiara? It’s custom designed for you, embellished with Austrian crystal.”

“It’s sharp. It hurts my head.”

“Charlotte, it doesn’t really.”

I bite the inside of my lip to stop myself from firing out a rude comment.

Charlotte droops. “All right. I’ll put it back on. My cake is still lemon, right?”

“Angel, no one likes lemon. Too sour. I ordered cherry filling. You will love it. The icing is the exact same shade as our dresses. Wait until you see it.”

Matilda smiles. Uncle H looks confused. Charlotte sighs.

“Is Cecile coming down soon?” I give Charlotte’s shoulder a comforting squeeze.

Matilda looks back at the house. “Yes. Maybe.”

“I can help her.”

Matilda takes my uncle’s hand. “Dani, you’re an absolute gem, but there are two nurses tending to her and I’m sure she’ll be down when she’s ready.” She eyes me critically. “Oh, I really wish you hadn’t worn that shade of blue today. But I suppose we can always color touch the photos. Look, the photographer is ready for us. Let’s not keep him waiting. We are running out of time.” She snaps the fingers of her free hand. “Charlotte, your tiara.”

Charlotte tips her head back to look up at me. She crosses her eyes.

I stifle a laugh.

She dashes over to one of the round tables decorated with ostentatious floral centerpieces. She shrugs out of her butterfly wings, gazes at them with regret and lays them carefully on a chair before snatching a sparkly object off the table and mashing it on top of her head with irritation.

Matilda has already escorted my uncle over to the poolside photo shoot. She arranges her face into an alluring expression and wraps her arms around her husband.

Charlotte trudges back to me with her chin out.

“Come here.” I hug her softly and then fix the crooked tiara atop her head. I want to share the news that her big brother is coming but then think better of jumping the gun. Micah isn’t a hundred percent reliable and I don’t want to risk disappointing her.

“Girls!” Matilda beckons gracefully. “Hurry, please. But don’t run!”

“Jesus,” I mutter under my breath without thinking. Charlotte giggles.

I lose count of how many different poses we are required to assume before Matilda is satisfied. The swans float back and forth behind us.

On the north side of the yard, Tony and his partner are setting up. A colossal inflatable dragon slide begins to take shape. Charlotte grows antsy, bouncing on her toes, wanting to take a closer look at the dragon rather than preen for the camera.

I notice Alta and Edie arriving together. Alta dumps her gift on the table and stalks over to the portable bar because every children’s birthday party must have an open bar. Edie blows us happy kisses and waves her arm in the air as if she hasn’t seen us in months.

Charlotte notices him before I do.

“MICAH!” She takes off running.

He has made an effort to look presentable in fairly new jeans and a black button down shirt. He carries a gift wrapped in newspaper and grins as his little sister jumps into his arms. He grabs her up and swings her around in a full circle as she laughs with glee. It's a sight to warm anyone's heart.

Well, almost anyone.

Matilda exhales noisily. "It would be a shame if he ruined her birthday."

"He won't *ruin* anything," I spit out. "And Charlotte wants him here."

She looks at me, curves her glossed lips into a strained semi-smile. "We all want him here, Dani."

HA!

Uncle H watches his daughter cling to her big brother. He taps his chin. "There's no harm in him being here, Mattie. Look how happy she is. Maybe it's the start of good things, of Micah rejoining the family."

Matilda hates to lose. But she's good at pretending. She sighs dramatically and gazes at her children, her eyes misted with tears. "That would just be a dream come true."

My uncle lifts her hand and kisses it.

I look away so I don't barf in the pool and ruin the swans' swimming experience.

My eyes happen to catch Alta's and I realize she's been watching the entire scene unfold. She holds a full wine glass and there's an amused twist to her mouth. Alta has enjoyed watching Matilda seethe over the unexpected arrival of her estranged son.

We're nothing if not dysfunctional, this family.

Charlotte insists on ripping open her gift from Micah right away. It's a plush lion with a red bow tied atop its mane. She hugs the toy fiercely, stares up at Micah with adulation. He notices me and jerks his chin in acknowledgement.

"Thank you." I mouth the words.

Micah nods his head.

Matilda makes a big scene out of greeting her son, folding him into a hug and wiping away nonexistent tears of happiness. Other guests begin to arrive through the backyard gate and Matilda's attention shifts so Charlotte takes the opportunity to seize Micah and drag him over to look at the fully inflated dragon slide.

It's clear Micah is unprepared to be the object of such affection. It's also clear he's very pleased.

Conner waltzes into the backyard wearing aviator glasses and clutching the strings of an immense arrangement of balloons in every recognizable animal shape.

"Who's having a birthday?" he roars and Charlotte runs over to him, brimming with giggles, jumping up to meet his high five.

I'm about to join them but then Cecile is wheeled through the backdoor by a nurse wearing a slightly terrified expression. Having grown frailer over the last couple of years, Cecile uses a wheelchair on the rare occasions when she agrees to leave her suite. The stairwell has even been outfitted with a lift. A floppy but fashionable black hat rests on her mane of thinning silver hair and she's dressed all in white, her sunglasses in place.

"I'm not a child in a stroller," she barks at the nurse.

"I'm so sorry."

“Don’t be sorry. Be competent.”

“Cecile.” I announce my approach in a loud voice. “It’s me, Dani.”

Her face turns in my direction. “Of course it’s you, Dani. I haven’t lost my hearing for pity’s sake.”

Her arthritic hands are resting in her lap. Cecile claims to detest affection yet she never recoils when I offer her a hug. The ruby necklace she gave me years ago has a new chain, a longer one. It dangles between us as she pats my back.

“And where is the child?” she asks. She and Charlotte have a special relationship.

“Charlotte is in her element, currently parading her brother around the yard.”

Her dark sunglasses fixate on my face. “Micah is here?”

“He sure is.”

Cecile breaks into a rare smile. “Good.”

She’s lost weight recently. Noticing this hurts my heart. I need to make an effort to see her more.

“Take me to Micah,” she orders the nurse. “I want to speak to my grandson.”

The woman looks at me with helpless confusion. She’s never seen Micah before. Wordlessly, I point him out and she nods with relief.

“I’d like to get there before I die!” Cecile declares when her wheelchair is pushed too slowly for her liking.

There’s a very cute scene unfolding at the kids’ table. Charlotte sits between Micah and Conner and a wide roll of brown craft paper has been unfurled across the table. Charlotte

hands them cups of markers and talks excitedly, using her hands a lot. Micah understands the assignment and nods, getting right to work.

Conner uncaps a marker and holds it awkwardly in one hammy hand. He hesitates and looks over to see what Micah is doing. Charlotte points to the paper and says something that's probably meant to encourage him. Conner tries to keep a straight face and attempts to follow orders while Micah remains focused on his work of art. He has uncapped all the markers and creates broad strokes on the paper. Charlotte looks at his creation and claps her hands with glee.

"Dani." Matilda steps into my line of sight, Edie a few steps behind her. "Would you mind going to the kitchen and checking on what on earth is keeping the catering staff?"

"I'll go," Edie offers.

Matilda continues as if her sister is invisible. "I'd go myself but my guests are becoming rather overwhelming." She fans herself with one hand as if there are thousands of people besieging the backyard instead of a few dozen.

"Sure," I tell her. "I'll take care of it."

"What would I do without you?" She doesn't wait for an answer to the question and flits back to the party, Edie trailing behind like a tugboat.

It's never surprising to be summoned to carry out one of Matilda's menial tasks. The flash of annoyance fades when I hear the tinkle of Charlotte's laughter.

With a sigh, I head indoors to light a fire under the caterers.

I don't get far before being waylaid by Olivia Davison Ballerini.

“I just stepped inside to visit the restroom.” The former principal of West Emerald Prep kisses the air around my head. “How are you, Dani?”

“Great. And you?”

She glances at her phone. “I keep busy.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Sometimes I can’t stop my own sarcasm. Tess is positive that her stepmother has regularly cheated on her father since the beginning. His refusal to believe the negative rumors about his wife has always frustrated Tess to no end.

Olivia’s head whips up. She stores her phone in a green handbag that looks like a very bright shade of snakeskin. She sniffs loudly. Her nostrils are slightly reddened. I’ll bet her visit to the restroom involved a date with white dust.

“I haven’t seen your husband yet,” I say, taking a stab at politeness. “Is he coming today?”

But she stiffens and her smile is cold. “I was thinking you might know the answer to that better than I would.”

Huh?

While I’m pondering what kind of powerful drugs must be swimming through her brain to say something so ridiculous, Olivia takes her snakeskin purse and her spiteful smile and stalks out the back door. She stops beneath the patio misters and stares off to the left, where Micah is now seated on a low chair and having a quiet conversation with his grandmother, although from here it looks like Cecile is doing all the talking.

I don’t really have the time to consider the strangeness of what just happened. Olivia is probably coked out of her skull anyway. I leave her behind without another thought.

Since I saw it last the kitchen has become a disaster zone, a place where charcuterie boards go to die. A trio of women cluster around a large piece of wood that takes up nearly the entire counter.

“We’re dead,” wails one of the caterers. “She’s going to give us an atrocious review and we’ll never get another job!”

One of her slightly calmer counterparts starts to argue, then notices me standing in the doorway and halts.

“Can I help with something?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “The main arrangement was dropped.” She frantically unloads a bowl of yellow cheese cubes onto a large piece of wood. “We had to start from scratch. We’re so sorry. We’ll get everything out as soon as possible.”

Elsewhere in the kitchen, a tray filled with neat rows of stuffed mushrooms sits beside another tray of mini sandwiches.

“Things happen,” I assure her. “But why don’t we carry out the finished trays and then worry about the unfinished ones?”

She nods. “Yes, you’re right.” She throws me a beseeching look. “Please know that we’re doing our best. My partner broke her leg and it’s left us a little shorthanded.”

“No worries. Everything looks delicious. And I’ll make sure you get a positive online review. I’ll write it myself.” Because I know damn well how unforgiving Matilda can be.

“Thank you,” she breathes and rushes out with trays balanced on each palm.

“I’ll take this one.” I grab a tray of chocolate dipped strawberries and return to the party.

The caterer whispers her thanks as we get everything set up on the narrow food tables.

I’m looking around to see where Charlotte’s run off to when a woman’s scream rips through the peaceful fabric of the afternoon.

Alta steps forward, her hand at her throat. “Christo?”

The man who has entered, uninvited, through the back gate stops. He stares at her with an indecipherable expression and then slowly shakes his head.

Alta gasps out a sob and runs into the house but I hardly notice this.

Colors melt together and my breath hitches. The backyard has grown deathly silent.

Or maybe I just can’t hear a thing over the sudden thunder of my own pulse.

I’m vaguely aware that Conner has rushed to my side, a rock of strength and moral support. Perhaps he’s here to hold me up in case I fall over.

I just might.

Micah quietly joins us on my other side.

Together, the three of us face off against Gage Silvestro.

Chapter 20

Gage

“**B**eware!” The little girl leads a pack of playmates who are all marching around just inside the unlocked back gate.

She extends a hand holding a sparkly stick with a star on the end and waves it in the air. “This wand is concentrated magic. By order of the Birthday Princess, I command you to identify yourself.”

I know who she is immediately. She doesn’t look exactly like Dani but there’s a resemblance in the way her intelligent brown eyes boldly size me up.

“I’m your cousin, Charlotte.”

She lowers the wand with a frown. “No, you’re not.”

“Honest. My name is Gage.”

That means something to her. Her eyes widen and her mouth falls open. “Nobody is supposed to talk about you.”

“I see.” And I’m not surprised.

Charlotte’s friends are growing bored and starting to wander away. She glances back at them and tugs on the sleeve of my shirt so that I bend down to hear her whisper. “Were you kidnapped?”

“No, I was not kidnapped.”

“Were you in hiding?”

“In a way.”

She steps back and looks up at me, clearly trying to decide if I’m for real or not. “I hope you like cherry filling in your cake. I *don’t* like it, not at all, but that’s okay.”

I hold out the gift bag containing her present. I was told by the woman at the art supply store that it’s the best set of drawing pencils on the market. “Maybe this will make up for the bad birthday cake.”

She smiles and excitedly grabs the gift. “Thank you!” She peeks inside, then looks up at me and tilts her head. “Nobody told me you were coming.”

“That’s because nobody knew I was coming.”

She likes this answer and bounces on her toes. “Then it will be a surprise!”

“Oh, it’ll definitely be a surprise.”

“Cool.” She flashes one more grin and then scampers away with the gift bag hanging from her wrist. The kid’s all right.

This backyard is a place where I spent a hell of a lot of time in childhood. It’s a place where I’m now intruding. I’m currently out of sight here on the shadowed side of the house where the fences are bracketed by tall flowering oleanders. The hum of voices and an outbreak of children’s laughter filters from the backyard.

They’re all bound to be here. My aunts and my grandmother. My own mother, probably.

Conner. Micah.

And Dani.

Charlotte might be raising the alarm right this second. There's no turning back. I wouldn't want to turn back. Eight years of exile is long enough.

I proceed down the brick path at a quick pace and keep going when I step on grass. The water misters are on full blast, which makes the panorama look weirdly smoky. There are birds in the pool, a giant dragon hissing out pink fire, clusters of adults carrying wine glasses, children running amok.

And there's Dani.

I pick her out from the crowd in an instant. Her dress is pale blue and summery, falling softly to her knees. She is fussing over the food table and touches a finger to her lips, as if lost in thought. My eyes scan every curve of her sweet body. A powerful hunger charges through my system, sending a surge of hot blood straight to my cock.

I want her. As much as ever. More than ever.

The sudden scream is one I've heard before. The last time I heard it was over the phone two months ago.

“Christo?”

My mother breaks through the clot of party guests and sways on her feet. Age hasn't done much to her looks, but the lines of her face are a little sharper than they used to be.

It's still terrible to see the horror in her expression as she gapes at me. It's more terrible to see the hope.

I shake my head at her.

She knows I'm not Christo because she knows Christo is dead. Her mouth quivers in disbelief. Grief and fury go to war on her face. With a cry of despair, she tears into the house to

escape this mirage; the ghost of the husband she lost in the form of the son she didn't want. Both of her sisters flutter after her.

Dani, in shock, steps forward for a closer look. I'm not sure she even realizes she has moved.

Never one to hide her feelings, she's plainly astounded. Dazed. She gawks like she's looking at a demon from her nightmares.

Maybe that's what I am to her. A nightmare.

Conner has stepped up to stand beside her. He stares at me in confusion, then switches to worry when he looks down at Dani.

Micah joins them, prowling over to Dani's other side like he's her bodyguard.

Out of us all, Micah has changed the most. Back in high school he had a wiry kind of build and a handful of tattoos. Now he's loaded with ink. He's as heavily muscled as Conner. Or me, for that matter. I've spent years battling my rage and frustrations in the gym and I'm aware that it shows.

"Hey!" Charlotte hurtles this way, unaware of the new tension in the backyard. She grabs my hand and pulls. "Come on, Gage. I want to show you the dragon slide." She notices everyone looking and feels the need to explain. "This is my cousin! I just met him today."

"Charlotte!" Dani surges forward, frantically reaching for the little girl. "Come here right now!"

Charlotte drops my hand, puzzled. "Why? He's not a stranger. He's my cousin."

"Honey, please. Come here."

Charlotte looks up at me for an explanation and I nod. “Go on, Charlotte. Listen to Dani.”

“All right,” she mutters and trudges over to Dani, who hands her off to Micah. He gently pushes the girl behind him, becoming a human shield, like I’m a fucking ogre threatening to gobble up his little sister.

“Do you think you are out for a stroll at the park?” My grandmother shouts at the woman laboring to push her wheelchair across the lawn. Cecile lifts her face in the air. “Gage, is that really you?”

“Yes, Cecile. It’s me.”

The wheelchair stops a few feet in front of Dani. My grandmother beckons with impatience and I kneel at her feet. She holds out her withered hands and I carefully take them in mine, feeling a pang at the evidence of her fragility.

“I always liked the roses,” she declares. “But I couldn’t smell the daisies at all so they were a waste.”

For every birthday and major holiday I’ve sent flowers to my grandmother, signing the cards ‘Your Secret Admirer’. I thought if I used my name then Matilda would just throw them away. I always hoped my grandmother could figure out who they were really from.

“I’ll cut back on the daisies.”

“That’s good.” She nods, then pulls on my hands so that I move closer. Her mouth arcs into an amused smile. “Don’t let them eat you alive.”

“Not a chance,” I tell her.

She turns. “Where on earth are the rest of you? Dani? Conner? Micah? Don’t just stand there like simple slugs.”

“Gage.” Conner becomes the first of them to speak my name. He walks up, stops several feet away and searches my face. I can see the old hurt in his eyes, the toll it took to be deserted by one of the very few people he truly trusted.

“Hey, Con.” I offer my hand.

He looks, moves his arm like he might meet the handshake, then changes his mind. He lowers his head and backs up.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dani asks.

It was painful to see Conner’s hurt. It’s torture to see Dani’s. She blinks away a film of tears and when they’re gone, bright anger remains.

Of course she’s angry. I crushed her. I did it on purpose.

The other guests are faceless moons in the background. Some of them murmur to each other but one of them catches my eye. She stands apart from the rest and smiles as she watches this spectacle unfold. Olivia is plainly having more fun than anyone else right now.

I don’t have an easy answer to Dani’s question.

She gets tired of waiting and asks another one. “Did Matilda invite you?”

“No, Matilda doesn’t even know I’m in the country.”

“And Alta?”

“Haven’t talked to her since my father died.”

She jerks in surprise. Looks at Conner, who gives her a blank look in return. She turns to see what Micah’s reaction is. He shrugs.

Funny, but it never occurred to me that Alta would keep the news of Christo's death to herself.

Matilda exits through the back door, head high, ready to spit nails as she blitzes her way over here. Racing to keep up is her pathetic husband. Almost forgot about him. Whenever I happen to see his stupid books in stores I always turn them facedown.

By the time Matilda gets here, though, she's glued a phony smile to her face. She even laughs as she seizes me in a hug.

"Oh Gage, it's been so long." She drops a kiss on my cheek even though I suspect she'd much rather stab me in the eye. She makes a sweeping gesture to her guests. "Some of you might remember my nephew! Gage has been living in Europe all these years."

They nod politely and begin to lose interest.

There's no sign of my mother. She's likely collapsed on a fainting couch somewhere.

But Edie is here. A clumsy merger of her two older sisters, she's taller than Matilda, shorter than Alta. She has Matilda's blonde hair and Alta's light eyes. Yet her smile is unlike Matilda's fake one or my mother's glare of horror.

"Oh, it's so good to see you!" Edie exclaims and bear hugs me like I'm her favorite person on the planet. She stands back and looks me over, practically jumping up and down. "You're very tall now!"

Matilda claps her hands together and speaks in a near shout. "Okay, now that we've had this wonderful reunion surprise, let's move over to the center table. The cake is about to be presented!"

She begins herding everyone in that direction. Charlotte looks back at me as her mother takes her arm, a little roughly, and drags her over to the cake table.

Dani hasn't moved. Neither have Conner and Micah.

"We should talk," I say to all of them.

"No." Dani violently shakes her head. "I'm going to watch Charlotte blow out her birthday candles and open her presents. You do whatever you want, Gage. Like always."

"Dani."

"Don't!" she hisses, holding up a finger in warning. "Just don't."

Conner still wears an expression that's somewhere between fury and injury. He slowly follows Dani. There's no confusion about the look on Micah's face. He's ready to throw down right here and he'd like me to know it.

"What the fuck do you *really* want?" he mutters. We're separated only by inches now.

"Micah!" Charlotte calls from her seat at the head of the table. "Come sing Happy Birthday! You too, Gage."

My cousin throws me a final homicidal glare before obeying his sister's wishes and joining the serenade.

A towering pink cake that looks fit for a wedding is carried out and deposited in front of Charlotte. Matilda tries to stop her from standing on her chair. Henley intervenes and pulls his wife back. Charlotte claps her hands and grins when everyone sings to her. She really does seem like a sweet kid. I regret never getting the chance to know her.

Dani records every second on her phone. "Make a wish, Char!"

“But don’t blow out the candles,” Matilda orders. “It’s unsanitary.” She snaps her fingers and the cake is carried away.

Charlotte slumps in her chair, dejected, until Dani swoops in and tickles her. Charlotte hugs Dani’s neck. It’s obvious they adore each other.

“Don’t worry, Char,” Conner says. “Later on we’ll all watch the sky until the north star appears and then you can make a wish on that.”

Her face lights up. “Really?”

“Sure,” Conner promises.

A weird feeling stirs in my chest.

This is my family.

Correction, this *was* my family.

I’m aware that despite the fact that it felt like I had no choice, I still made a choice.

I gave them all up.

Intentions don’t matter. Outcomes do.

That’s my cross to bear. No one should ever pity me. Still, now that I’m seeing them all together, it feels like a pyrrhic victory.

Dani separates from Charlotte and shoots me a look that could melt a glacier. I’ve already disrupted Charlotte’s birthday party enough. She deserves to enjoy the rest of her night without anymore trouble.

Charlotte is now chattering excitedly with her friends.

Conner looks at the ground.

Micah scowls in my direction.

Dani tries to keep smiling but ends up shooting a series of dirty looks my way.

I've done enough damage for today.

My grandmother is pushing away the nurse who is trying to get her to drink water through a straw. "Get that rat poison out of my face!"

"Cecile." I crouch down beside her. "I have to leave now. But I'll visit you again soon."

She reaches out and finds my face. Her palm flattens on my cheek. "You're better than you know, my boy."

It's a cryptic comment, but maybe she has me confused with someone else right now.

When I stand up, the three of them have joined forces again to regard me with open suspicion.

"So you're taking off?" Conner says.

"Yeah, I think I better. Tell Charlotte her long lost cousin hopes she had a very happy birthday."

Micah snorts with disgust.

Dani crosses her arms. "Kind of you to stop by, Gage. Perhaps we'll see you again in eight years, give or take."

"You'll be seeing me a lot sooner than that."

She's startled. "What the hell is that? A threat?"

Beside her, Micah bristles. He's practically growling.

"No, it's just a fact."

I turn away, deciding it's a bad idea to use this moment to spill the beans that I'm her new neighbor. The news will come

soon enough.

On my way out of the gate I half expect to be tackled by a furious Micah.

Maybe Conner too.

Nothing happens.

Once I'm out on the street I pause to look around. It doesn't take long to find who I'm searching for.

He sits behind the wheel of a Lexus with dark tinted windows. Smart move, intentionally done to fit into the neighborhood. Normally he drives a tricked out raised pickup that would stick out like a sore thumb. He'll understand why I don't acknowledge him. Someone's probably watching me. But he'll stay vigilant and make sure Dani gets safely back to the city.

My own drive back to the city is an irritable one. There's more at stake than reconnecting with the past.

Instinct keeps screaming at me that time is running short.

My instincts are rarely wrong.

To someone else, the situation might not appear urgent. First there was the parking garage incident, followed by an attack that may or may not have been a mugging. Nothing has happened since then.

I'm not my father. I'm not violent. But I will become violent if that's what it takes to protect her.

Dani has armed security trailing her every move.

And I know it's not enough.

Because accidents, misfortune and tragedy have *fucking always* shadowed this family.

Dani is not a peripheral player. She works for Matilda. She lives in a company building. She built the motherfucking West Emerald Golf Club. She's smack in the middle of all their shit.

After the backyard party drama I'm too keyed up to think about eating but I change my mind when I get to the city and stop for a burger. Then I return to The Tower, taking the stairs all the way up.

I sit at the kitchen counter, separate and sort my food on two large plates and for the hundredth time, read carefully through the police report that was filed after Dani's parking garage incident.

There's an even number of fries remaining so I toss them in the trash and retreat to the balcony. I've got some emails from my accountant that need to be answered. He's perplexed by the amount of money I've been funneling to charities all over the world. He warns that I'm on track to liquidate the bulk of my own net worth.

Fuck it, I'll make more money.

I don't want to keep anything that came from Christo Silvestro.

Restlessness eats at me as I watch the city slowly darken. I flash back to Dani wearing her dress and allow my hand to absently brush my stiffening cock.

I know I can't have her. That doesn't stop the rush of lust.

Matt Sullivan, Dani's secret bodyguard, texts to report that she's back in the building. He watched her reach the lobby alone and enter an empty elevator while talking on her phone.

Now that she's back she'll stay put for the night. She always does. I tell him it's all right to take off.

Then I leave the balcony and open the door to the apartment. She's alone and it's a good time to come clean about the latest addition to the neighborhood.

The elevator pings down the hall and the doors whoosh open. Dani's voice carries and I hear her before I see her.

“Can you believe it? Can you actually fucking believe it? Eight years without so much as a text. Now here he is, like EEEEEAAHHHH!”

With a prolonged shriek she drops her phone.

I wave at her from my casual post in the doorway.

A door opens in the next apartment and a silver head pokes out. “What's going on? I'm calling the police!”

Dani has turned pale but she gathers her wits and looks back at the old man. “No, that's not necessary.”

“You sure, Dani? Who the hell is that guy? Hey pal, I used to box in the Navy!”

“Thank you, Bob. It's really okay.”

Bob grunts with disapproval and shuts his door with a bang.

Dani whirls on me. “What in the name of god are you doing here?”

“I did warn you that you'd be seeing me soon.”

“So you're vacationing in the apartment across the hall?”

“No, I live here.”

“The hell you do.”

“It's the truth. I bought this place last week.”

“That’s insane.” But her face shows a dawning understanding that I might not be full of shit.

And then she becomes furious.

“You realize this makes you look like a complete fucking psycho, right Gage?”

“I’m used to that.”

“I’ll bet.”

I bend down and swipe her phone from the floor. The call is still connected and Tess Ballerini is having hysterics. “DANI? DANI? WHAT’S GOING ON?”

Dani snatches the phone from my hand. “I’m fine,” she says into the phone. “I’ll explain when you get home.”

I wait while she savagely shoves the thing into her purse.

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t understand what you’re doing.”

“We need to have a chat, Dorothy Ann. You want to do it here in the hallway?”

Her eyes narrow. “Piss off with your *chat*.”

“That’s not very neighborly.”

“Fuck neighborly,” she hisses. “You have no right to be here.”

“Property laws disagree.”

Her cheeks have turned a furious shade of pink. The seething glare in her eyes says that she wouldn’t mind feeding me to a woodchipper.

Yet I don’t look away, can’t look away.

No matter what, she's unreasonably beautiful, at ease with her own irresistible sensuality. I have to summon every scrap of my own willpower to maintain a polite distance. She has no idea that I've only ever been hers, that she could claim anything she wants from me. Still. And as long as I'm breathing.

Dani, however, has had enough surprises for today. She whips out a keychain, in a sudden frenzy to get her door open.

I wait, thinking she'll turn around and say something else but she doesn't. Instead, her door slams closed and the lock clicks in place.

"I'll be here when you're ready," I tell the closed door because I'm sure she's listening on the other side. "Just don't take too long."

Then I return to my own empty apartment and spend a long time in the dark, just watching the city lights and allowing my mind to be tormented by golden memories of all I've lost.

Chapter 21

Dani

Tess, being short, keeps a wooden stepstool in the kitchen to reach the upper cabinets. Right now she drags her stepstool over to the front door and presses her face to the peephole.

“It’s still closed.”

I rub my eyes. I doubt I’ve had more than two hours of sleep since Saturday night. “Oh, he’s in there. He’s probably plotting his next chess move.”

“Shit.” She hops off the stepstool and noisily moves it back to the kitchen by pushing it across the tile with her foot. “Am I still sworn to secrecy?”

With a sigh, I run a hand through my shower damp hair. “Conner and Micah are reeling over Gage’s bombshell return. They’ll come storming over here the second they hear he’s set up camp across the hall. It could be ugly. Who am I kidding? It *will* be ugly. Conner doesn’t need the bad press. Micah doesn’t need any run ins with the law. But I do need to tell them sooner rather than later.”

The electric tea kettle beeps. Tess switches it off and pours boiling water into a pair of jadeite mugs. She pushes one of the steaming cups across the counter.

“You should have let me go over there yesterday and deliver some verbal abuse. I bet I could have scared him off.”

I swirl a bag of Darjeeling around in the hot water and manage a smile at the thought of my spirited roommate banishing Gage Silvestro with harsh language.

The smile disappears and I stop stirring my tea. My fingers anxiously drum the counter. The instant I catch myself doing this I stop.

For me this was just a nervous movement.

For Gage it was something irrepressible, a command from the depths of his mind. He would try so hard to hide that piece of himself. There were very few people he allowed into his private world and I was one of them.

But only for a little while.

I should be immune to Gage after all this time, shouldn't be thinking nonstop about the man who crashed back into my life on Saturday afternoon.

He's taller now, visibly stronger.

The lines of his face have hardened into such a jaw dropping level of sex appeal it's freaking ridiculous. He was always intensely attractive but now he's grown into the kind of looks that people stop and gawk at on the street. I have no doubt women line up around the block for a chance to catch his eye.

To my shame, I'm jealous of them, the women he's been with, the ones who have enjoyed his company, been pleased by his body, shared his secrets.

I'd never admit this out loud, not even to Tess.

I'm not at all proud of the hold Gage still has over me.

“I don’t know why he’s here,” I tell my roommate. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“I can march over there right now and extract that information.” She glares at the door because she can’t glare at Gage. “I told you I looked up the recorded documents on the county website. The sale closed a week ago and a company holds the title. Must be his.”

“OCD Enterprises,” I grumble.

Clever, Gage. Very clever.

“And he paid double the market value,” Tess says.

“Not a normal thing to do,” I agree.

“No, but it’s definitely a *Gage* thing to do.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “We grew up together. The guy was always wired differently. You already know I didn’t like him back then.”

“I should have trusted your instincts. Would have saved me some punishment.”

But she doesn’t automatically agree. She gazes into her tea mug for a minute and then meets my eyes with a troubled look. “Dani, I never told you this at the time because you were so crushed but I always thought there was something off about the way he left.”

“Of course it was *off*. It was freaking brutal.”

“But that’s my point. I used to watch you two together. Gage wasn’t faking the way he felt about you. And there’s also the fact that he ditched Micah and Conner with no warning, and for no apparent reason. The three of them were always a

matched set, thick as thieves. I always figured there wasn't much Gage cared about but I wouldn't deny that he was fiercely loyal to his cousins."

"What are you saying?"

She exhales deeply and makes a face. "I don't know. I'm not defending him. But things aren't always what they seem."

"The thing is, Tess, that's how I knew his rejection was real. If he'd just dumped me, that would have been one thing. But for him to also turn against Micah and Conner...it just showed he truly cared for no one. He's always been heartless."

She sighs with sympathy but there's no time to consider any further insight into the mind of Gage Silvestro because I need to finish getting ready for work. Tess, aware that I was too keyed up all day Sunday to eat, practically force feeds me a cheese Danish before letting me leave the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, my anger refreshes when I exit my apartment, my well earned sanctuary, and see the closed door across the hall.

Who the hell does Gage think he is?

Swooping in here with his money and his muscles and his manhood to interfere in my life after all this time. He's got another thing coming if he thinks I can be bullied into submitting to whatever tricks he's got up his sleeve.

I'm distracted all the way to work, still distracted when I enter my office, toss my purse into the bottom desk drawer and sink down in my leather chair.

Work is always a soothing balm when other shit is going haywire. I'm capable of shutting everything else out and focusing on my job.

Two hours later, I've answered all the emails that have piled up over the weekend and made a series of calls to confirm all remaining details for the West Emerald Golf Club will be handled. It seems to me that I've earned a break so I head to the lounge, where I find Edie standing in there alone and sipping a goblet filled to the brim with red wine.

She greets me with a smile. "I had the most grueling session with my personal trainer this morning. I've earned this glass."

I don't know if she expects me to object. "Okay."

She holds the glass out. "Happy to share."

"Thanks, but I'll stick with these today." I pluck a small sleeve of cheese crackers out of a box of snacks for the staff. "Is Matilda still in a meeting? Her door has been closed all morning."

Edie sloshes some wine on the floor. She doesn't seem to notice. "She has a headache. She's had a headache since Saturday."

"Because of what happened with Gage?"

"Gage? Oh, you mean because he crashed the party. That was wild, wasn't it? He really should have called first. But it's so nice to have him back in the family."

I nearly choke on my crackers. This is one of the times when I wonder just how many connections have come loose in Edie's head.

"How's Alta taking the news of her son's return? She never returned to the party and I haven't seen her yet today."

Edie sniffs. "She claims to be too sick to come in. I'm not surprised. She always finds reasons not to work."

“Edie, did you know about Christo? That he’d passed away?”

“Oh, that happened months ago. Alta cried for days so Matilda sent her on a shopping trip to New York. I don’t *need* a shopping trip to New York.”

It’s a little disconcerting to hear that the three sisters knew that Gage’s father had died and didn’t bother to tell the rest of us. It wouldn’t have been earth shattering news, but definitely worth sharing with the family. There has certainly been enough opportunity to let that information drop.

After all, I work here. They literally see me all the time.

Edie gulps her wine. “What are you wearing to the club opening?”

The event is on Friday night. I haven’t given my wardrobe a single thought. “I don’t know, probably something I have in my closet already.”

She disapproves. “Matilda won’t like that.”

Like I care.

“In that case, maybe I’ll buy a new dress.”

She sips her wine and thinks. “Yes, you should do that. The color red is a good choice for you, Dani. It goes with the necklace you always wear.”

My fingers touch the ruby pendant around my neck. “Your mother gave me this. Did you know that?”

“Of course.” She smiles once more, dumps her wine out in the sink and leaves the room.

The lack of sleep is catching up to me. I can’t stop a wide yawn from cracking my mouth open. Luckily, I remember the

six pack of sodas I left in the fridge so I grab a can of caffeine and return to my desk with my crackers.

Plotting out project schedules for the next six months gives me a second wind and I don't realize I have a visitor until the sound of a woman's throat being cleared prompts me to look up.

Then I wish I hadn't.

"Olivia." I shut my laptop. "What can I do for you?"

My former principal slinks into the room. She wears a lime green sheath dress with a nineteen sixties retro vibe. "I'm meeting Matilda for lunch."

"Matilda's office is down the hall, the big one in the corner."

Her lip curls. "I know that, Dani. I just thought I'd say hello to you and touch base on the golf club gala."

"It's not a gala. It's just a grand opening."

A burst of fake laughter. "Come on, no need to split hairs on that point. I'm on the social committee and wanted to know if there's anything you need help with."

"Nope. We have a team of hired event planners to handle most of the work."

She doesn't seem to hear me. "Stuart can't wait for the opportunity to show off West Emerald's new addition. Did you know that some of his top campaign donors will be attending?"

"The grand opening is not a political event," I tell her, in case she has ideas about turning it into one.

Her eyes flash but her lips split into a smile. “Naturally, the campaign has been exhausting for us. Stuart will be taking me on a trip to Hawaii next month. Sort of a second honeymoon. We’re staying at a five star resort that books up a year in advance. He spares no expense, not when it comes to me.”

This conversation keeps getting weirder, and more boring. I don’t bother to stifle my next yawn.

“Olivia, you’re early.” Matilda shows up and for once I’m grateful for her interference.

Olivia, however, seems annoyed. “I’m not early. I said I’d be here at noon.”

Matilda gives her oldest friend/enemy a chilly smile. “But those of us who love you best know how you have a longstanding habit of being late for social engagements.”

Olivia’s mouth puckers. Then she laughs. “You’ve got me, Matilda. You’re always right.”

Matilda smirks and turns her attention to me. “Can we talk you into joining us for lunch?”

I’d rather drive a tack through my thumbnail.

“Thank you, but I was planning to work through lunch. I’m just going to run downstairs to grab a sandwich so I can get right back to it.”

Matilda touches her chest. “Olivia, our Dani is just a *saint*. You have no idea how lost I would be without her.” She holds her right hand out and wiggles the fingers. “Did I show you the emerald ring Henley surprised me with while we were on tour? It belonged to Zelda Fitzgerald.”

They drift away with Matilda shoving her ring in Olivia’s face and gushing over how much her brilliant author husband

loves and adores her every minute of every day, blah blah blah. I'll never understand why the two of them hang out. Clearly, they cannot stand one another.

I wait until they're long gone before grabbing my purse and heading for the elevator. The deli across the street is too narrow for seating but it's a great place to grab takeout.

I've hardly taken two steps out of the building when a strong arm swings over my shoulder. With a yelp, I instinctively swat the attacker away with both hands.

"Easy, Dani. It's just me."

"Hamlin," I gasp. "You scared the crap out of me."

"I'm sorry." He really does look sorry. Hamlin shoves his hands into his trouser pockets and stares at me with wounded eyes.

"It's all right." My heart still pounds from the adrenaline rush and I lean against a nearby wall. "I guess I'm just jumpy. What are you doing over here? Isn't your office about ten blocks away?"

Hamlin joins me against the wall and offers a charming smile. His tie is loose and he must have left his suit jacket back in his office. He's a handsome guy, always was. "You kept turning down my invitations. I thought maybe if I surprised you I could talk you into lunch. Pathetic, huh?"

"No. But I apologize for my lack of availability. The golf club is opening soon so it's been really chaotic."

"Heard about that." He crosses his arms and looks down. "A lot of our big clients are going to be there for the grand opening so I'm supposed to go and represent the law firm but I don't think I can."

“Why not?”

He looks up, his brown eyes playful and friendly, nothing like Gage’s arctic stare. “I don’t have a date.”

Hamlin was immature in college. But then again, I suppose I was too. We had some good times.

Still, Hamlin never stirred the kind of consuming passion that you read about in books. I never felt soulfully connected to him, not the way I felt with....

FUCK!

No, I won’t use Gage as an excuse. Whatever we had ended a long time ago.

“I can be your date.” I nudge Hamlin with my elbow. “What do you say?”

His grin is a mile wide, like he’s never gotten a better offer. “I’d say you’ve just made my year, Dani.”

The invitation was just supposed to be a friendly gesture. I hope he’s not expecting too much.

“Can I buy you lunch?” He’s as hopeful as a puppy.

“Hmm, raincheck on that? I’m pressed for time, just going to grab something across the street before tackling my mountain of work.”

“What do you want? I’ll get you something to go.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know, but I have an ulterior motive.”

“What’s that?”

He grins. “The pleasure of five more minutes of your company.”

It's a goofily cute thing to say and I relent. Hamlin keeps his hand lightly on my back as we cross the street. He does pay for my sandwich and even asks the cashier to throw in a cellophane wrapped slice of carrot cake. He carries the bag as he escorts me back to my building and it's all very sweet and normal and I wish with all my might that I could quit dwelling on the troubling fact that Gage Silvestro now sleeps right across the motherfucking hall from me.

No wonder I can't get any rest.

Hamlin grabs me in a hug that's a little too affectionate for my taste but then he takes a gentlemanly step back and holds the door.

“What time should I pick you up on Friday?”

“I'll meet you at the club. I have to be there hours before the event starts at eight.”

“Okay.” He grins. “Say the word if you want to take a break from work before then.”

“Sure. Thanks for lunch.”

Hamlin hasn't been anything but nice yet somehow I'm relieved when I get to escape from him into the building. He's not the problem. I am. I don't have a lot of feelings to spare right now.

The sandwich, a thick corned beef tower dripping with cheese, becomes the best part of my day. I've just finished the last crumb when I hear the beep of an incoming email.

And it's not good news.

The golf club's construction foreman reports that the place has been vandalized. Some of the windows of the main ballroom were broken and the interior walls are pocked with

holes, as if hit repeatedly with a hammer. Some custom light fixtures have also been ripped out. The security alarm should have gone off but it didn't so the damage wasn't discovered right away. The police are on site to take a report and the foreman says everything is under control but I'm already out of my chair and grabbing my keys.

This project is my responsibility and I need to go down there and evaluate the damage myself. With any luck, the damage from the vandalism will be simple cosmetic fixes.

Taking a drive turns out to be a good way to clear my head. I've spent far too many hours sulking in my apartment. The crowded city gives way to the green sprawl of West Emerald.

Up ahead, a traffic light ticks to yellow and I ease my foot on the brake. The car hiccups but doesn't slow down nearly enough. I drive my foot on the brake harder, not yet alarmed.

It's only when the brake pedal hits the floor and the car keeps rolling as the traffic light switches to red that I realize I'm in trouble.

A lot of trouble.

Chapter 22

Gage

Though the kitchen counter is spotless, I wipe the whole thing down with a clean towel again. I fold the towel into a symmetrical square, unfold it, then repeat.

More than thirty-six hours have gone by since Dani shut her door in my face.

This should be long enough for some of the dust to settle. There's no good way to go about my next mission but I need to try. It's time to explain, make the rounds of atonement.

Obviously, none of them are going to be willing to trust me anytime soon.

Why would they?

I'm the fucker who deserted them when life took a nosedive.

Abandoning my kitchen cleaning, I take a restless walk around the apartment.

Shit could have gone better on Saturday.

And later, with Dani, I blew that too.

I've never been any good at figuring out what to say, what not to say. A fundamental character flaw that hasn't improved

with adulthood.

Dani left for work early this morning and Matt is installed across the street from her building. According to him, there's nothing going on there but ordinary corporate crap today. I transfer a high five figure sum to his account to keep him on his toes.

Barging into Dani's office isn't going to impress her right now so I set that idea aside. Besides, there are blood relations on the loose in that building and I'd rather not get sidetracked by them.

Conner would be the logical first stop. He's still staying at the Palace Hotel. But even though I go there in person and hand out enough green paper to the staff in order to access the penthouse, he's nowhere to be found.

All right, I'll have to start with Micah.

The prospect is a little unsettling.

Micah's the least likely to be receptive to a social call. These days he lives in an east side dump, spending most of his waking hours at the gym where he works and trains. It will occur to him to wonder how I came by this information but I'll deal with that question when it's asked.

On the drive through Em City I have to switch on an app for directions through the labyrinthine east side. The layout makes less sense than the orderly downtown grid or the wide avenues to the west.

If you look at a map, you'd swear the east side is like someone with a bad sense of humor sewed a comic book version of a city to the larger picture for shits and giggles. The whole area is all curves and alleys and frequent dead ends.

Micah's neighborhood is an eyesore of crumbling buildings where iron bars crisscross over every window. I guess he doesn't mind because he's been living here for a while and shows no plans to leave. Right beside his gym there's a shop advertising tawdry sex toys. Standing out front is an idiot wearing a fake dick costume and waving to passing cars.

The entryway to the gym reeks of weed. An old heavy metal band blasts from within, the lead singer hollering the lyrics "GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS!" over and over.

The guy minding the front desk doesn't give off friendly receptionist energy. He chews on a toothpick and takes his time about answering when I ask if Micah's around.

Finally, he extracts the toothpick, loudly clears snot out of his throat and grunts. "You a friend of his or something?"

"No." Micah's voice is close and ominous. "He's no friend of mine."

I turn my head and see my unsmiling cousin standing less than six feet away at the mouth of a dim corridor. A minute ago there was no sign of him. He must move like a cat.

Micah throws me a stone cold glare of contempt and stalks back to the bowels of the gym. He doesn't invite me to follow him but I follow him anyway.

"Micah."

He keeps walking.

"Micah."

Two men pause their gladiator sparring match in the center ring to stare at us.

"Micah, come on."

He spins, catches a handful of my shirt and hurls me against a padded wall. I bounce right off, no worse for the wear. I won't hit him back, not unless he gives me no choice.

But Micah doesn't throw any punches. He leaves me there with his buddies watching and cackling. I find him in another room, kicking the hell out of a decrepit bag.

"Can we talk?" I approach warily in case he feels like taking a cheap shot. If shit gets savage, he'll discover he's not the only one in the family with fighting skills.

The bag is kicked so hard it seems likely to come loose from its chain. The thing swings back and Micah slams his fist into it once more.

And then he's off again, banging through a set of double doors that bleed chips of red paint.

I catch up with him outside, in an alley that hosts a collection of used condoms and drug paraphernalia. Dense clouds have moved in swiftly, covering the sun, giving the landscape an even bleaker tint.

He's facing away, breathing hard, head down, hands on his hips. "You fucking bailed on us."

"I know that's how it seems."

"No, that's exactly what fucking happened."

"Micah."

"YOU FUCKING BAILED ON US!" He whirls around. "We were brothers, Gage. You, me, Con. We were brothers!"

"I know."

His fury, his hurt, shows in his eyes. "Seems like you forgot the minute it became convenient."

“You want to hit me? Go ahead. I deserve it.”

He snorts and crosses his arms. “I’d have to give a shit to hit you. And you’re not worth that much effort.”

I don’t have a response for this. The best thing I can do is let him say what he needs to say.

“Fifteen months.” He coughs and rakes a hand through his hair. “I did fifteen months in that downstate shithole and I had a fucking target on my back the whole time. Privileged little rich boy, right? Let’s see how much he can take before he cracks.” Micah laughs hoarsely. “Well, I didn’t fucking crack. Some of *them* did, though.”

Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I really am.”

“That sorry ass apology plus a quarter is worth exactly a quarter.”

“I thought about you guys every single day.”

“Must be why you called so often.”

“For years he watched my every move.”

“Who?”

“Christo.”

He shakes his head. “Fuck off with using your dead father as an excuse.”

“You don’t have to believe me. But think about it. You remember the way we were. You really think I’d abandon you for nothing? Micah, my father used you as a bargaining chip. Both you and Conner. He said he’d make sure you did a lot more time. He promised Conner would end up in the cell right

next to yours. And I don't even want to repeat what he promised he'd do to Dani."

This sure grabs his attention. "What did that motherfucker say about her?"

"It's bad."

"Tell me anyway."

"Used by a thousand filthy men. I think I'll help myself to the first turn."

I remember every tortuous word as if the moment is still fresh enough to echo.

"Christo knew how I felt about Dani. He intended to use her to teach me a lesson. His plan was to snatch her and turn her into a hardcore addict. Then he'd do whatever he wanted to her and invite a crowd of perverts to do the same. Micah, he was going to make me watch a fucking army of men rape and destroy the girl I love."

Micah isn't easy to shock but this revelation really does shock him. He stares, open mouthed, then slowly his face twists into rage.

"Christo deserves to burn in fucking hell."

"And if there is a hell then I'm sure he's roasting. But that's why I stayed away. The price of Dani's safety was always my loyalty."

He's looking at me now, *really* looking, trying to decode if this is all the truth. I see the shift happen in his eyes when he realizes it is. "Why didn't you kill him yourself, Gage?"

"Thought about it. If he'd gone after Dani then I would have. There were many times when I almost did anyway."

“What stopped you?”

“If I didn’t get the job done the first time he would have struck back. He knew the best way to hurt me was through the three of you.”

Micah exhales. Laces his hands on top of his head and walks in a circle, processing this news.

When he comes back around, he drops his hands to his sides and stares, dropping his tough guy armor for a minute. “I really thought I’d never see you again.”

“Well, here I am so get used to the sight of me.”

“And what do you actually want?” He’s not hostile now, just curious.

“To set things right. I left you all behind because it seemed like the only choice. Christo was intent on turning me into his unwilling apprentice. I never even got to finish high school, let alone go to college. I belonged to him. Micah, I know you suffered more than anyone and I wish I could have done more for you. I really do.”

He sighs and looks away. A graffiti-covered dumpster squats at the other end of the alley, trash spilling out of its guts onto the cracked asphalt. “Don’t feel sorry for me. At least Conner didn’t get his life fucked over. And Dani’s safe. That’s good enough.”

“Is she really safe?”

His head whips back around. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Come on, you know our family history. We’re fucking magnets for misfortune. I wish Dani had left Em City for good. I *really* wish she wasn’t working for Matilda. I don’t

believe it was a coincidence that some maniac tried to run her over in a parking garage and I don't think you really believe that either. If she's got a target on her back then we need to figure out who put it there before she becomes another piece of tragic family lore."

Micah knows better than anyone what I'm talking about. My life has been a cakewalk compared to his.

I see it even now, the anger and helpless fury simmering inside the skin of a man who walks a dangerous tightrope.

"I'm listening," he says. Then his jaw hardens. "But know this. Dani is like a sister to me. Anyone who hurts her is going to fucking bleed. And that includes you."

"I would take a knife to the heart for Dani."

The wind picks up, lifting fragments of garbage and relocating them elsewhere. Thunder rumbles in the distance.

He nods, seems grudgingly impressed. "You'll have a time convincing her of that."

"I'll do whatever it takes. Whether she hates me or not."

My elbow bumps the side of the building.

And there it is.

The flex, always bubbling up to insist on compliance when I least expect it.

Now I have to touch the wall with my elbow intentionally. And then I have to do it exactly the same way again.

Again.

Micah watches carefully. "So that's still a thing?"

I touch my elbow to the wall for the last time. "No, I'm just entertaining you with performance art."

He grins. “You’re still an asshole.”

I grin back. “Incurable.”

He jerks his head at the gym door. “I’ve got to get back. I’m booked with training sessions all afternoon and tonight I’m bouncing at a club on Third Street.” He thinks, crosses his arms with a frown. “We’ve got to bring Con into this. Between the two of us we’ll come up with something.”

“I’m all ears if you have a plan.”

“I’m not completely sold on the idea that she’s in danger but I won’t argue that bad shit surrounds us and I’m not taking chances.”

“Neither am I.”

He nods. “I think it’s best if we approach her on her turf. She lives in this new high rise west of downtown.”

“I know.”

He raises an eyebrow. “What else do you know?”

I guess Dani didn’t get around to spilling the beans that I’m living across the hall. I look him in the eye. “A lot. More than I have any right to know.”

I’d be glad to come clean about everything right here and now but Micah asks no more questions.

“Write your number down and leave it with Elijah at the front desk so I know how to reach you,” he says. “And Gage? Don’t disappear again or I’ll hunt you the fuck down.”

“Staying in plain sight. You have my word.”

Elijah is not delighted to be tasked with taking messages. He shoves a scrap of wrinkled paper and a filthy pencil nub

across the counter and belches while I jot down my cell number. I add my main email address too.

The talk with Micah could have gone a lot worse. If he's willing to listen, Conner will be too.

I'm closing in on the daunting shadows of downtown Em City when my phone buzzes. One incoming text becomes two. And three. Before I can react, a call comes from Matt and I answer immediately, a sudden sick sensation blotting out all else.

"What happened?" I snap into the phone.

"She was in a car accident." There's a buzz of commotion in the background. "Car might be totaled and she's shaken up but she's in one piece. One of the officers on the scene is an old buddy of mine. He says she agreed to go get checked out at Em City Memorial."

"Did you see what happened?" Every muscle in my body tightens. I tell myself this is a busy city. Accidents, lots of them, occur every day.

"I was about three car lengths back. Traffic light changed and she didn't stop. She swerved, like she was panicking, rolled up over the curb and hit a light pole. Hey, a tow truck's here loading the car up. I'll find out where they're taking it so I can grease the wheels for intel on whether it was tampered with."

"You do that. Let me know."

I toss the phone in the passenger seat and cross three lanes of traffic so I can take the next right turn to the hospital.

This must be an active day for emergencies because the hospital parking lot is packed. I circle three times and end up parking on a scrap of dirt next to a construction zone.

Matt's words replay through my mind in a loop. He said Dani looked fine, just rattled. Still, I won't breathe easy until I see for myself.

Being in the same city with her has done something to me and it can't be undone. The invisible shield I've kept in front of my chest for the last eight years has cracked in half, exposing my raw heart.

The ER lobby is standing room only and Dani is here, her face tight with stress, her makeup smudged. But other than the fact that she's holding an ice pack to her left wrist, she appears to be unhurt.

Tess must have been the first one she called. Dani's roommate listens with sympathy while Dani tells the story.

"I don't know what happened. I just had the car in for an oil change two weeks ago and it was fully inspected. No problems with the brakes."

I slide to the left, staying out of her direct line of sight. Dani looks behind her, probably checking to see if there are any empty seats, which there aren't.

"Can I help you, sir?" The question comes from the check-in desk where a heavily pregnant woman in lavender scrubs pats her belly with a wince.

"Just here to see a friend," I tell her.

Not far away, Tess comforts Dani. "I believe your guardian angel was watching over you today."

"Or maybe I should thank my uncle for teaching me to be an eternally cautious driver." Dani moves the ice pack and tests out her wrist. "It's a little swollen but I don't need an x-ray. It's not broken. Let's just go."

“You sure?”

“Yup. Oh my god, Tess!” She points, but not at me.

Conner Wiseman, decked out in full football attire, helmet and all, is nonchalantly strolling through the emergency room door. There’s a stir of excitement as people start whipping out phones to capture the moment.

“Hey!” He waves his arm in the air.

Dani cracks up. “Weirdo. Why are you wearing your uniform?”

“I was in the middle of a team photo shoot when I got your text. You all right?”

Even here in the ER, people are shameless. They shove objects and paper in his face. “Conner! Conner! Can I have your autograph?”

“I’m fine,” Dani says as the noise of people clamoring for Conner drowns her out.

He looks her over, nods to himself when he sees that she’s in good shape, and starts fulfilling his celebrity responsibilities. “Yeah, sure I’ll sign. What’s your name?”

Dani laughs and nudges Tess. “Let’s go.”

Tess, however, has frozen in place. Our eyes meet and disbelief shadows her face. “Uh, Dani?”

Dani doesn’t hear her because she’s already walking to the door. At this point I won’t be able to hide so I step right in front of her.

Dani gasps. Loudly.

“GAGE!” she shrieks.

The people begging Conner for autographs look.

The nurse behind the desk looks.

Conner looks.

“Gage?” he says, like he’s not sure if I’m real or a statue.

“Gage.” Tess spits out my name like an obscenity.

“Hi, I’m Gage,” I inform everyone in the room so there’s no confusion.

Dani sets her jaw and glares while I hold the door open for her. I keep it open for Tess as well because I’m not always a complete dick. Conner can’t join us now because he’s busy scribbling his name on the backs of iPhone cases.

Dani clacks away in her black heels until she’s a good distance from the ER. She wears a blue and white striped dress that’s probably not supposed to be sexy but she can’t help being sexy in everything.

“You son of a bitch,” Tess mutters before she chases her best friend.

Dani stops walking, stomps her foot in anger, then turns to stare me down. “How the hell did you find me here? Are you tracking me?” She starts frantically rummaging through her purse. “Is there a tracker in here? Do I need to get a fucking restraining order?”

“I was worried about you. I heard about your car accident.”

“From who?” She looks to Tess.

Tess shakes her head. “No way.”

“Your brakes failed?” I ask Dani. “Is that what happened?”

“Answer my question and maybe I’ll answer yours.”

“I knew where you were because I hired someone.”

Her mouth falls open. “To spy on me?”

“To watch out for you.”

“You had no fucking right, Gage. None!”

“Dani.” I search for the right words, the ones that might reveal how much she means to me. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“From what? From who?”

“Maybe from whoever tried to murder you in the parking garage.”

She flinches, looks down, touches her injured wrist. “Nobody is trying to kill me,” she mutters. “That was just some jerk driving around drunk or high.”

She says that but she’s not convinced. The topic makes her uneasy.

Conner has been freed from the clutches of his admirers and jogs this way. At least he’s removed his helmet.

He throws me a critical scowl and touches Dani’s shoulder. “You really all right, kiddo?”

She nods but looks away. “I’m fine. It was just a fender bender. Tess, I know you’re busy but I do need to go down to the golf club and check out some vandalism damage. That’s what I was on my way to do.”

“I can drive you,” I say. “I’m not doing anything else right now.”

Dani ignores the offer.

“Sure,” Tess says as if I haven’t spoken. “I need to go in that direction and stop by my father’s house anyway.”

“Thanks,” Dani says before turning her ire back on me. “As for you, Gage, don’t you dare follow me. Don’t have your hired help follow me either. And don’t be there lurking in the hallway when I get home later or I will absolutely be following through on my threat to get a restraining order.”

Conner is confused. “Why would he be lurking in the hallway?”

“I live here,” I tell him.

“In Dani’s hallway?”

“Across the hall.”

“Huh.” Then he realizes what that means. “Wait, you live across the hall from Dani?”

“He sure does,” Tess says. “In all his creepy stalker glory.”

Conner rubs his jaw. “That’s fucked up.”

“Everything about this is fucked up,” Dani mutters.

It’s a gut punch when I see the film of tears in her eyes. She tries to blink them away and fails. She shakes her head miserably.

“I am not yours to protect,” she says to me, her voice cracking. “You made sure of that a long time ago.”

Dani shudders and sniffs. Tess puts a comforting arm around her friend, shoots me one final look of indignation and escorts Dani away, leaving me and Conner to face off.

He’s visibly unhappy with me but he waits until Dani is out of earshot before speaking.

“What the fuck are you up to?” he growls. “Why are you doing this to her? Do you have any idea what she went through after you broke her heart?”

No, I really don't. I know what I spared her from. I don't know what happened when I left her behind.

“Will you tell me, Conner?”

He works his jaw. There's a harsh glint in his eyes.

“WISEMAN, HOLY FUCK!”

“Hey Wiseman, you gonna kick ass for the Cyclones this season?”

The two of them are probably high school boys, excited to see their idol out and about. Conner, ever friendly, manages to limply wave in greeting as the boys hoot and snap photos and finally move on.

Conner watches them go and switches his gaze to the west, to the place where we came from. “Okay, you want to hear it? Dani was so crushed she made herself sick. Every day for weeks and weeks Tess and I had to go to her house to drag her out of her room because all she wanted to do was stay curled up in her bed, crying her heart out. Oh, we were all hurting. It was too much, between what happened with Lita, then Micah, then you. But Dani was fucking devastated. She trusted you and you treated her like trash. Don't make excuses. I saw it happen. My memory's not the greatest but I'll always remember what you said to her. That day, after she saw you drive off with Christo, she cried so hard she had trouble standing up. I had to carry her out to my truck to bring her home. She was never really the same after that. You took something from her that day, Gage, and I watched you fucking do it. I watched how you didn't care.”

I swallow the thickness in my throat over the brutal description. “I didn't want to hurt her, Conner. I didn't want to hurt any of you.”

“But you fucking did.”

“I know. I have a lot to make up for. But as far as what happened back then, I’ll tell you everything. Just like I told Micah everything.”

His eyebrows shoot up with surprise. “Wait, you told Micah?”

“Yeah. We had a nice talk today.”

“A talk?” He frowns. “That’s weird. I figured Micah would be more likely to kick your ass.”

“He was tempted. But my ass isn’t so easily kicked.”

Conner snorts out laughter and looks me up and down. “All right. I can’t promise I’ll like what you have to say.”

“Fair enough.”

“Shit.” He looks down at himself. “I gotta change. Let me stop at the Palace. Then you can buy me dinner.”

“You got it.”

He shakes his head but manages a cautious smile. “The bill will be high.”

I know he’s not just talking about dinner. But a twinge of relief eases the pressure in my chest. At least we’re talking.

“I’ll pay it, Con. Whatever it costs, I’ll pay.”

He’s skeptical. “We’ll see.”

Chapter 23

Dani

My wrist still feels thick and painful but I'm going to leave it alone today instead of wrapping it with an elastic bandage. After another fitful night in my bed the muscles in my back feel stiff but overall I'm less achy than I have been since the accident.

My car isn't as lucky.

Yesterday I got the news that there's too much damage to the frame and the insurance carrier is just going to declare it a total loss. For now I'm getting around with a rented Camry and I've set aside all thoughts of car shopping, at least until I get through tomorrow night's club opening.

With a homemade latte in my good hand, I watch the dawn greet Em City. I don't love the sprawling, mercurial landscape and sometimes I wonder what possibilities are out there in places I've never seen.

But everyone I love is here so here is where I'll stay.

Gage has made himself scarce since the clash at the hospital three days ago. Still, I know he's here, so very close, watching for reasons known only to him.

Micah and Conner are a lot more forgiving than I am. They keep urging me to talk to Gage, pushing for some grand

summit of the old Wicked West Rejects.

I can't fault them for feeling differently. Gage meant something different to them than he did to me.

But I haven't agreed to anything. I'm busy. Gage Silvestro will have to wait until I find the time to deal with him.

On the surface, I wish Gage had never returned. But in deeper, far more complex moments I'm terrified he'll leave again. This is a contradiction that needs to be sorted out before I face him.

A twinge in my lower back prods me to stretch the muscles, twisting from one side to the other. Sunrise has barely broken and I don't need to be at the office for hours. I could pull out my laptop and fill that time with going over details for tomorrow night but for once I don't want to work. The endless hours I've been putting in at the company make me feel increasingly restless, caged.

I want to get out of here, breathe some fresh air.

The building has an enormous rooftop pool but I haven't found the time to visit lately. I became an avid swimmer in college, making up for all the years I missed out. It's the one form of exercise I really enjoy. This early, the pool is likely to be empty, leaving just me and the water and the sunrise.

There's not a sound from the apartment across the hall when I quietly exit my front door with a fluffy beach towel draped over my arm. I couldn't find my one piece swimsuit so I settled for throwing on a coral colored bikini that was last worn two years ago when Tess and I took a weekend trip to the beach in San Diego.

I keep looking over my shoulder on the walk to the elevator. When I step out onto the rooftop, I take a cautious

glance at my surroundings before swiping my key fob on the pool gate.

I'm not afraid, not exactly.

Maybe I should be.

Whenever I think of Gage's words at the hospital, a chill careens through my blood.

Gage is not trustworthy. He might have motives of his own for wanting me to believe I'm in danger. But he's convinced Micah and Conner to listen to him.

It's occurred to me that I should swallow my pride and do the same.

Not long ago I wondered about bad things happening in threes. There was the parking garage, the street attack, and now the car accident. My mechanic found evidence that oil had been poured on the car's brakes, which could have caused them to fail. He stressed this could have been due to a careless spill when I brought my car in for a recent oil change.

It could have been.

Or not.

I was wrong about the pool. It's not empty.

He was always a fast swimmer, cutting through the water like he was born with the skill. Older now, and stronger, he moves with an effortless level of lightning speed that could rival any Olympian.

Gage hurtles from one end of the pool to the other, never wavering, never looking up, a rhythmic machine that hardly seems to pause for air. His body is sun kissed, artfully muscled. Ridiculously flawless. I can't stop myself from

inching closer to his swim lane to admire the broad, powerful back and strapping arms on display.

Heat stirs low in my belly, reminding me that in all the years that have separated us, nothing has ever come close to his touch. Every nerve in my body feels taut, on edge, as a baffling muddle of emotions war for first place.

There's anger.

There's confusion.

There's sadness.

And desire.

Yes, that's there too.

I can't turn it off.

The towel drops from my arm and puddles on the pool deck. Gage's eye is caught by the movement. He stops in the middle of the pool, for once stunned to see me show up somewhere unexpectedly instead of the other way around.

His eyes roam over my body, noting the flimsy bikini, the way my breasts stretch against a top that's slightly too small. From the day we met, Gage was a magnet, capable of pulling me in with a glance. That power hasn't disappeared.

But I can plainly see something else.

My own hunger is mirrored in his face. I still have significant power over him too.

Suppressing a smile, I throw down my keys and phone and stretch my arms over my head, a seductive pose intended to show off what he has missed out on.

He keeps watching as I kick off my flip flops and then neatly dive into the deepest part of the pool. I move

underwater with clean, purposeful strokes until I reach the swim lane beside his.

When my head breaks the surface, I find him in exactly the same place, staring at me with undisguised heat.

It feels dangerous right now, being alone, both of us wearing very little and stewing over different memories of the past.

“You have something to say?” I challenge him.

He doesn’t miss a beat. “You’re a much better swimmer than you used to be.”

I push my wet hair back and tread water. “I’m much better at *a lot* of things than I used to be.”

He stares, clears his throat, looks away. It’s throwing him off, not being the one in control.

I float on my back, the peaks of my barely covered breasts taunting just above the water. “So how do you like the building so far? Figured I’d ask since this was my project. It’s important that the residents are satisfied with the results.”

He still looks away, clears his throat again. “The building is fine.”

“And the pool? Is it to your liking?”

“Yes.”

I quit floating on my back and glide over to the nearest swim lane rope, hooking my arms over it. “Twenty laps a day, right?”

A flare in his eyes, perhaps some surprise that I remember that detail. “Forty now.” He takes a deep breath, then another one. “We need to talk, Dani.”

“That’s funny. Because I don’t give a shit what you need, Gage. Go cry about it. In the gutter. Like you told me to do once.” I duck under the water, transition to a butterfly stroke and keep going to the end of the pool. Then I push off the wall and do the backstroke in the other direction.

I’m not as focused as Gage when I swim. I take notice when he jumps out of the pool, casually dries himself off with a white towel and takes a seat on the edge of an Adirondack chair, his eyes following my every move.

He stays put, saying nothing, as I swim back and forth before abruptly stopping right in the middle of my ninth lap. I know he’s counting. And I know the lack of completion will annoy him.

My towel is still right where I dropped it, which happens to be about six feet away from Gage. I stand directly in front of him, mopping water off my skin as if he’s not even there.

He stares, shifting his weight while tapping one hand on his thigh. It’s oddly endearing, reminding me that there are some things about ourselves we simply cannot change.

Inconvenient memories run riot through my brain.

Gage rescuing me from Matilda’s pool. Gage showing up in the kitchen, his face bruised, his vulnerability showing. The near kiss beside the pool. The *real* kiss at his party. The way he touched me. The lake. The safety of being in his arms. The promises he made.

“How’s your wrist?” he asks, in what sounds like a desperate bid to make conversation.

I ignore that question and rub the towel through my hair. “I waited.”

“What?”

“I fucking WAITED!” I throw the towel on the ground. “I waited for so long, praying for a call, a message, something, *anything*, to explain why you treated me like that, why you deserted us all.”

He straightens up, listening, even his OCD tapping coming to a standstill.

“But there was nothing, Gage. There was no apology, no explanation. Just silence. Finally, I had to accept that the last words you ever said to me were the ones you really meant.”

Gage’s handsome brow furrows. I wonder if he even remembers it all, if that moment in front of his house is burned into his soul the way it’s burned into mine.

“Dani,” he says, and then gets stuck on his next words, blowing out a thick breath.

It doesn’t matter. He’s too late. Far too late. Without warning, a hot rush of tears arrives come to claim the moment. I’ll be damned if I let Gage Silvestro see me cry.

“Not now,” I grit out, snatching my towel and powering toward the gate. “And if you follow me, I’ll scream.”

Gage follows anyway, calling my bluff. I ignore him as I wait for the elevator. He doesn’t speak as we return to the tenth floor and I clutch my towel around my shoulders like a protective cape, staring down at my painted toenails and refusing to think about how he’s so close that I can smell the chlorine on his skin and hear every breath he takes.

I HATE YOU.

Yes, those words did come out of my mouth that day, but it took a while for them to really be true. It took day after day, month after month, of seizing my phone eagerly every time a text arrived, praying the message would be from him,

stubbornly refusing to completely relinquish everything we'd shared.

Eventually I was worn out, the fresh pain replaced by a dull ache that faded but never healed completely, just an addition to all the other betrayals I'd known in my life.

And that's when my heart shifted.

That's when I really did begin to hate him.

The elevator chimes and the doors open. Gage shadows my footsteps down the hall. My neighbor, Bob Hennessey, is the only other sign of life in the corridor. He stands outside his apartment cleaning off his door with a blue and white checkered cloth. "Hiya," he greets us with a grin. "Up early for a swim, I see." He whistles and keeps cleaning his door.

I hold my breath as I fumble with my keys, biting the inside of my lower lip to chase away the tsunami of emotion. If Gage touches me right now, if he says my name, I don't know what I'll do.

My sore wrist complains when I jerk the door handle open but at least I'm inside my apartment, locking the door behind me, erasing Gage from view.

I can hear when he retreats across the hall, his own door clicking shut.

I shiver in the air-conditioned chill, water dripping from the ends of my hair to the tiled floor. Tess likes to keep the apartment borderline freezing at night. She won't be awake for quite a while, which is something of a relief because I'm not in the mood to explain anything Gage-related right now.

The shower in my private bathroom is turned full blast, and as hot as I can stand it. I watch the steam rise before peeling off my bikini and stepping into the spray from the

overhead shower spout that rains down a gentle stream of water. It's supposed to feel like being caught in a spring rainstorm.

All the vanilla-scented soap in the world does little to rinse away my turmoil. I rub the steam away from the vanity mirror and gaze at my brooding reflection.

I'm angry.

I don't know what to do with that anger.

If only someone would invent a cleanse that could expel the damage left behind by cruel ex-boyfriends. I've grown used to thinking of myself as strong and decisive, not a woman who falls apart when a man crashes back into her life.

The initial shock has worn off since the afternoon at Matilda's house. It's now clear that Gage is a problem that's unwilling to disappear.

Maybe the best way to deal with him is to gain the upper hand.

With this thought in mind, I hastily dry my hair and select a red satin robe that was a Christmas gift from Cecile. The fabric whispers over my bare skin and I tie the belt loosely. After a quick search through a vanity drawer, I pluck out a small object and drop it into a front pocket.

I'm aware that the idea in my head is indisputably crazy. Someone should talk me out of it. I should talk *myself* out of it.

Instead, I proceed barefoot out of the bathroom, down the hall, through the kitchen and out the front door.

There's a low hum of music coming from Gage's apartment. I pause, listening, recognizing the lyrics. It's an old

U2 song. *All I Want Is You*. My knuckles rap sharply on the door.

The music stops. I knock again, impatient now, my blood on fire but not from anxiety. From something else.

He doesn't even look through the peephole so he's completely stunned when he opens his door to find me standing on the other side in my red satin.

His hair is wet, the black strands falling over his forehead in a finger combed look and he wears nothing but a pair of black nylon gym shorts. A fresh soapy scent rolls off him, crisp and vaguely coastal.

The whole picture jumpstarts my sex drive. I know that I'm playing with fire right now.

I also know that I'm going to keep playing until I win for once.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

He opens the door wider and takes a step back. The look of surprise on his face has given way to something different. Hope, perhaps, mingled with possible shyness. It's difficult to get a read on him, always was.

Gage crosses his arms over his broad chest, takes another shuffling step backwards, and inspects me from head to toe.

"You were working for your father all these years?" I ask him.

"Yes."

"Doing what?"

"Things you'd rather not know about."

"Oh, so you're an international crime lord now, like him?"

Gage shifts his weight, like the comparison aggravates him and he's trying not to show it. "Nothing like him."

I play with the end of the robe's belt as I take a slow tour of the living room. The furniture is bland and hideous. "Great color palette you've got going on here. Did you hire a decorator?"

He eyes me carefully, trying to calculate what I might be getting at. "No, the last owners left all this shit behind."

"I guess when you paid them double the market value it inspired them to be generous."

He shrugs. "Something like that."

"Did you admit that the only reason you wanted this apartment is so you could stalk your ex-girlfriend?"

At last, here's the scowl I remember so well. He uncrosses his arms, exhales loudly. "You're here so I assume you're ready for an explanation. I've been waiting for the chance to give it to you."

I pick up a couch pillow in the dulllest shade of grey imaginable. "I'll let you know what I'm ready for." I toss the pillow on the floor. "You do look good, Gage. I'll give you that."

"So do you."

"Do you think so?"

His voice drops an octave. "You're fucking gorgeous and you know it."

"Maybe. This unit is the exact same floorplan as mine. My bedroom would be down the first hallway. Is that where yours is too?"

“Yeah. Where the hell are you going?”

But I’m already walking down the hall and I don’t answer.

Gage’s bedroom is even more boring than the rest of the apartment, devoid of any personal touches or character. The king-sized bed is so neatly made it looks professionally staged.

The smell of his soap is stronger in here and the air holds a vague hint of humidity from a recent shower in the attached bathroom. A silver laptop has been placed dead center on top of a tall bureau and it’s the only visible sign that someone actually occupies this room.

I can hear him coming, walking at a slow pace and stopping when he reaches the threshold.

With fingers that shake only a little bit, I loosen the belt on my robe until it falls open. I’m wearing nothing underneath.

I turn around.

Gage leans against the doorframe, waiting to see what will unfold. He flinches ever so slightly at the sight of my open robe. I push the two ends wider apart, letting him see everything.

“Shit.” He swallows, voice suddenly hoarse. “Dani, what the fuck?”

There’s now an ache between my legs and it joins a sensual tingle in my breasts. I’ve deprived myself for a long time, staying preoccupied with my job and disdaining a social life.

My list of lovers is short, very short. There’s the architect I briefly dated more than a year and a half ago. And there’s Hamlin, my on and off boyfriend throughout college.

That’s it.

I'm willing to bet Gage sees more action in a month than I do in three years. Yet he's staring at me all flushed and slack-jawed like he hasn't laid eyes on a naked girl in half a decade.

"Does this bother you?" I ask and cluck my tongue. "It does, doesn't it? Too bad. Lately, you've been bothering me a lot and you never seem to care how I feel about it. Do you have a girlfriend, Gage?"

He's confused by the last question but finally shakes his head. "No, I don't have a girlfriend. I just--"

I talk right over him. "I'm not in a relationship either, but you probably knew that since you know everything else. It's good to hear you don't have a girlfriend."

He breathes rapidly. "Why is that?"

"Because then no one will get upset about this." I withdraw an object from my pocket and hold it up.

This is killing him. His eyes are blazing and there's a monster-sized tent visible in his shorts. The sight of his hard cock trying to poke through the fabric makes me smile.

I wave the wrapped condom in the air. "I'm sure you've learned how to use one of these."

He hasn't moved. "Come in the kitchen and let's talk."

"No."

He rakes a hand through his hair. "Dani. Knock it off."

"NO! You always get to call the shots, you asshole. You show up when you want, you leave when you want, you do what you want. Remember when you said you wished you'd fucked me at least once? Now's your chance." I kneel on the bed and do away with the robe completely, tossing it on the floor. "Take it."

His eyes narrow. He's expecting a trick. "Why?"

"Because this is at least part of what you came for, right? Let's get it out of the way. Then *maybe* I'll listen to whatever it is you want to tell me."

He doesn't move. "What if I order you to put your damn clothes back on and get out?"

I use my teeth to tear open the condom wrapper. "You won't do that, Gage. We both know it."

Silence.

He stares and I stare back.

Then he drops his shorts, revealing the massive length of his cock. "You're right. I won't do that."

Gage charges to the bed so fast I don't even have time to blink. I hadn't planned to let him kiss me but when his mouth collides with mine I have no complaints, submitting to the demands of his tongue while he seizes a fistful of my hair with one hand and crushes me to his chest with the other. Gage kisses with ferocity, like he's gone wild.

That's okay because I've gone wild too. We'd be tearing at each other's clothes if we were wearing any.

This is passion at its most primal, its most physical. This is what I haven't found with the clumsy groping of other men who invariably miss the mark. He grinds against the tender flesh of my belly while he sucks my neck severely enough to bring a delicious sting and probably leave a mark.

My knees are apart already when I sink to my back, pulling Gage down with me. His muscled weight threatens to squeeze the air from my lungs and his chest feels hard enough to bruise my ribs. He must realize this because he lifts himself

up on his elbows and the wild lust in his eyes dims a little, giving way to a confused tenderness as he gazes down at my face.

This doesn't last, though. We're in too much of a hurry. I've got the unwrapped condom in my hand and he shuts his eyes with a deep groan when I reach for him, palming the thick shaft before handling the condom.

It does something to me, hearing him, feeling him.

His hand covers mine, helping with the effort to stretch the condom in place. I guide him to the slick cleft between my legs, in a fever to be ruined. After all, this isn't supposed to be tender.

He thrusts deep, forcing my legs apart, stretching the boundaries of my body. He's giving me exactly what I wanted, exactly what I demanded.

I shouldn't be wishing for something else, for more than this. I shouldn't be wishing that instead of rushing to fuck our brains out we'd taken our time.

That, after all, would be dangerous.

Gage moves hard, fast, without caution, and he's huge. For a fleeting second it's too much, almost painful, and I can't muzzle a harsh gasp.

He halts and peers down, frozen in place, waiting for a signal from me. "Dani?"

Very stupid of me to take this test. Any contact with Gage is a risk to my heart and now I've let him inside of me.

But I don't want to stop. I can't stop.

I press my lips together and nod. "Just a little slower?"

Gage obeys, withdrawing partially. He dips his head and his lips find mine.

Old desires and old pains mingle together and I give him my tongue.

Kissing him is still a thrill, unlike kissing anyone else. My hips rock, my body growing impatient for relief. He gives it to me, moving carefully at first, keeping his weight on his forearms, watching my face to make sure it feels good.

And it does feel good, *so fucking good*. I'm getting close, the unstoppable wave starting to crest as he takes me on this ride.

This is how I always thought sex was supposed to be, and it's how it never was for me.

How I fucking resent him for that, for making me experience something that no one else could.

How unfair that the guy who broke my heart into a million pieces is the only one who can set my body afire this way.

This must be why I want to spoil it.

To torture him.

To torture myself too, I suppose.

"Another man took my virginity," I tell him through gritted teeth. "And I'm glad. I'm glad you didn't get to be my first, Gage."

His name turns into a moan on my lips because I'm coming and coming hard, the force of the orgasm crashing through my senses and stealing my breath.

I have no choice in the matter.

I submit to the delirious spasms blotting out all sense and reason and almost, but not quite, obscuring what Gage whispers in my ear.

“But you got to be *mine*, Dani.”

I hear these words but they don't quite register. I'm still drifting through a series of pleasure-laced earthquakes that rock me through and through, the sensations so intense that I'm left shaking.

Gage shudders, thrusting harder, seeking his own release. He throws his head back as he shatters and I watch his face with fascination even as an unsettling murmur begins to trouble my mind.

His forehead has broken out in a sweat and I'm tempted by a strange urge to kiss his brow.

Gage carefully withdraws, his face slowly relaxing. When he opens his eyes he gives me a smile that I haven't seen in a very long time.

The old cracks in my own heart flare with pain.

“You were lying just now,” I tell him, reaching over the side of the bed in search of my robe. “You're a liar.”

He sits up, discreetly pulls off the condom. “I've lied to you before, Dani. But I wasn't lying to you just now. And I'll never lie to you again.”

I'm in a hurry to cover myself with the robe, irritation rising by the second. “What does that mean? You don't actually expect me to believe that you were a goddamn virgin until five minutes ago, do you? What a crock of shit.”

He looks over at me, still naked, irritation flashing in his eyes. “It's the truth whether you feel like hearing it or not.”

It would be easy to doubt him. I've always pictured Gage hopscotching around Europe, bedding women everywhere he went and caring for none of them.

He could be lying now just to mess with my head, which would be believable considering the drastic measures he's taken to insinuate himself into my life.

"You're not lying," I say flatly, meeting his eye and searching for dishonesty.

He stares back at me without a flicker. "No."

"You just had sex for the first time."

"Technically."

"What in the hell does *technically* mean?"

"It means that I've never stuck my dick inside anyone until just now."

The last pangs of pleasure vanish, replaced with a sick feeling.

Who am I kidding?

This is my fault. I came marching over here with a half-baked seduction plot in order to score a little revenge.

Checkmate. You win again, Gage.

"You could have warned me!" I'm not screaming, but I'm getting close.

He's off the bed now, searching for his shorts. He calmly steps into them and considers my fury. "When should I have brought it up? Before or after you issued the ultimatum that I needed to fuck you before you'd take me seriously?"

My cheeks heat with shame and I can't even squeak out a response. It would have hurt less if he'd slapped me.

He figures this out in a hurry. Gage stops short at the look on my face, which must be horrible, exhales loudly and lowers his head. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

I’m already scrambling off the bed, running for the door. I have to get the hell out of here before I do something stupid.

Well, even *more* stupid than bullying my virginal ex-boyfriend into a round of wild sex.

He catches me before I leave the room, wrapping his arms around my body and lifting me off the floor. “Wait. Please, I’m sorry.”

Gage’s arms are an iron vice. I can’t get free no matter how hard I kick and thrash my elbows.

“Let go,” I command through clenched teeth in between all the thrashing.

Gage pushes my hair out of the way so his mouth can get close to my ear. “Not until you hear something.”

“There’s more? What kind of bombshell are you going to drop next, Gage? Are you secretly married? A priest? WHAT?”

Gage chuckles, enjoying himself and nuzzling my neck in a way that succeeds in turning me on despite my best efforts *not* to get all hot and bothered again.

“None of that.”

“Perfect. I don’t have time for this. I have to get to work.”

“Work can wait.”

“Who the hell do you think you are? I’m busy. The West Emerald Golf Club is opening tomorrow. Bickering with my crazy ex isn’t a priority.”

“What *is* your priority? Staying wedged under Matilda’s manicured thumb for eternity?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

He does shut up. His hand dives into the folds of my robe, touches between my legs. My knees turn to jelly. His fingers pry me apart, sliding inside with ease. I go limp against his chest, no longer having the slightest desire to break away. I’m shameless, riding his hand in the dirtiest way in a frenzy to get off again.

Gage waits until my muscles quiver and clench, waits until I’m digging my nails into his forearm while I’m coming. Only then does he deliver his declaration in a low, seductive voice that only sends me spiraling higher.

“You didn’t talk me into anything, Dani. Do you understand? There wasn’t a chance I’d turn you down.”

I’m too spent to find any words. All that emerges is a soft whimper when Gage takes his hand away. He sets me on my unsteady feet, keeping his hands on my hips in case I topple over. Then he carefully turns me around.

Gage presses his lips to my forehead. “I’m sorry about so many things, Dorothy Ann. But I’ll never be sorry about what we just did.”

The tickle in my nose is a warning. The sting of tears behind my eyes is another one. It would feel so good to wrap my arms around him and allow him to hold me for real.

This was a huge mistake, coming here. I’ll never be in control where he’s concerned.

Gage Silvestro is my kryptonite.

I step out of his arms and refuse to look him in the eye. “I take responsibility for what happened today. But you broke me, Gage. Maybe it feels like a long time ago for you, just high school garbage, but for me that was yet another unbearable rejection. It felt like more proof that I’m not worth much, that I don’t belong anywhere. And even after all these years it remains painful. Very painful. I don’t forgive you for that.”

He’s silent. He doesn’t try to pull me back when I turn around and slowly trudge out of his room and out of his apartment.

I know this isn’t the last word, or the last I’ve seen of him.

But I’ve had about all I can handle for now.

Chapter 24

Gage

It was like all my fantasies had rolled into a single moment.

Dani knocked on my door, asked to come in, took off her clothes and said she wanted to have sex. And yeah, I knew it might be a bad idea to get naked before we straightened out our shit but FUUUUCK...

I'm not actually made out of stone. When the girl of my dreams makes an offer like that, no power on earth could make me look away.

Time and again I've resisted the demands of my cock. Beautiful women have never been difficult to find and my father made a point of pushing them in my direction every chance he got.

I've had more offers than I can count, just a good time with no strings. My body was more than willing but my brain was another matter. Any woman I touched became Dani. Her face wouldn't leave my mind. It felt like betrayal, or something even worse, to fuck someone else and pretend I was fucking her.

Instead, I fucked no one.

Dani couldn't have been more shocked if I'd suddenly sprouted a second dick.

I don't know why it matters.

I'm aware that she dated that Hamlin fucker from West Prep during her years at Emerald State. I know she's dated other men since then. It changes nothing about the way I feel about her. But as soon as Dani hears that I don't have a habit of screwing everything in sight, she hits the roof and acts like I've just committed a cardinal sin.

She's used to thinking the worst of me. I can understand that. I understood that before I ever came back here. In my head there are always a million things I want to say to her but they all unravel in the moments that count.

I'm sorry about that.

But I'm not sorry about this morning's mind-blowing fuck fest. Hell no. I get hard again every time I think about it.

Shit.

I was inside of her.

I WAS INSIDE OF HER!

And she loved it. She cried out and shook and clenched my cock while she came.

I can admit that I've jerked off to Dani daydreams thousands of times. Maybe that makes me an obsessive freak whose cock will forever be ruled by one girl and one girl only.

So be it.

If she'd only given me a few more minutes this morning then I might have been able to cobble together the right words, the ones that would give me a chance to keep her safe in my

arms instead of crying anguished tears as she remembers all the reasons why she hates me.

Ever since she ran out of here I've been in a state, rehashing every single second and every word spoken, doing five hundred pushups and five hundred sit ups in order to stop myself from chasing after her. It wasn't easy.

I listened as she left her apartment an hour later. I went to the front door, started to open it, dropped my hand from the knob, put my hand back on the knob, and so on.

Then I texted Matt a heads up that she was on the move. Yesterday he sent me a report after he bribed the mechanic who examined Dani's car. There wasn't enough evidence to say for sure that the car had been tampered with. That means the cops won't look twice.

No shadows have been spotted trailing after her. She hasn't received any explicit threats. Conner and Micah aren't willing to dismiss my worries as paranoia, but they're also not convinced that anyone is targeting Dani. I'm sure that remembering my lifetime of compulsive behavior doesn't help sway them to my side.

Right now, every instinct is screaming at me to tear into Dani's office, carry her out by force and keep her in the same room until I know if my fears are justified or just misfires of my obsessive mind.

This would not be a popular idea.

I won't be doing it, even though the urge is about six hundred times more powerful than any light switch-flipping flex ever was.

After another frenzied workout and another shower, I'm less keyed up, more calm, or at least what passes for calm in

my head.

Normally, I'm not a fan of letting work-related chores stack up but for the last few days I haven't been able to concentrate on the scores of email messages and petty financial decisions of my rapidly liquidating empire. Two hours of sitting at the spotless kitchen counter with my laptop puts a small dent in the load but by then I've had enough and I snap the laptop closed.

When I was working for my father I regularly clocked eighteen hour days. That wasn't dedication, though. That was an effort to crowd out everything else.

Feelings. Memories.

And hope. I never dared to hope that I'd get to have Dani back in my life.

Christo's death is a gift in all ways.

Though the threat was forever implied, he never did speak her name in my presence again. And I never hated him any less than I did the day I left West Emerald. At least I got to tell him that at the end.

All these thoughts of my father bring another unpleasant idea to the forefront.

I should do something about Alta, make at least a little bit of an effort.

The toxic complexity of my parents' marriage will never be something that I understand. In spite of the fact that Alta has no love for me, I feel like I should try to talk to her.

The only time I've been to West Emerald since my return was for the great birthday party reveal. With Dani safe in her office and being watched over by Matt, I might as well take a

drive to my old neighborhood. I'll knock on my mother's door. Maybe she'll even answer. I can also pay a visit to Cecile, unless Matilda has left instructions to bar me from the house.

The sky is a brilliant shade of blue that I didn't see often enough when I was living in London. Closer to West Emerald, the new golf club dominates the skyline. It's outrageous, as decked out as a mini Versailles. Tomorrow's grand opening is supposed to be an exclusive invitation only event.

Luckily, I've obtained an invitation.

All it took was a call to my old principal. Olivia, now married to West Emerald's mayor, was only too happy to cooperate. When I explained that I'd prefer my attendance to be a surprise, she was even more delighted, never one to miss an opportunity to stick her finger in Matilda's eye.

Alta doesn't answer her door. Maybe she's not home or maybe she *is* home and sees that I'm the one ringing the bell. It's a mystery I'd rather not solve.

Being in the old neighborhood again feels strange, unsettling. I lived here from the time I was born until I was nearly seventeen. If I have a home base, this is it. Yet I can't conjure much nostalgia for the sprawling estates and hushed vibes of extreme wealth. The only reason this qualifies as home at all is because of the people who were here with me.

Before leaving my mother's property, I take a walk around to the side and peer through the vines winding all over the spikes of the wrought iron perimeter fence.

It's still there, the old guest house that never hosted real guests. It was a place to goof off when my mother wasn't using it to entertain her boyfriends, which happened often.

Conner and Micah would sometimes borrow the keys from me when they needed a place to hook up.

But I only ever brought one girl in there. Just one.

“Gage, I’ve wanted you from the beginning.”

Time is funny, the way it folds in on itself. I could swear that Dani just whispered that in my ear.

A red light tucked beneath the eaves of the house grabs my attention. Before walking away, I wave at the camera, just in case Alta is watching.

Across the street, Conner’s old house looks deserted, the rosebushes untended and gnarled, the hedges half dead. I guess Edie doesn’t feel that landscaping is a priority.

Matilda’s door is answered by one of Cecile’s caretakers, the same one who was wheeling her around the day of Charlotte’s party. She blinks at me, instantly flustered.

“I’m just here to see my grandmother,” I tell her.

“Um.” She looks around for help.

“It’s all right. I’ll deal with this.” Henley emerges from the bowels of Matilda’s mansion and decides to be useful. He shuffles over and to my surprise, he pushes the door all the way open instead of slamming it. “Come on in, Gage.”

The powdery smell of fresh flowers isn’t coming from the dozen roses I’m carrying. Matilda still keeps giant flower arrangements everywhere in sight. It seems like a love of flowers is the one thing she and her mother have in common.

Cecile’s nurse has already scampered away, leaving me alone with Dani’s uncle. It’s a little awkward, considering I don’t think we ever had an actual conversation before.

“Sorry to drop by unannounced,” I say, taking a stab at basic politeness.

There are shadows under his bloodshot eyes and he scratches at his unshaven jaw. “Yes, you tend to do that.”

There’s an edge in his voice but I’m not going to argue with the guy.

“Is Matilda around?” I ask, bracing just in case.

Henley cracks half a smile. “Do you think you would have gotten through the front door if she was?”

“No. So why did *you* let me in?”

He shrugs. “It’s not my place to keep Cecile’s grandson from her. Besides, the years have granted me enough wisdom to understand that people often deserve the grace of a second chance.”

I never liked Henley. First, since he married Matilda I’ve always figured he must have wood for brains. And also because he wasn’t always honest with Dani. I’m willing to cut him some slack now. He’s still an idiot for sticking with my aunt. But as for Dani, maybe he was doing what he thought he had to in order to protect her. That’s a choice I can relate to.

A high-pitched squeal comes from the top of the stairs. “GAGE!”

Charlotte comes pattering down the stairs so fast her father cringes and warns her to be careful. She’s wearing a pink nightgown, along with something that looks like gauzy purple wings. She twirls around me in a circle. “I didn’t know you were coming over. I had to stay home from summer camp today because yesterday I puked in the cafeteria after Brody Jones said I’d never be able to finish eating ten oatmeal raisin cookies in sixty seconds. But I did. He’s my boyfriend now.”

“What?” Henley says.

She stops twirling and giggles at her father. “Brody is coming over his weekend. We’re going to swim.”

“Best clear that with your mother, cupcake.”

Charlotte turns her head so her father won’t see her make a face like she’s gagging. This little cousin of mine is a trip. Charlotte catches sight of the smirk on my face and smiles.

“I LOVE the art pencils you bought me for my birthday. I use them every day. Micah promised he’d show me how to draw animals so that they look like *real* animals. I wish you’d brought him with you.”

“I’ll remember that for next time.”

She points to my hand. “Did you bring those flowers for Grandma Cecile?”

“I sure did.”

“She’ll like them. You should go upstairs now. I can go with you. My dad has to get back to writing his book. He’s on a deadline.”

“Charlotte,” Henley says as he gazes at his daughter with loving eyes. “I don’t mind if you stay in your nightgown for a while longer but you do need to get dressed before your mother gets home. You know she insists.”

“Fine, Daddy,” she grumbles and seems a little put out as she stomps up the first couple of steps. Then she cheers up and runs the rest of the way. “Come on, Gage! You’re super slow.”

“Thanks for this,” I tell Dani’s uncle.

He nods. I get the feeling he still isn’t that impressed with my big return but he’s willing to act cool about it so that’s

something.

Charlotte waits in the second floor hallway. “I’ll announce you,” she says and then dashes over to knock on Cecile’s door.

“Is that you, Charlotte?” my grandmother asks.

I join Charlotte at the door. “It’s your secret admirer, Cecile.”

“Don’t just stand out there, Gage. I only have so many years left to live.”

Charlotte flings open the door. The huge four poster bed is the same but my grandmother looks smaller lying in it than she used to. She isn’t wearing her sunglasses and the scars around her useless eyes appear puckered and raw. She raises her chin.

“You brought flowers.”

“Roses. Your favorite.”

“Red?”

“Of course.”

“Good. You’ll find an empty glass vase on the bureau. Place them in there.”

I obey her instructions, adding water from the bathroom sink. Charlotte stands beside our grandmother’s bed and watches everything.

“Dani’s old room is mine now,” she says with pride. “So I get to be neighbors with Grandma Cecile. You and Dani used to be friends, right?”

“I’d like to think Dani and I are still friends.”

Charlotte gives me a doubtful look, like she might have heard a thing or two in connection with my name. “Well,” she

says, “I have to get back to my room. Do you promise you’ll bring Micah with you next time?”

“Sure,” I tell her even though I have no clue how I’d pull that off.

She smiles. “I’m glad you’re back, Gage. It’s nice having another cousin.”

“I’m glad I’m back too.”

She sprints out of the room. A moment later I can hear her singing down the hall at the top of her lungs.

“Sit down,” Cecile orders. “There’s a chair by the window. Pull it over here.”

I do as she says. On the nightstand is a row of prescription pill bottles and a plastic pill dispenser for each day of the week.

“Are you sick?” I ask her.

“I’m old. They give you pills when you get old. I’m so glad to hear of your father’s death. Terrible man. I told my daughter not to marry him, but then again she’s not the cream of the crop either, is she?”

You can always count on Cecile for a dose of shocking honesty.

“I’ve missed you,” I tell her. “I’m sorry I’ve been away for so long.”

“I imagine it couldn’t be helped.”

“No. It couldn’t.”

“But you could have warned Dani you were returning. You won’t win her over by blindsiding her.”

“You’re right.”

“And buying the apartment across the hall from hers? Gage! How bizarre.”

“Didn’t know you’d heard about that,” I mutter, feeling properly scolded.

“My hearing is just fine. People still don’t seem to realize this so they say all kinds of foolish things. But we’re talking about Dani. If I disliked her then I would find this all very amusing but that’s not the case. You’ve been a man for quite some time now and yet it seems you still understand very little about women.”

“I understand very little about people in general, Cecile.”

She huffs out some air. “Most of them aren’t worth understanding.” She extends her hand in search of mine. Her grip is shaky. “But Dani is special. Dani is worth the effort.”

“I know.”

“You love her.” Cecile dares me to argue. I see no reason to do that.

“Always have.”

“And you’ve protected her,” Cecile says with a nod. “Even when she had no idea she was in any danger.”

I’ve never told my grandmother this, never even shared the reason why I left. It felt too risky.

“I’ll always protect her.”

She smiles. “Then tell her. Tell her exactly how you feel.”

“Working on it.”

I can hear Charlotte in Dani’s room, singing about how the cold never bothered her.

My grandmother never did like visitors to linger for long. After ten minutes she's ready to dismiss me.

"Kiss my cheek before you go," she says. "And tell those clowns downstairs that I am ready for my lunch now. I'd rather not perish of hunger today."

Her cheek is paper thin but she smiles when I give her a peck. Cecile's nurse hovers at the foot of the stairs. She already holds a lunch tray and nearly trips in her haste to carry it up the stairs.

I feel like I ought to hunt down Henley to say goodbye but decide against it. Dani always used to say that her uncle didn't like to be disturbed when he was in writing mode. He'll eventually figure out that I'm gone.

On my way out of West Emerald, I slow down and take a quick circle around West Emerald Prep, a landmark from my past. I never had much use for the place, or for school in general, when I was a student. However, I missed it bitterly once Christo forced me to leave.

The view of the golf club is unavoidable. It's practically a kingdom unto itself, surrounded by a moat of rolling greenery that is rumored to be one of the top golf courses in the country.

Nothing but the best, I think with some irritation.

When I'm back on the road I give Matt a call.

"All's well," he reports. "No weirdos hanging around. Except me, that is."

I'm sure Matt wonders if I'm being totally up front about my motives when it comes to Dani. Or he might think some wires got crossed in my head. But the paycheck is good so I guess he sets any doubts aside. He's been at this kind of work

for a while. It's a safe bet that he's done far shadier shit than this.

"You remember what's happening tomorrow night?" I ask.

"Sure. But there will be security up the ass at an event like that. Politicians, executives, city crime bosses trying to look legit. Even a former senator is supposed to show up. Expect a bonanza of armed guards. Got to protect the golden goose."

"A whole flock of golden geese. Most of them bite. I'll be on the inside. Keep an eye on who's coming and going."

"You're the boss."

Once the call disconnects, I'm back to brooding.

Cecile is right, of course. I've fucked up royally when it comes to Dani by failing to consider the spectrum of human emotion. It's not a topic I was well versed in to begin with. All the years of lonely banishment have only made me more disconnected.

Why would Dani trust me? Why would any of them trust me?

I've broken promises. The reasons don't always matter. I haven't yet earned the right to be here.

But I will.

I promise, Dani.

Whatever it takes.

Chapter 25

Dani

If I had a royal title it would be Queen of Bad Ideas.
This is my fault.

I'd completely forgotten about my offer to be Hamlin's date until he showed up when I was in the middle of speaking to the event planning team in the kitchen. He slid an arm around my waist and leaned in for a kiss that was swiftly deflected so he ended up with a mouthful of my hair.

No matter.

For most of the night he has stayed glued to my side like we're engaged. I have no interest in him and I'm regretting giving him any encouragement at all.

But that bad idea pales in comparison to the Gage situation.

In opting to play the role of deranged seductress, I've unleashed so many cans of worms that I don't know where to step. I can't get Gage out of my head, can't stop thinking about the feel of his body or replaying the echo of his deep voice in my ear.

There's nothing easy or transparent about Gage. That was always true.

And I think that's what bothers me the most right now. For so long I've lived with the idea of Gage as a callous villain. That's the idea that he wanted me to have.

But why?

When he blew up our relationship and skipped out of the country eight years ago, I felt the very real physical pain of a broken heart. Each day that passed without any word from him seemed like proof that I'd been fooled by someone who was truly cruel.

I still don't understand. But I'm ready to take another look.

It might change nothing. Or it might flip the world on its axis.

Whatever Gage wants to tell me, I'm willing to consider listening.

Not tonight, though, for crying out loud.

For tonight I'm up to my eyeballs in pompous rich people and tartlet trays.

This is not a good venue to fight an emotional battle.

Gage, not one to be dissuaded by common sense, obviously didn't think about this fact. The heat of his gaze has been doing all kinds of distracting things to my body since he walked in. He hasn't brought a date. He doesn't utter more than two words to anyone. He just kind of floats on the margins of the ballroom and watches me move around with an intense level of scrutiny that's impossible to ignore.

"Did you invite him?" I ask Edie.

She takes her face out of her wine goblet. "Who?"

"Gage."

“Where?”

“There.” I jerk my head to avoid pointing.

“I don’t see him.”

“Trust me, he’s there.”

“That was nice of him to come and support us.”

I stare at her, at a loss for words. She takes another gulp from her glass and then looks up at the ceiling, which is so vast and high I’m reminded of being in a museum.

“I did most of the work here,” she says, a little unhappily.

It’s true that the golf club was already more than halfway complete when I took over the project. It’s also true that Edie mismanaged the budget and failed at every deadline.

“You did a fantastic job,” I assure her. “Everyone knows that.”

She stops staring at the ceiling and gives me a smile. “You look beautiful, Dani. Did I tell you that already? You really do.”

“Thank you.” I smile back. “It’s too bad Conner couldn’t make it tonight.”

Micah has a fight so Conner is somewhere on the east side watching his cousin’s gladiator match. I’m not worried about Micah. He’ll win. He always does.

“Hello, girls.” Olivia Davison Ballerini slides into the conversation and brings with her a cloud of heavy perfume. “Did I hear you talking about Gage Silvestro?”

“Yes,” Edie says. “Naturally, Gage is here. This is a big night for the company.”

Olivia smirks and bats her fake eyelashes at me. “I do have a confession to make. Gage called me, completely out of the blue. He thought I might be able to help him score an invitation to tonight’s event. I’m sure it was just an oversight that he wasn’t included so I used my influence to get him one.”

“How nice of you,” I say, matching her phony smile. “You always did have a fine appreciation for the boys of West Emerald.”

Eddie hiccups and sloshes her wine.

“Just like the women in your family have for men who don’t belong to you,” Olivia says to me, because she’s crazy.

“I like your dress,” I reply. “That particular shade of green suits your personality. It makes me think of venomous lizards.”

Olivia opts to let the comment pass. She hails a waiter and selects a champagne glass from the tray. “Should we drink to the success of the club?”

“Oh yes,” Eddie says, grabbing for a champagne flute even though she still holds a gigantic wine glass in her other hand.

“I’m on the clock.” I look up to find Tess watching with a raised eyebrow as I chat with her stepmother. She stands close to her father as he speaks to a couple of dark-suited men I’ve never seen before. However, one of them is particularly striking, at least six foot five, with a granite expression and a thick shock of whitish blond hair.

Tess shifts her gaze to deliver a pointed glare at Gage, who takes no notice. He keeps one hand on a glossy black high top table, drumming his fingers on the surface and ignoring a trio

of women who cluster around the table and unsuccessfully try to engage him in conversation.

The look on his face shifts to annoyance when they burst into loud laughter, but then he sees how I'm looking his way and he breaks into a smile.

A real one.

Damn you.

Gage's smile is a lightning bolt of electricity charging my blood. It doesn't help that he's the most handsome man in the room. In the state. Maybe on the planet. He confuses me and he excites me. He's infuriating and he's strange and I've never met anyone else like him. I never will. There's only one Gage, for better or for worse.

"Excuse me." I leave Edie and Olivia without waiting for a response.

Tess meets me halfway and scowls in Gage's direction. "What is he up to now?"

"Beats me," I grumble. I wish I'd taken that drink after all. I could use it. Tess has no idea about my recent sexual misadventures with our new neighbor.

She studies my face. "Are you all right? You look pale."

"I was too busy to eat today. I'm fine."

She's doubtful. "I think these boys are draining your life force, Dani. I saw Hamlin practically mauling you earlier. Where is he?"

"Mercifully out of sight and not groping me for once."

She snorts out laughter and then lowers her voice. "See that tall guy my dad's talking to?"

“The one who looks like a *Game of Thrones* character?”

“Aric Marchenko.”

“You mean...”

“Yup. Lita and Haven’s father. He’s got more mob ties than The Godfather. I wish my dad would find someone else to chat with. That’s not really the kind of campaign cash we want to be cultivating.”

“Everyone!” Matilda stands at the head of the room, commanding attention with a microphone. “I don’t wish to interrupt the festivities but I just need to take a moment of your time. This night represents so many years of hard work and dedication and naturally I have always been completely involved every single step of the way. But my success, the success of Yellow Brick Properties, and the success of this incredible new world famous facility, could never have happened without the most wonderful man in the world at my side supporting me in everything I do. You all know of my brilliant husband, award winning novelist Henley Gallagher. Henley, take a bow my darling. You deserve it. I also want to give credit to my team, led by someone who, under my care, has blossomed from an awkward, shy, nervous girl into the most astonishing, remarkable and stunning woman. Dorothy Ann Gallagher, this is your moment!” She leads a round of applause.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

I should be used to Matilda’s performances by now but this takes the cake.

Tess bites her lip as she chokes on her laughter. All the heads in the room pivot my way. I lift my hand in a mortifying wave of acknowledgment.

Gage's eyes lock with mine.

Everyone else disappears. Or at least I wish they would. I'd like to escape right now, to go somewhere quiet and peaceful, to flee all the pretention and expectations.

And to my shock, I'd like nothing better than to do all of that with him.

"I need some fresh air," I tell Tess and she nods with sympathy, although she still sniffs out a few laughs.

Getting to the door is not easy. People keep stepping in front of me, trying to have a chat. I take a page out of Gage's antisocial handbook and put them off with a curt word or two.

"Dani." Maria Alvarez, who is the lead event planner, is the last one to stop me. But this is work and she's never one to be frivolous so I listen to her.

"The barrier to access the rooftop garden was removed," she says. "But there doesn't appear to be anyone up there."

"Let's keep it that way. There's always some clown who thinks rules don't apply to them but the legal team says it's too much liability to allow a crowd this size up there. Make sure no one else gets access."

She nods. "We'll take care of it."

"Thanks."

I take a detour through a discreet set of double doors leading to a narrow lane between the ballroom building and the adjacent five star restaurant, complete with a celebrity chef who hosts his own internet cooking show. Walking straight into the kitchen, a few staff members look up nervously when I pass through, but I offer them encouraging smiles along with praise that they are doing a fantastic job.

Though anyone unfamiliar with the layout would have a tough time tracking my movements, I look over my shoulder to see if Gage is following. I'm almost disappointed not to see him there.

The next door I breeze through gives me a blast of the fresh air I was craving. Out here, the night stays at least ten degrees cooler than it is in the concrete jungle of the city. I breathe in the crisp perfume of young grass from the nearby golf course and hear the splashes of night birds in the artificial pond, which required water to be trucked in all the way from Lake Poppy.

I know I can't dawdle out here for long, not with another hour left of the party. People will be looking for me.

The outdoor smells mingle suddenly with the stench of weed. I suppose it makes sense that if someone wanted to smoke they'd come out here where there's likely to be some privacy. But I'm surprised to hear male voices. I'm even more surprised when I recognize them.

"You always get the good shit," Hamlin says and coughs.

"Nothing but the best, little brother," is the reply from Hamlin's older brother, Bryson. "So you're really moving ahead with this?"

"Yup. Dani's ideal wife material. She might have come from trash but she's got all the connections now. Dad already gave me the go ahead to close the deal with her. I'll give it a few weeks to make it look respectable but when I stick a five carat diamond under Dani Gallagher's nose her fucking panties will melt off."

"Congrats. That's one hell of an accessory you'll have there. The girl, I mean. I was watching her tonight. She'll

make any white dress look damn good, although I seem to remember you bragging about how much you dirtied her up already.”

Hoarse laughter from Hamlin. The sound of a chef’s kiss. “Sweetest cherry I ever popped and I’ve popped quite a few. Won’t be any surprises between her legs but at least I’ll always know I got there first.”

His brother laughs too. “Fuck, you’re terrible.”

“You sure are,” I announce in a loud voice. “You’re *fucking terrible*, Hamlin!”

“Dani? Shit!” He’s off, chasing me down as I stalk back to the door.

I shove him away. “Don’t touch me. You’ll never touch me again.”

“Dani, come on.” He grabs my elbow.

“HEY!” A man in black comes running out of the darkness. “Security here! What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing,” I tell the security guard, freeing my elbow from Hamlin’s grip. “This guy was just leaving. Please make sure he gets promptly escorted off the property.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I hurry back inside, leaving behind the sound of Hamlin’s pathetic protests and the security guard’s stern resolve. For a moment I lean against the nearest wall and close my eyes.

That sucked.

That *really* sucked.

I mean, I don’t even care about Hamlin and it still sucked.

It's humiliating, being referred to like that, knowing I've been the topic of filthy conversations.

My pride is bruised.

A guy I spent a lot of time with, the same guy I even lost my virginity to, sees me as a business opportunity, a commodity to enhance his future. And he assumed that I'm so easy and so stupid that I'd just fall right into his lap when he snapped his fingers.

I open my eyes and move away from the wall.

Hamlin can go jump off a cliff.

He doesn't get to have any more of my energy.

I've got other things to worry about.

Work-type things. Gage-type things.

My heart skips when I return to the ballroom and can't find him at first. Then the crowd shifts and I spot him less than ten feet away, looking on as an employee uses a broom and dustpan to sweep away some broken glass.

The three Kingston sisters – Matilda, Alta and Edie – are gathered in a loose knot by the enormous stone fireplace that was constructed by an artisan from Florence, Italy, and will likely only get used twice a year in this climate. They keep looking at Gage, clearly discussing him. Alta's lips are pursed and Matilda pouts. Only Edie appears unbothered.

Suddenly, I'm more than ready to kick everyone out of here. Lack of sleep, an excess of professional stress and a huge helping of personal angst are colliding with a bad effect. I'm tired and my feet hurt and if I have to smile one more time I'm sure my face will crack.

As the minutes keep ticking by, I'm relieved that Hamlin doesn't show his face again. I hope that security guard found a reason to punch him. Hard. In a place that really hurts.

The clock finally chimes midnight and people begin drifting away. Even Matilda and Henley leave, Matilda laughing and clutching me and saying I'm wonderful before leaving me to handle the guest exodus alone.

I glance over at Gage, who shows no sign of going anywhere. He didn't bother wearing a jacket and tie tonight. In fact, he's dressed similar to the wait staff in a white shirt rolled to the elbows and black pants. His looks are only a small part of him but as my eyes rest on the broad plane of his shoulders I feel a quivering tug deep in my belly and it travels lower.

"I'm glad you didn't get to be my first, Gage."

"But you got to be mine, Dani."

My fingers curl inward, the nails embedding deep in my palm. Could that really have just happened yesterday morning? I've replayed the scene endlessly in my head since then. Later, when I left for work, I stopped and looked at his door.

And I wanted to go to him. I nearly gave in.

Who are you, Gage? Will I ever really know?

"Dani." Stuart Ballerini steps into my line of sight. Alcohol fumes fill my nose as he breathes in my face. "What a triumph. To have a world class establishment right here in our own backyard. I was speaking to some local business leaders about a golf tournament to raise funds for my campaign. You think you could speak to Tess and get that set up?"

"Actually, I won't have an active role managing the day to day activities of the club. Please call the office and we'll put

you in touch with the appropriate party.”

He is eerily within kissing range, his eyes straying to my breasts. “I was hoping you and I would have a reason to work together.”

My skin crawls. “I don’t see how that’s possible, Mr. Ballerini.”

“Stuart,” he reminds me. “I’ve known you for a long time, Dani. We can be a little less formal, don’t you think?”

No. Ew.

Tess left fifteen minutes ago. He wouldn’t dare behave like this if she was watching. However, he doesn’t seem to care that his wife is still in the room. Olivia waits by the door for her husband to finish being a pig. But instead of glaring at him, she’s glaring at me.

“You have a good night,” I tell the mayor and move away.

Soon, the ballroom is nearly empty except for the staff.

And Gage.

He waits beside the stone fireplace, watching impassively as I approach. The cleanup crew is already out in full force.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I say to him.

“Then tell me to leave,” he replies.

I try and I fail. I don’t want him to leave. Not tonight, not at all. This weakness is bewildering.

Bradley, one of the restaurant employees who assisted with tonight’s catering, rushes over, breathless. “Maria asked if you would take a look at the rooftop garden. I think she’s worried something might have been damaged when someone snuck up there during the party.”

“You talked to Maria?” I thought she was still outside dealing with an angry guest who claims his car got scratched by one of the valets.

“Uh huh.” He nods, one of those nervous types who doesn’t look you in the eye.

“Thanks, Bradley. I’ll take a look.”

The side door is the quickest way to access the stairs leading to the lavish rooftop gardens. The gardens are stunning, a bragging point, a tropical paradise built in what should be a desert. This time Gage does follow. I hear him trailing my steps and I feel his eyes on my body.

Gage follows me all the way up to the roof, which overlooks the sedate sprawl of wealthy West Emerald as Em City lights twinkle on the horizon.

He’s close, so very close.

“Do you still hate me, Dani?” The question is sad and sincere.

I shut my eyes, memories crowding in. “Why shouldn’t I hate you, Gage? Tell me why.”

I’m lost in the past, the good parts and the terrible.

I don’t see it coming. I would have had no chance, no time to react.

The sound of two men struggling in a death match is unlike any other.

Things happen in slow motion as I turn around to find Gage is battling an impossible monster. Not a true monster, just a man wearing one of those graphic Halloween masks, a grotesquely exaggerated witch’s face frozen in a cackling sneer.

It's a moment where everything seems unreal and yet everything is horribly, viciously real. The knife in his hand proves this.

Their brawl knocks into a large ceramic pot. The thing falls and shatters into fragments, a victim of the war.

Now I find my voice and scream because it's all I can do.

Gage is a good fighter. Even in the hazy night lighting I see him deliver a powerful kick that sends the witch staggering. Gage stands between me and my attacker. He glances back, searching for me.

“RUN!” he shouts. “RUN!”

I should.

And I can't.

Instead I watch, useless, as Gage charges into the witch. There's a muffled howl of pain from inside the mask and the metal complaint of the knife falling somewhere unseen. But the knife hardly matters. Now there's the terrible shape of a gun. Gage reacts like lightning, the gun knocked away. They're close to the edge of the roof and Gage definitely has the upper hand at this point, his hands around the man's neck.

“Who the fuck are you?” Gage says, or at least I think that's what he says.

The man struggles and chokes out sounds that might be words.

It's quick, so quick, when Gage unleashes a sound of fury and lifts the man, witch mask and all.

Then I blink and the witch is gone. There's just the two of us.

How many seconds have passed?

Five?

Ten?

My breath exits in a thankful rush, an adrenaline surge only now beginning to hammer through my veins.

I don't know why this happened but it's over. Gage is still standing and so am I. Nothing else matters.

Until Gage, my mighty and powerful protector, falls to his knees.

I can see it now, the truth. I see the vast stain darkening his white shirt, in the place where his heart is. I gasp out his name in anguish and fly to his side.

Panicked voices, drawn by the sound of my own screams, aren't far.

“CALL 911!” I shout to them. “NOW!”

I'm with him, pulling at his shirt, tearing buttons in a frantic mission to see how bad the wound is. Blood bubbles from an ominous gash on the left side of his chest.

I put my hands over it, wishing hopelessly for some enchanted healing power. I feel the thud of his heart beneath my palms but with each beat more of his blood trickles through my fingers.

“Hold on. Damn you, don't you dare leave me again! Don't you fucking dare!”

As if I could order him not to die.

There's no end to the blood. My hands are covered with it and still more seeps out.

“No, please, no.”

Gage says nothing but he gently touches my face, fading fast. I press my lips to his, a desperate connection meant to keep him here, with me, where he belongs.

Sirens wail.

Men shout.

And Gage Silvestro shuts his eyes.

Chapter 26

Dani

I'm not allowed to go with him.

Gage is swiftly loaded into an ambulance that zooms away with supreme urgency and I'm forced to stay behind. There are questions to answer and I was the only other eyewitness.

Another ambulance rolls away far more quietly, the one holding a dead man. His mask didn't save his head from splitting open when Gage threw him from the roof.

Every cop in West Emerald has swarmed the scene, or at least that's how it looks. There's a sense of shock and indignation in all the muttered conversations. Things like this happen in the city all the time. But West Emerald is supposed to be immune.

There's blood on my hands and on my dress and I want to cover my ears to escape all the stern questions being fired at me.

“Did you recognize the man in the mask?”

Fucking ridiculous question.

“Do you think he might have been trying to rob you?”

I want to scream.

The flashing emergency lights stab my eyes. When I vomit at the feet of the officers I'm taken away to the hospital too. A concerned female paramedic examines me for signs of shock on the ride over.

"He won't die," I tell her. "He can't."

She shines a light into my eyes, checks my pulse. "I'll say a prayer."

Once my vitals are found to be stable, I'm given an itchy blanket at the hospital and deposited in the Emergency Room waiting area.

I know this hospital well.

This is where Charlotte was born. It's where we waited for news of Lita. It's where I stared in disbelief at the sight of Gage Silvestro after my car accident.

Was that only five days ago? It feels like ancient history.

Uncle H and Matilda are the first ones to arrive at the hospital. Matilda weeps and keeps me gathered in her arms until I have to nudge her away. She says nothing about Gage. She wants to go to the golf club. It's bad publicity for everyone, all this mayhem and violence and dead witches. And on the night of the grand opening no less! She'll need to compose a statement for the press.

Uncle H doesn't want to leave and suggests Matilda should go alone but she doesn't like this idea and I don't want to deal with either of them so I order Uncle H to go with her. He only relents when Tess shows up.

Tess has brought me a change of clothes and she insists on escorting me to the restroom so I can clean up. There's dried blood on my skin and on my dress, which I never want to see again. I'm shoving the dress into the bathroom garbage bin

when Tess pops her head in to say that she was able to obtain some news about Gage.

“He lost a lot of blood but he’s stable for now,” she says. “He’ll be having surgery within the hour.”

“Oh, god.” I cover my face with my hands. “Tess, this is a nightmare, right?”

“He’s strong.” She pats my back. “He’ll survive, Dani.”

There are no guarantees, but her confident words give me hope. Right now hope is all there is.

Back in the waiting room, Tess thinks I could use some coffee. I’m about to refuse but then nod my head because my mouth still tastes like the vomit that erupted all over some cop’s shoes.

Tess is still gone on her coffee errand when Micah and Conner arrive. Micah is only half dressed, like he might have jumped out of the ring in the middle of a fight. There’s a puffy bruise under his right eye and his knuckles are covered with black tape. Conner wears a tee that says *I Like Food* in huge letters.

At the sight of them I burst into tears and can’t go running into their arms fast enough.

“Aw, Dani girl.” Conner kisses the top of my head and holds on.

Micah grabs me next and cradles me to his chest. “You all right?”

No, I’m not. I’m halfway to hyperventilating but I manage to nod.

Someone in the background wonders, “Is that Conner Wiseman?”

“No!” Micah barks back.

“Where is he?” Conner asks and I look up into his grim face.

“Surgery.” I swipe at the tears clouding my eyes. “He’s lost a lot of blood. He was unconscious when the ambulance took him away. I don’t know more than that.”

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Conner says, leaving me in Micah’s care.

Micah keeps a protective arm around my shoulders while guiding me to the least populated corner of the room. Tess returns with coffee and asks if there are any updates. She points out to Micah that he might want to think about throwing on a shirt before someone notices that he’s violating the hospital’s minimal dress code. He sends her a dirty look and she clams up.

Conner hotfoots his way over to us. “Come on. We’re allowed to go to the waiting room for family members.”

“All of us?”

“Yup.”

Score one for Conner’s celebrity status. Won’t hear me complaining.

This part of the hospital is far quieter than the Emergency Room. A nurse hands Micah a freshly laundered hospital gown and tells him that if he wants to stay then he needs to cover up.

Tess smirks at him with triumph.

Micah rolls his eyes but throws on the hospital gown, which is comically too small for him.

They all take seats on cushy chairs but I can't do that.

"I'll be back."

Tess stands and starts to follow me. "Where are you going?"

"I just need a moment alone. Please," I add when she continues to follow.

"We'll wait here," Conner says.

I saw a sign for a non-denominational chapel and thought of the comment from the paramedic. I've never prayed in my life and don't really have anyone to pray to. Maybe at a time like this that doesn't matter so much.

The etched wood sign posted above the arched doorway reads, "All Are Welcome". The windows stretch from floor to ceiling with intricate stained glass panels in the center. The room must be full of cheerful light in the daytime hours. The windows are all dark now but the atmosphere is peaceful. Symbols from different religions, none of them mine, hang on the walls. Still, the sight of other people's faith is a comfort.

I'm the only one here and I have my choice of any of the dozen polished wood benches. I select the front row. The noisy business of the hospital feels remote here, the silence just about complete. My fingers reach for the reassuring shape of the pendant around my neck like I've done thousands of times before, the pad of my thumb sliding across the smooth gemstone and finding solace in the act.

Thoughts of misery and bitterness are not welcome in my mind right now. There is only room for healing, for hope. I shut my eyes and Gage's smile lights up my soul.

The connection between us hasn't been erased. I use that energy to wish with all my heart.

Let him stay.

I'm not sure if that qualifies as prayer but a sense of peace washes over me as I whisper the mantra out loud. I doubt too many minutes have passed by when I realize I'm not alone.

Looking over my shoulder, I find a man sitting quietly in the back row. A flicker of alarm is eased when he nods to me in a friendly way.

"Hello, Dani. Don't be afraid. I'm just here to look out for you."

"Are you a cop?"

"No." He stands up, slowly walks over and raises an eyebrow at the bench beside mine, clearly asking if it's all right for him to sit down.

"I don't own the chapel. Who are you?"

He sits with a sigh. He's a big man, probably in his late thirties, tall and imposing with a hard jaw and swollen muscles beneath his black shirt. He wears a US Marine Corps cap and his brown eyes are kindly.

And familiar.

"Wait, I know you. You're that security guard from the club. The one who intervened when my asshole ex got handsy."

He nods. "That's not the only place you know me from, though, is it?"

The question confuses me. This is starting to get a little weird. After everything that's happened tonight I'm not in the mood for weird.

The man sees me tense up. He becomes quick to explain. “Sometimes I wear a fake beard. Sometimes a hair piece too. It’s necessary in my line of work. I was wearing both the night you were walking home and a man tried to attack you.”

My mind sifts back to the night in question. Last month, shortly after the parking garage incident, I stepped out of my apartment at dusk to get some lobster rolls from a place just down the street from my building. On the way back, I was less than twenty yards from the entrance to The Tower when a man wearing a black balaclava seized my forearm. The bag of lobster rolls dropped to the ground and I fumbled for the pepper spray I usually keep handy. I didn’t need my pepper spray because in the next second a human battering ram charged the scene and tossed the would-be robber/rapist/whatever into the street where he narrowly escaped getting hit by a car and then took off running. My defender turned to me, said, “Are you okay?” and when I nodded, a flash of a smile split his thick black beard.

By then, other people were starting to gather around the scene and I noticed a glass vial on the sidewalk. I bent down to pick it up, a little dazed, thinking it would hold a clue to what just happened, but by the time I finished dropping it into my purse the man who had rescued me was gone.

“You were also in West Emerald,” I say as the pieces click together. “You were watching the house the day of my cousin’s birthday party. You waved to me as you walked by and I thought you were a neighbor.”

“Yup, that was me.”

“Why? Just who the hell are you?”

The man is not put off by my tone. “Name’s Matt Sullivan. I work for him.”

“WHO?”

He raises an eyebrow like I should know the answer. And I do.

“You work for Gage.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been following me.”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Ever since the attempt on your life in the parking garage. Gage was convinced it wouldn’t be an isolated incident. Looks like he was right.”

This takes a moment to sink in and when it does a number of new questions fill my head. If Gage found out about the parking garage then he must have been monitoring my life from afar, at least on some level.

How long has he been watching me? Has he been watching all of us?

Why the hell would he bother when he’s the one who chose to walk away?

Matt waits for me to come to grips with the situation. “I’m damn sorry that I wasn’t around tonight when it counted. After I removed that prick who put his hands on you, the club’s real security team took notice and forced me off the property. I really didn’t think any serious shit would go down in such a public setting with so much security milling around so I didn’t break my neck trying to get back in. I’m sorry about that, Dani. I let you down.”

“I’m all right.” I roll my ruby between my fingers. “Gage saved me.”

Matt’s face sags with sadness. “How is he?”

“I don’t know. He was stabbed in the chest. They had to operate.”

With a nod, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a card. “Keep my number handy. Call me if you need anything, doesn’t matter what time it is.”

“Will you still be following me?”

He gnaws the inside of his mouth and sighs. “If there’s some fucker out there who still means you harm, I don’t want to see that happen.”

I look down at his card. “You’re a private investigator. If you want to help me, and help Gage, then apply your skills. I’ve had one too many brushes with death to chalk anything up to coincidence. That’s what you can do.” I stand up and offer my hand. “Thanks, Matt. I do owe you some gratitude for being my secret bodyguard.”

He shakes my hand. “Be careful, Dani. And I mean it. Call anytime.”

“I might.” I move down the aisle but he remains sitting. “Are you staying here?”

He glances at the cross on the wall. “Maybe even a prayer from a lapsed Catholic will do some good tonight.”

“Can’t hurt.” I leave him to his personal task.

The waiting room where I left Tess, Micah and Conner isn’t far. I nod to a passing nurse as we travel in opposite directions down a long corridor with glass walls on either side.

The city lights are much closer now than they were when I stood on a roof in West Emerald. Dawn is still hours away.

When I round the next corner, it's a shock to find Gage's mother seated alone on a chair in the hallway, hands in her lap, her head down. She still wears the same sleek black dress she wore to the club earlier tonight but there's a sweater draped over her shoulders.

"Alta."

She starts, then raises her eyes, which are red and pained. "Oh hi, Dani." She follows my movements as I sit down in a chair.

"Have you heard anything?" I ask her.

She takes a breath. "He's still in surgery. I spoke to one of his doctors. So far it looks like the knife missed all his major organs."

Relief floods me. "That's fantastic news."

"Yes." She worries at her lower lip. A tear leaks out of her right eye.

I can't help but stare. In all the years I've known Alta I've never seen her express any sincere emotions about her son.

"You think I'm a bad mother," she says. "I'm not fishing for sympathy. I *am* a bad mother."

She's also not the only bad mother in the world. I could write a book on bad mothers. But this seems like a poor time to throw salt on the wound.

"You're here now," I point out.

She twists a ring around her finger, a garish diamond I haven't seen her wear in years. Her wedding ring. "When I

allowed Christo to take Gage, I didn't believe that he'd stay away. I was sure he'd be back in a few weeks, a few months maybe. He always did come back, no matter how terribly we fought or how many times we were unfaithful to one other. I didn't believe him when he said we were finished. I was so accustomed to fighting battles that I didn't realize I'd already lost the war. That was the end of my family. The two of them never came back. But you knew that already."

People are such mysteries. They can't ever be kept in neatly categorized boxes. The layers of complexity are endless.

"You and Gage don't speak, do you?"

She shakes her head. "That's my fault."

"Maybe you could try."

"He's a man now. I don't know him."

"He's your son, Alta. You're the only mother he has."

She looks at me with all the pain of a miserable woman, a regretful mother. "He's my son." She says this softly, like she needs to hear it out loud to remind herself.

"Why don't you come with me to the waiting room? Conner and Micah are there. We'll wait for news about Gage together."

Alta slips her wedding ring off and hurriedly puts it back on. "No. I'm going to stay here until he's out of surgery. Then I'll go home."

"If you change your mind, you're welcome to join us."

She doesn't answer. I take that as my cue to leave.

“Dani, if you see him...” She trails off, brows knitted together.

I wait while she fidgets on her chair.

She swipes at her tearful eyes, somewhat irritably. “Just tell him I was here, please.”

Alta could tell him herself. I’m sure it would mean a lot more.

“All right, I will.”

Back in the waiting room, I find only Conner and Micah. Micah now wears the hospital gown like a coat, tying it loosely because it doesn’t close all the way across his chest. Underneath, he wears only a pair of black shorts with the words War Lion embroidered in gold. He looks ridiculous and under any other circumstances I’d laugh.

Conner sees the question in my eyes before I ask it. “Tess left. She wants to go light a fire under her dad to see if he can get involved in the police investigation. Isn’t her dad’s kid brother in charge of the West Emerald force now?”

I forgot Tess’s uncle is the police chief. “Yeah.”

“It’s time to accept that someone’s trying to kill you,” Micah says.

I know it. Still a disturbing thought. I blow out a long sigh and sink into the nearest chair. “This is just unreal. I don’t know why anyone would be trying to kill me.”

Micah’s jaw hardens. “There doesn’t need to be a good reason for murder, Dani.”

He’s thinking of his father. This night must bring back memories for him, dark and terrible ones. My tongue sticks in my mouth as I try to come up with something to say.

Micah watches me. “We were talking.”

“About me?”

Conner clears his throat and takes a seat on my other side. “Gage hasn’t told you yet, has he?”

“Told me what?”

“The real reason why he left. And why he stayed gone.”

I straighten up. “No. I think he tried but I wasn’t willing to listen yet. It doesn’t even matter right now. It’s the past.”

“It does matter,” Conner says. He peers over my head at Micah. “Can you take this? I never trust my ability to remember all the details.”

“Yeah.” Micah lowers his head like he needs a minute to locate the right words.

When he finds them, I feel like the world changes colors and becomes unrecognizable.

For the second time tonight, I’m going to puke. I jump out of my chair and Conner catches me when I wobble on my feet. “I’m okay.”

I’m not.

Conner lets me escape to the ladies’ room where I lock myself in a stall and sit on the toilet because there’s no place else to sit.

All these years.

All these fucking years!

Wrong, all of it wrong.

“Do you still hate me, Dani?”

Gage gave up his own chances, sacrificed his own happiness.

All to keep me safe.

Christo Silvestro assumed he had all the power in this world. If not for his father's threats, Gage would have stayed here with us. *With me*. Home, where he belonged.

Gage was the holder of a fierce and loyal heart. His father knew and used that against him.

What a cruel moment to discover that the man I've spent so long hating is the same one who once made a choice to love me more than he loved himself.

"Gage," I whisper, knowing he can't hear me but needing to answer his question anyway. "I don't hate you. I need you. Come back to me."

Chapter 27

Gage

The beeps of machinery, the patter of determined footsteps, the murmur of serious voices.

This is the night music of the hospital and every time I drift off to sleep, the night music pulls me back.

I'm still in a post-surgical haze when a West Emerald detective, a graying force veteran who wears his tobacco habit like invisible skin, stops by for a chat. He logs my statement, his forehead creasing when I repeat the killer's words.

"I was paid. Cut her throat."

The detective averts his eyes and that's when I know he doesn't fucking believe me. "Events get confusing in a struggle. Trust me, every possibility will be examined."

But at least Witch Mask isn't saying anything to anyone. He's in the morgue.

And Dani is safe. For now.

That's the only promise I'm able to extract from the tight-lipped detective before he takes his leave, pausing in the hallway to hack up a lung before returning to the chore of catching bad guys.

I need to get the fuck out of here. I don't want to hear about how many freaking cops are guarding the hospital. Dani

remains vulnerable.

A spasm of pain is real but the violent slice of agony through my chest has nothing to do with being knifed and then cut open by a surgical team. This is a more visceral, primitive terror.

Nothing has been solved. Dani is not really safe.

The I.V. drip attached to my arm must include a sedative. Against my will, I fall into a fitful world somewhere between rest and nightmares, always to the soundtrack of that hospital night music. Time has a watery quality right now, but I'm sure my spell in dreamland hasn't lasted for long before a nurse stops by to check my vitals in the darkness.

"Are you comfortable?" she asks.

Fuck no. The heavily bandaged region below my left shoulder pulses whether I move or not. And I need the haze to clear out of my head so I can do something more useful than lie here.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I tell her so she doesn't try to feed me more drugs.

She taps notes on her handheld tablet. "Let's make sure we keep on top of your pain."

"I need my phone."

The nurse gazes around the hospital room with a frown. "I'll check on the whereabouts of your personal belongings. I'm sure they are being kept safe."

"I need to make some calls. It's urgent."

She disapproves. Her tablet gets tucked under her arm and she checks the bag of fluid dripping into my arm. "How about something to help you rest for now?"

This is a waste of time. “Thanks, but I’m just about to drift off anyway.” I crack a fake yawn to prove my point.

Satisfied, she tucks a bed remote in beside me and orders me to use the call button if necessary.

My legs don’t want to work right when I try to stand. Blood thunders through my head and my vision fades. This pisses me off but I’m still being swept under the shroud of bodily trauma plus whatever sedatives are pumping through my system.

I crash back into bed and shut my eyes, sure that if I just give it a minute then I’ll be able to function.

No telling how much time passes but the next time my lids flip open I’m sure I’m either hallucinating or dead.

She’s here, within reach, an angel summoned from my dreams.

“Dani.” My throat is dry, my voice hoarse.

She sniffs. She’s been crying. “They said you were awake.”

“Sort of. What time is it?”

“Four a.m.”

“Surprised they let you in here at this hour.”

“Conner. He convinced one of your doctors to let me slip in here. You know how he oozes charm. I think he’s out there telling football jokes.”

I laugh. It hurts. “Sounds like Conner.”

The pale light emitted by medical equipment isn’t enough to get a good look at her. I’m reminded of that grim moment on the roof, when her face faded and I had one last wish.

“You’re going to be okay,” Dani says. “That’s what your doctor said.”

“I’m told I’m damn lucky. No organ damage. What about you? Are you all right?”

“I’ve had better nights,” she jokes, then her voice drops to a whisper. “I had to see you. I couldn’t wait until morning.”

I don’t know if I have the right to touch her hand but I take the chance. “I’m glad you did.”

Dani runs her fingertips over mine and laces our hands together. “Gage, they told me.”

I’m still a little out of it. “Who?”

“Conner and Micah. They told me about you, about your father. My heart is broken for everything you had to suffer alone. God, I hated you. I hated you and I’m ashamed. Gage, I’m so ashamed.” Her shoulders shake and she can’t speak anymore.

Her tears unleash the floodgates of all the sorrow I’ve smothered for so long. I can’t help being the cause of her tears in the past but I won’t let her cry over me now.

“Dani, no. Shh. Come here, baby.”

She lets me pull her closer and I shift to the left so she can stretch out in the bed beside me. She continues to sob softly as I stroke her hair.

“I thought I was going to lose you.” Her voice catches and a shudder rolls through her body. “I was terrified I’d never get the chance to make this right.”

I rest my chin on top of her head and breathe in the rainwater scent of her hair. “You didn’t lose me. I’m still here.”

“We *all* hated you, Gage. We all hated you for nothing.”

“It had to be that way.”

“But maybe we could have fought him together.” She sounds so dreamily hopeful, imagining a world where villains like Christo Silvestro are vanquished by teenagers in love.

Wouldn't that be a nice world?

Perhaps it exists somewhere. But since it's not the world I know anything about, I have no regrets.

I would have spent forever in exiled purgatory for her sake.

Maybe Dani hears my thoughts because she lifts her head, propping herself up on one elbow. She stares at me in the semi-darkness and lightly traces my cheek with her fingertips.

“Will it hurt if I kiss you?” she asks.

“No, it would hurt if you didn't.”

Her breath is sweet and her lips find mine tentatively, like we're two beginners about to try out romance for the first time. The free hand that's not attached to a damn tube slides into her hair and my thumb massages the tender spot at the back of her neck. Dani leans into the kiss, giving me her full mouth, and I take advantage, using my tongue until a moan escapes her throat and she hooks her leg around mine.

She breaks off the kiss and stares at the shape of my cock saluting the ceiling from beneath the sheet. “You just had surgery.”

“Not down there I didn't.”

Dani kisses my lips, my jaw, my neck. The feel of her body is insanely good.

“Can I stay here?” she asks. “I just don’t want to be away from you. I promise I’ll let you rest.”

“Rest is overrated.”

She sits up on her elbows, her gaze solemn. “You need to heal.”

“I’ll heal better if you’re here. Stay. Please.”

“Gage.” She runs a hand over my chest, exploring lightly, careful not to stray too close to the bandages. “I want there to be a real chance for us. Do you?”

Is she kidding?

“You’ve always been all I want, Dani. Don’t you know that?”

She nestles beside me. I wrap my arms around her as best I can.

In a sleepy voice, Dani tells me about meeting Matt in the hospital chapel. She says she ran into Alta, which is a huge surprise. Dani pities my mother, sees her as a woman who’s made many mistakes and allowed a bitter relationship to ruin her life. Well, if my mother wants to see me, I won’t turn her away.

But Dani doesn’t know something important. No one told her what the witch said before I killed him. She drifts off to sleep now, breathing evenly in my arms. I allow myself to join her because she’s right. I need to heal as quickly as possible. I won’t be any good for her if I have to stay in this hospital bed.

I wake up to the sound of voices.

And Micah cursing.

And Conner laughing.

I crack an eye to find my cousins staring at me. Conner stuffs a whole powdered donut into his mouth and waves. Micah leans on the windowsill with his arms crossed.

“What the hell are you wearing?” I ask him.

“Same thing as you.”

“Why?”

He rolls his eyes. “Something something, decency and hospital standards, blah fuckitty blah.”

“Want a donut?” Conner asks, loud enough to stir Dani awake, despite my effort to shush him.

Dani sits up, hair tousled, beautiful in the morning light. She casts a puzzled look around at the scene in the room. “What’s going on?”

“Breakfast.” Conner pushes the donut box at her now. “I’ve got juice too. How the hell are you feeling, Gage?”

Like I’ve been smacked by a train and speared with a bayonet.

“Great. I’ll be running a marathon later today.”

Conner grins and licks sugary powder from his fingers.

“You’re disgusting,” Micah tells him.

Conner picks up a small bottle of orange juice and throws it at Micah’s head.

“Guys,” Dani hisses. “Stop it or they’ll kick us out of here.”

“Sorry.” Conner yawns. “I didn’t get any sleep. I’m not as much fun as usual.”

“I talked to that Matt guy,” Micah says. “He’s got connections in the police department. There’s no profile on that fucker in the witch mask. He burned his own fingerprints off so he’s still a John Doe. Cops think it’s a mob hit gone wrong.”

“Bullshit,” I grumble.

He shrugs. “It’s West Emerald. They’re not exactly up to speed when it comes to street crime.”

My arm stays around Dani. “He talked to me.”

She frowns. “Who?”

“The witch. I had my hands around his throat. I asked him who he was. He answered.”

Her eyes widen. “I didn’t hear him answer.”

“He did. And he said he was paid to cut your throat.”

Conner drops his box of donuts.

Dani’s hand claps over her mouth.

Micah stands stock still.

Another breath and another spasm of pain. “The cop I talked to didn’t seem to believe me.”

“I believe you.” Micah’s posture is tight, like he’s about to pounce. He nods to Dani. “You know that kid that sent you up to the roof?”

She drops her hand from her mouth. “Bradley.”

“Yeah, he says he was sent a hundred bucks on a payment app with a message that if he could convince you to head up to the roof at midnight he’d receive another five hundred.”

She’s outraged. “And he didn’t wonder why?”

“Claims he assumes it was a practical joke. So either he’s a fucking liar or he’s dumb as paint. But it’s tough to trace that shit.”

Conner leans forward in his chair. “What do we do? I mean, the cops will give her some protection while they get this sorted out, right?”

“Not good enough,” I say.

Micah kicks his heel against the wall. “Definitely not fucking good enough.”

Driven by fierce instinct, I curl my arm around Dani’s body to hold her closer.

“You shouldn’t go back to West Emerald,” I tell her. “Or to your apartment. Or to the office. This isn’t finished.”

She starts to argue, then her eyes flip to the bandage covering a deep stab wound that could have easily killed me if it had penetrated in a slightly different way. She swallows. “I’m listening.”

“You need to get out of town,” I tell her. “And anyone outside this room shouldn’t know where you’re going.”

Micah raises his hand. “How do we pull that off? Pretty sure the cops will insist she stays in touch.”

“We’ll figure it out. There’s got to be some perks to being part of a West Emerald ruling family. The fucking police chief is the mayor’s brother. I’m sure they owe our family a favor or two.”

“Wait.” Dani’s mouth sets in a stubborn line. “I can’t just leave without telling Uncle H and Tess and-”

“Yes, you absolutely fucking can. It’ll be enough for them to know you’re safe.”

Dani mulls that over. “Work is a problem but I can do a lot remotely.”

The persistent ache in my upper chest is blossoming into something stronger. Dani notices the grimace on my face I try to shift positions. She scrambles to grab the remote and adjust the bed.

“Better?” she asks anxiously after raising the mattress.

It still feels like I’m being gnawed by a sharp-toothed rodent from the inside out. “Yeah, much better.”

Conner has been nodding along and now he gets animated. “So we need a safe house for her. Where?”

“Lake Poppy?” Micah suggests. “It’s out of town but not too far. We’re getting closer to the end of the summer season so there should be rentals available for the right price. We’ll find something out of the way of prying eyes.”

“That’s good.” I nod. “Let’s go with that plan. I’ll add a big bonus to the offer if we can have it today. Someone will jump at that. We can be there by sundown.”

“Whoa,” Dani says. “There’s no way the hospital is going to release you today.”

“What are they gonna do, chain me to the bed? I’m leaving.”

“You are not! Gage, seriously.” She looks to Conner and Micah for help.

Conner clears his throat and becomes unusually serious. “Gage, you need to take care of yourself. That means staying in this hospital bed until someone in a white coat tells you it’s all right to get out.”

“Because if you don’t,” Micah declares, “I’m going to beat the shit out of you.”

“See?” Dani picks up my hand and kisses my knuckles. “Although beating you up would kind of defeat the point of getting you healthy, you get the picture.”

I know they’re right. I won’t be of any use if I collapse from complications or infection. I rub Dani’s back and wonder how the hell I’m going to let her out of my sight. The very idea is torture.

Micah reads my mind. “I’ll guard her with my life.”

“And no one is getting past me,” Conner says.

But Dani shakes her head. “I can’t ask you both to drop everything and babysit me indefinitely.”

Micah snorts. “Like I can be stopped. I’ll find replacements to stand in for my upcoming fights. And no one will give me any grief at the gym. People need to check out on short notice all the time for one reason or another.”

“Pre-season play doesn’t even start for weeks,” Conner says. “I’ll make it work.”

They’re all waiting for me to agree.

“You’ll both stay with her?”

Micah’s had enough of being imprisoned in his hospital gown and rips it off. “Yeah, of course I’ll stay with her. Me and a couple of trusted fully loaded companions.”

“I don’t have any fully loaded companions,” Conner says. “I’m scary enough all on my own. I’ll be on guard twenty-four seven like that guy on the fireplace.”

“What fireplace?” Micah scowls. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Conner smacks his hands together. “You know. The elf. Elf on a shelf. But I’ll be the quarterback on the couch.”

Dani busts up laughing and despite the gravity of the situation, her laughter is the best damn medicine in the world.

“We’re officially reunited,” she declares. “The Wicked West Rejects.”

Conner rediscovers his appetite and chomps down on another donut, talking with his mouth full. “I think we should get matching jackets.”

“Hey.” I snap my fingers at Micah. “Just so we’re clear, no way would you be able to beat the shit out of me.”

He grins.

There’s a serious mess to deal with and I still feel like I’ve been run through a meat grinder, but I also feel more like myself than I have in forever.

I’ve got my boys back. I’ve got Dani back.

I’m damn grateful to be alive.

Chapter 28

Gage

“How’s the house?” I ask Micah on the walk to the car.

“Big. Decadent. Prime spot on the water with a private dock and no neighbors within a quarter mile.”

There’s a stack of hospital release paperwork in my hand. I toss it in the backseat of my car while Micah climbs behind the wheel. His own vehicle isn’t the most reliable box of metal in the world so he’s been using mine since he and Conner got Dani safely installed at the Lake Poppy rental house two days ago. With my arm in a sling, driving would be a chore so I let him keep the keys.

I could have hired a car service to drive me up to the lake but we decided it would be best if no one else outside our tiny group knows anything about our location. Even Matt doesn’t have the address. He’s been sending me updates as he tries to find clues that the cops might have missed. So far, they’re coming up empty.

Micah sees the grimace on my face as I get the seatbelt clicked in place. “You’re hurting.”

“Nah.”

“Why don’t you take something for the pain?”

“Double nah.”

The sling feels like it’s making the soreness feel worse so I remove it. This morning the surgeon confirmed everything is healing well. I’m still on antibiotics but I refuse to take the prescribed painkillers. The brain fog side effect is a dealbreaker so I’ll have to suck it up.

“Let’s call them.” I dial Conner’s number and set the phone on the dash.

Conner picks up on the first ring. “You’re free?”

“Yup. I’ve got you on speaker. Where’s Dani?”

“I’m here.” Her sweet voice sends a current through my chest.

We’re in touch constantly but it was torment to let her go. Only the knowledge that she was with Conner and Micah eased the panic. I’d trust them with my own life and they’re the only people on earth I’d trust with hers.

“We just had lunch.” Conner sounds cheerful. “I made grilled cheese. Now we’re going to watch *The Empire Strikes Back*.”

“Not again,” Dani groans.

Micah sighs with impatience. “Hey Con, you’re packing, right?”

“Yeah. Most lethal weapon known to man.”

“Not talking about your dick.”

“Then no.”

“Conner!”

“Kidding. Lighten up. I’ve got everything under control. There’s no one in sight and I’m on high alert. You take care on the east side. Don’t let Gage wear his fragile self out.”

“I wish you would just drive straight here,” Dani says, worry thick in her voice. “This seems like a really bad idea.”

Micah and I exchange a glance.

“It’ll be fine,” he says. “Won’t take long.”

Matt has been keen to speak to anyone who might have a grudge against Dani. Haven Marchenko made the list and her crime boss dad happened to be at the club that night. But Matt’s run into a roadblock when it comes to getting Haven to answer any questions at all. He visited one of the strip clubs she runs. She told him to fuck off. She wasn’t able to tell the police to fuck off but they haven’t found any connection between Haven and the attacks.

Maybe it’s a longshot, but Haven might be rattled enough to cooperate if she gets a blast from the past. While she might still hate Conner, she has no reason to despise me or Micah. Micah has even seen her around since his neighborhood is in the middle of her criminal empire.

Micah looks me over with doubt. “You sure you’re up for this?”

I give him a look. “Bulldozer couldn’t stop me.”

“You don’t have to go in. I can do this myself.”

“Quit trying to shove me in a nursing home.” I snatch my phone and locate the notes I’ve been keeping on a suspect list. “Should we go over our cast of characters again?”

He guns the engine, accelerating up a freeway ramp. “Listening.”

“Let’s start with the dickweed hiding out in his daddy’s law office. Dani had Hamlin thrown off the property that night. When Matt spoke to him he was almost blubbering, crying that he loves Dani more than life itself. He’s a scumbag for sure but Witch Mask was set up in advance and Hamlin was making wedding plans at the time. No motive.”

Micah nods. “Agreed.” He pushes the accelerator harder. “Damn, this engine’s smooth.”

“Keep the wheels if you want.”

He chuckles. “How much capital you got, moneybags?”

“Why, you need some cash?”

“Please.” He rolls his eyes. “If I need money I can go kiss my mother’s ring and beg for a company job.”

I mull that over. “And we’re positive Matilda has nothing to do with any of this?”

“No way. I’m the first one to call out my freaking mother over her crap but it doesn’t track. She loves Dani, thinks of her as a daughter.”

I’m sure he doesn’t mean a tone of bitterness to creep in. And I’m also sure it has nothing to do with Dani. It never stops stinging when your own parent rejects you.

“But maybe putting Dani front and center created some friction with with Alta and Edie. Seems like they’ve been kind of sidelined ever since Dani started working at Yellow Brick. Matilda thinks of Dani as her successor, not her sisters.”

“You don’t know my mother. Matilda doesn’t plan to be succeeded by anyone. She’ll have to be pried out of that building. Alta doesn’t care about the job. And I think Edie would be relieved to find a way out.”

I scroll to the next name on my list. “What do you think of our former principal?”

Olivia Ballerini is spiteful and unpredictable. She’s already accused Dani of screwing her gross husband so she’s also a few sandwiches short of a picnic.

Does that make her a murderer?

I don’t know.

Micah keeps his eyes on the road. “Has Matt found anything connecting her to any of this?”

“No. She cooperated with an interview, even expressed dismay over the attack. I don’t count her as a top suspect but I don’t want to cross her off the list either.”

He nods and exits the freeway. Micah knows exactly where he’s going and we take a very twisty route through dim streets where piles of garbage squat on filthy sidewalks and graffiti of varying artistic merit broadcasts enigmatic messages.

“You’ve been here before?” I ask Micah as he pulls into a strip club called Back Door. We’ve got some company in the parking lot. In addition to some more modest vehicles, there’s a Maserati, a pair of BMWs and a Bentley.

“Once,” he admits. “I stopped here for a drink with a buddy of mine after a fight.”

“And Haven was here?”

“Yeah. She even nodded at me, which is about as enthusiastic as she gets. This is the place where Matt found her too. They always open early, catering to the suits climbing down from their corporate skyscrapers to drink their lunch while getting an eyeful of ass.”

“Got it.”

Micah checks the gun holstered under his shirt. “Any sign of trouble, let’s just agree to take off. We’d be outnumbered.”

He doesn’t need to warn me. I’m no stranger to being in the same room with dangerous men. But I just nod and follow him to the door, which cracks open before we reach it. The steady thump of music pumps out of the building.

“Gentlemen,” greets a friendly female voice and a woman wearing a short red dress beckons from just inside the doorway. She’s young with a coil of dark braids piled on top of her head. She smiles at us. “Welcome.”

She steps back to allow us to enter and we come face to face with a huge bald guy who keeps his mouth set in an angry line while his sharp eyes look us over.

“Leave your piece here at the desk,” he says to Micah. “You can collect it on your way out.”

To my relief, Micah doesn’t argue. He hands over his gun and gestures to the smiling hostess. “We’re looking for Haven Marchenko.”

Her smile falters a little. “May I ask why?”

“We’re old friends.”

“Like hell you are.” Haven had crept up right behind us and I turn to find the girl I remember from high school has transformed into something almost unrecognizable. She’s dyed her hair a deep purplish red and traded in her sporty schoolgirl look for a seductive costume of a very low cut black sheath dress. She surveys us from eyes lined with heavy black liner and it’s impossible to tell just how hostile her glare is.

I guess we’re about to find out.

“Hello, Haven.” I don’t bother to extend my hand for a shake.

“You just here for the show?” She jerks her chin in the direction of the stage where a pair of young women in cowboy hats and little else strut to the tune of *Old Town Road*. They perform in front of an audience of a dozen men who match Micah’s description of corporate suits.

“I was hoping we could have a quick talk,” I say. “We won’t take up too much of your time.”

I’m sure she’s about to say no but Haven surprises me.

“Why not?” She shrugs. “This might be entertaining.”

Haven leads us to the table farthest from the stage. She takes a seat and motions to a rough looking guy hovering in the shadows by the bar. He’s big and muscled and covered in tattoos, but he hustles over like a puppy at Haven’s signal. He throws us a suspicious glare before settling in behind her chair and putting his hands on her shoulders.

She leans into him. “Give me your best, Alex.”

He grins down at her. “You know I always do.”

Haven turns her attention to us and becomes businesslike. “Yes, I heard what happened and the police have already been here. I answered their questions but I sent your hired hand packing.”

“You mind answering a few more questions? For old time’s sake?”

“Harder,” she says to the man massaging her shoulders. She snaps her fingers in the direction of the bar and waits while a filled shot glass is delivered. Haven tosses it back and turns the glass upside down on the table.

“The way I remember old times,” she muses, “they weren’t so hot.”

“I’m sorry about your sister,” I say. “I’m sure it’s been difficult.”

Her eyes veer coldly to my face. “Don’t give me that shit. It’s *difficult* to fuck a guy with a micro dick. It’s *difficult* to run in three inch heels. That’s not an appropriate word to describe the fucking torment of watching your twin sister remain trapped in her own damaged head year after year.”

“Lita’s the best of us,” Micah says. “How about we drink to her recovery?”

The suggestion pleases Haven for some reason. She orders the bartender to bring a round of whiskey shots. Micah downs his with no hesitation. Haven must have a high tolerance because she does the same. I’m not a drinker and I hate whiskey but I don’t want to piss her off.

“To Lita.” I hold up my glass and gulp down hot fire.

Haven laughs when I break out in a coughing fit. This isn’t a great development for my healing stab wound and I try not to grimace at the pain.

Micah raises an eyebrow at me. I tip my head in a nod. I’m fine. We’re not even close to being finished here.

Meanwhile, Haven arches back in her chair, moaning lightly as Alex works his hands on her. The guy is clearly getting all kinds of turned on, breathing hard, pushing his fingers beneath her dress fabric to knead her shoulders.

“That’s so good,” Haven breathes, tipping her head back all the way. I’m sure she’s fucking with us, putting on a show to throw us off track. “Oh yeah, baby, keep going.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” He’s almost panting. His hands leave her shoulders and travel elsewhere, fingertips brushing the tops of her breasts and then plunging lower, inside her dress, feeling her tits up with both hands right out in the open.

Nobody else in the room looks twice. This kind of behavior must not be a big deal around here.

Micah squirms and turns his head from the sight of Haven getting off in public. I don’t especially want to watch either but I’m not leaving until we get what we came for. With my arms crossed, I stare in silence like I’m just watching a boring commercial.

Haven peeks at us through half closed eyes and then abruptly sits up. She swats her lover’s hands away from her tits.

He mewls in protest. “Fuck these two. Let’s go in the back, baby. I always know how to make you feel good.”

“Not now.” She pats her dress to make sure everything is in place and swivels around to cup his bulging crotch. “But go lie down and keep this warm for me. I’ll want to play with it when I’m finished here.”

He gives her a pathetically lovesick smile and staggers off to the other side of the room, disappearing down a dark hallway.

Haven smirks at us. “You look shocked, Micah. Was your manhood offended by the talent?”

Micah scratches his jaw. “Getting used for your cock is not a talent. I would know.”

Haven is unimpressed. She swings her long hair over one shoulder and nods to me. “What about you, Gage? I remember how the high school fairy tale went. Gage Silvestro had a heart

of stone until Dani Gallagher tamed him.” She laughs. “And then you humiliated her! I can admit that I halfway respected you for that.”

“I had reasons.”

“Reasons?” she cackles. “Yeah, don’t we all.”

Just when I’m about to fire off some really tough questions, a commotion breaks out close to the stage.

“WHAT THE FUCK!” yells one of the girls who had been gyrating onstage. “YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!”

Haven sighs. “Goddamn,” she mutters, slides out of her chair and takes long strides across the room. “What’s the matter, Abby?”

Abby ties the strap of her string bikini. “Him!” She points to a fortysomething overweight dude with a carefully trimmed beard. “I was doing my new routine, you know, the one where I do an invert on the pole. This guy hops up on stage and helps himself to a crotch feel while I’m upside down.”

Haven picks up a nearby bottle of vodka and turns her attention to The Beard. “That’s assault, motherfucker.” She points the neck of the bottle at him for emphasis.

The man laughs. “You know damn well who I am, Haven.”

“A shit stain. That’s what you are. And never speak my name again or I’ll shove this bottle so far up your puckered ass it’ll come out your left eye.”

“Like a kitten trying to roar.” He keeps laughing. “You dumb bitch. You strut all over this side of town thinking you scare people. I could shut you down tomorrow.”

Haven doesn’t miss a step as she smashes the bottle against the stage and advances.

“Say that again.” She aims the cut end of the bottle at The Beard’s gut.

The commotion has brought additional attention by now. The bouncer at the door has huffed his way over and tenses for action.

The Beard is rapidly reassessing the situation. He looks at a pair of men who were sharing his table but they’re both refusing to meet his eye.

He holds his hands up. “Let’s not get hysterical.”

Haven laughs. “Fuck you. Get out or get gutted.”

The bouncer rolls a step closer. He’s practically on top of the guy now. The Beard pulls out his wallet and dumps a wad of cash on the table. All his bluster is gone.

“Appreciate the show,” he says and heads for the door with the bouncer on his heels.

“He never gets back in here,” Haven announces. “Do we all understand that?”

Some vague murmurs from her employees.

Now Haven turns to the dancer and adopts a kinder tone. “Take the rest of the day off, Abby. You need a break.”

The girl’s face crumples. “I can’t. I’m paying my mom’s rent this month. She lost her job at the gas station because her boyfriend broke her arm.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll pay your mom’s rent until she gets back on her feet. Talk to Kelly in the office.”

“Oh, my god! Thank you so much, Haven. I don’t know what to say. I’ll be back for my shift tomorrow.”

“All right.” Haven gives her a rather motherly pat on the arm. “Now get going. See a movie. Eat junk food. Relax. Don’t think about this place.”

“Thanks again.” Abby trots happily away from the stage and disappears down a hallway.

Haven returns to her seat as if nothing unusual has happened.

“Fucking men,” she mutters. “Always treating women like trash.”

Micah snorts out a laugh. “Says the strip club madam.”

I kick him under table.

“And how do you think she’d be treated if I wasn’t here?” Haven snaps. She hisses out a breath and shakes her head. “Still the same stupid boys you used to be. Don’t know a fucking thing.”

Far be it from me to shake Haven’s image of herself as some sort of feminist heroine. I don’t care what she does. It’s time to cut to the chase.

“Looks like you’ve got some tough guys on your payroll. Maybe some of them are willing to commit murder for the right price.”

She sneers. “I told you, the cops already asked their questions. I didn’t pay some asshole to stab you at the fucking golf club.”

“Dani was the target, not me.”

“So shocking to hear that she has enemies. This is my shocked face.”

“Yeah, and you’re one of those enemies.”

She thinks that's funny. "Dani thinks I hired someone to kill her?"

"I think you might have. You've threatened her. Recently."

She taps her chin. "Did I?"

"Cut the crap, Haven." Micah's getting agitated.

"All right." She leans closer and gestures for us to do the same.

I'm close enough to smell her perfume, a spicy, sensual blend. She uses too much of it. Her knee bumps mine under the table.

I jerk away. Haven smiles.

The smile abruptly disappears. I wonder if she's completely sane.

"You want to hear the truth?" She licks her lips.

We wait.

Haven inches even closer. "The truth is that your frigid little girlfriend is nothing but a weak joke. I like to scare her because it's easy. And because I can't fucking stand her silly ass."

I shrug at her performance. "Well, that makes you look a little suspicious right now."

She leans back in her chair, mouth twisting into a disgusted expression. "Fuck you, Gage. I don't hurt women. Not even the ones I hate. You know why? Because there's enough violent men around searching for any reason to do that and I don't see any reason to help them."

A different set of dancers takes the stage.

Haven stands up. "You're wasting my time."

“Sorry.” I pull some money out of my wallet. “Thanks for the talk.”

She watches while I drop the cash on the table. Something in her face shifts and she looks younger, more uncertain. Whatever Haven Marchenko’s deal is, it’s a safe bet that she’s unhappy.

“You believe her?” Micah asks once we’re back on the road.

“Yeah,” I have to admit. “I believe her.”

I’m sure Haven is a nightmare for a whole lot of people but there’s also something weirdly honest about her. If she was guilty, she’d be proud of her guilt and unable to hide it. I watched closely when she stepped in to help one of her employees. She meant everything she said.

“You really okay to drive?” I ask Micah, thinking about the whiskey shot. I’m feeling a little dizzy myself.

He chuckles. “That was nothing to me. I’m all here.”

We stop at my apartment so I can pack a suitcase and then go out for a quick lunch before making the drive all the way up to Lake Poppy. Evening approaches when we finally roll into the secluded lakefront house. I paid a pretty penny to secure it indefinitely.

I haven’t even stepped out of the car when Dani races through the front door. She’s a vision; barefoot, wearing a white tank top and denim cutoffs. Her loose brown hair bounces over her shoulders as she runs to me.

TO ME!

She’s running straight to me.

I open my arms and she's about to jump into them but stops, mindful of my injury, and throws her arms around my neck instead. She smells of sunlight and vanilla and our mouths meet with eagerness.

"I missed you," she whispers in between breathless kisses. "I missed you so much."

Conner waves from the doorway. He's eating what appears to be a giant turkey leg.

"I missed you too," I say to Dani, letting the years of separation and heartache compress and fade away.

Never again will I let her go.

Never.

Chapter 29

Dani

Conner has discovered a new hobby.

He enjoys cooking, which is perfect because Conner Wiseman eats more than anyone I've ever known. I suppose running up and down a football field and getting tackled by huge men inspires an appetite.

Tonight he's making chicken cacciatore. Micah was enlisted to drive to the nearest town and shop for the ingredients. Gage is still on the mend, I'm supposed to be hiding and Conner draws an audience whenever he appears in public. Micah didn't seem to mind the task. Out of all of us, I think Micah's the one really feeling the bite of stir craziness.

The smell of food reaches me in the bathroom as I touch up my makeup in front of the mirror. After brushing on a hint of mascara, I pull back to examine the effect.

I admit I've dressed to impress, exchanging my casual shorts and tee for a black crop top and a bohemian-style blue maxi skirt. Cecile's ruby pendant doesn't really match the ensemble but that never stops me from wearing it anyway.

Hints of my favorite perfume are dabbed on my neck and I slide a pair of ballet flats on before following the delicious promise of dinner.

Conner stands by the stove, flipping a silver spatula from one hand to the other. He looks up, lifts one eyebrow and discharges a playful wolf whistle.

“We feel unworthy.” He winks.

Micah already waits at the table with a grumpy attitude. “Do I have to get dressed up too before I’m allowed to eat?”

“Of course not.” Conner lifts a simmering pot lid. “We’re used to your ugly ass.”

“Where’s Gage?” I’m eager to see the spark in his eyes when he checks me out. There’s nothing sexier than the way he constantly follows my movements with blazing intensity.

“Right here.” Arms circle my waist and my knees go weak.

The sexual energy between us is downright combustible but we haven’t done much about it since he arrived at the lake house four days ago. We sleep with our arms around one another and I feel the urgency of his need pressing against my body. We’ve been enjoying the romance that comes along with touching, kissing, getting each other all riled up like we’re teenagers with limits.

I’ve loved every minute.

I’m also ready to shred the fuck out of those limits tonight. I’m getting hot just thinking about it.

Gage must have just come from a shower. His skin is damp and the beachy smell of his shower gel is strong. He pushes my hair aside and tickles my neck with his lips. I move my hips slightly, ever so slightly. It’s enough to feel him through layers of fabric.

He breathes in deeply, aware of what I'm doing. He responds, tightening his arms around my waist and digging his cock through the folds of my skirt.

And just like that, dinner is the last thing on my mind.

"Come and get it," Conner sings and he carries a platter of chicken to the neatly set table.

Micah, however, has noticed what we're doing. He stares at me and Gage with an expression that's halfway between being amused and being grossed out. I stick my tongue out at him. He snorts with laughter and reaches for a big serving spoon to help himself to the food.

Conner smacks his hand.

"What the fuck?" Micah is outraged.

Conner regards Micah patiently while unfolding a napkin in his lap. "Don't act like a mutant with crappy table manners. We're eating as a family." Conner looks expectantly at me and Gage so we have no choice but to take our seats at the round kitchen table.

"Everything looks great, Conner," I tell him as I shake my own napkin open.

He beams with pride. "Thanks! This is the first time I'm trying this recipe so you're all my guinea pigs."

"*Now* can I eat?" Micah grumbles. "Or should I start chewing on my shoelaces?"

"Ladies first." Conner gallantly hands me the serving spoon.

I'm quick about taking my portion before handing the spoon over to Micah.

“Thank you, Dani,” Micah says and issues a pointed glare at Conner.

“So fucking ungrateful.” Conner cracks the top of a beer bottle with his teeth. “No wonder why he sends the ladies running in the other direction.”

Micah piles food on his plate. “I’m letting that go by in the interest of keeping the peace.”

He tosses the spoon to Gage, who sits on my right.

I pour us both some water from the filtered pitcher.

“Isn’t this nice?” Conner marvels. “All of us sitting here together like a civilized family.”

“More or less civilized.” Micah rips the cap off his own beer.

Gage lays his hand on my knee under the table. I inch my chair closer to him.

Micah drains three quarters of his bottle in one extended gulp. “Any news today?”

“Heard from Matt this morning,” Gage says. “He’s been trying to get his hands on the surveillance footage from the country club.”

“There weren’t any cameras in the rooftop garden,” I point out. “An oversight we’ll be correcting.”

“True, but one of the other cameras might have picked up something.”

I take a bite of food. “Excellent, Conner.”

Conner grabs another beer. “I think I’ll start my own line of pasta sauce. I’ve got ideas.”

“Tess called,” I tell everyone. “She’s back home, staying in her father’s house to keep him happy. He thought it was too risky for her to stay in the apartment alone, just in case.”

“Mayor’s not the dumbest douchebag in the world I guess,” Micah observes.

Gage needs to take his hand away from my knee to sort out his food, separating and categorizing on the outer rim of his scalloped dinner plate. I miss his hand.

We could be any normal dinner party but we’re not. A storm threatens, even if we pretend it doesn’t. The witch on the roof wakes me up at night, an incursion into my dreams. I wake up with the taste of death in my mouth. There is no feeling equal to that of knowing that someone urgently wants you dead.

Micah, half drunk in one of his darker moments, once wondered if there’s something lethally wrong with our family. A curse, or a festering poison that eats away a little at a time.

I’m terrified to believe this might be true.

If it is true, then that same malevolence might someday touch our sweet Charlotte.

Such dark thoughts consume Micah even more than the rest of us, I think.

“Dani.” Gage sees something in my face that makes him abandon his food. He reaches for my face and tucks a piece of loose hair behind my ear. Gage knows what I need and bends closer to give me a taste of his lips, which I accept ravenously. His kisses are spellbinding. My blood hums and my fears dissolve at his touch.

Micah and Conner eat quietly while Gage and I share our moment. We’ll have more of those later. Moments.

I wasn't lying when I praised Conner's cooking. He really does have a talent for it. There's no more talk of danger and anxiety at dinner. For a little while we can all forget *why* we're here together and just enjoy the fact that we *are* here together.

Micah lights the firepit after dinner and we relocate to the deep benches surrounding the circle of bricks. This close to the lake, the air is pleasantly chilled at night. My arms are dotted with goosebumps until Gage pulls me to his chest and wraps my body in his warmth.

Conner drinks too many beers and starts to nod off by nine p.m. He's the first to retreat inside. Micah will remain out here for hours. He must sleep sometimes but he doesn't sleep much.

"You tired?" I ask Gage with my cheek pressed to his cotton shirt.

"No." He plays with my hair and the word has all kinds of meanings.

I sit up and look at him. "I'm going inside."

He nods, understanding. The fire in his eyes matches the heat flushing my skin.

Gage won't be far behind so I hurriedly change into a cream colored lace camisole with matching panties. I don't own a lot of sexy underwear. As soon as I'm out of this predicament I'll change that. For now, I'm pleased with the shape of my body in the mirror, glad that my breasts push against the lace fabric, my nipples alert and tingling.

We enter the room at the same time, me walking in from the bathroom, Gage using the door. His eyes flare at the sight of me and he presses the lock.

"Hi." I stand in front of him and let him look.

He doesn't touch me, just keeps looking and looking until I feel like I'm already naked. "You are so crazy beautiful."

I smile at the flash of memory. "You said that to me the night we kissed for the first time."

He nods. "I know."

Of course he does. Gage remembers everything.

He refuses to wear a sling even though he still has some pain close to his shoulder where the knife did its damage. I tug at the hem of his black tee and lift it slowly. Gage reaches behind his back and pulls the shirt over his head. I can tell when he feels a cut of pain because his lips press together. There's a lot of skin discoloration surrounding the wound. The bandages are off and we'll have to act with care. He's still healing.

I press my lips to the hotly bruised skin an inch away from where he nearly gave his life for me. Gage's breathing quickens. My lips move across the expanse of his hard, sculpted chest and eventually find the quick pulse of his heart, which beats strong and sure. I tilt my head back to look up into his eyes.

"Gage." I open his jeans, first a snap and then a zipper. "I want to make love to you tonight."

He inhales sharply and his head rolls back. I push his jeans over his hips and step back to admire the shape of his cock straining against his dark blue boxers. I drop to my knees.

He's almost panting already. "Dani, fuck."

I use my tongue to tease him through the flimsy cloth barrier before pulling the elastic waistband down and freeing him to meet my mouth. In the past I haven't liked this,

avoiding or participating minimally in the ritual. But with Gage I want it all. Every single part of him.

His cock meets my lips and I test with my tongue to find the spot where he's most sensitive. I taste a drop of sweetness at the tip and kiss it. Gage's hands tangle in my hair with a low rumble in his throat. This is an insane turn on. I let him have my mouth, as much of him as I can fit, and he takes it all.

Just as we're really starting to get a rhythm he stops me, gently holding my face as his cock leaves my mouth. I raise my eyes to see what he has in mind next.

His thumbs stroke my cheeks and his eyes flash. "Now. I want you *right fucking now*."

I nod and he lifts me off the floor. I kiss his mouth and his neck and we move to the bed.

"Lie on your back," I whisper. "I'm going to ride you like you wouldn't fucking believe."

Gage kicks his clothes aside and climbs on the bed, pulling me down with him. He knows I'm on the pill and asks no questions when I don't break out a condom. I want us to be as close as possible, as intimate as possible. I want to know what it feels like when he reaches his shattering end inside me with nothing in the way between us.

My panties are discarded before I straddle him. Gage sits up and my muscles quiver as I feel the solid length of him between my legs.

"Don't turn off the lights," he warns. "I need to see you."

"Look all you want." I throw my lacy top aside. "I'm all yours."

His mouth finds my breasts and he torments each nipple in turn, sucking and playing, until I'm making desperate moaning noises and grinding on him shamelessly in pursuit of relief. I've never ached this much for anyone, only for him.

My palms push lightly on his chest, careful to avoid the site of his injury. He's magnificent and will be no less magnificent with that battle scar. Gage allows me to push him to his back and he grips my hips in his hands.

Our eyes remain fastened to each other as I guide him inside slowly, taking him one half inch at a time so it's not too much at once.

"Dani." He groans underneath me as I start to move. "You don't even know what a fucking goddess you are."

This is exactly how I want him right now, his hands directing my hips, pushing me hard, so hard I wonder if I can take it, in search of the sweet promise of ecstasy. When I do find that sweetness, the wave slams with force and I'm unable to keep quiet.

This isn't just sex.

This is an awakening.

This is everything I've always wanted and craved and envied.

This is desire and tenderness and powerful connection.

This is us and this is love.

We're still learning about each other, still discovering. But I'm as sure about him as he is about me.

Gage holds out for as long as he can but after I come a second time he gives in. He breaks in hot waves while I don't quit moving until I'm sure he's finished. We're both sweaty

and spent for now and we kiss for a long time before Gage shuts off the bedside lamp.

He turns it on again. Turns it off.

“Sorry,” he mutters and I feel his frustration over the things he cannot help. He doesn’t know that this only endears him to me even more.

When I say the words first, I mean them. “I love you, Gage.”

His arms circle me with fierce protectiveness. “I’ll always love you, Dani.”

Yes, this is us and this is love.

Chapter 30

Gage

Micah takes another stuntman leap off the dock, backflipping into the lake.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack!” Dani shouts at him.

He surfaces twenty feet away and grins.

Conner, not to be outdone, stands by in his swim trunks and beats his chest. “Know what fucking time it is?”

“Afraid to ask.” I’m sitting on the edge of the dock, away from the water because I’m still supposed to be careful of the healing incision. Dani, decked out in a bright bikini that’s setting my dirty impulses ablaze, sits between my legs and leans back to snatch a quick kiss before turning around.

Nope, she’s not getting away so easily. I trap her with one arm and dive in for a better kiss. She gives in, allowing full access to her mouth and changing positions so that she faces me, her knees open and straddling my hips. She’s not shy about pressing her soft tits to my chest, sending a message that if I want to play right now then she’s game. I swear, I can’t get enough of this girl.

“IT’S CANNONBALL TIME, BITCHES!” Conner flops into the water and we’re struck by a small tidal wave of cool

water.

Dani throws her head back and laughs at my cousins. The rays of the sinking sun bathe her lovely face in a rich light. My heart punches in my chest. She's everything.

Micah complains that Conner is acting like a teenager. Conner retaliates by dunking him underwater and then pretends to be terrified when an angry Micah gives chase. They cut across the calm lake water, both of them good swimmers. I never did enjoy swimming in the lake. There's no order to being immersed in a sloppy body of water without a shape. Give me a spotless chlorinated rectangle with clearly defined lanes any day.

I rub my hands over Dani's back. "Go ahead and swim. It's hot out here."

"If you insist." She nips at my neck with playful affection. "Save my seat."

I move my hands lower and push each of my thumbs an inch inside her bikini bottoms. She softens and exhales, closes her eyes.

Fuck, she's sexy.

"On second thought, I think I'll skip the lake." She tosses her hair over her shoulder and braces her hands on my shoulders.

"Why?"

It's the question she was waiting for. Her lips curl into a naughty smile. "I'm more than wet enough already."

Dying, I'm fucking dying.

While I'm struck speechless, Dani rises slowly, takes three steps toward the house and gives me the world's most

seductive over-the-shoulder look. “You *coming*, Gage?”

I can’t scramble to my feet fast enough.

“And there they fucking go again,” Micah complains from the lake. “Like rabbits.”

Conner laughs. “Let ‘em be. Race you to the floating raft.”

My cousins’ argument recedes and I follow Dani into the cool interior of the house. She unties her bikini top, letting it fall right outside the bedroom door, and I can’t keep my hands off her for another second.

Dani squeals when I grab her around the waist and lift her in the air. Her legs part eagerly and her hand cups my cock outside my shorts. Carrying her, I barrel through the bedroom door and slam it shut behind me.

“Savage.” She sucks my neck.

“What can I say?” I toss her carefully on the bed and drop my shorts. “You bring out the animal in me.”

Dani rolls her bikini bottoms off and I just stand at the foot of the bed and marvel at her, this gorgeous, exciting, intelligent woman who somehow wants to be all mine.

Something else I love about her?

She knows when to be spectacularly dirty.

Dani, gloriously naked, faces away on her hands and knees, her long hair spilling over her back. Her eyes sparkle with mischief as she turns her head to look at me. “Prove it.”

No further encouragement needed. I’m all over this. I grab her hips in my hands, relishing the soft contours of her body. My right hand goes exploring between her legs.

Dani arches her back when my fingers dip inside her. “See?” she breathes as I feel her for myself. “I warned you I was wet for you.”

I smile and take my hand away. She pouts until I push her legs wide apart and replace my hand with my cock. It’s heaven, the way I glide into her. She moans when I go deep and I move slowly at first. Even when she’s being feisty I always take care not to get rough unless she says she wants it.

“Yeah, that’s it.” She matches my rhythm, giving me all of herself in the way that she does and it’s so fucking hot I can’t stand it. “Keep going.”

I pick up the pace and she loves this. I run one hand up her bare back and get my fist tangled in her hair. She tilts her head back, really getting into it, crying out her pleasure when I pull lightly.

“I fucking love you, Gage!” She’s at the brink, starting to come apart and shudder from the onslaught of bliss as I ride her with no mercy. Sometimes counting each thrust comes in handy while I’m trying to keep from coming too soon. This is all about her until she gets what she needs.

Dani grabs a pillow and screams into it as the orgasm destroys her.

And I’m done.

No amount of counting is doing to distract my cock from going over the cliff. I don’t try. I give her everything I have, releasing in pulsing waves that feel criminally endless.

Dani collapses on her belly and I flop down next to her.

“That was amazing,” she pants in a soft, dreamy voice that always drives me wild. “It’s always amazing with you.”

A light sheen of sweat glistens on her back and I run my fingertips over her skin. “Want to know something?”

“Yeah.”

“Every time I look at you I feel like the luckiest guy on the planet.”

It might be a cheesy thing to say but fuck it. I mean every word.

Dani likes hearing this. She stretches an arm across my chest and nestles close.

“I do love you so much,” she whispers.

I raise my head and kiss her lips. “I love you too, Dorothy Ann.”

She smiles and yawns before drifting off to sleep. Sex consumes a lot of energy and Micah’s complaint wasn’t too far off. We’ve been going at it like crazy. No wonder she’s tired. I’m a little worn out too. Grabbing a throw blanket from a nearby armchair, I cover my beautiful queen with it and take a nap beside her.

It’s dark when I hear the vibration of my phone blowing up. Dani sighs happily in her sleep when I drop a kiss on her bare shoulder and slowly swing my legs around to plant my feet on the floor. After making sure Dani is still comfortably tucked under the blanket, I haul a pair of clean boxers on and locate the phone that I left charging on top of the dresser.

My stomach tightens when I see all four of the messages are from Jen Sullivan, the local private investigator I’ve worked with for years. She’s also Matt’s sister.

CALL ME ASAP.

Closing myself into the bathroom so I don't alarm Dani, I waste no time placing a direct call.

"Gage." Jen's voice is almost unrecognizable.

"What's wrong?"

"Matt's dead."

My shock is reflected back at me in the bathroom mirror. Jen struggles to breathe on the other end of the line.

"Jesus. What the hell happened?"

I spoke to him less than twenty-four hours ago. He said he'd come across some topics of interest but wanted to double check before sharing in case he was on the wrong track.

Matt Sullivan seemed like a force of nature. It's tough to imagine anything or anyone taking him down.

"He was shot in his car right outside his apartment building. Nothing was stolen. Two shots to the head."

Not robbery. Probably not random.

Someone simply wanted him dead.

"I'm so sorry. Matt was a hell of a guy. Can I help with anything?"

She takes a shaky breath. "There won't be a funeral. Matt couldn't stand funerals. And we don't have any living family anyway."

"Did they catch the killer?"

"Not yet."

I hesitate to approach the touchy subject when the shocking news is so fresh but it has to be said. "I know you're aware of the work Matt was doing for me."

“Yes.” She pauses. “Matt worked on a lot of complex cases. In doing so, he made a lot of enemies and received a lot of death threats. I doubt your particular case had anything to do with his murder. But trust me, no stone will go unturned. I have his laptop. That’s a big reason why I’m calling. He’d want you to have all his investigative notes. I’ll drop everything over to you right after this call.”

“I’d appreciate that. And I truly am sorry. I’d begun to think of Matt as a friend. Please let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“Will do.” Her voice cracks “Take care, Gage.”

I set my phone on the bathroom counter and just stare dully at the floor tiles. Less than a minute later I hear the beep of an incoming email. True to her word, Jen has sent a link to all the documents pertaining to the work her brother had been doing for me. Taking a seat on the floor, I open them one by one and read through his careful notes.

Matt was thorough. He investigated everyone in Dani’s inner circle. Everyone in her outer circle as well. Trying to rule out each possibility one by one.

Matilda and Henley. My mother. Aunt Edie. Conner. Micah. Tess. And so on.

Rapidly, I skim through the paragraphs, mostly mundane information that comes as no surprise. When my eyes fasten on one line in particular I have to stop, sure that the detail must be a typo, or a misunderstanding. But no, the next sentence confirms the first one. I read the section again, committing every word to memory.

Holy shit.

Cracking open the bathroom door, I see Dani is still sound asleep. Good. I don't want her to hear this until I find out what the fuck is going on.

I don't make a sound as I tiptoe out of the bedroom into the dark hallway. There's noise coming from the kitchen and I find Conner sitting on a kitchen stool and watching a cooking show. A Glock pistol waits in the center of the block wood countertop.

He glances up at my shadow. "Hey, we grilled some ribeyes if you're hungry. I'm betting you are hungry after all that exercise. You do know sound carries in this house, right? I mean, I don't care, it's kind of cute and all but some of us are living like monks so have some consideration." He quits joking and his brow furrows when he takes stock of the look on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Matt's dead. Shot in his car. Looks like a hit."

"Fuck." Conner's head drops.

"No suspects rounded up yet."

He props his elbows on the counter and blows out a breath. "Anything to do with us?"

"I don't know. His sister doesn't seem to think so." I take a look at the empty living room. "Where's Micah?"

He jerks his head at the sliding glass door. "Smoking weed out on the dock. I'll come with you."

"Nah, let me talk to him alone first."

Conner is surprised but doesn't argue. I leave him in the kitchen and open the patio door, shutting it behind me.

Micah is a vague human shape in the darkness. My eyes adjust by the time I walk to where he stands at the end of the

dock. I find him staring out at the water with his arms crossed.

He turns at the soft sound of my bare feet on the wood.
“What’s up?”

I join my cousin at the dock’s edge. The night air smells of mildew with a tint of decay.

Micah inhales the stubby stick in his fingers. “I’d offer you a hit but I know you won’t take it.”

“Nope, I won’t.”

Micah smokes and we watch the water ripple under the moon. I was born less than two months after him. For me, there was never a world that didn’t include Micah. Family chronicles say we took our first steps on the same day. Conner, a year older, was always a little bit ahead of us. We didn’t catch up for a long time.

“Matt was murdered,” I tell him.

Micah is so startled that he drops his joint in the water.
“What the fuck happened?”

“He was shot sitting in his car. I don’t know more than that yet. But his sister sent me all of his notes for Dani’s case. He logged a lot of interviews. Some I didn’t even know about. He wanted to rule out the people closest to her.”

Micah, street smart and shrewd, tenses, paying close attention. “And?”

“And he talked to the guys you work out with. He talked to your friends at the gym. Did you know that?”

“No.” He snorts. “So what? They wouldn’t mind chatting with the devil in exchange for a twenty.”

“One of them mentioned a woman who shows up to watch you fight now and then. Always pisses you off when she does.”

“I know a lot of women,” he says but wariness has crept into his tone.

“Apparently our former high school principal is one of them.”

He’s silent.

“Micah.” I nudge him with my elbow. “You know I’m not going to be the one to trash you for keeping secrets but now I have to ask. How far back does this business with Olivia go? Did it start at West Emerald Prep?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “No, back then she’d get all flirty and weird sometimes but nothing happened until I got out of prison. I was in a bad headspace, no future to look forward to, my own mother acting like I’d died already. Olivia said she wanted to help me, be a friend. And yeah, I knew all along she was a snake but what can I say? I hadn’t been fucked in a hell of a long time and she was all over me. Plus, there was also some value in flipping my mother off by screwing her old rival.” He pauses and looks at me earnestly. “Sorry, I know I should have told you. But I’m not exactly proud of myself, Gage.”

“Not judging you.”

He sighs and threads his hands together on top of his head. “Didn’t take long for me to call it off and Olivia went nuts, kept crying that she loved me. I didn’t want any part of that drama. Then she went and married the mayor so I thought that was it. But eventually she started coming around again. She still shows up when I least expect it, like an incurable virus.

It's one reason why I try to avoid West Emerald as much as possible."

"Matilda has no idea?"

He chokes on a bitter laugh "What do you think?"

"Fuck no."

"Fuck no is right. I don't need to give my mother yet another reason to think less of me."

I chew on the next question I need to ask him. "Is Olivia someone we need to be looking at more closely?"

"I thought about that. She doesn't like Dani for sure, but I've never seen any sign that violence is her style. She's not going to give up the West Emerald good life and take time out from her country club parties to hire an assassin to slit Dani's throat."

His logic makes sense. Olivia Ballerini isn't really high on my list of suspects either. Matt felt the same way, recording the tidbit about Micah as little more than a passing note.

"Do Con and Dani really need to hear about this?" he asks.

"I don't like keeping something from Dani but ultimately it's up to you whether or not you want to share something that personal."

"What would you do?"

"Tell them, Micah. Better they hear it from you."

He coughs. "You think I'm garbage?"

"Come on, no way. You've had some tough breaks."

"Haven't we all?" He rubs his jaw and studies the flat water in silence. "Fucking Wicked West Rejects."

I study the water with him in silence until he's ready to go back inside.

Then we return to the house together.

Chapter 31

Dani

Gage drums his fingers on his thigh, an agitated pattern, his mind making secret deals with itself while trying to cope with the uneasiness of visiting West Emerald.

I lay a hand on his knee. “We won’t stay long.”

He quits tapping and takes my hand. “Pay no attention to my attitude. I know this is important to you.”

“They still don’t know we’re coming?” Micah asks from up front, behind the wheel.

“No. But they’re home today for sure. My uncle mentioned Matilda was hosting some social club luncheon. It’s got to be over by now.”

Matilda herself has been rather annoyed that I’ve been out of the office but Matilda is just going to have to cope. Before now, the number of days I’ve taken off from work in the four years I’ve been at Yellow Brick could be counted on one hand.

We’re not taking this unscheduled trip to West Emerald to visit Matilda, or even Uncle H. Charlotte is breaking my heart. She has been beside herself since Gage was stabbed. She asks for me every day. I can’t stand the thought of staying away from her any longer while she suffers that kind of anguish.

Gage, more tense than ever since Matt's murder, refused to be left behind on this West Emerald excursion. We'll do this together, the four of us. I don't see much risk in the trip, but I've been wrong before.

The freeway traffic is light on an early Sunday afternoon, the city skyline deceptively peaceful. Conner cracks open the front passenger seat window and the car fills with warm wind as Micah drives with fast precision.

It's not at all unpleasant, the rush of air and the way my hair lifts and dances. I shut my eyes and lean my head on Gage's good shoulder. He tips my chin up and steals a kiss. He can have all of my kisses.

I'm unprepared for the stir of dread when the coveted greenery of West Emerald breaks into view after miles of lead-colored urban clutter. The first time I laid eyes on West Emerald I thought it was a magical place.

The golf club squats in the center of West Emerald like a bloated citadel.

I hate the sight of it now.

Notoriety has only made the club more desirable. There's already a long waiting list for new members and the application process is formidable. Nothing draws people like the promise of exclusivity. Everyone wants bragging rights.

Micah punches in the gate code. I tried to think of this as home when I lived here but I never did, not really.

A couple of unfamiliar vehicles are already parked in Matilda's vast driveway and Micah swings around to add Gage's sporty BMW to the mix.

"Shit," Micah mutters.

Conner's head swivels. "What's with you?"

But Micah just climbs out of the car and smacks the door closed. He hangs back, letting Conner be the first up the flagstone path to the front door. I'm pretty sure I know what's eating Micah.

I sidle up to him and keep my voice low. "Olivia's car, right?"

He glares at a dark green vintage Porsche.

Hearing Micah's sordid history with our former principal was a shock, although I carefully muted my reaction so he wouldn't feel any worse. I've always disliked Olivia. Now I flat out despise her.

Conner rings the doorbell by pressing the button repeatedly.

Alta opens the door. She cringes at the sight of Conner. Her eyes swing past me and land on Gage. Always pale, she becomes ashen.

After that tearful episode in the hospital waiting room, I was sure she'd return to visit Gage. She didn't.

Alta recovers and clears her throat. "I was not told to expect a family reunion today. I would have taken a migraine pill."

"We were just in the neighborhood," Conner says, like nothing out of the ordinary has happened lately. "How have you been, Auntie Alta?"

She sighs through her nose. "I shouldn't be required to attend these ridiculous tea parties. Matilda insists."

I've never understood these sisters. The Kingston sisters. Cecile's daughters. They are not friends and yet they cling to

one another like a matched set that cannot be separated.

Maybe the reason has something to do with the sister they lost. Or maybe the blood bonds in some families are just complex beyond reckoning.

Alta looks beyond the colossal arrangement of summer roses dominating the foyer. “They are all in the backyard,” she informs us. “Go and find them if you want. I was just about to leave.”

“Thank you,” I say but she gives no sign that she’s heard me.

We file into the house but Alta doesn’t retreat. Her cool gaze flinches when Gage stands in front of her.

“You look well,” she says to her son.

“I’m just fine.” His reply is clipped. I squeeze his hand.

Alta lifts her chin. Her eyes blink too rapidly. “If that’s true then I’m glad.”

This, apparently, is about as maternal as Alta is willing to get. She exits the front door without another word.

Conner leads the way to the backyard, where an idyllic late summer day presides. The dozen white tables arranged for the luncheon are still standing. Each one hosts a colorful centerpiece filled with massive daisies. A chocolate fountain bubbles on the patio. A standing easel props up an enormous sign embellished with real flowers and pink and gold lettering welcoming the West Emerald Ladies Social Club. Whatever the hell that is.

“Hello!” Edie pops up first and throws her arms around her son for an excited hug. “Where have you been? You’re so late for the party!”

Conner gives us a look. “We’re not here for the party, Mom. We were just stopping by.”

“Oh.” She stops hugging him. “Well, I’m so happy to see you all. Dani, it’s been so boring at the office without you.”

“Dani?” Matilda practically shoves her sister out of the way to get to me. “Dani! You’re back! It’s about time.” She pecks each of my cheeks and steps back to admire me. “You look so beautiful. You’ll have to tell me where you’ve been vacationing. Clearly, the destination agreed with you. Henley, look! Our girl is back.”

I don’t get a chance to inform anyone that I’m not really back, not staying for very long, and moreover, there’s still a killer running around out there. Matilda has a way of sucking all the energy out of any conversation.

It’s painful to see how Matilda virtually ignores her son but Micah doesn’t appear to notice. Cecile was wheeled out here for Matilda’s luncheon and she’s delighted to have a visit from all three of her grandsons at once.

Uncle H is more subdued than his wife as he hugs me. A divot of worry deepens above his brown eyes as he inquires whether law enforcement has come up with any new leads.

“Not yet,” I tell my uncle as I watch Gage greet his grandmother. Gage lifts his head and grins at me.

Uncle H sighs. “Dani, I’ve been worried sick. We all have. We can arrange for increased security at your apartment. Or better yet, why don’t you stay here with us? We’ll hire the best team money can buy.”

I feel safer with Gage, Micah and Conner than I would anywhere else on earth. And we’re facing a situation where we don’t know who to trust, where the next threat might be

coming from. Meanwhile, Matilda's out here throwing ridiculous luncheons like there's nothing wrong. She hasn't even mentioned the attack or Gage's brush with death.

West Emerald feels cursed now. If I had the power, I'd take Charlotte back to the lake house with us.

I think of powerful Matt Sullivan and realize no one is safe. Then I wonder if coming here today was a selfish idea.

"Where is Charlotte?" I ask my uncle.

He gestures past the pool, to the far side of the yard where a child's tent in the shape of a purple castle can be seen through a thicket of lemon trees.

"This has been hard on her," he says softly. "She has nightmares. She wakes up crying for you."

Hearing that is like being punched. "I'll go see her now."

Uncle H lets me go alone. Edie sits beside the pool, just staring at the water, but she looks up and smiles at me when I pass by.

When I get close to Charlotte's tent I hear the muffled voice of a woman. Sweeping aside the purple door flap, I come face to face with Olivia Davison Ballerini. Shock flares in her eyes but then she laughs.

"You startled me, Dani."

"Dani?" Charlotte, sprawled on the ground amid small hills of toys, had been coloring on a large sketchpad. She scrambles to her feet with a squeal and tackles me.

"I missed you!" she scolds, hugging me with ferocity. "I missed you so much!"

Over Charlotte's head, my eyes meet Olivia's. I don't like the thought of her spending five seconds alone with Charlotte. She shouldn't even be allowed near the house anymore after what I learned about her stalking Micah. I need to mention this to Uncle H before I leave today.

"I was just keeping her company," Olivia says. She seems at ease, kneeling on the tent's nylon floor with a stuffed lion on her lap, the same one Micah gave to Charlotte on her birthday.

"I'll keep her company now." I don't bother to keep the tightness out of my voice.

Olivia sets the lion down. "There's not enough room for more than one visitor in here anyway. Charlotte, thank you for the hospitality."

"Sure," Charlotte grumbles and returns to her nest on the floor.

Olivia says nothing else to me before exiting the tent.

Charlotte tears a piece of paper from her sketchpad. "I didn't do a good job on this one."

"This is a nice place you've got here, Char."

"Mother said she didn't want my grubby tent spoiling her pretty backyard but my tent isn't grubby! And Daddy put it up for me anyway so ha! Sit down, Dani."

"Micah's here to visit you too."

She lights up at the mention of her brother's name. "Really?"

"Yup, I'm sure he'll be right over after he talks to Cecile. Conner and Gage are also here."

She screws up her adorable face. “Where have you all been? I heard what happened to Gage. I wasn’t allowed to go see him at the hospital.”

“Gage is better now. You’ll see for yourself.”

She sighs. “I love this tent. Nobody bad can get us in here, Dani. You should stay.”

Oh, Charlotte.

She’s probably only heard snatches of conversations, enough to be afraid. How I want to scoop her up and take her with me.

I tuck a soft purple floor pillow under my knees. “Charlotte, what was Olivia doing in here?”

Charlotte rummages through her colored pencils. “I don’t know. She always wants me to like her but I don’t.”

I lean down close and whisper. “I don’t like her either.”

Charlotte looks up and giggles. Then she hunts through her art supplies again.

The floor pillow isn’t exactly comfortable. I attempt to shift position but my knee lands on a hard object. I expect to see one of Charlotte’s toys, or perhaps a marker, but what I pluck from the floor sends a gruesome chill rocketing up my spine.

“Charlotte. Where did you get this?”

She pauses in her coloring. “Oh, Olivia left it here. She says it’s full of magic. I told you she was weird. It’s just water in a bottle.”

The vial is made of clear glass with a silver cap on the end. It’s small, unremarkable, not something that should send my

heart racing.

Except for the fact that I've seen one just like it before.

On a city summer night when one man threatened me and another one saved me, I held its twin in my hand, just like I'm holding this one. And then it was lost.

Some pieces are beginning to click together. I'm afraid the picture will be hideous when they do.

"Honey." I pause to take a breath, keeping my voice level so I don't frighten her. "What did Olivia tell you to do with this magic?"

"Oh Dani, come on." She rolls her eyes. "Magic is fun but it's make believe. Olivia just thinks I'm an idiot. She said I needed to add the so-called *magic* to Mother's tea tomorrow morning at breakfast but I can't tell anyone or the magic won't work right. It's a big secret, Olivia says, that Mother is really a fairy queen who lost her powers but if she drinks the magic she'll get her powers back."

Charlotte laughs at the silliness of it all.

Whatever this glass bottle contains is dangerous. Lethal. I'm certain of that.

"You haven't even started drawing yet," Charlotte says. "Micah tells me I draw like a champ but he's just being nice. I don't draw nearly as well as him. Should I add a rainbow over this house?"

"That's a good idea," I say, my words hollow.

Charlotte doesn't notice. She begins singing a verse of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. She's intent on her art, her sweet voice a melody of innocence.

"I'll be right back," I say to her.

She looks up with a frown. “You’re leaving?”

“I just have to go to the restroom.”

“Can you tell Micah to come in here?”

“Absolutely.”

She resumes her singing.

I step out of the tent with the vial in my hand. Everyone else remains clear on the other side of the vast yard.

Uncle H watches as Cecile basks in the undivided attention of her three grandsons.

Matilda yells into her cell phone.

Edie suns herself on a pool lounge.

Olivia stands apart, almost blending into the shadows under the thick shade of a willow tree. It seems her stare is trained on Micah, but then it changes direction, veering to me. We exchange glares. She keeps her arms stiffly crossed and returns to staring at Micah.

I don’t know what I’m dealing with. The best move is probably to get Gage’s input. His instincts are better than mine.

Instead, I take determined strides to the most secluded corner of the yard, where thick, ten-foot high-oleander hedges guard the perimeter and a colony of prolific rosebushes gives the impression of a miniature enchanted forest.

A thorn bites into my thumb when I snap a branch from a rosebush. The red bloom at the end is as large as my hand. Dropping the rose on the grassy carpet at my feet, I kneel down and uncap the glass vial with extreme care. Willing my hand to remain steady, I tilt the bottle over the rose.

The sprinkle of liquid does look like water. The red petals shiver as they are splashed. And then they change. The petals shrivel and blacken, melting before my eyes. Within a minute, the brilliant red rose becomes a warped-looking tumor.

Destroyed. Dead.

From far away, Conner's voice drifts. He's telling a joke. His grandmother claps her hands together and laughs with delight, her enormous dark glasses in place as usual.

Cecile.

The attack on Matilda's mother was just one more misfortune in a family that has known many.

An invisible heavy weight presses on my lungs.

"Yes, we've been friends forever. Inseparable in high school."

"Olivia and I did have a horrible falling out back then...I consider grudges to be unhealthy."

Now I can't stop my fingers from shaking as I replace the cap on the vial. It's still partially full. The rest will need to be tested. *Acid*. Or something like it.

My mind continues to race, understanding at last.

Olivia, thriving on her resentment of Matilda, has purposely retained her position as a central character in Matilda's world. She has pretended to be a friend while seducing Matilda's troubled son.

But what else has she done?

What else does she plan to do?

Olivia hates Matilda. Olivia might hate me by extension.

“Olivia says that Mother is really a fairy queen who lost her powers but if she drinks the magic she’ll get her powers back.”

What if Olivia has finally reached the end of her crazy tether and she is not content to simply kill Matilda? What if her mad plan is to destroy the people closest to Matilda as well?

Micah. And me.

And Charlotte.

“What are you doing?”

Charlotte has come looking for me. She takes in the odd scene of me kneeling in the grass beside a ruined rose.

Gage has also taken notice that something is wrong. He steps away from his grandmother and cousins, his posture tense as he watches us.

“Charlotte.” I try to push the panic out of my voice. “There’s nothing to worry about but I need you to do something for me.”

She’s too smart. Her eyes widen. “Why? What’s happening?”

“You need to go to your daddy. Stay with your daddy, okay? He’ll keep you safe.”

“Dani.” Her face crumples.

I haven’t done a good job at keeping her from seeing my fright.

“Come here, sweetheart.” I take her hand, the one not holding the partially full bottle of acid, and lead her across the yard, careful to go nowhere near Olivia.

Uncle H starts to smile at the sight of us together and then his smile falls away.

“Take her inside, Uncle H. Please.”

He hears my urgency and collects his daughter in his arms.

The instant they are through the patio door I turn to Gage, Conner and Micah.

“I need you.”

It’s all I have to say to them and it’s enough.

I hear them following as I cross the yard to confront evil.

She waits in the shade, watching our approach, and if she’s afraid she doesn’t show it.

I hold the bottle between my thumb and forefinger. “It’s time to answer some questions, Olivia.”

“What’s that?” Conner mutters behind me.

“Answer him, Olivia. Tell everyone what this is!”

She ignores me and steps out from the shade. She pauses close to Micah and reaches out like she’s going to stroke his face.

He recoils. “What the fuck?”

Olivia sulks. “We could have had everything, you and me. Don’t you know that?”

Micah’s jaw drops. “It was nothing, Olivia. Nothing.”

“I thought so too at first. I thought I was just fucking you as payback.” She looks around for Matilda, who has paused her phone conversation. Olivia smirks and raises her voice. “That’s right, I fucked your son, Matilda! What do you think of that?”

Matilda, for once, is at a loss for words. The color has drained from her face. Her phone falls out of her hand. Edie jumps out of her lounge chair and runs to her sister.

“Stop this.” Micah is starting to look downright murderous. “Fucking stop it, Olivia.”

She tilts her head and stares at him with deranged lovesick eyes. “You’re so much like him, so much like Ethan.”

“No.” Micah shakes his head vigorously. “Don’t you talk about him, not now, not ever.”

Olivia’s expression shifts, turns tortured. “Ethan and I were *crazy* about each other. We were soul mates, together from the time we were thirteen. Matilda took no notice of him. Then one day Matilda Kingston and her bewitching golden pussy decided come calling and Ethan lost his mind. How do you think it felt? Forced to stand by and watch while Matilda stole my heart away? And she made him fucking miserable. He hated her. HATED HER! Of course he died. Because Matilda wrecks everything she touches.”

Matilda leans on Edie with a wounded cry. I’ve learned how to tell when Matilda’s acting. I don’t think she’s acting right now.

“What’s happening?” Cecile shouts.

I look over at the woman who I love as much as if she were my own grandmother.

Cecile has suffered so much. Someone made sure of it.

“Why did you hurt Cecile?” I demand to know. “I know it was you, Olivia. It had to be.”

“Was it?” She gazes at the old blind woman and her expression grows dark. “Maybe it was a mistake, the wrong

target. But I'm sure any mother would be happy to be a martyr for her daughter's sake."

"Olivia." Micah looks sick. "What did you do?"

Clearly, Micah is Olivia's weakness. Her composure falls away when she faces him.

But she knows now.

She knows she's caught. There's no way out.

"I'm sorry!" she blurts and tries to touch him again. "It's your mother. *Your fucking mother!* She never suffers for anything she does. Watching her only son get arrested and disgraced should have hurt her but it didn't. She didn't even care when Ethan was hacked to pieces so of course she didn't care about you either. I know it wasn't easy for you, the time in prison. But it was good for you, Micah. It was a *good* thing because that's how you were able to break away and become the man you are now. That's how you escaped from *her*."

"No fucking way!" Conner speaks for us all.

Another piece clicks into place. "You set up Micah. The fire. You made sure he was seen up there moments before it started. You could have killed everyone in that building, Olivia. And do you know what you did to Micah? Do you have *any fucking idea?*"

I'd take her down for that alone, to avenge the man who is a brother to me. I'm unprepared when Olivia rears back and slaps me across the face with brute force.

"Scheming slut," she snarls. "These boys all LOVE you, don't they, Dani? They always have. Let's hear about what you do for them in exchange for that loyalty."

Micah grabs her arms to stop her from attacking again. Gage pushes me behind him.

“You’re crazy,” I tell her.

Olivia shakes her head with a bitter laugh. “Matilda sure manufactured a nice little clone, didn’t she? Yes, I know what you are. *You’re her!* Just like her.”

Olivia tries her best to charge but Micah holds her at bay. She’d have to get through Gage as well and that’s not happening. My right cheek stings from the slap.

“That’s why you’ve been trying to kill me, Olivia? Because you hate Matilda so much? And that’s why you gave an innocent little girl a bottle of *acid*, telling her it was magic and she should secretly add it to her mother’s tea? You were trying to use Charlotte as a weapon to kill her own mother you sick fucking bitch!”

Micah can’t handle hearing this. Horrorstruck, he lets Olivia go and staggers away from her. “No,” he chokes out. “No, no, tell me you couldn’t do that.”

Gage remains my shield. Conner moves closer to Micah, maybe in case Micah falls over.

But Matilda has found her voice and begins running this way. “GET THE HELL AWAY FROM MY CHILDREN, OLIVIA!”

Uncle H, likely hearing all the shouting from inside the house, appears at the patio door with a bewildered expression. A second later, Charlotte stands at his side.

Olivia laughs. She reaches into her purse at the same time Gage draws his gun.

But Olivia doesn't have a gun. All she has is another bottle of acid.

"Matilda, don't!" I shout because she's still moving this way while Olivia waits for her. "Get back!"

Gage aims his gun at Olivia's heart.

Olivia smiles at the bottle in her hand. She flips off the cap.

"I love you," she says to Micah. "Even more than I loved him."

Then she tilts her head back and drinks every drop.

Charlotte screams.

I do too.

Chapter 32

Gage

It always feels wrong to let go of her, even for a very short time.

I hold Dani in my lap, unwilling to relinquish the warm comfort of her body. “You should come with us.”

“Next time.” She plants a kiss on my lips and another on my neck. “I’ve been neglecting Tess. She’s bringing takeout for lunch. She doesn’t like going to restaurants these days because the publicity has been so awful. Someone always recognizes her and wants to chat about her evil stepmother.”

I issue a grunt of sympathy and keep Dani centered in my lap. The last two weeks have been harrowing for everyone and Tess has been right at the epicenter.

There was a lot of explaining to do after Olivia died hideously in Matilda’s backyard. The fact that Olivia was married to West Emerald’s mayor and died at the home one of West Emerald’s wealthiest families while in the presence of the hometown pro football quarterback sounds like the narrative of an unhinged soap opera.

To say this whole ordeal has been tabloid fodder would be an intense understatement. It’s candy for the masses, this depravity of the rich and powerful. Only in the last few days

have nosy journalists stopped camping out outside Matilda's gates.

The name Olivia Ballerini is now nationally notorious. True crime shows keep calling. There might be a dramatic mini-series. Henley is being pressured to write a book about the ordeal. Matilda has given a number of weepy on camera interviews, wringing her hands over such a grave betrayal from a lifelong friend.

She has every right to be devastated. Maybe she really is. But I know what my aunt is like and she's plainly enjoying the limelight. She's been spending so much time front and center that she hasn't given much thought to the distraught little girl who saw things no child should ever have to see.

Little Charlotte is struggling. We've been going over there to see her every day and Micah even stayed at his mother's house every night for a week because Charlotte asked him to. Micah knows better than anyone how it can mess up a kid to see such violence and it kills him that his little sister now has these memories too. Matilda seems eager to make amends with her son now that Olivia's role in his unjust imprisonment is known. It's anyone's guess whether or not she's sincere but Micah's willing to go through the motions, for Charlotte's sake if nothing else.

"I'll only be gone a few hours." I'm rubbing Dani's back now, massaging the tension out of her muscles. "You sure you're going to be okay here alone?"

She smiles as my thumb strokes the back of her neck. "I guess it's been a while since I've been alone at all."

"Bolt the door, just in case. And keep your phone close."

Dani turns her head and gives me a rather grim smile. “I will. But the evil witch is dead.”

I know that’s true, even if there are still a few unsolved details. There’s a guy, a known drug dealer with a mile long rap sheet, who claims to have been hired by Olivia to attack Dani outside her apartment building. He also admits to sabotaging Dani’s car brakes. He was collared for an unrelated crime and clearly he hopes this information can be used as a bargaining chip.

He did deny trying to run Dani down in the parking garage and obviously he’s not Witch Mask, who spent his last minutes waving a knife around on a roof. It’s possible that Olivia kept a whole club of hitmen on her payroll.

Still, the lack of confirmation bothers me.

Dani twists my wrist around to look at my watch. “You’re going to be late. Didn’t you tell Conner you’d pick him up at eleven?”

“Yeah.” I kiss her once more and reluctantly allow her to leave my lap.

Dani stretches with a yawn and then opens the balcony door. I stand back to admire her body. I can’t help it. I don’t try.

“I think I need some caffeine,” she says.

“You haven’t been sleeping enough.”

Dani gives me a knowing, naughty look. “There are better things to do in bed than sleep, Gage. Haven’t you learned that lesson yet?”

“I could always use some more tutoring.”

She blows me a kiss. “Later.”

This girl drives me crazy in all the best ways.

“I love you,” I tell her.

She lights up every time. “I love you too.”

After I claim one more kiss, Dani swats me on the ass and sends me on my way. Still, I don’t move on from the door until I hear her click the deadbolt into place.

My next door neighbor, Bob Hennessy, is just rounding the corner with an armful of groceries and whistling the Notre Dame theme song. He greets me cheerfully. I wait until he’s inside his apartment and then take a good long look at the hallway. It’s empty, as expected.

I’ve just reached my car in the parking garage when an incoming call vibrates my phone. Jen Sullivan is calling.

“Hey, Gage. Sorry I haven’t been in touch lately. I’m sure you’ve had your hands full.”

“No problem. Just thankful all the pandemonium is finally starting to die down.”

“How’s your lady doing? I feel like I know her after watching out for her all these years.”

“Dani’s good. How are *you* doing, Jen?”

“Touch and go,” she admits. “Matt was my little brother. I’ll never get over losing him like this.”

I tap the steering wheel and the taste in my mouth turns sour. With everything else happening, I haven’t had much time to dwell on Matt’s murder. “Any leads?”

“He was hit at close range with two thirty-two caliber bullets. No video footage, no witnesses, but I finally got a little bit of a break. A friend of Matt’s got in touch, an old military

buddy. He left for a survivalist retreat the morning after Matt was killed and hadn't heard of Matt's death until he got back in town two days ago. Turns out they had met for drinks that night at an Irish bar called O'Dublin's. Matt was a big believer in investigative discretion so he didn't talk about his cases but the guy said Matt was in good spirits, nothing out of the ordinary. He was on his way out when a woman showed up. Fake blonde, high end accessories. He said Matt knew who she was and wasn't especially happy to see her. But the woman sat down next to Matt and ordered some drinks. That's the way things stood when Matt's buddy left him. Could be nothing. The owner's digging back through his receipts that night and promised to get back to me."

"I hope this leads to a suspect." I pause. My fingers keep tapping the steering wheel. There's something I need to say to Matt's sister. "He saved Dani, you know. When she was grabbed in front of her building by the bastard hired by Olivia, Matt got there in time. He did good, Jen."

"Yeah." She sniffs. "He did good."

"You take care. Stay in touch."

"I will."

After picking up Conner at the Palace Hotel we head to the east side. To Micah. He's back at his gym now, training for his next fight. With Micah, there will always be another fight.

When we find him, he's sparring in the ring, but it's not an even match. Micah's opponent bleeds from the mouth and sways on his feet. Micah, seeming almost bored, has mercy on the guy and sends him down to the mat with one final punch. They must be friendly because the guy kind of laughs from where he sprawls on the mat and accepts Micah's hand to help him to his feet.

Micah finally hops out of the ring. “What’s going on?”

“Kidnapping you for lunch,” Conner says.

One of the men milling around the practice ring barks out Micah’s name. Micah shakes his head at the guy and props his hands on his hips.

“Haven’t you both seen enough of my fucking face lately?” Micah says and though he’s being sarcastic, there’s a bleak tenor to the question.

“Never,” I tell him. “You’re stuck with us.”

He smirks but nods and then looks away.

“You can pick the food,” Conner offers. “And Gage is paying so pick someplace pricey.”

Micah finally chuckles. “Give me ten to shower up.”

“Take fifteen,” Conner says. “You stink.”

He gets flipped off for that. Some things really do never change.

The gym crowd is unimpressed with our intrusion so we wait for Micah out in my car. When he emerges, showered and dressed, Conner generously lets him have the shotgun seat.

“Where to?” I start backing up.

“Taco stand on Frank Street. Guaranteed to be a hundred times better than anything you’ll find in an overpriced downtown café.”

He’s right. The food is damn good. We sit at a rickety metal table that rusts at the edges. It’s a noisy spot, across the street from a crowded elementary school playground. Conner has a knack for dominating the conversation but it’s pleasant

to hear him prattling about the upcoming football season and the post roast recipe he wants to try.

Micah doesn't say much. He hasn't yet talked about Olivia at all. He doesn't have to. We know she haunts him anyway. If he ever does want to open up, we're here.

"Why don't you come back with us?" I suggest. "Dani wants to go see Charlotte later and then maybe we could have a movie night or whatever."

Judging by the expression on Micah's face, his first instinct is to say no. Maybe he needs some time alone to deal with the Olivia baggage. But then he nods.

"Yeah, that sounds good."

Conner stuffs another taco in his face and talks with his mouth full. "I'm invited too, right?"

Micah throws a napkin at him.

I decide to let Micah's visit be a surprise to Dani. She's been extremely worried about him. This will make her happy.

We're walking to the elevator inside The Tower's parking garage when my phone goes off. It's Jen Sullivan again and I motion to the guys that I'll just be a minute.

Jen doesn't bother with pleasantries. Her voice is agitated and she speaks in rapid fire tempo. "Remember when I said Matt met a friend for drinks and a woman showed up?"

"Sure."

"The bar owner had a stack of card receipts from that time frame. He scanned them and sent them over in case something caught my eye. Something did. There was a card swiped at ten thirty, less than half an hour before Matt was shot."

Uneasiness starts to settle in, the kind when you know you're about to get some fucked up news. "Who did the card belong to, Jen?"

She speaks the name and I nearly drop my phone.

Chapter 33

Dani

“Have I officially lost my roommate?” Tess asks with a wink.

“I have not moved,” I point out and crush a fast food hamburger wrapper.

She sips her soda and then the straw pops out of her mouth. “We both know that’s a technicality.”

It’s the truth. I’ve been spending every night here with Gage. This felt like a better option than forcing Tess to listen to our sexual acrobatics through thin apartment walls. We’ve been making plans, lots of plans that involve a big picture future together. But I hate the idea that Tess might feel abandoned.

“I’m sorry.” I jump off my stool so I can run over to hug her. “I won’t be selling anytime soon so you can stay there as long as you want. You can have the whole apartment to yourself or you can get a roommate if you’re lonely. It’s up to you.”

She laughs and hugs me back. “I was teasing. You’re in love, Dani. No one is more deserving of happiness. I always knew I couldn’t keep you as my roommate forever. It’s just the end of an era, that’s all.”

I let a minute go by before touching on a more serious subject, one I avoided while we ate lunch together at Gage's kitchen counter. "How is your dad?"

Her smile drops. "He's struggling. You know the campaign has been suspended while he tries to come to grips with who his wife really was. All the publicity has been difficult. I'm going over there later to convince him to leave the house for a little while."

While I never much liked Stuart Ballerini, it's impossible to escape sympathy for the man. He found out his wife was a monster and then had to bury her. The story has been very public.

I've been avoiding the internet myself because I don't want to know what the online world is saying. They can be cruel, those who judge from the comfort of their keyboards with no regard for the real people they so casually take apart.

"I won't lie," Tess says. "It's shaken me up too. There was never any love lost between me and Olivia but she was part of my family and I never would have suspected her of all this. Messes with your head, you know? Makes you wonder if anyone is what they seem."

True.

"*We* are what we seem," I assure my best friend. "And I'll always have your back."

She grins. "Same."

A minute later, Tess needs to cut our lunch short and get going. Despite her dad's campaign being suspended, she's still on the hook for answering media inquiries and making decisions.

After I close the door behind her, I flip the additional bolt Gage had installed. The nagging sense of a threatening, watchful shadow has been slow to evaporate since Olivia's death.

That takes time, I suppose. For a while there will be things that bring the entire episode back into focus.

Right after Gage left earlier, I was cleaning out my purse and almost had a stroke when my fingers located the shape of a tiny bottle of glass. I knew what it was before I withdrew the object from where it had become lodged beneath a rip in the lining.

I'd last seen it the night I was grabbed on a street, the night Matt Sullivan chased away my attacker. If Matt hadn't been there, the contents of this small glass bottle would have been thrown in my face. I assumed it had been lost forever. Unsure of how to dispose of it safely and wondering if the police might want to have it, I wrapped the bottle in a dishtowel and cautiously stored it in the kitchen utensil drawer. Gage and I will figure out what to do with it later.

Reminders will keep cropping up. There's still a lingering dread that I'm being pursued. There's the undefined fear that wakes me up in the darkness and is soothed only by the warm feel of Gage's arms around me.

But in spite of all the recent craziness, I'm happy. I'm optimistic about what the years ahead with Gage will look like. Even the thought of him brings a flutter to my heart and a dreamy sigh to my lips.

I'm going to marry Gage Silvestro. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him.

I'm still leaning against the door, preoccupied with fantasies of my future husband, when there's a sharp knock on the other side.

My breath halts.

The sound just startled me, that's all. All surprises might do the same for a little while. With caution, I look through the peephole and breathe with relief.

"Dani!" Edie greets me excitedly when I open the door. "Oh, I hope I'm not bothering you. I had to come this way to drop off a new contract bid and I wanted to check on you."

"Of course you're not bothering me." I open the door the rest of the way. "Come in."

She clutches a glittery pink tote purse to her side, smells strongly of floral perfume, and enters with her sunglasses on. "So this is where you're living now. With Gage. Matilda told me. She wishes you would return to the office."

"Yes." I shut the door and slip the bolt back into place. "I promised Matilda I'd come back to the office next week. Sorry, I know you've probably had to pick up the slack, but after everything that's happened I really needed some time off. And Gage and I aren't officially living together, but--"

"But you're in love with him." She removes her sunglasses. Her blue eyes gleam. "How adorable."

"Yeah." I have to smile. "Do you want anything? Water? Or I could make some coffee?"

Knowing Edie, wine would be the beverage of choice but we have none.

She points to the counter. "Is that your latte machine?"

“Yes.” I laugh. “It does take up a lot of space, doesn’t it? I suppose I have started moving in whether Gage is ready or not. Do you want me to make you one? I have regular milk or almond.”

“Almond would be perfect.” She gazes out through the open balcony doors. “This is such a beautiful building.”

“It really is. Feel free to take a look around, although I’m sure you know the layout.”

Edie explores the apartment in the background as I work on her latte. I pour the steamed milk into the cup, trying to create a heart shape, which is something I’ve attempted dozens of times but never perfected. I feel a rush of delight when the layered heart shape floats in the center of the cup.

“Wait till you see this, Edie.” I turn around with a smile on my face.

Then I drop the cup on the kitchen tile and scream.

The nose is monstrous and dotted with warts. The mouth is curved into a wicked grin that exposes a handful of rotted teeth. Deep wrinkles are cut into the green rubber, the brows arched in a design to make the face appear as malevolent as possible. It was dark when I last saw this face in the midst of a life and death struggle. I missed some of these details then.

But the face is not one I’m likely to forget. It’s the one of my would-be murderer.

Blue eyes watch me merrily from within the grotesque veneer and a high-pitched shriek of a laugh fills the room.

Chapter 34

Gage

““**T**here’s more,” Jen says. “Last month she passed a background check to buy a gun.”

“Let me guess. It’s in the thirty-two caliber family.”

“A customized thirty-two caliber Beretta, yes. I’ve just passed this information onto the police. I just wanted to give you a heads up because this is your family. Be careful, Gage.”

Conner and Micah have heard enough from my end to be alert.

Micah is wary. “What now?”

I nod to Conner. “Where’s your mother today?”

He blinks at the question. “I don’t know. Probably at the office. Why?”

“Because it’s possible that she killed Matt Sullivan.”

“No way.” He laughs weakly and then sees I’m serious. “Gage, have you met my mother? She cries over dog commercials and she’s afraid to make left turns.”

“Did you know that she’d recently bought a gun?”

His eyebrows shoot up. “No.”

“She did. She bought a gun that happened to be of the same caliber as the one that killed Matt Sullivan.”

He’s starting to pace between the cars. “People buy guns every day for fuck’s sake. She probably wanted it for protection.”

“She was also at a bar with Matt less than an hour before he was found with two shots to the head.”

Conner says nothing. He doesn’t have to. The sick reality of this update is written all over his face. Of the three of us, Conner is the only one who has a good relationship with his mother. When I search through my own memories, I can recall no sign that Aunt Edie had any violence in her at all. Maybe she was uniquely threatened by Matt’s investigation for some reason. Or maybe we’ve all been catastrophically fooled.

“Edie.” Micah shakes his head with a sigh. “I would say that’s crazy but craziness does seem to follow us.”

“Gage,” Conner says.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “The cops will pick her up. She’ll have to answer some questions.”

“Gage,” Conner says again. He points.

I don’t see anything but parked cars.

“That’s my mother’s car,” he says. “The silver Acura. She’s here.”

My dread spikes to a five alarm fire. To my knowledge, Edie has never visited before. Dani is upstairs with the door bolted but she’d have no problem opening it for Edie. Dani knows Edie well. They even work together.

It takes me half a second to whip my phone out and press a button to call Dani.

Pick up, baby. Pick up.

Straight to voicemail. Her phone never ever goes straight to voicemail.

“Elevator,” I tell the boys and we make a run for it.

“Fuck, let’s just take the stairs,” Micah frets when the elevator doesn’t show up within three seconds.

It’s torture to wait instead of sprinting up the stairs but I’m sure this will be faster. The elevator dings. We pile in and I frantically press the tenth floor button.

“She wouldn’t hurt Dani,” Conner says but he’s doubtful now, shaken. He no longer knows who his mother is or what she’s capable of. None of us do.

When the girl you love is in danger, seconds become eternity.

We arrive at the tenth floor and I’m the first to tear through the elevator doors. The hallway is hushed and empty, just like I left it. Nothing looks to be out of the ordinary when we reach my apartment.

Micah is ready to charge. “Open the fucking door.”

But I hesitate and listen. Murmurings on the other side. Too muted to decipher words. There’s an argument happening. There’s Edie’s laughter. There’s Dani’s fearful reply.

Silently, I plug the key into the door and twist until the lock clicks open. The door doesn’t budge when I turn the knob.

Shit.

“Deadbolt,” I hiss.

“I can break it down,” Conner insists.

Maybe he can. But the bolt is thick and would likely need a couple of hits. In the meantime, Edie would have time to react. We have to catch her by surprise. There are only so many ways into a tenth floor apartment from the outside.

“Stay here,” I say to Conner and Micah. “If you hear things start to go sideways, break down the door. Get in there by any means necessary.”

Micah grabs me. “Where are you going?”

“The door to the balcony was open when I left earlier. It might still be open.” The balconies between apartment units are mere feet apart and a decorative ledge connects them.

Micah’s eyes narrow. “I’m coming with you.”

I don’t bother to argue with him. It never does any good.

He stands tensely beside me as I bang on Bob Hennessey’s door.

“Hold your horses,” my neighbor grumbles as he flings the door open. A frown deepens the creases in his forehead.

“Bob, we’re coming in,” I say and then push right past him before he can answer.

Chapter 35

Dani

““**Y**our face!” Edie points and whoops with hilarity. “Priceless, the look on your face, Dani!”

The scene has gone haywire, straight into Twilight Zone territory.

“Edie.” I need to lean on the counter or I’ll pass out. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Edie pulls off the witch mask, irritably smooths out the static in her hair and tosses the rubber monstrosity on the counter. “It’s funny!”

The taste of fear is sour. “You need to leave now.”

She gives me a radiant smile. “No.”

My mind spins, trying to sort through this fresh hell and come up with a conclusion.

In a panic, I look around for my phone. I’m sure I left it on the counter beside the sink but it’s gone.

“Looking for your phone?” Edie clucks her tongue. “I threw it over the balcony.”

“What?” I can hardly gasp out the word.

“I said, I THREW IT OVER THE BALCONY! But don’t worry. Maybe you’ll be reunited when you reach the bottom.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ll be going over the balcony too, Dani. Very soon.”

How can this be real?

My hands go numb. A rational part of my brain pleads for calm.

This is just Edie. She’s not big or strong.

The apartment door is less than ten feet away. She may be nuts but she won’t be able to overpower me.

Then she plays her next card.

Giggling to herself, Edie dives into her purse and pulls out a gun the color of bubble gum. She quits giggling and admires the thing as she aims it at my chest.

“It doesn’t look real, does it? I would swear it was a piece of candy. But I had it custom made and it *is* real. It shoots actual bullets and they do kill. I tested it out already to make sure.”

No matter how fast I get to the door, I won’t be able to outrun a bullet.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, a naked attempt to buy time while my mind sorts through my very limited options.

But also, I truly want to know.

Sweet, clueless, Edie. It makes no sense.

She holds the gun steady. “I’ve been shoved into the background my entire life. Matilda was always the queen. The world revolves around her. I have no idea what she sees in you, though. You’re nothing special, Dani!”

“That’s what this is about? I wouldn’t have guessed you were just another Olivia, consumed with jealousy and hatred of Matilda.”

The barrel of the gun lowers a few inches and her face contorts with rage. “I LOVE MATILDA! Everything I do is for Matilda. Everything!”

“And you think Matilda wants you to kill me?”

She rolls her eyes as if I’m asking the silliest question imaginable. “Oh, she’ll probably cry for a couple of days because you’ve tricked her into thinking you’re irreplaceable. But she’ll recover. They all love you so much. The boys. My mother. Even my own son likes you more than he likes me. But I’ll be there for Matilda when she needs a shoulder to cry on. She’ll forget you, Dani. They all will. That’s what always happens.”

“What does that mean?”

She pauses and becomes thoughtful. “I had another sister once. Did you know that? Yeah, you probably know that. But no one likes to talk about her. Just too painful. Or something. Anyhow, shortly after our father died and we flushed his ashes down the toilet, Lynette decided we should sell Yellow Brick. She had my mother almost convinced. Can you believe that? Matilda was freaking. She’d planned to run the company since we were children. It belongs to her! But once Lynette was gone everyone stopped talking about that stupid idea.”

All that’s left is for me to say it out loud. “You killed your own sister.”

Edie narrows her eyes. “It’s really not hard to make someone disappear in the jungle. There are so many people

who will do a lot of really bad things for just a little bit of money.”

She fooled us, all of us. I’ll give her that. In all the time I’ve known Edie it never once occurred to me that she was a deranged sociopath.

I need to buy more time, distract her until I can somehow get the upper hand. “You tried to run me down in the parking garage.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I hired someone for that just like I hired someone to deal with Lynette. But he did a crappy job so I had to fire him and find someone else.”

“Someone else? You mean the man who tried to kill me and Gage at the golf club.”

The memory casts a shadow over her face. “Gage wasn’t supposed to be up there with you. It’s your fault he nearly died.” She brightens. “But did you like the mask? I thought it was a nice touch, very dramatic. My idea! It would have been the last thing you saw before your throat was sliced open. But now I’m kind of glad that plan didn’t work out because this seems so much more poetic.”

“Did you kill Matt?”

“Sure. The man kept pestering everyone with questions, thinking he’s James Bond or whatever. He was really getting on my nerves. Anyway, I wanted to test out my gun.”

The butcher block filled with sharp knives is all the way in the corner beneath the mounted microwave. Too far for me to reach before Edie fires off a shot. A knife isn’t exactly a match for a gun but it’s better than being defenseless.

Meanwhile, the kitchen island counter is high and Edie hasn’t noticed that she can’t see my hands. The fingers of my

right hand explore the outline of the nearest drawer, the utensil drawer, and inch it open.

“You’ll hurt the rest of them too,” I tell her. “Conner and Micah. Charlotte. Gage. They will all be devastated if you kill me.”

She shakes her head, impatient. “There’s going to be such a mess when you splatter on the ground but tragedies have always been a thing in our family. This is just going to be another one. Everyone will move on. It will be like you were never here, Dani.”

Edie smiles at the image of her own words.

I pry the drawer open a few more inches and silently search for something sharp. Instead, my fingers find a soft towel, and within its folds, the vial of acid.

“I know what you’re doing.” She glares. “Shut the drawer.”

“Or you’ll shoot me?”

“I’d rather not. It’s not the way I wanted to do this. But yes.”

With the glass vial already in my palm, I loudly shut the drawer, the sound eerily similar to a gunshot.

“Put your hands on the counter,” she says with exasperation.

Keeping the bottle hidden within my palm, I place my hands on the counter.

“Now what?”

She thinks for a minute. “I have a lot of errands to run this afternoon. You’re going to need to jump off the balcony now.”

“Edie, listen to me. I won’t be jumping off the balcony. And you’re not strong enough to force me. I’ll make you shoot me and that’s going to raise a lot of questions. This building has a ton of security cameras. Do you really think none of them have caught a glimpse of you today?”

Her mouth purses at the advent of these new complications. Then she sighs. “I’ll think about all that later. But Dani, if you don’t jump off the balcony, I’m going to have to shoot Gage.”

Of all the insane things that have come out of her mouth so far, this is by far the most terrifying. “You can’t shoot Gage. He has nothing to do with this.”

“I don’t *want* to shoot him. He’s my nephew! But if you don’t do what I need you to do then I won’t have a choice. He’ll come back here sooner or later. When he walks through the door, he’ll get a bullet in the face. And then I’ll shoot you anyway. So you’ll both be dead. But guess what? It doesn’t have to be that way! Gage already almost lost his life protecting you. Now you have the chance to repay him.”

Throughout Edie’s speech, she faces me. She doesn’t see what I see behind her.

Micah appears on edge of the balcony. Soundlessly, he hops down. Seconds later, Gage follows.

A trickle of sweat runs down the back of my neck. If Edie turns around and sees them, she may just open fire. Within my sweaty palm, the glass vial remains cool and innocuous despite its fatal threat.

“Edie, listen.” I draw my words with slow calm. “You aren’t thinking clearly. You need to put down the gun now.”

The words have the opposite effect. Spots of pink appear on Edie's cheeks and she gazes at me with true unbridled hatred. "I can't fucking wait to watch you die, Dorothy Ann Gallagher."

A force slams into the door and it shudders but the deadbolt holds. With another try, the bolt cracks and Conner falls inside. Edie, startled, fires the gun. The bullets hits Conner's right leg. Blood blossoms on his jeans and he drops to the floor, gaping at his mother with sick shock.

"LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!" she screams, now waving the gun wildly around the room as Micah and Gage barrel through the open balcony door.

There's no time to think twice. I charge from behind the counter, uncapping the vial of acid, and I aim for her face.

The acid splashes across the bridge of her nose and sticks to her eyelashes. She blinks once, twice.

"Oh no," she whimpers as the acid begins to eat her flesh. Hatred twists her features one more time and, with her eyesight rapidly vanishing, her hand wavers as she tries to point the gun at me.

"MOM!" Conner screams as he tries to get up again. "STOP!"

Micah leaps over the sofa to grab his aunt from behind, seizing her around the waist with a crushing grip. The gun fires and the bullet hits the ceiling. Edie thrashes and howls as Micah keeps her locked in place. Gage twists her arm and extracts the gun from her hand.

"HATE YOU!" Edie screams, wildly flailing.

Now that she's disarmed, Micah releases her. Edie chokes and gasps and lurches toward the open balcony door.

“Water!” I shout to them. “She needs to put her face underwater to flush out the acid.”

Edie continues to scream as she spills out on the balcony, colliding with the chest high barrier at the balcony’s edge. Gage and Micah are in hot pursuit but Edie has made her choice. She hoists herself up on the wall and Gage only manages to grab a fistful of her pink blouse, which tears in his hand, before Edie flips over the side. She screams and screams.

And then there’s nothing.

A second of stunned silence seems to stretch on forever.

Gage looks down over the balcony where his aunt just disappeared. Then he turns and runs to me. I crash into his arms and feel my legs give way.

“Gunshot wound,” Micah is barking into his phone. “The Tower, tenth floor.”

There are sirens already. The buzz of many alarmed voices begins to escalate on the distant sidewalk below.

“It’s not bad.” Micah presses a dishcloth to Conner’s leg to stop the bleeding. “You’ll be okay, Con.”

I don’t know if that’s true. There’s a lot of blood now. Conner’s pants are soaked with it. He was just shot by his crazy mother and then saw her fall to her death. Nothing will be okay for him anymore.

Conner’s eyes meet mine and his desolation breaks my heart.

I take his hand. “We’re here, Conner. No matter what, we’re here for you.”

Gage crouches at my side, one hand around my waist, the other squeezing Conner's shoulder in solidarity.

The four of us wait in the grim hush that comes with the aftermath of terrible things.

We hold on to each other for dear life.

Chapter 36

Gage

The morning room's wall of glass overlooks the backyard. We watch from here, Dani and I, just in case we're needed.

Conner's crutches are propped up against one of the pergola pillars, although for the most part he refuses to use them. At first his posture was tense in the cushioned swivel chair, his bad leg stretched out in front of him on a wide ottoman.

He's starting to relax now, to talk a little more. In the whirlwind of the past ten days he's received endless interview requests and declined them all. He finally agreed to talk to Bree Lambeau, provided it's not on camera. She's a friend and won't grill him without mercy.

Bree nods her encouragement as Conner speaks and she doesn't push him when he frequently pauses. Physically, he's recovering. He'll miss at least the first half of the football season but his doctors are optimistic about his chances to return to the field.

His emotional state is another matter.

Conner, our lovable goofball football hero, has been largely quiet since his release from the hospital. There was no funeral for Edie. It would have become a complete paparazzi

circus. And honestly, no one much felt like crying for her anyway.

The clickbait headlines have been relentless.

World's Most Scandalous Family, screams the entire internet.

Overkill, if you ask me. This is a big world and fucked up families inhabit every corner. Still, it's the truth that ours must score at least an honorable mention.

It all became too much for Matilda. Henley, taking charge for once, spirited his wife and daughter away for extended vacation at a secluded Hawaiian resort to escape the onslaught of attention. At Charlotte's insistence, they brought Micah with them. Only for his little sister would Micah have even considered the trip. Every evening Dani talks to them via a video conference call. For now, Charlotte seems content in paradise with her parents and her big brother. I don't know how much she's been told. She'll hear it all eventually.

Cecile refused to travel anywhere so Dani and I are here to watch over her. Like Conner, she's been quiet, still adjusting to the terrible facts. There was no way to spare her the knowledge of Edie's evil misdeeds.

In the end, there never is a way to escape from the truth.

Bree says something that makes Conner chuckle. That's good to see. We had to do a lot of fast talking to persuade him to stay here with us. He shouldn't be on his own right now.

Dani hugs my waist and I tip her chin up for a kiss. Thinking about the future might seem like a tall order when the present is so fucked up, but life doesn't wait.

Neither will we.

Dani likes my ideas about what to do with the liquidated portions of my father's lost empire. She's had a few ideas of her own. New enterprises are already being set in motion and she's a critical part of the plans. Dani still needs to break the news to Matilda that she's leaving Yellow Brick but that can wait until Matilda's return. Alta's been running the company in the meantime, diving into the role with zeal. My mother and I don't share a warm and fuzzy bond and never will. Still, we've spoken a couple of times in recent weeks, which is a stunning improvement.

"Did the apartment go on the market today?" Dani asks.

"Yup. Realtor texted this morning to say she's already been flooded with interest. Apparently, it's a thing, buying properties of infamous crime scenes."

She shudders. "Morbid."

Dani doesn't want to set foot in The Tower anymore, let alone live there. I have no reason to keep the apartment. She was hesitating to put her own place up for sale because of Tess but Tess told her to go ahead and do what feels right. Anyway, Tess has moved back in with her father for the foreseeable future. For now, it seems like old times with all of us back in the neighborhood.

Maybe Dani is thinking the same thing because she turns suddenly and walks to the long table that's perpetually set with rose-patterned antique china, as if a large family is expected to sit down to a meal at any moment.

She drops into a chair and flashes a mischievous smile. "I was here."

I know where this is going. I take the chair on her right. "And I was here."

“I thought you were horrible.”

“I was.”

She laughs.

“HELLO!” My grandmother’s voice crackles through the aging intercom. “I woke up to find that the foolish nurse has forgotten my breakfast. I’d rather not starve today.”

Nobody has forgotten Cecile’s breakfast. Cecile herself has forgotten that she already ate breakfast about five hours ago.

“Cecile, it’s Gage. Sorry about your breakfast. I’ll bring it up to you right away.”

Dani’s already on her way to the kitchen to fix Cecile’s meal. She prepares the tray with loving care and offers to bring it up.

“I’ve got this.” I slide the tray to my palm.

Dani stretches on her tiptoes for a kiss. She gets it.

Cecile waits by the window in her bedroom, seated in a cushy armchair beside a small round table. She’s more unsteady on her feet than ever and I get nervous that she’s going to fall one of these days. She takes the stair lift up and down the stairs but won’t move down to a first floor bedroom. Cecile hates the first floor, claims it reminds her of her dead husband.

The heavy draperies are open and her face points to the window, her dark glasses in place. Even if she can’t see the world outside her window, the sun probably feels good on her face.

“Your breakfast.” I deposit the tray on the table.

Cecile's mouth moves like she's biting the inside of her lip. She doesn't speak.

"Can I get you anything else?" I ask her. It's tough to tell when she's in the mood for company. Usually, she's not.

"My picture," she says. "I'd like my picture."

Alta found it in a box at Edie's house. The framed photo of the four Kingston sisters and their mother, the one that disappeared from Cecile's room years ago.

It's a real throat punch to look at that happy moment on the beach and know that two of those four little girls are dead. Then it feels even worse to remember how they died. Maybe Edie stole the photo because the guilt over her murdered sister got to her. Or maybe the photo was more like a heinous trophy.

I'll never understand. In any case, the photo is back here where it belongs and Cecile likes knowing it's close by.

"This was Lynette's bedroom," my grandmother says. "Did you know?"

I didn't. I wonder if that's a big reason why she insists on staying in here.

"We can always talk about her if you want."

She taps a finger to her chin. "We've always been a family that doesn't talk about things. We should become a family that talks about things."

"Yes, we should." I twist off the cap of the mineral water to make things easier for her. "Maybe you'll want to come down and get some fresh air in the backyard later?"

"No. But tell Dani if she's bored then I wouldn't mind if she wanted to come up this afternoon and listen to audiobooks."

“I’ll pass the message along.”

Cecile’s dark lenses fix on my face. “You’re going to marry her.”

She declares this with utter certainty.

I’m honest with my grandmother. “Absolutely.”

She smiles and turns back to the window, which overlooks nothing but the hedgerows. It makes no difference since she can’t see the view.

Cecile waves her hand when I ask her another question and it’s a sign that she’d like me to leave her alone.

After jogging back downstairs, I see that Conner must have wrapped up his interview with Bree because she’s gone. He’s trying to get up out of his chair and shaking his head as Dani pushes his crutches at him.

“You’re stubborn,” she scolds as I step outside.

Conner grins at her. “That’s part of my charm.” He gestures to me. “Just ask that guy.”

“It’s true.” I take the seat Bree was occupying earlier. “I’ve known him all my life.”

Dani rolls her eyes and gives up on the crutches. Anyway, Conner has stopped trying to climb out of his chair.

“Interview go okay?” I ask him.

He nods. “Good enough. It’ll get everyone off my back for a little while.”

“You start physical therapy next week?”

“Monday, yeah. It’ll be good to get back up and running.”

“Might take a few more weeks for the running.”

He nods, coughs into his hand, looks around the backyard. We were the fourth generation of our family to grow up here. We spent endless childhood hours in this place. Me and him and Micah. And later, Dani too.

Whatever terrible memories live here, the good ones overshadow them.

Dani strolls over to the pool. She slips off one sandal and dips a toe in to feel the water.

“Micah says that they’re coming back next week,” I tell Conner.

He leans back in his chair. “Guess it’s time for us all to get back to everyday life. Where are you and Dani going to live now?”

“Not sure yet. I think Em City has kind of lost its luster. We’ll figure it out. Long as I get to be with her, I don’t care.”

Conner rubs his jaw. “Reminds me of that old saying about home and the heart.”

I shrug. “She is my heart.”

He gives me a grin.

“So are you, Con,” I tell him. “And Micah and Cecile and Charlotte.”

“Family,” he says and extends his fist.

I bump his fist with mine. “Family.”

He motions to Dani. “Now go pay some attention to that gorgeous girl.”

“Every chance I get.” I rise and snap my fingers at him. “And use your crutches or she’ll worry.”

Dani is lost in thought when I approach from behind. She starts but then relaxes with a happy sigh when I slide my arms around her body.

“What are you thinking?” I ask her. I always want to know.

She strokes my arm. “I was thinking about how it’s possible to take such a long journey without really going very far.”

My lips brush her neck. “I’ll go where you go from now on.”

She picks up my hand and kisses it. “My prince.”

I don’t know if this is the perfect moment.

Then again, I’ve never been good at picking those anyway.

She notices when I reach into my pocket. All day I’ve been checking constantly to make sure it’s still there. I flip open the lid so she can see what’s inside.

The sunlight catches the complex stone facets of the red ruby. Only red will do for her.

“Will you marry me, Dorothy Ann Gallagher?”

“In a heartbeat,” she replies, and I slip the stone on her finger, where it will stay.

Epilogue

DANI

“I think our guests might be a little annoyed if we’re late to our own wedding.”
I pull on his arm. “Then walk faster.”

He smiles and humors me.

“She just finished weekly therapy,” the nurse at the front desk says. “She’s in her room now.”

“Thanks.” I clutch the engraved plaque under one arm while dragging Gage along the corridor.

Today Lita wears a turquoise tracksuit and her short hair is kept off her face with a matching headband. The television is tuned to a show about wedding dresses.

“Lita.” I kiss her cheek. “Gage is here with me.”

I motion to him that he should speak.

“Hey, Lita.” He gently touches her folded hands in greeting. “It’s been a long time.”

“We’re getting married today,” I tell my friend. “At the Em City Courthouse. Yes, Matilda did have a fit when we refused to have a big wedding, but this is exactly what we want. I wish you could be there too. But I’ve brought you something.” I hold the plaque up in case her half open eyes can see. “Gage

and I have started a new foundation, dedicated to fund medical research and provide financial assistance for coma patients. The name is the best part. It's called Lita's Angels."

I prop up the celebratory plaque on a little table beside her. A haze of tears briefly clouds my eyes but I blink them away.

"This is for you." I can't stop my voice from cracking. "Until we get to celebrate the day you come back to us."

Gage puts his arm around me. I rest my head on his shoulder.

We really can't stay. Everyone waits for us at the courthouse.

For a second, I could swear Lita is looking right at me.

No, it must have been a trick of light. Her eyes remain unfocused.

Gage takes my hand. We turn around to discover we have an audience.

Haven stands in the doorway. Her dress and makeup are as fierce as ever but the usual fury is absent from her face. There's a sense of sadness in the way she watches us with her head tilted.

Haven backs up from the doorway as we exit. She stares down at her shoes. I'm not sure if I should say anything to her. The last thing I want to do is get into a scuffle on my wedding day.

She waits until I start to walk away. "Dani?"

I brace for insults. Threats. A punch in the face.

"Good job kicking ass." Haven flashes a rueful smile. "And congratulations."

“Thanks, Haven.” It’s a wonder I can utter those words. I feel like I should be speechless.

But there’s no time to dwell on miracles because we have a wedding to get to.

Gage and I dash to the parking lot holding hands. We’re not following traditions at all. I woke up this morning with his tongue between my legs and we made love as the sun rose. Then we watched each other dress for our wedding, and now we’re driving to the ceremony together.

I look over at Gage as he keeps a serious eye on the road. He’s appallingly handsome in his tux. And I feel like a princess in my sleeveless white dress with a frothy tulle skirt that flares at the knee. I could swear the smile on my face is permanent.

In every way this is a fairy tale come true.

My fairy tale.

“We were about to send out a search party!” Conner complains when we discover that we’re the last ones to arrive at the courthouse.

He’s getting around better now, has even started practicing with his team again. He’s also wearing a large black top hat for some obscure reason known only to him.

Micah and Tess - never friends before, and still not friends now – are actively bickering about something until Tess elbows his arm and waves at us excitedly.

Matilda looks slightly horrified to be standing in a courthouse at all. She holds stiffly to her husband but blows me a kiss when our eyes meet. Charlotte is beside herself, bouncing up and down in her favorite butterfly wings next to her grandmother’s wheelchair. How I wish Cecile could see

us, but her smile is so wide that maybe it doesn't matter. She sees us in every way that counts. It's a surprise to see that Alta has shown up. She stands behind her mother's chair, gazes at her son, and wipes away a tear. I choose to think it's a happy tear.

A door opens and a woman pops her head out to inform us that we are next in line for the ceremony room.

Uncle H takes this opportunity to leave Matilda's side. He warmly shakes Gage's hand.

Then he shows me something I didn't realize he'd been carrying under his arm.

"Your new book!" I exclaim.

"An early proof copy. Read the dedication."

The title of the book is *Tin Heart*. I flip open the cover and find the page Uncle H wants me to see.

For Dorothy Ann.

*I may not be your parent but you are forever my child.
Watching over you has been the honor of my life.*

With Gratitude, Your Uncle H.

I close the cover, moved beyond words.

None of us are perfect with our choices.

We try to do the best we can for the people we love. I know Uncle H always tried to do the best for me. As for my mother, I hardly think of her at all anymore.

And that's all right.

When I hug my uncle, I hope he knows there's nothing but love in my heart for him.

“Dorothy Ann Gallagher and Gage Silvestro,” calls the court clerk.

Gage takes my hand. We exchange radiant grins.

This is our moment and we’ve earned it.

We stand before our family and the judge and whoever else wants to watch while we make our promises.

“Forever,” I tell Gage with finality after pushing a titanium band on his finger.

Gage Silvestro, my husband, kisses me with unconcealed passion.

Our storybook ending is real but we’re not *really* at the end.

No, it’s never the end.

It’s just what comes next.

Gage had offered to take me anywhere, but I couldn’t think of a place I’d like to travel to. For our honeymoon, we rent the penthouse suite across the hall from where Conner lives at the Palace Hotel. On our wedding night we enjoy each other for hours and then Gage wraps me securely in his arms while the lights of Em City twinkle inside a canopy of darkness.

We have found a house to move into. Right in our old neighborhood, close enough to see Charlotte off to school every day and also visit with Cecile.

I suppose it will be home in the way most people think about home.

But I’ve been looking for home my whole life and as I drift toward sleep in the arms of my husband, I have a different idea about what the word means now.

Wherever he is...

This is home.

BRAVE

(WICKED WEST REJECTS)

It began as a DARE between two lifelong enemies...

Micah Lyonne is the worst man I know.

As children, we were constantly thrown together by our
powerful parents.

And we always despised each other.

He was supposed to be the heir to a billion dollar empire.
Instead, he lives in the shadows and chooses a life filled with
violence.

Meanwhile, I'm the mayor's ambitious daughter with a long
list of responsibilities.

Micah sneers at everything I stand for.

And I know better than to dance with danger.

But when the inked, volatile Micah comes to my rescue one
night, I'm forced to trust him.

It's a night when I let my guard down.

It's a night when I reach for him in a way that will change me
forever.

It's a night when I understand what it means to crave a man
who is the opposite of the safe future I assumed I wanted.

The two of us make no sense together.

We won't let that stop us.

He's all I want and he's decided that I'm his.

Together, we turn all the rules upside down and set the world
afire.

Until someone decides to make us pay...

Prologue

TESS

20 Years Ago...

The woman who whispers to her friend in the hallway doesn't know I'm listening.

She says what happened to Ethan Lyonne is something that should only happen to people who live in the city and never to someone who comes from West Emerald.

All my father told me was that Micah's dad had been killed by bad men and I shouldn't ask people any questions today. I wish something like that would never happen to anyone, whether they live here or in the city.

I'm the only one at the funeral who wears yellow.

I do have a black dress and I was wearing it this morning. But after I dropped my toast jelly side down in my lap at breakfast, my father shook his head and said I was 'disappointing'.

I wanted to crawl under my chair.

He made me leave the table and change to my yellow Easter dress. He said I'd better be careful and not get it dirty.

I've been careful. I haven't gotten my dress dirty.

“I beg your pardon.” By accident I’ve bumped into some legs in a black skirt.

The owner of the legs peers down at me. She smiles. I know who she is. One of the sisters of the dead man’s wife. “What a little princess you are.”

I never know how to answer when adults say things like that. I repeat the words my father told me to use. “I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

She’s already forgotten me. She drinks red liquid from a glass that looks like a small bowl, tipping her head all the way back to swallow great mouthfuls.

I don’t ask her where my father is. I can find him myself.

My broken shoe buckle flaps against my foot as I keep moving through the crowd of people. Micah’s house is huge, much bigger than my house just down the street.

“The Ballerini girl,” sighs a woman’s voice when I squeeze past another group of people. “Mayor’s daughter.”

“Yes.” Another woman makes a tsk-tsk sound. “And Stuart is stuck raising her all on his own.”

“Ever since Diana died.”

My cheeks burn. I move faster through the legs and the perfume smells in order to escape hearing whatever they say next.

People have always felt sorry for my father.

They feel sorry for me too.

I don’t remember my mother. Sometimes I think maybe I do but my father says this is impossible because I was only a

baby when she died in a pool accident and babies remember nothing.

The room up ahead is bright and sunny. There are not as many people in here and I don't need to push my way through in order to see the long table where Matilda sits. Sometimes I'm jealous of Micah because he gets to have a beautiful mother who probably tucks him in at night and fixes him his favorite snacks.

Matilda is still beautiful today even though it's a very bad day. Ethan Lyonne was her husband and now he's buried at the West Emerald Cemetery. He won't be far from where my mother lies beneath a statue of a crying angel.

Once a month my father brings me there to leave flowers for the angel. On those days I know I'll have bad dreams later. The dreams are all the same. I can hear the angel crying. When she screams, as she always does in the end, I wake up and yell for my father.

At least I used to.

The last time I did this in the middle of the night he was mad, standing in the dark doorway of my room in his flannel pajama pants. "You're a big girl now, Tess. Have some self-control or you'll never accomplish anything."

Then he shut off my light and went back to his room.

I still have those bad dreams. I just don't cry for him anymore when I do.

Just like I didn't cry the day I tripped in the school parking lot and landed on a piece of broken glass. The glass went right into my knee and there was a lot of blood and teachers came running. I had to get six stitches at the hospital.

But I didn't cry.

Nope, I had self-control. And my father didn't get mad. He watched the doctor sew the stitches and said I should pay more attention to things like broken glass. I'll do that.

Matilda cried at the funeral and her sisters had to hold her up. She's not crying now while she sits at her table. She nods to people and accepts their kisses on her cheek when they come to her one by one. I still need to say the 'Sorry for your loss' words to her but I feel like I should fix my shoe first and I can't fix my shoe until I find my father.

To get to the door, I need to walk right past the woman who sits alone in the corner of the room. She wears sunglasses and I've never seen her without them. Everyone says her eyes are broken and horrible. Her name is Cecile and she's Matilda's mother. Even though she can't see behind those dark glasses I would swear she's looking right at me. People try to talk to her but she tells them to go away.

Then I see him, my father. He's outside on the patio talking to Uncle Josh and a couple of other men. No one pays any attention to me when I walk through the open door to the patio.

My father's voice is always the loudest in any crowd. "Of course there was no open casket, given the circumstances."

"No shit, the guy's in fucking pieces."

"Ethan was alive the whole time he was being carved up."

"Never did find his hands, poor bastard."

"You get dirty when you lie down with dogs. What the hell was he up to?"

Uncle Josh speaks for the first time and he sounds angry. "Quit spreading rumors. Ethan just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

“Wrong place my ass. It was personal as shit, what was done to him. Had to be a reason.”

“The kid was hiding under a bed. Heard everything. He’ll never be right after this.”

Uncle Josh looks at his shoes and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “Fuck.”

This is terrible to hear. If I could erase these words from my ears then I would.

But now I think of the shiny wooden casket at the cemetery and how it’s filled with ‘fucking pieces’ that used to be a dad who played catch with his son on the front lawn and worked with my father. He watched football games at our house. He twisted balloons into animal shapes at neighborhood parties.

And I put my hand over my mouth because all of a sudden I feel like I did the time I had the flu and couldn’t get out of bed for five days.

“Hey there, Tessie Belle.” Uncle Josh crouches down in front of me.

He’s dressed in a suit today instead of his police uniform. He’s a lot younger than my father and he’s always making me laugh and bringing me presents. Last year he was supposed to marry a girl named Avery but then he said he didn’t want to marry her after all. Avery wanted to move far away and Uncle Josh says he’s never leaving us. I’m glad.

I take my hand away from my mouth and hope I don’t throw up on Uncle Josh’s suit. I’m about to tell him about my shoe because I know he’ll fix it for me but then my father says my name.

“Tess.” He’s using his angry voice. “Why haven’t you gone to find the boys like I told you to?”

Because the boys don’t like me and I don’t like them.

Uncle Josh frowns and looks up at my father. “Why don’t I take her home, Stu? She seems upset.”

My father sighs and bends down to my level. He’s getting mad. “Do you *really* need to go home?”

There’s only one right answer and I give it. “No, Daddy. I’ll stay.”

He nods and even smiles a little. “Yes, you will. Remember who you are. A Ballerini. Act accordingly.” He points. “A few minutes ago I saw the boys run back there by the trees. You go and visit with Micah. You need to pay your respects to your friend.”

“All right.”

Even if Micah Lyonne is *not* my friend.

“The kid was hiding under a bed. Heard everything.”

I really don’t want this to be true. Maybe it isn’t.

My father stands and pats me once on the head. That means I’m supposed to leave and I do. But I’m happy that he’s not angry at me. I’m happy that I still have a dad who is alive.

Last night I had a nightmare that my own father was dead instead of Ethan Lyonne. That dream was much worse than when I dream of the screaming angel. For a long time I stared at the dark ceiling in my bedroom with my sunshine-colored quilt pulled up to my chin and felt like I couldn’t breathe.

I’ll never tell anyone. If I say the words out loud then they might come true. Nothing in the world scares me more than

the thought of my father being with my mother in the ground beneath the stone angel.

My shoe is still broken so I have to move slowly, dragging my foot through the grass as I walk all the way around the pool, across the open lawn. But if I wasn't looking down at my broken shoe then I might have missed the yellow head of a dandelion poking up out of the thick grass.

Anyone who says dandelions aren't a flower is wrong. I like how they grow where they're not supposed to grow. I also like how they don't really die and instead just turn into feathery wishes that get blown into the wind.

The stem breaks off in my hand and I feel bad. This dandelion will just have to come home with me. I'll take care of it. I'll put it in a glass of water on the white table next to my bed.

I'm careful as I carry my flower toward the thick fruit trees and bright rosebushes.

This is where I find them, all three of them.

They are cousins. Micah is the only who lives on my street but it seems like Gage and Conner are here every day.

My father knows all of their parents. Parents who are friends always think their kids should be friends too. I'm forever being told to go 'play with the boys'. I have to invite them to my birthday parties and I'm forced to go to theirs.

I've tried really hard to like them but I don't think they want to be liked. They are rough and dirty and loud and they even curse. The only one who is a little bit nice is Conner and even he isn't all that nice.

Every day I wish really hard for a girl to move in around here. Then maybe I won't be stuck with nothing but awful

boys all the time.

They are doing something to the rosebushes. When I get closer I see that it's really just Micah who is doing something. His two cousins stand back and watch.

One by one, Micah is ripping the flowers from his mother's beautiful rosebushes. But Micah doesn't just take the flowers off. He tears them apart and throws the torn petals on the ground.

I hate what he's doing. The roses did nothing to him and pretty things shouldn't be destroyed for no good reason.

He crushes another flower.

I cry out. "Don't!"

Conner and Gage turn their heads.

Micah kills another rose like he didn't even hear me.

"Micah, you need to stop."

He doesn't stop.

"Go away." Gage now has his arms crossed. He always means what he says. "Just go the hell away, Tess. You're always bossing people around. That's why you have no friends."

I don't even look at Gage. I don't want him to know that he's hurt my feelings because he'll just say something worse.

Micah destroys more flowers.

Conner keeps watching and says nothing.

Sometimes I want to cry when the boys get mean like this and sometimes I do cry. But I won't cry right now.

I swallow hard and remember what I'm supposed to say. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Micah."

Micah finally stops what he's doing. There's a huge rose in his hand but he hasn't ripped it up yet.

Slowly, he turns his head.

When our class went to the Emerald City Zoo last year on a field trip, one of the big lions was watching us all, standing on the other side of a tall fence behind a wide ditch. It made me nervous, the way his unblinking yellow eyes kept staring at me. He looked like he wanted to get over to our side really badly and was angry that he couldn't.

Micah's eyes are blue, not yellow, but he still reminds me of that lion.

And not in a good way.

He stares at me as he rips the rose apart but he doesn't throw away the crushed petals.

"He'll never be right after this."

I really shouldn't have yelled at him. Micah must feel the same way I feel when I wake up from nightmares about the screaming angel.

Maybe he feels even worse.

Anyway, Micah and I are alike now. We both have dead parents.

And suddenly I want to cry for a different reason. Not just because the boys are being mean but because I really am sorry for Micah.

He's still standing there with the crushed rose petals and his angry lion eyes. I give him the only thing I have to give

him. Micah moves closer and looks down at the little dandelion in my hand.

Then he opens his own hand that holds the ruined rose petals and smashes them hard into my chest. He rubs his palm to make sure my dress gets stained by the rose petal juice.

I don't even have time to pull my hand back before he rips the dandelion out of my fist, tears the flower in two and throws the pieces at me.

My face gets hot and my throat feels funny. I look down and see the ugly red streaks on my dress.

I feel the tears coming. I'm losing self-control.

"Micah, you are terrible."

I can't stop myself from saying this.

Anyway, he is terrible.

Being sad doesn't make it all right to be mean.

Micah doesn't care. He pushes me out of the way and starts walking across the grass. He still hasn't said a word.

Gage gives me a dirty look before he chases after Micah. "Just leave us alone, Tess. We don't like you."

Conner seems like he might want to say something to me but he doesn't. He just looks down and follows his cousins, leaving me all alone with broken flowers and a stained dress.

My father will be furious. Even if I tell him what the boys did he won't listen.

We are Ballerinis. That's what he'll say.

We are Ballerinis and we don't let anyone get the best of us.

We have self-control. No one can make us cry.

From here I can't see my father or Uncle Josh. I hope that means they can't see me either.

A tear trickles down my cheek and I rub it away. Tears always show up when they aren't wanted. I have to make sure they are gone before I go back out there or my father will see.

With my shoe buckle still broken, I leave the rosebushes and walk slowly through Matilda's lemon grove. There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of small green lemons growing on the leafy branches.

The more I keep taking deep breaths the more I'm sure my tears are leaving.

But the dark-haired woman sitting on a gray bench in the middle of the lemon grove is crying all kinds of tears. She moans as she cries and rocks back and forth like she's got a bad stomach ache. I've seen her before but I can't remember her name. She must be part of Matilda's family.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," I tell her.

She's so surprised to see me that she stops crying and stares. "Oh. You're Stuart's daughter."

"I'm Contessa Arabella Ballerini."

She wipes tears from her cheeks. "Your father calls you Tessie Belle."

Only when he's happy. Most of the time he's not happy.

"My father usually calls me Tess like everyone else."

"Well then, hello Tess. I'm Olivia. How old are you now?"

"I'm six. You knew Micah's dad?"

I forgot I wasn't supposed to ask any questions today.

Olivia's pretty face gets all scrunched up and she rubs her hands on her legs. "Yes, I've always known Ethan." Her voice sounds funny.

"I'm very sorry for your loss." I've said that already. I hope it doesn't hurt to say it again.

Olivia looks me over with a frown. "What happened to you? Did you fall?"

"No."

She pats the bench. "Come here and I'll fix your shoe."

Olivia knows my father and she seems nice so I sit on the bench beside her.

She takes my foot in her hand and pulls on the shoe strap. "The tooth of the buckle is broken but it should hold for now."

She releases my foot and gives me a smile. She's not as pretty as Matilda but she's still pretty. "Us motherless girls have to stick together, don't we?"

Olivia is not really a girl. She's a grown up.

"Yes." I'm trying not to be rude.

She points to my dress. "Tell your father to soak that in cold water before the stain sets."

"Okay." I think of Micah smearing the rose petals on my dress. My chest feels tight. "Boys are terrible."

I didn't mean to say that out loud to Olivia.

Olivia thinks about this. "Terrible, yes. They can be." She smiles again, this time not at me but at the lemon trees. "But we can be so much worse."

Suddenly, I don't want to sit here with her anymore. I hop down off the bench.

“Thank you for fixing my shoe.”

“You're welcome, Tess. And watch out for those terrible boys.”

I'm glad she doesn't follow me out of the lemon grove. I'm not sure why I don't like her but I don't.

Once I'm out of the lemon grove I can see my father again. He stands in a group of people and I can't hear what he's saying but those people listen while he talks.

Until Matilda and her sisters come running out of the house. They are all angry. They shout the names of their sons and now I see why.

Micah, Conner and Gage are in the pool. They are wearing their clothes and swimming around during Micah's father's funeral.

Conner's mother hauls him out of the pool first.

Gage splashes his own mother, then swims to the other side, climbs out and shows everyone his middle finger.

But Micah won't get out of the water, even though Matilda is making a big fuss and crying again. She bends down and grabs his arm. Micah yanks his arm away and Matilda shrieks as she falls right into the pool, dress and all.

No one is listening to my father now. Everyone watches the pool. Some people make shocked noises. Others shake their heads and whisper to each other.

Matilda's two sisters help her out of the water.

Conner is laughing like nothing has ever been as funny as his aunt falling in the pool. Gage stands on the other side of the concrete deck with his arms crossed. Micah goes underwater and pops up again near the diving board.

Now my father has decided to help. He jogs to the edge of the pool and holds out his hand to Micah, who pulls himself up on the ladder and flings water on my father's black suit.

"MICAH!" Matilda is dripping wet.

Her son doesn't listen. He just starts walking in his wet clothes. He didn't even take off his shoes.

I get nervous when I realize he's walking right to me.

Micah gets so close that water from his soaked shirt brushes against my arm. He gives no sign that he can even see me standing here.

Seconds later, Conner and Gage follow their cousin. They pay no attention to me either.

Why would they?

We aren't friends and never will be.

The three of them break into a run and head for the gate. They won't get far. Adults are already running after them. The boys are just acting this way because they like to make people mad.

"Watch out for those terrible boys."

Adults, including my father and Uncle Josh, chase the boys through Matilda's back gate while shouting their names.

No matter what, Micah Lyonne will never see me cry again.

None of them will.

Part I

Once Upon A Time...

Two Lifelong Enemies

Called A VERY

Dirty Truce

1. Tess

The east side has always been a mystery. Until tonight it hadn't occurred to me that I've never actually been to this part of Emerald City before.

Now I think this has been an oversight on my part. There are bound to be plenty of votes up for grabs here.

The calculation is one I'm ashamed of. I'm equally ashamed it hasn't crossed my mind before.

However, I can be sure it's crossed the mind of the man at my side. His hand stays on my lower back as he guides me through this dim cave, pretending he belongs here.

He's faking it. He doesn't belong any more than I do. But this was his idea, dodging the popular downtown night spots in favor of someplace obscure, where we won't be seen.

"Let's try something new," he said earlier after collecting me in his silver Ferrari. He even touched my knee with confidence he has no right to have. "Where we can be alone and get to know each other."

We're not alone here, not at all. We also won't run into anyone we know.

I don't care that we aren't alone because I have no special interest in getting to know Pierce Carrington.

Carrington is a last name that turns heads in Em City. His father owns the Cyclones and pro football is huge around here. Pierce left his job in the team's head office to manage his older brother's campaign. Larson Carrington is running for mayor of Emerald City this year.

He's running against my father.

This bar, tucked away in a single story brick commercial strip on an east side street I've never heard of, attracts all sorts on a Saturday night. There are old men who drink quietly alone and young men who arrogantly demand attention. There are women too, not as many. Some command the pool tables in the rear and others gyrate to a heavy bass thud. We collect a few amused glances on our way to the circular bar in the middle of the oddly shaped room.

I'm aware that I fool no one.

I look like what I am; a cloistered rich girl in search of a thrill. I won't be the first or the last.

Pierce extends his hand, like he means to help me hop up on the high barstool. The chunky silver ring he wears is courtesy of the Cyclones' Super Bowl win a few years back. I suppose the owners receive rings too but it strikes me as odd, the wearing of a trophy not personally earned.

Ignoring his outstretched hand, I manage to sit on the barstool with no assistance. I'm short, not helpless.

I hail the bartender. "Jack and Coke, please."

Pierce nods to the man. "Same."

The bartender wears an eyepatch and a thick gold cross. A streak of white runs in a lightning zigzag through his black hair. He moves with hypnotic speed, pouring our drinks within seconds and sliding them across the table.

I drop a fifty dollar bill before Pierce can make a move. “Thanks. No change.”

“I’ll get the next round.” Pierce inches his stool closer, close enough for our shoulders to touch. He’s polished and assured and thirteen years my senior with two former wives notched into his belt. He radiates the belief that he’s obscenely good looking and I suppose many people would agree. He’s tall and square-jawed and clearly finds time to use the gym.

But he’s here for a reason. He thinks I’m young enough, silly enough, to be bought with flattery and attention while he mines for useful information.

I doubt it’s occurred to him that I might be interested in doing the same.

My father blindsided me with this campaign. After many years as the mayor of affluent West Emerald, his original plan had been to run for a Congressional seat.

Life had other ideas.

Last year, a horrific family scandal turned us into national tabloid fodder. My monstrous stepmother dragged our last name through the sewer even after her death. The decision was made to suspend the Congressional campaign.

But out of tragedy comes opportunity.

Those are not my words. My father repeats them often.

Stuart Ballerini had become a person of interest, a celebrity of sorts. A devoted father who had raised his little

daughter alone following the death of his first wife and was then deceived by a despicable woman.

What a story.

After all, evil men are a dime a dozen.

But evil women? They capture everyone's imagination.

I wasn't there the summer afternoon my stepmother drank a bottle of acid rather than pay for her crimes. But I was certainly around to witness the fallout.

Meanwhile, the Emerald City mayor, old and frail, had decided not to run for re-election.

Out of tragedy comes opportunity.

Stuart Ballerini wants to be the leader of Emerald City, which has suffered a long string of indifferent politicians and deserves better. My father has grand plans to make the troubled city whole and I believe that he can.

Pundits and journalists have been baffled by his choice to appoint me as his campaign manager. Why not hire a seasoned professional with decades of experience and multiple successes? Not a girl who has never scored with a campaign of this magnitude and could easily pass for a sorority coed.

But Stuart Ballerini's mind was made up.

"They'll underestimate you, Tess. That will work in our favor."

He thinks he can ride the wave of public sympathy and goodwill to become king of the city. At his side will be his youthful daughter and his handsome brother, the police chief of West Emerald.

If Uncle Josh has any misgivings about the journey then he never shares them. He is devoted to his older brother after their own parents died young and the Ballerini brothers are a force to be reckoned with.

Two men seated on stools across the bar collapse into braying laughter. One wears a distressed leather cut, the other a dirty green tee that hardly covers his belly. They both look grimy, like some time might have passed since their last shower.

Snob. My own conscience sneers at me.

I try not to be. But growing up in prosperous West Emerald has influenced my view of the world, for better or worse.

Pierce taps my arm, letting his fingertip linger on my skin. “How long have you worked for your father?”

I’ve never done anything else but work for my father. I was still in middle school when I began stuffing ad mailers at the dining room table for my father’s real estate office.

I choose a simpler answer. “Since college.”

“Unusual for a young girl to be managing a campaign this important.” He flashes a set of perfect teeth, teasing as he says this.

The comment makes me want to kick his chair over. There’s too much arrogance in his oily grin.

I don’t smile back at him. “There’s no one better for the job than me.”

I doubt this is true. I am young, lacking the double digit years of experience that my competitors have. But if men like Pierce Carrington can be cocky then so can I.

His smile just widens. “No wonder Stuart considers you his primary asset.”

Another annoying comment. I won't bother to answer this one. I'd rather sip my drink and stew over how to turn the conversation in a more useful direction.

But the instant I raise the glass to my lips there's a commotion at the entrance and I pause.

Half a dozen men pour through the door. They all look different but they are cut from the same cloth. Loud and muscled and tattooed, casual in jeans and tees, some also sporting bruises that appear fresh.

The tallest and most striking among them doesn't smile or laugh while his buddies make a racket as they claim two tables in the corner. This man casts a cold gaze over the crowd, assessing and not lingering.

Pierce notices that my attention has drifted. “See someone you know?” He wheezes out a laugh at the end. To him, the idea that I might have an acquaintance around here is hilarious.

I leave his question alone for now and set my glass down. The man I was watching finishes his quick skim of the bar and joins his friends, who are already demanding a round of shots from the besieged waitress. He is handed a shot glass and downs it with no fanfare like it was water, unaware that I'm watching him.

How could I possibly summarize Micah Lyonne?

My childhood neighbor. My childhood nemesis.

A rowdy boy who witnessed his own father's brutal murder and then turned uncontrollable.

Once I called him a human volcano.

Accurate then. Accurate now.

Still, I would feel sorry for him if he wasn't such an asshole.

As a teenager, Micah was imprisoned for a crime he didn't even commit. He was charged as an adult and sent to an adult prison.

This, of course, only made him worse.

Scorning the wealthy world he was born to, he now chooses the crime-filled alleys on the east side where he fits right in. Just another dangerous man among countless dangerous men.

Micah doesn't need to stay here. Micah could have a corner office in his mother's downtown building with an executive title to match. He was supposed to be the heir to a multi-billion dollar empire.

But no, Micah would rather scrape together a ferocious living with his fists.

We have a long history, an unshakable and unwanted connection. Our families are intertwined and so are our lives.

Especially now, thanks to Olivia.

More than a year has passed since her death and still she shadows me every day. Even the echo of her name in my head chases away any hint of a good mood.

My stepmother's obsession with Micah's dead father eventually turned to Micah himself. She did hideous things that I can't think about without getting sick.

Olivia was a lesson. A bitter one. There's no way to guess what some people are capable of until they show you.

All things considered, Micah and I should have made our peace with each other. My best friend is part of his family. Dani loves him like a brother. Yet despite our list of joint tragedies, Micah and I can hardly be in the same room for twenty seconds without exchanging a sharp comment or an eye roll.

Old habits never die, I guess.

Pierce can't seem to sit still. He fidgets on the stool and keeps moving closer than I'd like him to be. I wind up edging away until my nose is practically pressed into the hair of the woman beside me.

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I never answered Pierce's question. "No, I don't see anyone I know."

Micah's back is now to me. He must have come here on a mission to get drunk quickly. He swallows another shot.

"Hey." Pierce's hand lands on my lower back.

Instantly, I wish he'd remove it.

"I've got to make a quick call." His breath is sour. "You'll be all right here for a minute. Just sip your drink and avoid eye contact."

I wiggle away from his hand. "Think I can manage to behave in public without instructions."

He grins. His face is too close. "Be right back."

With every passing minute I'm feeling less enthusiastic about this impulsive night out. Pierce caught me by surprise after a long day at campaign headquarters when he asked me

to come for drinks. We've had plenty of conversations, never anything social.

I'm not at all attracted to Pierce. He strikes me as vain and calculating. Standard political qualities. I'd hesitate to believe a word out of his mouth. It feels like a silly whim now, the idea that I might learn something of value on this outing.

But maybe my reasons are thornier.

I've been putting in crazy hours and shouldering a ton of stress. Dani is always urging me to branch out and live a little. My best friend is right when she worries that I've been missing out on all the fun.

I have.

My circle of real friends is very small. I don't date. Sex is a distant and not particularly compelling memory.

Sadly, an invitation from even the likes of Pierce Carrington is the most exciting thing to come my way in a while.

What a depressing thought.

I might as well mute it with a drink. And then maybe I'll have another.

But before I can even pick up the glass a hand slams down over the rim. A woman's hand, with chipped neon pink nail polish and a paper cut across the middle knuckle.

"Don't," the hand's owner says.

I look up to find troubled hazel eyes.

The woman's curly black hair frames a round, flushed face. "That guy you're with? My friend saw him drop something in your drink."

The friend in question cranes her neck around the other woman's shoulder. "You were distracted and he thought he was being sneaky. Fucking bastard."

A fucking bastard indeed.

I have no doubt they are telling the truth.

"Thank you. I'll deal with him."

The woman who saved me sighs and slides off her barstool. "Be careful, hon. Men like that don't take kindly to being cornered."

Oh, he'll be cornered all right.

"Thanks again."

She throws one final curious glance over her shoulder. I smile at her to show that I'm grateful but inside I'm raging. Mostly at myself.

How much of an absolute idiot could I possibly be?

Pierce Carrington should never have had the opportunity to spike my drink. I shouldn't be here with him. I shouldn't even be on this side of the city.

My father would pitch a fit if he knew. He's up north, attending a retreat with some of his biggest campaign contributors. When I texted him earlier I let him think I'd be out with Dani tonight.

Technically, I'm a grown woman with no obligation to tell my father where I am and what I'm doing. We've always been close but the Olivia disaster made our tiny family even smaller. I try not to chafe at my father's overprotective nature. I'm his only child and he puts a lot of trust in me. I won't let him down.

The move back home to the West Emerald house I grew up in was just supposed to be temporary. Then he launched this campaign and everything kind of snowballed. I think about moving out. I think about it a lot. Some days living in that house feels like a slow suffocation.

But independence will have to wait until after the election. I can't take off when he needs me. I'll just bite my tongue for now.

Still, I feel like crawling under a barstool when I picture the look on his face if he caught wind of the mess I've gotten myself into.

A mess that's still not over.

The lighting in the bar is horrible and the Friday night crowd keeps growing thicker. The top of Micah's head is visible in the far corner and thanks to the Pierce situation I'm now extra grateful Micah hasn't noticed me. It's never a good idea to give Micah Lyonne something to hold over my head.

While scanning the room, I catch sight of Pierce, who sticks out like a sore thumb. Just like me. Before we walked in here, Pierce shelled out five hundred dollars to a guy on the street to watch his car, promising another five hundred if it was undamaged when we returned.

He's now speaking to someone, a man I've never seen before. A vine of anxiety curls through my stomach.

I ignore it.

There's no reason to be afraid. I haven't taken a sip of the tainted drink and I'm surrounded by people. If anyone should be fearful it's Pierce Carrington.

Perhaps he can feel the daggers firing from my eyes. He stiffens and turns his head. Our eyes meet and I really don't

like what I find in his. He's quick to cover the devious spark with a smile. After a quick word he leaves his companion, who retreats into the depths of the bar like a rat.

Before Pierce finds his way back here I swiftly swap our drinks. He already drank about a third of his while mine was full.

Can't wait to see if he notices.

"Sorry I was gone so long." He flashes that cocky grin and takes his seat.

I've already placed my phone on the bar. Now I discreetly press a button.

Pierce thinks he's being sly when he checks out my glass. He smirks when he sees it's no longer full. He doesn't notice that his is.

"Cheers." I raise the glass. "Let's toast to a clean, well fought campaign season."

"I'll drink to that." Pierce takes a long pull at his drink and watches me tilt the glass to my lips.

Then I set it down without swallowing any.

A wrinkle etches into his forehead.

I tap my fingers on the sticky bar top. "By the way, what exactly was your plan?"

He lifts a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Pardon?"

"Your plan, dipshit. Are you just a regulation pervert or did you think you were going to get some footage to use against my father?"

He flinches, ever so slightly. But still comes up with a smooth denial. "I don't know what that's supposed to mean."

“It means you just drank whatever garbage you tried to feed to me.”

That sure makes his eyes flare.

He looks at ‘his’ drink.

Looks back at me.

A weird sound squeaks out of his throat.

“Pierce, you look like you might be feeling sick. Or it just a wave of dizziness? Sorry, but I can’t relate. I’ve never been drugged before.”

As his jaw goes slack I feel a wave of grim victory. Until I look at my phone.

Shit.

Epic fail. This conversation has not been recorded.

But there’s no need to enlighten him. Let him think I’m holding all the cards.

Sliding my phone into my palm, I face the scumbag who has recovered from his initial shock. His face now contorts with fury. I’m glad I’m not alone in a room with him.

His eyes dart back and forth. Beads of sweat pop out on his brow. “What the fuck did you do?”

I raise my chin and stare him down. “Nothing as bad as what you were going to do. Who was that man you were talking to? It’s doubtful you have any friends here. He must have a role in tonight’s mission.”

His smile is tight and lethal. “You’ve lost your mind, Tess. Perhaps the influence of your dear departed stepmother shoved you over the edge. Or maybe it’s closer to the bloodline. I hear your own mother wasn’t exactly of sound mind either.”

I'm used to dodging arrows on the Olivia front but I'm caught off guard by the remark about my mother. I have no memory of her. She drowned in a friend's backyard pool when I was an infant.

Keeping my emotions in check is an enduring skill, acquired at a young age. My father's old lessons echo in my head.

"Self-control, Tessie Belle. Never let them see what gets to you. It's like handing over a loaded weapon to the enemy."

"I have a suggestion. Let's allow the court of public opinion to decide who the villain is. You tell your side of the story. I'll tell mine."

The sweat on his forehead glistens. He covers his discomfort with the same smile he uses for each of his fake moods.

"You're out of your depth, kid. Your father counts on the pity factor and uses you to get it."

I lean in closer to make my point. "You don't scare me, Pierce. But I'm pretty sure right now I'm scaring you."

That hits a nerve. Or maybe he's starting to panic as some of the drug's effects tickle his brain.

He manages to snarl and whine at the same time. "Find your own way home, you cold blooded little bitch."

Then he tips right off his seat, stumbling as he makes a beeline for the door without looking back. I guess I'll never know what kind of depraved conclusion he had in mind for tonight.

Something tells me it's better if I never find out.

Pierce Carrington won't dare blast me to the press. It's inevitable that I'll see him again but I would bet my car that he'll pretend as if tonight never happened.

Speaking of cars, mine is miles away in a downtown parking garage. Now I'll have to call for a ride, which I always hate doing. There are areas in this part of the city where drivers don't like to go. I might have to do some searching to find someone willing to even show up.

Meanwhile, the bartender has been within earshot this entire time. His face shows nothing but indifference and he sweeps Pierce's glass away. Maybe that struggle was tame compared to what he usually sees and hears around here.

The thought makes me uneasy. I had assumed that being in a place packed with people meant relative safety. Now I wonder if that's true, if anyone in the room would have intervened if Pierce had lashed out violently.

In any case, I'd really like to get the hell out of here. Preferably before I'm spotted by Micah or anyone else who might recognize the daughter of Stuart Ballerini.

Keeping my eye on Micah's party, I slink around the bar toward the restrooms in the back. No one pays me the slightest attention, which is a relief. I'll just hide out in there for a little while.

Uncle Josh would drop everything and drive out to rescue me for sure but I'd rather not hear a lecture. Plus, it might cause a stir if the West Emerald police chief showed up here. A stir is exactly what I'm trying to avoid.

My bladder demands immediate attention but there's a short line to use one of the two toilet stalls. This bar must be a black hole for internet access because I'm having trouble

getting any of the ride apps to work. I'll deal with that in a minute. If necessary, I'll find a back door and step outside for better reach.

A laughing blonde crashes into me while I'm at the sink.

"Sorry," she slurs and pumps the soap dispenser.

"No worries." I turn to the hand dryer. It wheezes out puffs of air.

When I turn back, the drunk blonde is gone.

My purse is right where I left it. But immediately I realize it's too light. Peering inside, I make the unpleasant discovery that my wallet and my phone are missing.

A costly error in judgement, setting it down on the sink counter for a handful of seconds. It was completely within reach and yet someone managed to dive in there and snatch the most valuable contents, assuming it would take me a little while to notice. At least my keys are secure in a zippered side pocket but that feels like a small comfort right now.

Running out of the bathroom in a panic does no good. All I do is crash right into a different woman. Whatever fruity red concoction she was drinking splashes out of her glass and all over the front of my dress, which is a light grey color that will undoubtedly show the stain.

"What the hell?" She's clearly pissed.

"Sorry." I can't even offer to buy her a replacement because my goddamn purse was stolen.

As for the thief, I didn't get a real good look at her face. Honestly, I can't even be sure that she's the guilty party. I didn't see her do anything. And she's nowhere in sight.

Fuck.

The bartender doesn't seem like the friendly type who will let a stranded girl borrow his phone. The overhead speakers continue to blast music. It's not loud enough to drown out the eruption of bawdy laughter from the crew of rough men in the corner.

Micah is still among them. His back is to me but there's no mistaking his broad shoulders.

With a sigh and a gag order on my own pride, I make my way through the thick collection of people. Without my phone I feel weirdly vulnerable, disconnected from humanity, even though humanity is everywhere I look.

I have to reach up to tap Micah on the shoulder.

He whirls around so fast it's like he's expecting an ambush. The cold glint in his blue eyes is not comforting but it disappears when he looks down and sees it's just me.

"Hi." I cross my arms, partly to cover the brand new stain on my dress. The liquid has soaked through the thin fabric and I feel the sticky wetness on my skin. "Can I talk to you?"

There's a half empty beer in his hand and he takes the time to gulp back the other half before giving me his full attention.

Then he smirks.

I'm very familiar with the sight of Micah Lyonne smirking.

He's about to make me suffer.

"Check it out, boys. The princess from West Emerald finally decides to hop off her fucking throne and acknowledge the commoners." He's being loud on purpose. His buddies crane their necks and stare.

Plus, I now realize he knew I was here the whole time. Of course he did. Micah's sharp eyes miss nothing.

Two of his friends snicker with laughter.

Micah waits to see what I'll do.

I'm not interested in playing games with him. But I think I'll need a dose of humility if I want his help.

"Please."

God, I nearly choke on the word. I *hate* the fact that I need to tip my head back to see his face. My nose only reaches the middle of his chest.

At least his stupid smirk vanishes. He directs me to an empty spot against the wall and then bends his head to hear me speak. When I inhale I catch a heady mix of alcohol and spiced soap.

"Look, I'm sorry to interrupt your night."

He snorts out a laugh. "Yeah, it's the social occasion of the year. You scare your date off?"

"Fortunately."

He frowns. "What does that mean?"

I'd rather not get into the particulars. "Just didn't work out. Forget about him. I don't have my car and my wallet and phone were just stolen in the restroom. So if I could use your phone to call for a ride I'd really appreciate it."

His face is very close. He's cleanshaven for once and the light brown hair that often flops down over his eyes has been cropped since the last time I saw him.

Micah is still frowning. "What the hell are you doing all the way down here anyway?"

“Having some new experiences. May I please borrow your phone now, Micah?”

“Planning to call your daddy?”

“No.” I lean against the wall. “He’s out of town on campaign business this weekend.”

“With no idea you’re slumming on the east side, I take it.”

“Correct.” I just wish he wouldn’t say it like that. “I’ll use one of the apps and find a car. I just need to get to the garage where I’m parked downtown.”

Micah rubs his jaw, thinking. “That’s a sketchy proposition. This isn’t West Emerald.”

“I know where I am. And I’ll be fine.”

“Thought you said your wallet was gone.”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that where you keep your money?”

Damn. Somehow I’d neglected to think this plan through. No cash, no cards, no phone.

“I’ll pay you back tomorrow,” I tell him. “If you spot me the funds.”

He exhales loudly and flattens his palm against the wall right over my head. “Fuck. I’ll drive you.”

“No way. You’ve been drinking like a fish.”

“Had three shots and two beers. I’m not drunk. But I probably shouldn’t get behind the wheel for a few hours.” He glances back at his friends and nods like he’s just made a deal with himself. “Come on. My place is only two blocks away. You can hang out there until my head is clear enough to drive you back.”

“Your place?” I know Micah lives around here but I’ve never given a second’s thought to what his apartment might look like.

He catches my tone and gets annoyed. “Did you think I was homeless?”

“No. Do we have to argue right now?”

“We’re not arguing. We’re leaving.”

When I hesitate, he jerks his head in the direction of his friends.

“Unless you’d rather get fed to the wolves. I could always do that instead.”

It’s impossible to tell if he’s serious. He might be.

Micah starts walking to the door and I follow him.

I don’t really have a better option.

2. Tess

How is it possible to know someone your entire life and yet not really know him at all?

Once we're outside the chaos of the bar it occurs to me that Micah and I have never actually been alone.

It's a shocking thought because we grew up on the same street. We went to school together. Micah has always been in my life. Yet when I sort through my memories I can't find any of us having a conversation that didn't turn into a fight.

As kids, Micah and his two cousins were obnoxious jerks who enjoyed going out of their way to humiliate and exclude me.

That was a long time ago. These days I'm friendly with Conner. Even Gage and I are on good terms now that he's married to Dani.

But Micah's a different story.

He and I just don't connect, never have.

Right now he matches my pace, positioning himself on the street side and staying close enough that there can be no doubt we're together. Sirens bleat somewhere nearby and then fade.

The lighting here is patchy. As we pass a beheaded streetlamp I glance up at the man at my side.

It's not too dark for me to notice the tension in his posture or see the way he constantly surveys his surroundings. A trio of men huddled together across the street receive a harsh glare until we're out of their line of sight. A car rolls by only inches from the curb and Micah prods me closer to the strip of buildings on my right.

The next streetlight we pass is intact and I get a better look at his face. He's an intimidating man and his furious expression makes me glad he's on my side.

At least I think he is.

Sometimes I'm not a hundred percent sure of anything when it comes to Micah.

Years ago Dani said that Micah always looks like he wants to die fighting, like he's hunting for the challenge. It's no secret that he's never forgiven himself for surviving the violent attack that killed his father.

"The kid was hiding under a bed. Heard everything. He'll never be right after this."

Many times those words have come back to haunt me. The brutal details of Ethan Lyonne's murder are burned into the lore of our neighborhood.

"Your gym is around here, isn't it?" I ask him this because I don't like silence. And because I'm trying to redirect my thoughts. I doubt Micah would want anyone's pity, least of all mine.

He nods without looking at me. "Two blocks to the north."

"And you work there as well as train there?"

“Yup.”

I know he’s a Mixed Martial Arts fighter but I’m not really sure what that looks like. I’d have to guess it looks like men rolling around on a gym mat and kicking the hell out of each other.

“Dani says you always win.”

“Dani’s right. This is my building. Moved up to the fourth floor a couple of months ago. Hope you don’t mind stairs. There’s no elevator.”

Even in the dark I see that the brick box of a building would benefit from a facelift. A naked yellow bulb hangs above the door, which sits at the top of half a dozen chipped concrete steps. The windows of the bottom floor are protected by stark iron bars. Inside, a man is curled into a snoring ball at the base of the stairs and Micah motions for me to step right over him.

Micah takes the lead and keeps checking to make sure I’m right behind him. The stairwell is narrow and dark. After the first two flights I start feeling like I’m ascending a medieval tower. One with streaks of garbled graffiti on the walls and ringing with the shouts of a couple screaming ‘FUCK YOU!’ at one another.

Micah checks over his shoulder once again when we reach the fourth floor, like he doesn’t trust me not to run off. This is worlds away from the place we grew up.

The thing is, Micah has options. His family owns a colossal property development company. I know he has a chilly relationship with his mother but I can’t imagine Matilda would refuse to give him a job.

Dani is under the impression he stays here because he wants to forget where he comes from. I can't think of a better explanation.

"Home sweet home." He unlocks the door and shoves it open, waiting for me to walk through first.

Somehow I was expecting a mess but this is far from a disaster. The apartment is small, a studio, even smaller than the suite I shared with Dani back in college. But the queen sized bed is neatly made and aside from a couple of dishes in the sink, there's nothing out of order.

There isn't much room for furniture. The sofa is only a two seater. The dresser and nightstand are mismatched shades of dark wood. And the small bistro set just off the kitchen has two chairs but the table is tiny.

Micah spots an open sketchpad on the table and quickly snatches it up, closing the cover, an obvious signal that he has no desire to share the contents. He'd always been an extremely talented artist, even designing his own tattoos. I just assumed his art was something that had fallen to the wayside.

"Did you forget to wear a bib at dinner?" Micah gestures to my dress.

I'd forgotten about the stain. Now that I take stock of the damage I see a softball-sized red splotch that would look pretty gory if it was a few shades darker.

"Call it a casualty of my east side adventure. I just bought it too. You mind if I use your bathroom and try to rinse it out?"

"Go ahead." He moves to his dresser and then makes a shockingly chivalrous move. "Here, in case you want to change."

I catch the hooded sweatshirt he tosses to me. The words Emerald City Cyclones are emblazoned across the front. I feel a thud of dread in my belly as I'm reminded of Pierce Carrington.

But then I also remember this is the team Conner plays for, which would explain why Micah roots for them. I don't follow football much but I do know Conner's having a great season as the starting quarterback and the Cyclones have a shot at the playoffs.

Micah tucks his sketchpad under his arm and crosses the room. "The sweatshirt should be as long as a dress on you."

"Thanks."

He flips the latch on a narrow door and opens it. A cool breeze drifts in, bringing with it the sound of the street below. "And if you're thirsty, there's water and beer in the fridge. Take your pick."

Before I can thank him again, he vanishes through the door to the balcony, leaving me on my own.

Luckily, there are no nightmares awaiting in the bathroom either. Just a very surreal sense that I'm in a place that I never expected to be, which is standing in Micah Lyonne's bathroom in my bra and panties.

The dress might be a lost cause. I rinse it out in the sink as best I can and ring out the water before draping it across the shower rod. Micah was right about the sweatshirt. It reaches nearly to my knees.

My hair had been trapped in a bun but it's been coming apart ever since I left the bar. I pull out the claw clip and shake the dark waves loose before critically assessing my reflection.

My mother, an ethereal redhead, was beautiful. I don't look like her. She passed down her petite figure but otherwise I'm a dark eyed, dark haired testament to my Sicilian roots on the Ballerini side of the family.

I kick my heels off because I've been wearing them for about fourteen hours and my toes hurt. At some point I need to call my bank with an alert that my cards have been stolen but I'll wait until I get home. Last year when my credit card information was stolen online the bank had no issue with reversing the fraudulent charges.

My phone is a bigger problem. In waking hours it's rare for me to go twenty minutes without checking it for texts or monitoring political polls. I highly doubt some drunk blonde will be able to hack into the layers of security on my phone and I'm just too stressed out and irritated to deal with this shit right now. I'll get a new damn phone tomorrow.

Maybe I should be more anxious about tonight's drama but the constant grind of the grueling campaign has taken a toll. We're in the final six week stretch before the election and I feel like I'm hardly allowed to sleep.

My father doesn't know that I've been counting down the days until it's over. I need a break. And the more time I spend in the political sphere the more I think it's not for me.

Sometimes I feel like this job is eating me alive. There are so many days when I just want to escape.

My father doesn't know that either.

This has been a weird night. I decide to take Micah up on his offer of a beer. He didn't lie that the fridge is well stocked with beer and bottled water, but otherwise it's laughably bare

except for a brick of cheddar cheese that may have been edible at some point but now resembles a science experiment.

The door to the balcony is still open, although when I get closer I realize the term ‘balcony’ is rather generous. It’s more like a fire escape with a narrow platform, hemmed in only by a rickety metal fence. Though it never gets truly cold in Em City, there’s a pleasant bite of autumn outside, a nice shift from the stifling tyranny of summer.

Micah’s folding chair takes up a good chunk of the space out here and he’s deep in concentration mode, his head bent as his pencil moves across a page in smooth arcs. Even with help from the harsh light of the neighboring motel’s Vacancy sign, this doesn’t appear to be ideal drawing conditions.

He’s so intent on his task that I have to clear my throat to get his attention. His head snaps up and I could swear he’s startled to see me. Which doesn’t make sense because he can’t possibly have forgotten that I’m here.

Then I notice how he straightens his back and his eyes scan my body more carefully.

No, he wasn’t surprised to see me. He was just surprised to see me like *this*. Hair down, barefoot, wearing his sweatshirt.

Speaking of shirts, he’s lost his since he stepped out here. I’ve seen Micah shirtless before so his kaleidoscope of tattoos is no shock. But here, late at night, alone in the dark, there’s a different feeling in the air.

I hold up the beer. “Can I trouble you for a bottle opener?”

He wordlessly reaches out and I hand him the cold beer. Micah swiftly pops the lid off with his teeth, spits out the cap and hands the bottle back.

I drop down on a metal fire escape step, careful to keep my knees together as Micah eyes me. He keeps watching while I take some hearty swallows of beer. The beer is cold going down but that will change once it settles in my stomach. I'm barely even a social drinker. Mostly I indulge in a few sips here and there because it's expected. But tonight I like the taste of the beer.

And I like the way Micah watches me drink it.

He hasn't resumed his sketching. I wonder what he's drawing. Then again, if he wanted me to know then he wouldn't have rushed to close the cover of his sketchbook earlier.

"So what was up with your big date?" he asks.

I don't want to talk about Pierce Carrington. "Not exactly a date. It was kind of a work thing."

"And then he ditched you at an east side bar?"

"Something like that." I roll the bottle between my palms. "He's a real asshole."

Micah lets out a low whistle. "Will wonders never cease. Never heard little Tess Ballerini curse before."

"Then you don't listen very well. I curse all the time."

"Not around me you don't."

"Fuck you, Micah. Is that better?"

"Slightly."

"Well, you've always been tough to please."

He snorts. "Did you ever try?"

It's not my imagination, this crackle of electricity between us.

A long moment of silence passes as we evaluate each other.

I'm the one to break it. "Can I ask you something?"

"As long as it's not about politics."

"Would you really have fed me to the wolves at the bar?"

He leans forward and I can't help but take stock of his broad shoulders, his swollen muscles.

Whatever I think of Micah Lyonne, there's no denying he's absurdly sexy.

He's also completely serious right now. "Tess, I would have throat punched anyone who fucking touched you."

The heat in my belly travels lower, buzzing between my legs. I couldn't stop it if I tried.

"Good thing no one tried to touch me then."

He's still leaning forward. "What are you really doing on this side of town?"

"Wasn't my idea. I guess fun has been in such short supply lately that I was willing to grab at low hanging fruit."

"Huh. I figured you were immune to fun."

I roll my eyes. "Of course I like to have fun. Why would you think otherwise?"

"Because you like your shit to be orderly."

"You don't know what I like or don't like."

"Does anyone?"

"I'm not a virgin if that's what you're implying."

He startles me with laughter. "Yeah, I know."

“It’s just...wait, you *know*? What do you think you know?”

Micah hesitates for a few seconds. “Berkhoff had a big mouth back at West Prep.”

Well.

That’s kind of a slap in the face.

Aaron Berkhoff was a longtime student government rival during our years at West Emerald Preparatory Academy. Still, I thought we were friends. Apparently I made a mistake in assuming he had more class than the average locker room braggart.

Micah takes note of my silence. He exhales. “Look, I never heard it from the fucker myself. Just rumors.”

I shrug like I don’t care. “It’s not as if we were in love. I would describe the experience as transactional.”

He just stares and says nothing.

I clear my throat. “That means we made an agreement-”

“You think I require a freaking vocabulary lesson?”

“No.” I feel properly scolded. Micah was always plenty intelligent. He doesn’t need me to explain the meaning of words.

He sits back in his chair. “What did the son of a bitch do, blackmail you?”

I shake my head. “Nothing like that. We just came to a mutual conclusion that it was time to shed our virginity.”

“Shed your virginity.” He looks at the ugly building next door and gives that some thought before turning his head to

focus on me again. “And Aaron Bullshitter Berkhoff was the only candidate you came up with?”

I cross my arms over my chest and try not to squirm while being pinned by his gaze. “At the time it seemed like the choice came with more pros than cons.”

“Sounds like you made a list.”

I don’t feel the need to elaborate. I sip my beer instead.

But Micah rocks with laughter again. “Shit, you actually made a fucking list.”

I did. I like lists. But I don’t have much patience for ridicule.

“It’s none of your goddamn business, Micah.”

He quits laughing. “You’re right. It’s not. And he’s a prick for shooting his mouth off. Wish I’d taught him a lesson.”

Micah’s temper was infamous when we were growing up. He never needed much of an excuse to lunge into a fight, always in a fever to prove his bravery. Chalk it up to a side effect of watching his father get butchered.

“Not necessary,” I tell him. “But I appreciate the thought.”

His eyes flicker down, over my bare legs. I could swear his breathing speeds up. I know mine does.

He plays with the pencil in his hand, twirling it between his strong fingers and then switching to the other hand. In school it was always a source of fascination how he had the ability to write equally well with both hands.

“If you’d come to me instead, I wouldn’t have told a soul.”

I wish he wouldn’t say that. Right now I’m feeling things I don’t really want to be feeling for him. “Do I need to remind

you we weren't exactly on friendly terms?"

From the time we were in preschool, Micah typically behaved as if I had a contagious disease. He's well aware of this.

He shrugs. "Just saying, I would have been glad to help you out. And it would have stayed a secret."

Strangely, I believe him. With Micah, what you see is what you get. He's no phony. Nor is he a liar or a gossip.

And I have to admit...the idea is interesting.

It's so interesting that I'm practically squirming. A jolt of arousal intensifies.

I hope mind reading isn't among his talents. "Anyway, Aaron shouldn't have been so conceited. He didn't know what he was doing."

Micah keeps twirling his pencil with ease, not even looking as he switches back and forth between his hands, something he just does as second nature. "No good, huh?"

"Not good at all. And I'll add that it was over extremely quickly."

"Hope things have improved for you since then."

"Not really."

Why did I say that?

WHY WHY WHY?

Because it's true. And because I like the way we're bantering.

Even more than that, I like the way he's looking at me.

Micah quits twirling his pencil. “Are you trying to say you don’t know how to come?”

I can’t believe I’m really doing this. I’m really discussing orgasms in the dark with Micah Lyonne.

“No, I can come just fine.”

There’s his smirk again. “Is anyone else ever in the room when you do?”

Ouch.

“Honestly, I find that it’s way more productive to just get myself there.”

I brace for laughter.

But Micah doesn’t laugh.

He also doesn’t move. “Believe me, I could get you there, Tess.” The current in his voice is heavy and hot.

“Are you joking?”

“Never been famous for my sense of humor.”

“You think we should have sex?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Because we’re not even friends.”

“True. Makes no difference.”

“Micah, you don’t like me.”

“So? You don’t like me either. No one would ever know. You said you were looking for new experiences. An east side fuck would definitely qualify.”

I shouldn’t be tempted but I am.

Micah is far from a stranger. He's always been part of my life. It's true that we've never gotten along but it's also true that he's brutally hot. And I don't doubt him when he says this would stay between us. Just a night of steamy fun to file away and never talk about again.

I've never had a night like that. Not ever.

And I know I've been missing something.

Something that I might be running out of time to find.

"You're overthinking things," he warns.

When he huffs out a laugh, I understand that he expects me to say no. He thinks of me as puritanical. Incurably neurotic. The kind of girl who religiously obeys the speed limit and will only screw beneath the covers in the dark. He's sure I'll either be offended or spit out a flat refusal.

Instead, I carefully set the beer down, get to my feet and promptly pull his bulky sweatshirt over my head.

The look on his face is fucking priceless.

I figured that Micah, who has seen and done a whole lot in life, would be impossible to shock. But the sight of me standing out here in nothing but my bra and panties leaves him speechless.

Though I know I'm far from ugly, I've rarely felt sexy. Cute and sexy are not the same. I've wished for bigger breasts, curvier hips. Tonight, however, I'm happy with my body, especially when Micah's expression shifts to basic, unmistakable lust.

I roll my bra strap down my shoulder. "Now who is overthinking things?"

Not him, that's for sure. Micah springs out of his chair and seizes me before I take another breath.

His mouth collides with mine and he scoops me up with one mighty arm. My knees open and catch on his hips. He demands my tongue and he gets it. His other hand locates my bra strap and pinches it open before twisting into my hair.

The feel of him is overwhelming. It's like mounting a wall of muscle. I like that he's a rough kisser, tasting of whiskey, tugging on my hair to tilt my head before sucking hard on my neck.

I'm dizzy as I hold onto his hulking shoulders, relishing the sting as he leaves his mark on my neck. Then he changes his mind and claims my mouth again. I don't even realize we're moving until the light changes. We're inside his apartment now.

Micah kicks the door closed and my back hits a hard surface. I want him so bad I'm ready to let this happen standing up right here against the wall. My bra is gone, my tongue is captive, and I feel the engorged length of his cock pressing into my damp panties through his jeans.

A low groan rumbles in his throat when I reach down and cup my palm over the bulge, searching for the zipper.

Micah stops me by breaking the kiss. He shoves away from the wall and winds my long hair in his fist to get my attention. "No, you don't get that until you earn it."

Already I'm dazed by this level of passion. I'm also impatient to have so much more. "What do you mean, *earn it?*"

There's his smirk again. "You'll see."

He carries me a short distance and tosses me lightly onto the bed. I rise up on my elbows to watch as he opens his pants.

Micah dips his hand inside and rubs himself while studying my reaction. From the neck down, his skin is painted with a collection of random scraps of art, like a practice canvas or the most graffiti-filled east side building. It covers his chest and runs down his arms. He prefers black ink to color but this takes nothing away from the artistic merit. I could spend hours poring over the details and never completely absorb it all. I can pick out skulls that look alive and animals that seem human. The effect is painful and beautiful.

There's not a flaw to be found in his muscled body, from the broad span of his shoulders down to the sculpted ridges of his abs. Micah knows exactly how hot he is and somehow this makes him even sexier.

Typically, I drool over the suit and tie look, not guys who wear battered old jeans and are covered with mismatched ink.

As of tonight, that trend is history.

No polished suit will ever have a prayer of competing with Micah's raw sexuality.

He drops his pants but leaves his blue boxers in place.

There were rumors about him back in high school. Boys aren't the only ones who talk. Girls also tell stories. And I might have glanced down a time or two when he strutted around in his swim trunks, curious to see if he was really hung the way girls whispered about.

The proof is now irrefutable. This boy is *packing*. The shape of his massive cock strains the fabric. Another searing surge of excitement quivers between my legs.

He stands at the edge of the bed. There's now a fierce spark in his arresting blue eyes. "Sit up."

Unsure of what he has in mind, I rise to my knees.

He's not satisfied with my position and palms my ass to pull me closer, close enough to feel him against my belly. He cups my chin roughly between his fingers and stares into my eyes. "We need to get something straight first, Tessie Belle."

It's startling, hearing my nickname from him. He's never called me that before. I had no idea he even knew about it. "I'm listening."

Micah's eyes are like blue fire and he doesn't blink.

He runs the pad of his thumb over my lower lip. "We both know I'm nothing like what you're used to. But if I go too far or do *anything* you don't want then you let me know it. Understand?"

I bob my head, half hypnotized by his gaze. "I understand."

"Good. Now get on your back and show me."

"Show you what?"

"How you touch your pussy. Show me what you do to get off."

I'm not completely inexperienced. But no man has ever talked to me so bluntly in the bedroom.

And I am HERE for it.

But he's not the only one who wants to set the record straight. "Micah, I can trust you, right?"

There's a sudden change in his eyes and I'm not sure why.

He becomes solemn and doesn't sneer or look away when he says, "You can trust me, Tess. I promise."

My cheeks feel flush with heat. "I'm not on the pill or anything."

This only makes him chuckle. "Don't worry about that." He stretches over the bed, aiming for the nightstand. He yanks open the drawer, seizes a fistful of condoms and scatters them.

Then he straightens up and rakes his eyes over my body. "You have your instructions. Let me see you follow them."

I don't have to obey.

But I want to.

He stays where he is while I lie down on my back and push my fingers into my panties.

I've never had an audience for this before. And I'm not sure if I've ever been this turned on. A soft moan escapes my lips when I touch the slippery split between my legs. At home I keep a drawer full of useful toys to help this process along. I won't need any help to come right now.

Micah's not satisfied with the view and takes the liberty of easing my panties halfway down my thighs. He stares, breathing hard. "You're so fucking gorgeous. I always knew you would be."

His words produce another sharp ripple of arousal, unstoppable. I bite back a moan.

He notices with a slow smile of victory. "Didn't know I've jerked off to you before, huh?"

"No," I whisper. "I didn't know that." My back arches as I rub my clit. I slide two fingers inside.

“Fucking hell,” he curses and yanks my panties all the way off. He pushes my legs apart and nestles between them as he hovers over me and clucks his tongue.

“Look at you, Tessie. Spread out on my bed and fucking yourself.”

Quickening the movement of my fingers, I pump them in and out to give him a show. “You could fuck me instead.”

“I will.” He nudges my hand out of the way. “Right after I get you a little dirtier.”

His fingers are strong and roughly calloused. I nearly come the instant I feel one sink into me. His thumb swirls, teasing my clit, and I’m done for, clutching the fabric of his dark grey comforter in my fists as I shamelessly get off on his hand. I’m so wet I can hear his fingers sliding in and out.

Micah doesn’t let up. He strokes and teases and gets me to the brink. “I know you’re ready to come. Give into it, baby. Keep riding my hand and let me see what you look like when you get there. Then you can have something else to ride.”

“Oh my god.” My breath sputters and my muscles quake. The orgasm builds at a frenetic pace. I know it will destroy me when it breaks. “Don’t stop. It feels so good.”

A low chuckle of amusement from him. “I know it feels good. That’s why you’re so fucking wet for me that my goddamn hand is drowning.”

He’s right. And I can’t hold on anymore. The wave is crashing and I have no choice. In a frenzy, I grab a nearby pillow to muffle my cries but Micah rudely rips it away from my face.

“Aw hell no, you’re not hiding. You’re gonna let me watch every sick second of this.”

I can't speak. All I can do is grab his muscled arm with both hands and tremble.

This is nothing like toying with a dildo under the covers. No, my spine sizzles and my legs shake. It's almost like I just came apart at the seams.

Now I feel his mouth on my breasts. I rake my fingers through his short hair and work on catching my breath while he entertains himself by sucking at one pebbled nipple and then the other.

It's a disappointment when he withdraws his fingers. Despite the fact that I'm still trembling, I feel like I could go again, and soon.

I bring my knees up and command his attention, grabbing the sides of his head to force him to look at me. "Have I earned it yet?"

He raises himself up on his palms so he can stare me down. "If you want something, you need to ask for it by name."

His hands are flat on the bed.

I shove his boxers down and take his thick, rigid shaft in the palm of my hand. "Micah, have I earned the right to get fucked by your huge cock?"

"Damn." He rolls his head back and sucks in his lower lip as I stroke him. For a second he pauses to peer down at me with heated intensity. Then he abruptly snatches a condom, rips the wrapper off with his teeth and glides it on with lightning speed.

But Micah enters me slowly, with care, aware that he's big and I'm not. In fact, I've never taken on a guy this size before.

I'm surprised at how easy it is, how my body shivers and adjusts and then greedily angles for more of him.

My legs lock tightly around his waist, stretching, pulling him in deeper, as deep as possible. I feel like I've been filled with a cannon and still I clench and tighten my hold on him.

His hot breath hisses in my ear. "You stop that or you'll make me come."

Nope, not stopping. This feels too amazing.

I squeeze my inner muscles and rock my hips.

"Bad girl." He grabs my wrists and pins them to the mattress. "You're not following instructions."

I try to wiggle my wrists free and can't. "Surprise. I don't always do what I'm told."

Micah likes this. He flashes a wicked grin. "Someone should teach you a lesson until you beg for mercy."

A thrill buzzes through me. "If only someone had the nerve."

He pulls back, ignoring my protesting whine as he leaves my body, instead choosing to tease me with just the tip of his cock. "You might be sorry. This tight little pussy of yours isn't gonna be the same by the time I'm done wrecking it."

Fuck. I can't stand it.

Hearing the filthy talk roll out of his mouth is like finding a new erotic drug. I need him back inside of me in the worst way. I'm trying to move my hips to recapture his cock but he doesn't allow this, keeping me restrained as I writhe around in search of release.

He laughs at me, sinks in barely an inch, watches the way my eyes roll back with a moan, then he withdraws again, intentionally tormenting me.

And now it's on.

He's not the only one who can taunt and mock. I'm competitive by nature and now I want to get the better of him.

He still has me trapped. Let's see if he can make it through this test.

I smile sweetly up at him. "Are you sure you know how to use that thing, Micah? I'm starting to wonder."

He tightens his grip on my wrists and raises an eyebrow, still refusing to give into what I want even though he couldn't possibly get any harder. He must be ready to explode.

We're playing a game at this point.

We know we'll both win in the end but we want to fight some battles in the dirt first.

His tongue pushes between my lips and invades for a brief taste before he pulls back to brag. "I'm the only man who's been inside you and actually *does* know what you need, Tess."

"Then prove it. Stop playing around like a horny teenager and show me what you can do with your dick before I get bored."

I catch sight of the gleam in his eyes a split second before he meets my challenge with a thrust that's ruthless enough to produce a stab of pain.

The pain doesn't last. Two thrusts later it's replaced with a rush of intense pleasure. He doesn't pause before pumping hard, fast, with no mercy, as good as his threat.

I've never been screwed this roughly before and *I LOVE IT*.

Together, we're crude and smutty and filthy.

There's nothing hotter, never will be.

Micah's in the process of ruining me for all other men and I'm letting him.

Hell, I'm reveling in this.

My next orgasm is different. It begins to stir somewhere deep, a place that's usually inaccessible. It builds and churns and blots out all else but an insatiable need to follow it.

When the dam cracks open I don't even try to be quiet about it. "Fuck, Micah. FUCK!"

I claw at his back. If my nails were long I'd be drawing blood.

Even as he keeps pounding away there's triumph in his voice. "Warned you, didn't I? Don't expect to find this anywhere else. You won't. Only right here with me. You think about that tomorrow when you're sore and remembering why."

I hear every word he says even as the pleasure cascades with such ferocity that I see stars.

He's right. I will be sore tomorrow.

And guess what? *I'm looking forward to it.*

Micah's getting close. I can tell by the way his muscles stiffen and he shuts his eyes. He groans and pumps harder with his head back, sucking his lower lip between his teeth. He's absolutely stunning to watch, like a force of nature that has been held captive and finally freed.

I feel the pulsing force roll through his body when he reaches the edge and then goes over it. But it's his face that keeps me mesmerized. He spends everything he has with a heavy groan that vibrates in his chest and makes me wish this moment didn't have to end.

"Holy shit." He rolls to his back beside me, breathing heavily as he rips the condom off.

He doesn't stay there for long. Micah vaults to his feet, stretches, and glances back as I cross my arms over my naked body. Now that we're not in the throes of passion I'm feeling a little self-conscious. Besides, it is rather chilly in here.

Micah takes notice. He drops to the floor, rummages beneath the bed and comes up with a dark green plush blanket. It's kind of sweet the way he shakes it open and drapes it over my bare shoulders.

An instant later he's gone, on his way to the kitchen. He opens the fridge, selects a couple of bottled waters and lightly tosses me one.

I hold it up with a sniff of bitter humor. "At least I know it's not spiked."

He twists the cap off his bottle. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing. It's just that I've already had a close call tonight."

"What are you talking about?"

I really shouldn't have brought this up. I set the water on the nightstand, pull my knees up to my chest and hug my legs. "You know the guy I was out with tonight? He put something in my drink."

Micah freezes. "He did WHAT?"

“I didn’t mention that he’s the brother of the opposition candidate. He was probably thinking he could use me to create a scandal that would hurt my father. Luckily, a woman at the bar spotted his evil act and warned me. I confronted him and that’s why he stormed out.”

Micah bangs the bottle down on the counter. “I was right there. Why in THE HELL didn’t you tell me?”

He’s almost shouting.

I actually flinch.

“I handled it, Micah.”

“*Handled* it? Are his fucking legs broken?”

“Of course not.”

“Then it’s not fucking handled.” He’s pacing back and forth now, still naked.

It’s quite a sight.

And I regret killing the mood, whatever mood this was.

“Whatever.” I prop my chin on top of my knees. It’s rattled me more than I’d like to admit, how close I came to danger.

Micah stalks over to the bed and sits in front of me. He tenderly pushes my hair aside and looks deep into my eyes. “He didn’t hurt you, Tessie?”

Seeing the genuine distress on his face is really throwing me for a loop. “No. I think he’ll lie low for a while, afraid I’ll go public.” I chew my lip. “What would you have done to him?”

Micah’s eyes narrow. “Grabbed some hardcore pals of mine and dragged the motherfucker through the streets of Em City before giving him what he deserves.”

“And what’s that?”

“Not sure your stomach can handle the details. But he would have learned a very excruciating lesson about what should happen to men who mistreat women.”

When Micah says things like that he’s not just shooting his mouth off. He means it.

“Pierce didn’t hurt me. I swear. He didn’t get the chance.”

Micah grunts and glares darkly at a far corner, brooding over acts of violence he’d like to commit on my behalf.

I allow the blanket to fall from my shoulders. “Can’t we get back to concentrating on something more pleasant?”

His expression shifts away from anger.

I look down and smile at the sight of him growing hard again before my eyes.

He reaches out and toys with my right nipple, coaxing it with his thumb as a tingling shiver rolls through me. “Thought you’d be in a hurry to get out of here.”

“No. Are you in a hurry to get rid of me?”

Micah releases my breast and cups both big hands around my hips, sliding me down until I’m flat on my back. Then he settles on top of me and cages my body between his powerful thighs. “No way. We’re not done. Think I’ll keep you here until I get my fill.”

I wiggle underneath him and enjoy his groan. “I’m waiting to be *filled* again anytime you’re ready, Lyonne.”

With a hoarse laugh, he stretches his arm to reach for another condom.

3. Micah

My ass is getting kicked from one side of the ring to the other today.

“Must be one hell of a hangover.” Sean Halligan kicks my ribs while I’m down on the mat. He’s tough and relentless so I like him as a sparring partner.

As a man, I like him less.

He’s enjoying a peacock strut around the ring at the moment because he’s knocked me flat three times in twenty minutes.

This is not normal. He shouldn’t get used to it.

Halligan is still cackling as he bounces on his toes. By this time some of the other boys have taken interest and collected on the sidelines.

This should have been just a standard workout and now I’m getting my clock cleaned. This is newsworthy around here because I’m always on the other end of the equation.

My excuse today is not a hangover. No, there’s another reason why I can’t concentrate for more than three seconds.

I’m worn out after a marathon overnight fuck fest with Tess Ballerini.

The thing is, I've had some thoughts about Tess over the years.

Like how nice it would be to interrupt one of her annoying lectures by stuffing my cock in her pretty mouth.

The girl is bossy and self-righteous and she's full of herself. Always has been. Tess, with her class president goody two shoes pedigree, was constantly held up as an example of how the rest of us should behave. She's also never understood how sexy she is.

The combination ends up being an inevitable fantasy. The kind where she's on her back and the only thing she's capable of saying is my name while I blow her uptight little mind in ways she never thought possible.

Last night that became reality. Now I'm having a tough time thinking about anything else but the way she yelled, "*Fuck, Micah. FUCK!*" while she thrashed around under me.

What a surprise to find that the girl who obeys every rule ever invented and demands that everyone else does the same has a secret freaky side.

An even bigger surprise to discover that she likes the rough stuff.

Tess was on fire the second I touched her. She's feisty as hell once she takes her clothes off. Being inside of her was such an insanely tight fit that I almost lost my freaking mind trying not to come too soon.

Seriously, it's going to be a LONG time before I get over the way that pussy felt.

We were at it for hours before we both finally passed out. I'm terrible at sleeping. It's an issue that predates my prison time but got a whole lot worse when I had to share space with

violent maniacs. Ever since then I can't fall asleep with anyone else in the room. I don't remember falling asleep beside her, but when I opened my eyes the sunlight was cracking through the window edges.

And there was Tess, buttoning up her stained dress and announcing she needed to leave because she had Things To Do.

I would have behaved decently, maybe stopped somewhere to get her coffee and breakfast.

She wouldn't allow it.

Tess was in a rush to escape the east side so she could return to running her shitty father's life for him. The whole drive downtown, she stayed huddled in the passenger seat with her knees pressed together and kept her head turned to the window, like the sight of ugly Em City was enthralling.

The parking garage where she left her car was right next to the campaign headquarters but she ordered me to drop her off two blocks away. She didn't want to be seen doing the walk of shame after getting dumped off by the inked bruiser who fucked her stupid last night. No, that would be her worst nightmare.

I get it. But it still pissed me off.

And I refused to leave her on the side of a city road like a bag of garbage. That's why I ignored all her protests and pouting and sped through the parking garage until I located her Lexus, screeching to a halt right behind the car while she fumed.

Her hand was already on the door handle, prepared to eject, when she tossed her hair and said, "Thank you for the ride."

Kind of a funny thing to say, considering last night she'd eagerly ridden everything from my hand to my dick to my tongue.

That's why I started cracking up and couldn't stop.

This made her mad.

She dove out the door, slammed it shut, and jumped into her own car like she was being chased by Freddy fucking Krueger.

What am I supposed to do with that?

It's like she won't let me *not* be an asshole.

Anyway, Halligan has benefitted from my wandering thoughts. He's an adequate fighter but he can never get the upper hand with me. Not unless I'm distracted by pornographic flashbacks of Tess Ballerini fingering herself on my bed and pleading for my cock.

"WHEW!" Halligan bobs around with a whole lot of unnecessary footwork. Makes him look like he's dancing badly or having a seizure.

He tries to deliver a round kick but this move is a weakness of his.

I dodge with ease.

Halligan pivots, sneers. "Don't worry, you'll be eating the mat again in a minute, Lyonne."

Eh, fuck this guy. He takes me down a couple of times and gets all kinds of cocky.

I don't have much tolerance for trash talk in the ring. If a man has to crow about what he can do in the middle of a fight then it's a clue he can't really back it up with action.

I take a jab with my left hand but it's a bluff and he falls for it, evading with a cackle. He's so hopped up on his own ego that he's shocked when I follow through a second later with a brutal right overhand punch that lands square between his brows. His eyes flutter, rolling back to show the whites, and he crumples like a sack of dirt.

I've already turned away when I hear his body land with a thud. There's some dry laughter all around. Halligan isn't a favorite around here.

Some backslaps slow my progress as I head for the locker room.

My jaw aches where Halligan clocked me pretty good. Even though I ought to slap some ice on the swelling I don't feel like going to the trouble. Pain comes with the territory when you fight for a living and I don't mind pain.

While I'm showering in a fog of steam it happens again.

"Show me what you can do with your dick before I get bored."

Tess has got one hell of a mouth on her and she knows how to use it in more ways than one. I wanted her to keep talking almost as much as I wanted to make her shut the fuck up and come again.

There's something extra intense about getting crazy with a girl I've always known and never gotten along with.

Still, the sweat-stinking gym locker room is no place to beat your meat so I'm forced to crowd out my new Tess experiences with more practical thoughts.

Like how there's something very particular I need to deal with today.

I feel my teeth gritting together with rage as I remember her story about that bastard who took her out last night. The one who's walking around somewhere today and believing he has the right to drug a woman and then carry her away to be abused.

Last night when I strolled through the door of Lucky Lou's it didn't take me long to spot the two of them sitting at the bar. Tess looked away and pretended like I wasn't even there so I did the same to her. No one needed to explain to me that the pompous prick taking up space at her side was keeping her company. They were clearly a matched set; both breathing money fumes and dripping with the kind of upper class self-importance I grew up with in West Emerald. I gave the guy less than two seconds of my time and thought to myself that it figures Tess would attach herself to a douchebag like that.

I should have known something was off. Seeing her show up on this side of town was a puzzle in itself.

Now I can't handle the idea of what might have happened to her. And it would have happened here in my own neighborhood.

While I was in the same goddamn bar.

Right under my nose.

RIGHT UNDER MY FUCKING NOSE!

For that, I would have killed him. If he'd actually laid a hand on her, he would have already seen his last sunrise.

As it is, he's going to have to pay a price whether Tess agrees or not.

There are a lot of things in the world I have no patience for. At the top of that list are men who hurt women. And if they're stupid enough to harm a woman I know personally,

then they better be praying on their knees that I'm in a forgiving mood.

Tess wasn't wrong to say we're not friends. We're not. Sure, we got a lot closer last night but I'd still say we aren't friends.

That, however, is not the same as saying she means nothing to me.

I can't easily explain my feelings about Tess Ballerini. She's kind of a pain in the ass but she's been part of my life since the beginning. Even now we're tied together in a lot of weird ways. In any case, I'll gladly take apart any man who thinks he can fuck with her.

"Micah, I can trust you, right?"

Tess believed me last night when I told her she could trust me. Not many people have a reason to trust me. I've sure never given Tess a reason. But she trusted me anyway, even after another man had shown her just how fucking depraved men can be.

That's why I'm so hot under the collar today, throwing on my clothes and banging out the back door to the alley to have a conversation that needs to happen in private.

Gage's phone keeps ringing as I pace the dirty alley, kicking aside shards of glass and bits of garbage. The opposite wall broadcasts the fact that MARCO SUX in dripping red spray paint.

My cousin runs in more polished circles than I do. He's also been part of a different world, the one where violence and corruption rule. He won't bat an eye, no matter my plans.

Just when I'm about to give up and text him that he needs to call me ASAP, there's a click on the other end. Then a

crash, like he dropped the phone.

“Micah. What’s going on?”

“You sound weird. Did I wake you up?”

“No, but a minute ago my tongue was doing something a hell of a lot more fun than talking to you.”

Dani’s muffled giggle is in the background.

I make a supreme effort not to dry heave.

I’m happy for the two of them. Sincerely happy. Dani and Gage have earned their happiness after a lot of years of grief and separation. These days they’re in the throes of newlywed bliss.

Good for them.

That’s what they should be doing; rolling around in bed together every chance they get. I just don’t want to hear the bullet points. Dani and I aren’t blood related but she’s my sister in every way that counts. No guy is entertained by the thought of his sister getting railed. It’s just never going to be okay.

“Christ, Gage. Why the hell did you answer in that case?”

He loudly exhales with irritation. “Because you never call on a Saturday afternoon. I thought something was wrong.”

“Just go back to what you were doing and give me a ring later.”

Too late. It sounds like he’s up and walking around. A door squeaks open and then snaps shut. “You’ve already interrupted us. And I know you. This is not a call to shoot the shit.”

“All right. I’m in need of your skills to get some intel on a guy. Has to stay between us.”

He doesn't hesitate. "Sure."

There are a few beats of silence when I tell him who I'm looking for. He knows better than to ask why. If I wanted him to know that's what I would have led with.

"Give me forty-eight hours," Gage says. "I'll get you details on where he sleeps, who he fucks and what keeps him busy after dark."

"Thanks, man."

"You need backup?"

This is what I love about the guy. With nothing more than my word, Gage would rush headlong into the fray before he even knows the reason.

That's some serious loyalty.

I'd do the same for him. Anytime, anywhere. Brothers forever.

Wicked West Rejects.

Conner gave us that name. It was eons ago, back when the three of us assumed our fucked up teenage lives couldn't get any worse.

We were wrong.

Life had a whole lot more sick shit in the pipeline.

I assure Gage that I've got the backup situation covered. Then I tell him to get back to his marital bed before Dani gets pissed. He replies that he'll be in touch real soon.

Back inside the gym, Halligan has recovered and he's sulking, sitting on a pile of mats in the corner with his right eye half swollen shut. There's a grudging quality to the nod he tips in my direction.

I return his nod and move along. Rubbing salt in the wound has never been my style. Besides, I need him at his best if he's going to be any use as a sparring partner.

The walk to my apartment only takes five minutes from the gym, which is why I never bother to drag my dumpster of a car along. As I cross at the intersection my head takes an automatic turn to the left.

No one would mistake Lucky Lou's for a classy bar. It's a typical east side dive with sticky floors, bad tempered service and a collection of sad sack regulars. But the drink prices are right and it's a good temporary destination if you plan to just suck back a few shots and be on your way.

Last night I almost skipped out and went home when some of the boys tried to drag me along on a bar crawl. Glad I didn't follow that urge.

If I had, then I'd never have known the feeling of Tess Ballerini clenching around my cock as she comes so hard she shakes.

I feel no regrets for fucking her.

Last night was a once in a lifetime opportunity. What made it even sweeter was that I hadn't fucked anyone at all in quite some time.

There's a reason for that.

Not a pleasant one.

Even a fleeting thought about Olivia is like summoning a demon. The icy chill on the back of my neck is inevitable.

Olivia Davison Ballerini had many roles in my life.

My mother's best friend.

My high school principal.

Years ago, back when I was little more than a stupid kid, she was also my worst mistake. It was right after I was released from prison, full of fury with nothing to look forward to and my head all screwed up.

Her lifelong obsession with my dead father was news to me.

More than a year has passed since the day in my mother's backyard when Olivia finally revealed her true nature and confessed her crimes.

But I never talk about that shit, not even with Conner and Gage.

"I love you. Even more than I loved him."

Fucked up beyond belief.

But that's why I've been in the habit of keeping my pants zipped. There's something about watching a woman drink a bottle of acid seconds after professing her crazed, undying love that makes a man hesitate to stick his dick anywhere new.

That's the way things had stood until last night, until a girl I've been at odds with my whole life called my bluff and met my dare with one of her own.

And I will never be fucking sorry that I took her up on it.

This is the first day in a very long time that I don't feel like there's an invisible war tearing me to pieces on the inside. I would even say that I feel kind of good.

A pair of men huddle on a grey corner and eye me as I pass. I stare back at them without breaking stride. I don't give a hot damn if they're dealing or plotting or what. There's no shortage of shady shit happening at all hours of the day in

plain sight. These two granite-faced assholes wearing biker cuts are nothing special.

Still, I stay on high alert until I'm sure they're not following. If they do, they can expect a nice hospital vacation.

I'm so busy listening for approaching footsteps that I fail to notice the gleaming silver pickup truck until I'm practically on top of it. It's parked haphazardly beside the curb right in front of a peeling weathered sign that declares no parking is allowed at any time or there will be FINES and TOWING, as if anyone's around to enforce that shit.

Stretched out in the long back bed, fast asleep, is the quarterback for the Emerald City Cyclones.

Breathing out a sigh of exasperation, I stand there for a minute and look at my cousin.

Seeing Conner turn up in odd places is never astonishing. He has a talent for it. There's no way the hard surface of the pickup bed can possibly be comfortable yet he's flat on his back with his head resting on a spare tire, snoring lightly.

The picture of contentment.

Until I drop my loaded gym bag right on his stomach.

Conner bolts upright. "Use the force, Luke!" He looks around, sees me staring at him and yawns. "Oh. You're back."

"You know damn well where the gym is. Why didn't you just go there? Or better yet, send a text like a modern human so I'd have a clue you were waiting."

He hops out of the truck, landing on the cracked concrete with far more ease than you'd expect from a man his size. He reaches back in to snatch the baseball cap that had fallen off

his head while he was napping. “I didn’t mind hanging out. It was peaceful.”

“Peaceful.” I roll my eyes. “You were a sitting duck. Damn lucky you didn’t get mugged.”

“Always so negative.” He follows me to the door. “What kind of food do you have?”

“Absolutely nothing.” I start trudging up the stairs. “Why aren’t you running on a grassy field and chasing pigskin?”

“Had a game on Thursday, remember? Played San Diego. Threw six touchdown passes. I was amazing.”

“You always are.”

“I’m playing Miami next week. Why don’t you come? I’m sure I can get you on the team plane. I’ll say you’re my emotional support cousin.”

Laughter snorts through my nose as I flip my key in the door lock. “Can’t. I’m booked all week with personal training sessions.”

I can practically hear Conner grumbling inside his head. He’s been after me to take a job with the team forever but I don’t accept mercy paychecks and if not for him I’d have no interest in football.

“Guess what?” He flops down on my sagging sofa, taking up the entire thing.

I throw my gym bag in a corner. “I don’t like to guess.”

He rolls his eyes. “What crawled up your ass and died today? Luckily I’m in a good mood so I’ll just tell you. I’m buying a house.”

“Oh yeah?” Ever since returning to town last year to play for the Cyclones, Conner has been occupying a penthouse suite at the Palace Hotel downtown.

He leans forward with his elbows on his knees. “Gage and Dani have talked me into thinking on a more permanent level. It’s time to turn the page, get to the next chapter.”

Someone else might not notice the way his tone drops and his voice catches but I do. I’m not the only one who struggles with the weight of the past.

To state that our family history is kind of messy is like saying that there are a few stars in the sky.

There are countless stars. And there’s no end to the notorious disasters that have plagued our family.

Accidents. Betrayals. Scandals. Murders.

Stretching back through generations and casting a bleak shadow over those of us who are left.

What a crappy legacy.

Once when I was in a dark mood I told Dani that our family was cursed. I was drunk and feeling the melodrama.

I don’t really believe in curses. I believe in blood and suffering and pain and grief.

So does Conner.

He learned the truth about his mother the hard way. Aunt Edie, who had always seemed so silly and harmless, was busy leaving a trail of carnage in her wake when no one was paying attention. Then came the finale when she pulled a gun, shot her own son in the leg, then pitched headfirst off a tenth floor balcony.

Good times.

Our family.

And oh boy, did the press and social media have a field day with that story. Conner, being a pro sports hero in the public eye, will need to dodge questions about his mother forever.

Of course it's taken a toll on him. How could it not?

He's still Conner, still a goofy crack up who excels at busting my balls. But he's quieter now, more serious. Sometimes I wonder if he really is okay like he insists. More than anyone, I would understand if he's not.

"Then that's good news," I tell him. "You have a place picked out already?"

"Not yet. I was thinking Tess might help me look but I didn't want to bother her in the middle of her dad's campaign and-

"Why Tess?" I don't mean to ask the question so sharply. I just wasn't expecting to hear her name.

His eyebrows shoot up. "Dani says Tess still has her realtor's license. She ran Ballerini's business for him for years back when he was West Emerald's mayor, before he decided to have delusions of grandeur and become the emperor of Emerald City. Why, what's the problem?"

"Nothing." I start flicking the blinds open so he can't see my face. "No problem."

But Conner heaves a long sigh. "I know Tess isn't your favorite person but let it go. We're all adults now. She's a lot cooler than you give her credit for."

I'd forgotten that Tess and Conner are friends. Now that I think of it, she's probably friendly with Gage too, since he's married to her best friend. I'm the only dickhead around who's still known for giving her shit.

And I know just how cool she can be when she wants to. I know a lot more than Conner does.

But that's one fact I won't be sharing. Not only would he likely disapprove of how I fucked the dirty daylight out of his little friend, but I'd be breaking a promise to Tess.

Last night is between us. Unless Tess decides otherwise, it'll stay that way.

I'm saved from replying to Conner when my phone buzzes. Thinking it might be Gage with some fast news on the earlier topic of interest, I whip it out of my pocket.

The message isn't from Gage.

"Why are you smiling?" Conner says. "It's freaking me out."

"Charlotte." I stare down at the text sent by my little sister. "Matilda finally caved and let her get a puppy."

"Matilda's allowing a dog in the house?" He lets out a low whistle. "That's got to be the shock of the week."

Ha! I can think of a much bigger shock.

But I say nothing and tap out a reply to Charlotte. "Henley's got more influence lately."

My stepfather is the one who argued that Charlotte should have a phone so she could contact me whenever she wants. Last year's events were gruesome for us all but Charlotte's just a kid. It crushes me to think about what it does to her, being

raised in our crazy family. At least when I was growing up Gage and Conner had my back at all times.

Conner rises from the sofa and smacks his hands together. “Let’s go eat and take a drive to West Emerald.”

I hesitate. It’s just always my first instinct when it comes to West Emerald.

Conner watches me. “It would make the kid happy. It would make Cecile happy. We could even drop in on the newlyweds.”

He’s right. My grandmother isn’t one to fuss but I know Cecile is always pleased when her grandsons stop by. And Charlotte is my biggest fan, even though I’ve done nothing to earn such devotion. I’m trying to be a good big brother for her.

It wouldn’t kill me to try a little harder.

“Yeah, all right.”

He nods. “We’ll take my truck. Your car is shit.”

I know my car is shit. I like shit.

He’s wandering toward the bathroom. “Drank too much Gatorade on my way over here. Be right back.”

While he’s gone I remember that my sketchbook was left out on the balcony last night. I dropped it the instant Tess pulled her clothes off and gave me a naughty smile that’s still doing things to me today.

The pages are flapping in the light breeze and there’s some dirt on the edges of the paper. My sweatshirt is still lying in a puddle where Tess dropped it and I pick that up too. The pencil I was using must have rolled off and hit the ground because it’s nowhere in sight. When Tess found me out here I was drawing trees.

Trees with hollow-eyed skulls instead of leaves.

It's just what was in my head at the time. But whenever I think of the woods that's what I see.

My father was murdered at a cabin in the woods. We were on a fishing trip, just the two of us. The weekend getaway was supposed to be his apology for working so much. I woke up to the sound of a crash, and then my father's voice screamed my name...

"Hey." Conner shakes me out of my bad memories.

I turn around and blink.

"You ready to go?" He's wearing a grin of mischief. And there's a hair clip awkwardly clinging to his dark blond hair.

Fuck.

The clip belongs to Tess. She was wearing her hair up when she found me at Lucky Lou's. She was no longer wearing the clip when she stepped outside with her hair down and a beer in her hand, her petite body swimming in my sweatshirt. That was enough to send my dick spiking in one second flat.

Conner's grin broadens. "You've had company." He yanks the clip from his hair. "Who is she?"

"Never mind." I toss the sketchbook on the table.

"Tell me. Was it a one nighter? It's good you're getting some real exercise. Maybe it'll improve your personality."

"Shut up." I push him to the door. "Let's go."

4. Micah

“**T**here it is.” Conner doesn’t need to point. I know what he’s talking about.

The building always reminds me of a middle finger made of glass. Speared into the center of Em City’s downtown district, it’s the home of Yellow Brick Properties. An immortal monument to our family’s wealth and power.

I feel like flipping it off in return. Sometimes I do that.

But there’s not much point in saying Fuck You to a building. The building won’t care.

The three of us boys were supposed to end up occupying windowed offices. That was always the plan. Gage, Conner and I are the first generation to have no role in hoovering up local territory and turning it into something outlandish like million dollar condos with rooftop wine bars.

The fact that I chose to have nothing to do with the company is still a sore point and always will be.

Matilda runs that place and everyone in it. At her side is Alta, the one sister she has left. She had Dani in her web for a while but Dani quit last year. Matilda has forgiven her for leaving the company because Matilda loves Dani.

Matilda has not forgiven me. Some conclusions might be drawn from that.

When my mother married Henley, his niece came with the package. Dani's own mother was a loser who'd dumped her kid off at age five on her older brother's doorstep so she could go party. She never came back.

But the day I met Dorothy Ann Gallagher we were both sixteen and I immediately understood the role she'd play. In her, my mother saw the child she *really* wanted. A sweet, beautiful girl instead of a volatile, pain-in-the-ass boy.

That's not Dani's fault, not at all. It kind of stung in the beginning but it's been years since I last gave a shit what my mother thinks. Now I worry that Matilda has pinned all of her hopes on Charlotte, and will mold her accordingly.

Still, I'm careful not to complain about my mother around Conner. Matilda is selfish and annoying and the sound of her phony voice causes my teeth to grind but she's a saint next to Conner's mother.

She's also still alive. And Edie isn't. So that's why I never utter a single irritable word about mothers these days.

I shift my eyes away from what could have been my inheritance, if only I'd wanted it. "Barbecue City for lunch?"

"Now you're talking." Conner grins.

Conner is recognized at the casual country-themed eatery and the manager almost trips on himself running over to pay his respects and to declare that our meal is on the house. This happens a lot and it's why Conner leaves a seven-hundred-dollar tip that he won't allow me to contribute to.

There's an outbreak of autograph requests when we try to leave. Conner handles them all cheerfully, even posing for

dumb selfies with a quartet of giddy women who keep squeezing his muscled arms.

I just stay patiently out of the way until Conner is finished getting pawed. The guy has a heart of gold, can never say no to anyone who asks for a favor.

In that way, we are opposites.

When we were kids, Conner suffered a terrifying head injury. He fell from a tree. After the fall, he had trouble with academics and turned all of his energy to football.

It's still a touchy subject with him, the fact that his brain isn't what it used to be. I don't know everything about severe concussions but I know enough to worry that getting knocked around on the field will catch up to him in a bad way sooner or later.

“And who are you?” A woman sidles up to me, catching on that I'm somehow affiliated with Conner Wiseman. She has dark hair and a tight body and if I squint she might remind me a little bit of Tess.

She smiles up at me.

“I'm nobody,” I tell her. “Get lost.”

Her smile falls and her eyes stray elsewhere.

No, she's nowhere near in the same league as Tess.

“Now who is overthinking things?”

I wonder how long it'll take me to quit fixating on the hottest one night stand in history.

I think it'll take a long fucking time.

Especially because I don't want to quit thinking about it. I'd much rather jerk off to those memories until my dick is

worn out.

“Ready?” Conner, finally free of his fan club, gestures to the door. Then he pauses to peer at me with some suspicion. “What are you so happy about?”

I shrug. “My lunch was tasty.”

Then I file past him so he can't examine me anymore. Conner has instincts when it comes to sex. It wouldn't be a complete surprise if he guessed the truth about me and Tess right out of thin air.

Luckily, his mind has wandered by the time we return to his truck. He wants to talk about his house, the one he hasn't bought yet.

“The north side has all the quiet old neighborhoods,” he says while heading for the westbound freeway. “We should go there.”

“We?”

“Yeah.” He fiddles with the radio until locating a classic rock station. “I thought you'd be my roommate. You can't expect me to live in a house all by myself.”

He's mentioned this before. I don't hate the idea of living with Conner. I don't hate it at all.

But the life I've made on the east side is easy and uncomplicated.

This is a conscious choice.

The thought of moving to some decadent gated community populated by McMansions isn't tempting. Sounds too much like West Emerald.

“Think about it,” he urges.

“Sure.” I’ll find a way to let him down easy.

Political signs scream on every corner. Many of them belong to Stuart Ballerini, his last name stenciled in gigantic block letters to make sure you can’t misread it.

I’ve never thought much of Tess’s father. The guy is so fake he’s practically plastic. Plus, I’ve seen him drool over Dani in a creepy way that makes me want to kick his kneecaps out.

And then there’s how he treats Tess.

Like she’s his indentured servant, or a stage prop to advance his ambitions. That’s always bothered me. Today it bothers me more.

He was my father’s business partner at one time but I don’t remember much about that. I do remember the arguments my parents had. Matilda wanted her husband to work for her at Yellow Brick. He refused, preferring to keep running his real estate business with his buddy, Stuart Ballerini. If my father had lived, I doubt he and Matilda would have stayed together but you never know.

No one will ever know. That’s the thing about death. It leaves a whole lot of questions behind.

The closer we get to West Emerald the more my muscles tense. All the satisfaction I’d been feeling after an epic night with Tess begins to vaporize.

There’s more than one reason for bad blood between me and West Emerald but I can’t think of the old neighborhood anymore without also thinking of Olivia.

And then I want to throw the fuck up.

Got to give her credit, Olivia was a master of deceit, good at hiding her eternal grudge against my mother. It was a wrath that stretched all the way back to their schoolgirl days at West Emerald Prep.

In those days, Olivia was in love with my father. Then Ethan dumped her for Matilda and never looked back. Instead of moving on like a normal person, Olivia simmered in her rage and made long term revenge plans.

I got caught in the middle of those plans.

Olivia framed me for setting a fire. Dozens of people could have been killed. She thought Matilda would be crushed when I went to prison. Joke was on her because Matilda assumed I was guilty. She wasn't all that broken up to see me hauled away in cuffs.

But there was Olivia, waiting for me when I got out.

And I was stupid to get taken in by her. I know that. I cut her loose pretty quick and she went and married Stuart Ballerini, settling into her role as a West Emerald socialite and political wife. Now and then she'd surface on the east side like a recurring bad dream. I ignored her every single time.

But until that late summer day in the backyard of my family's home, I had no clue just how far into the depths of her own madness Olivia had sunk. Or what she had done while the rest of us were clueless.

Years earlier, Olivia had mounted a mission to torment and devastate Matilda by destroying the people closest to her. She was responsible for blinding my grandmother. She sent me to prison. She tried to kill Dani. Eternally obsessed with my dead father and blaming Matilda for his murder, her sick mind latched onto me as a substitute.

And then, in a staggering move of incalculable evil, Olivia tried to use my baby sister, Charlotte, to inflict a final act of revenge against Matilda.

I truly fucking hate her.

It's a hatred with a pounding pulse and a bitter taste.

I hate Olivia like I hate the men who sliced my father into pieces while he screamed.

Not that it's any use hating a dead woman. Olivia took the coward's escape and she's beyond caring about what anyone thinks.

The bleak, grimy scenery of the city has been left behind and we're closing in on the landmarks of West Emerald. Squatting in the center of town like a mammoth bejeweled fortress is the celebrated West Emerald Golf Club. Built by none other than Yellow Brick Properties. I've heard the membership waiting list is two years long. Only the motherfucking best.

West Emerald Preparatory Academy looks unchanged from the outside. It's probably unchanged on the inside too, just hosting a new generation of spoiled, affluent progeny.

I never got to graduate from here. While the rest of my class was cheering at football games and hooking up at parties I was deposited in the state's most notorious prison. Some of the other inmates were happy to see me, figuring they would have a field day with a West Emerald rich kid. They discovered the hard way that blood and pain don't trouble me and that if a motherfucker crosses the line severely enough he's likely to get his throat cut in his sleep.

A few months ago I received word from the state that my criminal record would be deleted now that everyone knew I

was innocent. I even received a signed letter with the governor's embossed golden seal. Their version of, *Yay for justice! Now let's all pretend this never happened.*

I took that piece of garbage, held the corner up to a lighter and watched that shit burn in the kitchen sink.

Seemed fitting. Start with fire, end with fire.

Prison was a hellscape but I feel some pride in surviving. If I were prone to dreams then I'm sure the stench and violence of that place would creep in. But I don't dream and don't want to. My relationship to sleep is fitful and sporadic. Rarely do I catch more than two hours at a stretch. Last night when I sank into the void with Tess's head on my shoulder was the exception, not the rule.

Conner eases the truck down a narrow lane of tall palm trees. He punches numbers in a keypad and waits as the decadent golden gates slowly swing open to allow us entry into the neighborhood.

Our neighborhood.

We were the princes of West Emerald, expected to conquer the world and make the family proud.

They got two out of three right. Gage is plenty successful. And Conner is a legend.

As for me, I kind of enjoy stomping all over everyone's expectations. I was never going to be what my mother had in mind.

Conner takes a right and I explode with laughter.

"What?" He looks over and then snorts at the spectacle.

Stuart Ballerini's front yard has been decorated with a preposterous larger-than-life political sign. He's pictured in

front of a deep blue sky with a constipated look on his doughy face. On one side of him stands his younger brother, Josh Ballerini, all costumed up in his police chief finery.

Ballerini's daughter is on his other side, looking like she just escaped from Sunday school in a lemon-colored dress buttoned to her neck. Tess smiles sweetly while her father's heavy hand clamps down on her small shoulder. The caption on the bottom says, *"We're all family here. Vote BALLERINI."*

Gross. I hope Tess didn't come up with that crap.

Behind the mammoth yard sign, the house is still the same butter color it always was, but more of the surface is now covered by the vines of ivy that tangle every which way. It's a mystery why anyone thinks that looks good.

There's no hint whether Tess is home. I have the bizarre, fleeting thought of marching right up to her door and knocking.

To say what?

"Hey, Tess. Remember that time last night when I finger fucked you on my bed and then made you beg for my cock? That was fun, huh?"

She'd be mortified. Furious.

And turned on as hell, whether she wanted to be or not.

I rub my jaw so Conner doesn't catch a glimpse of me smiling again and wonder why.

Anyway, it's time to set dirty thoughts aside. Conner slows down, pulling up at the curb before cutting the engine.

The house I grew up in has its own personality. Matilda and her sisters grew up there too. Charlotte is probably being coached to carry on the tradition. Every few years Matilda

spends an ocean of money to redecorate in some silly theme that she discovered on the internet. I could never keep track of any of them.

Right now when I look at the house I see my father showing me how to catch a baseball on the wide ribbon of front lawn.

“Showtime.” Conner shoots finger guns and jumps out of the driver’s seat.

He rings the doorbell by pressing it again and again until the door is flung open. Dani stands on the other side. She surges with her arms open, hugging each of us with real affection.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you guys today.”

Gage is right behind her with a more muted greeting. The two of them live within walking distance, choosing to remain close to be near Charlotte and Cecile.

“Micah!” My nine-year-old sister barrels past Gage with a squeal and makes a flying leap into my arms.

I catch her and twirl her in a fast circle, as I always do. She throws her head back and laughs.

It still gets to me how she’s so delighted just to see me show up. Charlotte was born while I was locked away and I didn’t even get to meet her until she was already walking. Matilda didn’t want me around her too often and for once, I thought Matilda might be right.

After all, what little girl wants a violent ex-con packed with ink and a shitty attitude as a big brother?

I didn’t even know how to be a big brother. As it is, I’m still kind of winging it.

Charlotte doesn't seem to mind. She acts like I'm her best friend in the world.

Conner complains about the neglect. "What am I, invisible?" He pretends to catch Charlotte's nose between his fingers and she hugs him with a giggle.

Then she pulls on our hands. "Come on, you guys. You have to meet the puppy. He has to stay in the morning room until he's trained. His name is Total."

"Total?" I look to Dani. Gage stands behind her and she leans back as he wraps his arms around her waist.

"Matilda's contribution," Dani explains but she smirks.

Charlotte keeps dragging us through the house. "Mother says he will make a TOTAL MESS out of her flowers and her carpet. So I decided that should be his name. Total."

Total is a globe of brown fur with beady little eyes. He yips and wags his tiny nub of a tail when Charlotte climbs over the barrier of the enclosure where he's penned in.

"It's okay, Total." She coos and bends down to kiss him. "Look, my brother is here. I told you about him."

The puppy cocks his head and appraises me, like he understands her words and is ready to pass judgment.

I reach my hand in and scratch behind his ears. He wiggles and scrapes my hand with his pink tongue.

"He likes you." Charlotte picks Total up and rocks him in her arms like a baby.

If there's anything cuter than a little girl with a puppy then I've never seen it.

Conner takes a turn being introduced to the dog while Henley strolls into the room.

He wasn't my first stepfather but it looks like he might be the last. I guess he deserves some credit for standing the test of time.

Henley's a big shot author. Matilda basically jumped in his lap one day at a book signing and latched on. We've never had much of a relationship and still don't have much of one now but I know he likes to pat himself on the back for trying.

"Hey, Micah." He holds out his hand, leaving me with little choice but to shake it unless I want to be a dick to Charlotte's dad while she watches.

"Henley."

After that, we have nothing else to say to each other. He turns his attention to Conner and starts babbling about football, unaware that it's clear he has no clue what he's talking about.

Matilda's fluttery voice drifts down the hall. "Why does no one call before stopping by? Manners seem to be extinct these days."

Dani answers, sounding a little testy. "I stop by all the time without calling."

"And I'm always so happy when you do, sweetheart. I love that new dress you're wearing, by the way. Your taste is impeccable. I would have chosen the same myself."

The click clack of heels approaches and my spine stiffens.

"Boys." Matilda presents herself in the doorway and arranges her face into a smile. It doesn't come naturally. "What a surprise."

“They’re here to meet Total,” Charlotte announces as she continues to cuddle with the dog.

“That’s wonderful, Charlotte. But you need to put him down this instant. We don’t yet know his temperament and you will be covered in dog hair.”

Conner throws me a look.

I roll my eyes toward the ceiling.

Henley makes peace. “We’ll take him for a walk in the backyard later, Char. Start getting him used to the leash.”

My little sister sighs and reluctantly sets down her pet.

I clear my throat. “Sorry if we’re disturbing you. We were in the neighborhood.”

She laughs, high and affected, gliding over to peck my cheek. She misses by a few inches. “Oh, it’s fine. What mother doesn’t want to see her only son?”

YOU. That’s who.

She steps back and studies my face more closely. I don’t miss the flare of disapproval in her eyes. I forgot about how Halligan did a number on my jaw. It’s swollen and bruised enough to be noticeable.

I’ve never invited my mother to any of my fights. I don’t want her there. The idea is cringeworthy. But she doesn’t need to behave like my line of work is no better than pimping on the streets.

There’s little point in having these thoughts.

Matilda is not as bad as she used to be. That’s not a very high bar to clear but it’s better than nothing. I do my best to get along with her for Charlotte’s sake if nothing else.

“Is it all right if I go see Cecile?” I’m asking the question just to be polite. I’m going upstairs to visit my grandmother no matter what.

“Of course.” Her smile is thin and she moves to adjust Henley’s polo shirt collar. “The art deco overhaul was just completed last week. Enjoy.”

“Okay.” Like I fucking care about her new furniture.

“Tell Cecile I’ll be up to visit in a minute,” Conner says. He seems very taken with the dog, allowing it to gnaw on his arm like a piece of rawhide.

“Will do.”

On the walk down the hall I pass the little side courtyard that used to be a favorite hiding spot when I was little.

Dani and Gage are in there and they are sharing a moment. Her arms are hooked over his shoulders. His are firmly circled around her waist, just beneath the curtain of shiny brown hair hanging down her back. They stare into each other’s eyes. Gage says something to her and she laughs before stretching up for a long, slow kiss.

It’s like a snapshot of true love. I’m not in touch with that emotion. Doubt I ever will be.

And I’m an intruder on this scene so I pass by in silence, leaving them alone.

A walk through my childhood home is never a blast from the past. Nothing looks the same thanks to Matilda’s penchant for makeovers. There’s also zero evidence that a man named Ethan Lyonne ever lived here.

There’s no evidence that I ever lived here either.

Cecile's bedroom is on the second floor, close to the one I used to occupy. My old room is unrecognizable, now a guest room with rose-patterned wallpaper. Matilda would always have fits because I drew and painted all over the walls. It's what I did at night instead of sleeping.

There's usually a home nurse around tending to Cecile but I don't see one right now when I rap my knuckles on the door.

"Dani, is that you?" Her voice quavers, not nearly as forceful as it used to be.

"It's Micah." I walk into the room.

Cecile sits in an armchair with a tablet propped up on the table beside her. An audiobook narrator reads one of the romance novels she loves so much. The sunglasses always worn to cover her damaged eyes dominate her face and her cheeks are gaunt.

She tips her chin up. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Standing there and thinking that I look like hell."

I give her a quick kiss on the cheek. There's never any point in lying to my grandmother. "Conner is here too. He'll be up soon. How are you feeling?"

"Like I'm dying. Which I am."

There's a straight backed chair beside the table and I take a seat. "What does that mean?"

"Pancreatic cancer. The doctor gave me the news yesterday. No one else knows yet."

It's been clear for a while that Cecile isn't well. Yet hearing this is a complete kick in the gut and I'm at a loss for

what to say.

She sighs. “You’d better not be crying. I assumed I could count on you not to carry on, which is why I decided to tell you first.”

“I’m not crying.” Only because I never cry.

“And I won’t be dropping dead tomorrow so don’t say your goodbyes just yet either.”

My grandmother can be brittle and difficult. But she’s always been good to me. After my father was killed and I quit talking for a while, she said I didn’t need to speak if I didn’t want to. She also said she hoped I was saving up all those words because she would really like to hear them someday. She even pushed Matilda to buy me art supplies when Matilda was still clueless that I liked to draw.

It won’t be easy to get used to, the concept of a world without Cecile in it.

“Can I get you anything?”

She waves her hand. “You can open the window. Your mother keeps ordering the nurses to close it, claiming I’ll get a chill. As if that could harm me now. My own grandmother used to tell me that the soft breezes were gentle ghosts. It sounded foolish to me then. It doesn’t sound foolish anymore.”

I’ve already flipped the window open by the time she’s done talking. There’s an extra throw blanket folded at the foot of her bed. I hang it on the back of her chair in case she changes her mind about friendly ghosts and chills.

The narrator’s pitch reaches a frenzy.

“And now I see the duke’s manhood, erect and ready to take me. I quiver with excitement, ready to bend to his will, to

become a woman for him...”

I want to plug my ears. “What in the pornographic hell are you listening to?”

She chuckles. “Ravished By The Vampire Duke. I told Dani I was in the mood for something spicy and this was her suggestion. Now I’m missing the best part.”

“In that case, should I leave you alone with your duke?”

“Please do.”

“All right, but Conner will be up to interrupt you again in a minute.”

“Fine, fine.” She waves a bony hand. A light autumn breeze filters through the window screen and ruffles the wispy ends of her silver hair.

I never plan to look at the picture that sits on the table beside her bed but my eyes are always drawn to it anyway. A young, beautiful Cecile and her four little daughters pose on a California beach. A childish Aunt Edie smiles at me through the lens of time as she stands beside the little sister she would murder one day.

It’s hard enough for me to escape thoughts of Edie.

For Conner, I’m sure this is impossible.

I leave the room as the duke’s manhood makes a conquering move.

It’s weird how I keep wondering what Tess is doing right now.

5. Tess

This has been a long week.

Partly because I've worked a ton and haven't slept enough. But mostly because my mind insists on constantly revisiting last Friday night.

The night I dropped all inhibitions, had multi-orgasmic sex with Micah Lyonne and loved every second of it.

A dollop of oatmeal lands in my lap when my spoon tilts sideways.

As usual, Micah's gruff, seductive voice has a way of finding me wherever I am.

"Bad girl."

The spoon is now being clutched so tightly my fingers ache. I cross my legs at the ankle and silently order my brain to quit going dirty places.

After all, I have plenty of other things to keep me occupied. Campaigns to run and shit. Thirty-eight days until voters go to the polls.

Dropping my spoon back into the oatmeal sludge, I scan the trending political hashtags on my phone. My *new* phone, that is. A replacement for the one that met an uncertain east side fate.

I've not breathed a word of that misfortune to anyone. The topic strays too close to...other topics.

Micah topics.

My father drizzles honey over his whole wheat toast before turning his shrewd dark eyes on me. Sometimes it's nerve-racking, sitting across the kitchen table from my own father and bearing the full brunt of his scrutiny.

"You've arranged all the transportation, correct?"

This is a pointed question. Early in the campaign I'd delegated the task of confirming his ride back from a conference he attended up in the Lake Poppy area. After being stuck there for an extra two hours in a raging thunderstorm, he was displeased.

The next day I received a lengthy lecture.

"Never neglect the details, Tess. And remember every bit of my faith is wrapped up in you."

No pressure there.

I keep my head up and answer him without missing a beat. "The car will be here in half an hour. You'll find your full itinerary in your email along with the changes I approved to your speeches. There is some criticism coming from the opposition that you are spending time at rallies outside Em City, campaigning for candidates in other races."

I don't add that he committed to these upstate rallies without consulting me. He thinks it's a smart move. But it looks as if he's already looking to jump up the ladder to the next higher office.

"Anyway, your speeches should deflect the criticism by pointing out that Em City's fortunes are tied up with the

broader economy. One final note; while you are up north in the Forest district you will want to mention the job losses from the factory closure.”

He nods, which isn't praise, but it's his version of approval.

“Knock knock.” An old joke with Uncle Josh, opening the side door and *then* declaring his intention to knock.

He grins and steps right in, knowing he never needs an invitation. If you don't factor in sleeping hours, he probably spends as much time here as he does at his own house a mile away.

“I bear gifts.” He holds up a white paper bag from my favorite local bakery.

I snatch at it greedily. “Tell me at least one of those scones is chocolate raspberry.”

Uncle Josh hands over the bag with a laugh. “Wouldn't forget your favorite.”

No, he never would.

Uncle Josh has always treated me like a person of supreme importance. With no children of his own and ferociously devoted to his older brother, he has been a critical part of my life. Even if my father couldn't find time to attend my school events or dance recitals, I could count on seeing Uncle Josh in the audience. He's never missed a birthday or a holiday and even now, when I'm an adult with no right to expect special treats, he brings them anyway.

I dive into the bakery bag and pull out a warm, freshly baked scone that will condemn my gummy bowl of oatmeal to the trash disposal. “Thank you. I've been craving these.”

Uncle Josh pours himself a cup of coffee and takes his usual seat at the table. He's unshaven, still in his uniform, likely just having come from the West Emerald PD headquarters. Josh Ballerini is a favorite around here; handsome and young for the position he occupies. He could have political ambitions of his own if he chooses.

Maybe someday. Right now he's dedicated to seeing his brother successfully elected and installed in downtown Em City.

Fifteen years separate the Ballerini brothers. Josh was only a young teen when a car accident at a downtown intersection stole my grandparents. Though recently married and trying to build his real estate business, my father didn't hesitate to accept the responsibility of his teenage brother. He put Josh through college and has helped him with every career step along the way.

Josh hasn't forgotten that debt. He loves no one more than he loves my father.

Josh takes a sip of his coffee, then makes a face. "Forgot my sugar fix."

"I'll get it." I jump up before he can object.

The small glass sugar dispenser is on the second shelf of the cabinet above the sink, barely within my reach when I'm not wearing heels. My fingers fumble as I stretch to get a grasp on the container. I think I have it in hand but I'm wrong.

Instead of the sugar dispenser I've grabbed a jar of dried mint leaves. An ordinary thing to see in a kitchen cabinet. The sight of it is enough to make my mouth go dry.

This jar was last opened by Olivia. She's the only one around here who used mint flakes. She would measure out a

teaspoonful to add to her English tea.

It's been a chore, expunging all traces of Olivia from the house. Every time I think I'm successful I stumble across something like a jar of mint leaves when I least expect it.

In the Olivia aftermath, I suggested that we should put the house on the market. There's no need for a house this large anyway and a fresh start might be best for everyone.

My father was indignant. Why should he move? This is *his* house. No, he wouldn't be going anywhere.

Olivia Davison Ballerini has secured her place in infamy as the ultimate wicked stepmother. Long before she was caught launching acid attacks, I always regarded her with some serious side eye. She resented the fact that I was my father's priority. I resented the fact that she was a narcissistic bitch.

Yet during their marriage I also received my first real taste of freedom. There is a stifling element to being raised by a very overprotective single parent who has suffered one tragedy already and was terrified of losing his only child. With Olivia in the picture, my father finally had someone else to focus on. Olivia was the one who persuaded him to allow me to go away to college at Emerald State where I roomed with Dani. I hadn't fully realized just how closely I'd been under my father's control until I escaped it.

Their arrangement had always struck me as a mutual bargain, devoid of passion. They were not affectionate. They even slept in separate bedrooms. Olivia enjoyed the prestige of being the wife of the West Emerald mayor. Stuart Ballerini used the beautiful, charismatic Olivia as a political asset.

A win win situation. Until it became the opposite.

I can hardly fault my father's blindness to his wife's depravity. She fooled a lot of people.

Shaken by the Olivia reminder, I shove the jar back into the recesses of the cabinet and finally locate what I came for.

My uncle flashes an appreciative smile when I deposit the sugar beside his mug. "Thanks, Tessie Belle."

For the first time, the use of my old nickname makes me cringe.

"We need to get something straight first, Tessie Belle."

Returning to my seat, I curl my fingers and dig my nails into my palm in an effort to keep my face neutral.

Is this to be my new reality?

Drifting back into the confusing realm of this Micah infatuation every two minutes?

It's beginning to feel like an unproductive way to proceed through life.

In an effort to distract myself, I use the edge of my fork to cut through sugared pastry layers and shovel a triangle wedge of scone into my mouth.

I'm still chewing when I take note of my father's sudden calculating expression. He's going to ask me to do something that I won't enjoy.

"Conner is playing in Miami this weekend," he says.

I swallow the food in my mouth. "Is he?"

"But I imagine he'll be back in town next week."

"Probably."

An eyebrow lifts. He gets them professionally shaped these days. Can't be a future Em City mayor with unappealing eyebrows. "I'm sure your schedule already includes sparing some time to show him a few prime listings."

I've made no announcements. But it figures gossip about the biggest pro athlete in town would reach my father's open ears.

Just this past Wednesday I received a friendly call from Conner Wiseman. He's interested in buying a house and wants to give me the first crack at the job. It's a score that any realtor in the metro area would crawl over glass to get. Not only is the commission certain to be substantial, but the prestige of having Conner Wiseman as a client is invaluable. He could take his pick of realtors but he'd rather work with a friend.

I'm touched that Conner would think of me. Over the years we've grown into an easygoing sort of friendship. I've even traveled with Dani to watch him play before he was traded to the Cyclones.

Conner was quick to add that he understands I'm preoccupied with the campaign right now and he's glad to wait until after the election. I look forward to it. Truth be told, I far prefer being a realtor to being a campaign director.

"You didn't mention that you'd heard of Conner's offer."

Stuart Ballerini is always pleased by his ability to blindside. "I keep tabs on the industry, Tess."

I suppress a sigh. "His request was casual. But if he wants to look at some properties next week I'll see what I can do."

"Wouldn't hurt to show him that you're eager to go above and beyond."

I'm not sure I like the sound of that. "Conner and I are just friends, Dad."

"Of course." He waves a hand. "And if he's truly a friend, now would be a perfect time for him to make an endorsement choice."

What a surprise.

More than once he's pressed me to ask Conner Wiseman to show public support for his campaign. This would be a delicate situation for Conner, considering he plays for the team owned by the rival family.

"Conner has no interest in politics." I don't even know if this is true. But I'll never cross such a line and use a friend in that way.

The shift to chilly disapproval is almost palpable. Instead of wincing under its weight I meet my father's gaze with a stubborn one of my own.

I'm not wrong here.

As a child, the thought of letting my father down was enough to make my stomach hurt. I'm no longer a child.

He hates to lose. Or maybe he feels sheepish because I've already shot down this idea more than once. In any case, he looks away first and begins digging around in the pocket of his blazer.

Uncle Josh, aware of the tension, tosses a nod of sympathy my way.

The fortunes of the mayor's race won't rise or fall with the endorsement of Conner Wiseman. Even if they did, there are some sacrifices I won't make for the sake of ambition.

I am aware this is not a good attitude to have in politics.

The sound of a pill bottle being shaken grabs my attention. Two white pills fall from an amber prescription bottle into my father's broad palm. He swallows them swiftly, chasing with a sip of coffee.

“Dad, what are those? Vitamins?”

He's not on any medication. Just last week we released a full report to the media, attesting to his clean bill of health.

He shakes his head while swallowing. “Blood pressure's been a little high.” Then a confident smile flashes. “Nothing for you to worry about. Naturally, we'll keep this quiet. I'm sure it's just standard election stress.”

Some terrors follow you into adulthood. As a child, my father was everything to me, larger than life. I'd lost my mother before I ever knew her. The fear of losing my father too was so overpowering that sometimes I couldn't breathe properly.

That old panic is not as crippling as it was when I was six. Just the same, ribbons of anxiety curl through my belly.

My tone softens. “You're doing too much. Maybe we should cancel the weekend rallies.”

“Now's not the time to slack off, Tess. It's full speed ahead until the election.” He looks me over, taking note of my yoga pants and hoodie. “You are planning to go to headquarters today, right?”

No, I wasn't. “I don't think there's much reason to go all the way downtown. There are no meetings on the agenda. I can work remotely.”

“Other members of the team will be there. You ought to be there too.”

Uncle Josh clears his throat a bit loudly. “It’s Saturday, Stu.”

He receives a stern ‘*Who Asked You*’ glare for interfering. “It *is* Saturday. And I’ll be working. Looks like you’re working today too. It’s what we do as Ballerinis.”

Uncle Josh shifts his gaze to the window. He’s not a pushover elsewhere but he tends to back down when it comes to his older brother. All he does is exhale a little bit more loudly than usual.

“I can stop by headquarters. It’s fine.” My phone pings with an alert and I take a casual look, expecting polling news or a social media clip. Instead, my hand flies to my mouth. “Oh my god.”

Micah. You didn’t.

My father sits up straighter. “Bad polling news?”

This is always where his mind goes first. Every time.

Uncle Josh leans forward, watching me with concern.

“No.” I turn the phone face down on the table and face my father with artificial calm. “Shakeup in the opposition camp.”

He relaxes. “What kind of shakeup?”

I’m glad it’s impossible for an outsider to hear the pounding of a heart. “You know that Carrington’s brother is his campaign director. He had an accident. Apparently both of his legs are broken. He’s stepping away from the campaign for now.”

A grunt from my father. He’s barely interested at this point. “The guy was lacking in competence anyway. Might not be the worst thing for Carrington.”

“But inconvenient this late in the game.” I pick up my scone again, nibbling at the edges as blood roars in my ears.

There is no doubt in my mind that Micah is responsible for Pierce Carrington’s ‘accident’. Micah doesn’t just act tough. Micah *is* tough. He was outraged. He even said that Pierce’s legs should be broken.

Maybe I should be furious that he found a way to pull this off. Violence repulses me.

At least, violence *usually* repulses me. But then I flash back to Pierce Carrington’s smug patrician face when he thought he had me cornered. I think about what kind of plans he might have had in store. I have no proof. He would have gotten away with it.

Suddenly, I decide that Micah has the right idea.

In the case of Pierce Carrington, violence sounds acceptable. Commendable. I actually feel the urge to applaud.

Something of my inner monologue must show on my face because Uncle Josh studies me. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m great. This scone is absolutely delicious.”

My father excuses himself to go pack, leaving me alone with Uncle Josh. I’m glad because I need to ask him a question. It’s a question that has been sitting on the troubled edges of my mind all week and so far I’ve failed to scrounge up the nerve to ask my father.

“Mind if I ask you a question?”

My uncle grins. “Always.”

“It’s about Mom.” The word feels funny on my tongue. Probably because it’s not a word I use, not ever. My mother

died before I could talk. I sure as hell never felt inspired to call Olivia that name.

His grin falters. "I'll try to answer, Tessie."

My father's bedroom is on the other side of the house. He won't hear us talking if I keep my voice low. It's likely Pierce Carrington was only flinging out insults in the hopes something would stick.

On the other hand, maybe not. I know very little about my mother. She's a photo in a frame. A timeless mystery.

I need a deep breath before pushing the words out. "Did she...struggle with mental health issues?"

Josh blinks. The question is not one he was expecting. "Not that I'm aware of. Diana never even seemed unhappy. She was very intelligent, very lovely. She grabbed everyone's attention when she walked into a room. Definitely had a flair for the dramatic."

The pang deep in my chest is not imaginary. How is it possible to miss someone you don't even remember?

I don't know how. You just do.

Even the circumstances surrounding her death are foggy. She'd gone to a friend's house that afternoon. A luncheon with her college sorority sisters. Harmless. She had a few drinks and sunk to the bottom of the swimming pool when no one was paying attention.

"Was I there that day? Was I with her the day she died?"

Another question he doesn't want to answer. "No, you weren't. Diana didn't bring you places."

He shifts in his chair and I get the impression he didn't mean to arrange his answer that way. The hint of a frown

between his brows makes me wonder if he's holding back.

But why would he, after all this time?

An alert lands on my phone the same second I spot a black Escalade pull up to the curb.

It's easier just to text my father than to shout across the house.

Your ride is here.

Within seconds, he wheels out a black suitcase, garment bag slung over one arm, grumbling that he cannot find his iPad. I offer him mine.

He snatches the tablet from my hand and exits while I'm in the middle of reciting the main points of his itinerary. I'll wait a little while and send him the list in writing. He'll be expecting this.

Uncle Josh yawns and says he needs to get back to the station for a little while. West Emerald isn't a hotbed of criminal activity but there are probably piles of paperwork sitting on his desk and my uncle takes every single aspect of his job very seriously. The old Ballerini work ethic.

He pauses by the door with his hand on his jaw, his eyes troubled, like there's something he still needs to say.

I pour my unfinished coffee in the sink. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all." He flips his uniform hat back on his head and winks. "You have a good afternoon, kid."

He whistles a West Side Story tune as he strolls back to the squad car parked in the driveway.

When he's gone, I take a nonchalant walk out to the front yard.

The abominable life sized cardboard campaign ad my father insisted on parking in the middle of the lawn tempts me to commit vandalism. In theory, there are rules in this highly exclusive, gated enclave of West Emerald. No tacky political signs allowed. Typical that an exception would be made for my father.

I'm not really out here to fret over the sign. No, I'm taking a casual look down the street, thirsting for the unlikely sight of Micah visiting his old house.

Pathetic?

Probably. It's not as if I don't know where to find him. Sooner or later we'll run into each other.

I just have no clue what to expect when we do.

When Conner called on Wednesday, something didn't occur to me until after we were finished talking. Even though he and Micah are joined at the hip, I never worried that Conner would have heard about my dirty deeds with his rowdy cousin.

Micah promised that secret would stay safe. Micah keeps his word. As unpredictable as he is, I never doubted him on that point.

From here, there's nothing to see at Matilda's house. Micah's old house.

Feeling foolish, I march back inside to get my purse and keys. There's something I want to do before trudging downtown to the stupid campaign headquarters.

6. Tess

Next year it will be a full decade. Ten years since Lita Marchenko suffered a blood clot in her brain and slipped into a coma.

We all tell ourselves that there's still some hope she'll emerge from her vegetative state.

We are also aware that hope grows fainter each year.

The front desk nurse at the long term care facility knows me by sight. She smiles in the midst of her phone conversation and pushes a visitor's badge across the counter.

During my years at West Emerald Prep, I was elected to every student government position I ever sought and graduated near the top of my class. But I had few close friends.

Lita, however, was a friend. A good one.

It hurts to remember how she was; hilarious and fearless and beautiful and radiant. Suspended now like a dragonfly in amber inside of a body that breathes but with a mind that lies dormant.

She's alone in her room, blinking occasionally at a mounted television she doesn't really see, her thick blonde hair cut to chin length, her long-fingered hands curled idly in her lap. I know there's no certainty about what she can hear in

this constant dream trance. Our one-sided conversations have been countless.

As I slide a narrow futon closer to her recliner, I hope she's not screaming silently inside her head at the first hint of my voice. I do tend to ramble on during my visits.

The television is often tuned to musicals and today plays *The Sound of Music*. Maria travels from the abbey with her guitar and proudly sings about having confidence in sunshine.

"How have you been?" This is my habit, to ask questions as if she can answer them.

Lita blinks, her heavy lidded eyes fixed to a bare spot on the wall. Back when Lita was still Lita, she hardly sat still, a beacon of vitality and endless quippy comments that none could rival.

A few weeks back, Dani and I sat in a downtown French café while Bree Lambeau dabbed tears from her eyes. Our friend's news wasn't sad, not sad at all. She'd fallen in love and planned to move in with her girlfriend. After so many years mourning the loss of her Lita and drifting aimlessly through relationships, unable to commit, she'd found a way to move on at last. Dani, always wiser than me in matters of the heart, hugged our friend and said, "Life is meant to be lived."

True. No matter who is gone and how. For those of us left behind, life is meant to be lived.

Whether Lita can hear me or not, Bree's news isn't mine to share. Instead, I babble about the upcoming election and Conner's football season and Dani's charity organization and how the weather has finally turned cool enough to wear a cardigan.

“Oh, and I had sex with Micah. You’re shocked, huh? I probably should have warned you before blurting that out. No one else knows. Dani doesn’t even know. But it really happened. We had sex in his apartment and it was the hair-on-fire, can’t catch your breath variety that I always thought people were exaggerating about. I’m kind of amazed to find out it’s real.”

A wheeze of laughter enters the room.

I flinch and shut my eyes. “Haven just heard every word I said, didn’t she?”

The throaty voice is filled with amusement. “Lucky for you, Haven isn’t too analytical when it comes to fucking.”

Lita’s identical twin sister slides into the room looking like she’s dressed for Halloween a few weeks early, her costume a match for a vampire temptress or perhaps Morticia Addams.

But Haven is neither.

This is just her style now; a skintight black dress with a neckline two inches above her bare nipples, hair dyed an unnatural red, makeup fierce. A one-hundred-and-eighty-degree swing from her polo-shirted volleyball days at West Emerald Prep.

“Shove over.” She plops down on the futon.

I scurry to the opposite corner. “I wondered why I didn’t see you around today.”

“Just ran out for lunch.” She leans forward to check her sister, then sinks back into the cushion.

Haven and Lita, opposites in personality, used to fight often.

No, that makes it sound like they squabbled over whose plaid skirt was in the dryer.

Lita and Haven were like Superman and Lex Luthor. Godzilla and Mothra. Obi-Wan and Vader.

I've seen them destroy entire rooms of furniture during their knock down brawls while they shrieked appalling obscenities at each other.

Then came the devastation of Lita's coma.

I've never seen Haven cry over her twin, not once. But her agony is undeniable. She monitors Lita's care and visits every weekend without fail.

Haven Marchenko isn't easy to describe. With her beloved sister adrift in a permanent twilight sleep, Haven turned to the unseemly world of her father's east side crime empire. She wasn't the most pleasant person in high school. Now she's this semi-terrifying version of a modern mafia madam.

These days I have no difficulty picturing Haven circling some guy's head with piano wire and smiling as he gags out his last breath. She would scare the shit out of me if she didn't seem to tolerate my company more than she tolerates most people.

I gnaw my lip before making a plea. "I beg you not to repeat anything you have just heard."

She scoffs. "As if I can't wait to dial up all the members of your fucking Scooby gang to spill the gossip."

Haven despises Dani for reasons that only make sense in Haven's weird brain. Or at least she used to. More recently, she and Dani are on polite terms, although I would never call them friends.

I'm unsure if the word 'friend' even exists in Haven's vocabulary.

Anyway, Dani isn't Haven's primary issue with my inner circle. Way back in the hormonal bowels of high school, Haven had a huge crush on Conner. Conner, infinitely flirtatious and always willing to get naked with a pretty girl, casually hooked up with her at a party, perhaps not understanding just how crazy she was about him. Typical teen drama ensued. Conner tried to make things right with her. Haven decided she'd rather hate him instead.

For all I know, she still hates him. I'm not going to ask.

I curl my knees under me. "It was a heat of the moment kind of a thing. You've seen Micah. Can you blame me?"

Haven examines her long nails, filed to a point, painted glossy black. "Micah's prime real estate for sure but I tend to avoid dick that comes with complications."

"Good to know."

She lowers her nails and studies me instead. "Sometimes he takes security shifts for me at the club."

"You mean your strip club?"

She cracks a smile. "I smell judgment."

"No, not judging."

"Yes, the strip club. As for Micah, he's reliable and quick to knock pests to the pavement. And because I like you, Tess, I'll add that he's not easily sidetracked by eye candy. I don't keep men on the payroll unless I know they aren't animals. Micah can be trusted to never touch the girls." Haven leans in. "Even when they *beg* him to. Which they do. Often."

Hearing the news of Micah's chastity pleases me more than it should. I would have guessed the opposite to be true. "I have no right to be worried either way. Micah and I aren't together."

Uttering these words is somehow unpleasant. I feel an inexplicable twinge of regret.

Haven turns smug. "If you say so."

I want to escape this topic so I mention the election. Haven yawns loudly, an unsubtle message that this conversation does not meet her standards.

Her family has contributed a hefty dollar amount to my father's campaign but Haven might be unaware of this. My father shrugged off my concerns when I brought up the fact that the Marchenko family are not the kind of people you want to owe favors to.

To him, money is money and the source is irrelevant. There are times when I wonder why he insisted that I need to manage his campaign. He dismisses nearly all of my advice.

When a nurse arrives to escort Lita to her daily physical therapy session, it feels like a cue for me to leave. Haven stretches her long legs out on the futon as soon as I stand.

"Be a pal and flip the light off when you leave." She's already closing her eyes.

Given the fact that she runs a strip club that operates all hours of the night, she probably has some sleep to catch up on. I'd say it's likely she's wearing the same outfit she wore last night and hasn't been to bed yet.

I'm about to leave her alone when I spot a cozy knit blanket left behind on Lita's armchair. Feeling oddly maternal,

I use it to cover Haven's exhausted form. Lita, I know, would approve.

Haven's forehead ripples but then smooths out. I nearly miss hearing her softly murmured words. "Thank you."

Then I shut the light off as she asked.

I'm still trekking back to my car when my phone pings with a text from Dani.

Avoiding me?

The guilt is instant.

No, I haven't been avoiding her. I just haven't been as talkative this week out of fear that the person who probably knows me better than anyone else in the world will guess the truth.

When Dorothy Ann Gallagher moved to the neighborhood at the start of junior year I felt like I had been granted my biggest wish. Growing up at the mercy of Micah and his cousins, constantly being tossed into the lion's den of their rough and tumble boy world, all I wanted was a real best friend of my own.

Well, I hit the best friend jackpot with Dani. She's funny and she's wise and she's loyal. I admire her and I'm proud to call her my best friend. I can tell her absolutely anything.

Well, usually.

The words, "I fucked your brother," just don't roll right off the tongue.

Rather than tap out an awkward message, I duck into my car and call her directly.

She picks up immediately. “Are you live from the campaign trail?”

“Nope, although I have to swing by headquarters today. Dad’s on the rally circuit all weekend. You haven’t found a new best friend to replace me, I hope.”

“Please. As if my Tess could be replaced.”

I smile. “I’ve missed you.”

“Prove it. Come over tomorrow. You live two blocks away and I hardly see you. We’re having a watch party for Conner’s away game.”

I chew my thumbnail and try to sound casual. “So who will be there?”

“The usual cast of characters. Uncle H and Matilda will come by for at least a little while with Charlotte. Did I already tell you she has a new puppy? She’s bringing him. Cecile hasn’t been feeling well and doesn’t seem to want company so she’ll be at home. Alta might shock us and show up. And of course Micah will be there but I know you’re skilled at avoiding each other.” She laughs.

Oh Dani, if only you knew...

Dani takes my silence as an opening. “Come on, Tess. You’re going to put yourself in the hospital from overwork. You have to come. I’m making your favorite vegetable dip.”

“The one with the water chestnuts?”

“Yes. I’ll even put it in a sourdough bread bowl and I won’t let anyone else touch it but you.”

I have to smile at the eagerness in her voice.

And she’s right. I work too much.

At a job I absolutely hate.

Did I think that out loud?

“I’d love to come over and watch the game. What time?”

“Game starts at six but feel free to show up any time before that. And bring your appetite. Gage thinks I’ve gone overboard on the food.”

“I’ll be there. And I’ll eat my fair share.”

“You better.”

There’s a bubble of excitement in my belly as I start my car.

I would have accepted Dani’s invitation whether Micah was going to be there or not. But all week I’ve struggled with one inescapable fact.

The more I think about Micah, the more I want to see him again.

7. Micah

My little sister pulls on my arm and then whispers like she's sharing a state secret. "Total went on the floor."

"Total did what to the floor?"

"SHHHH." She points.

A small puddle is visible in the hallway leading to the kitchen.

Total stands at my feet, nubby tail wagging, proud of his accomplishment.

Charlotte heaves a huge nine-year-old sigh. "Mother will be so mad."

Matilda shouldn't care. This isn't even her house. It's Dani and Gage's house. And besides, puppies tend to piss all over shit, don't they? But common sense never interferes with Matilda's tantrums.

I pat Charlotte's shoulder. "Let's go get something to clean this up."

Total tries to chew on my shoes while I mop up his piss with a wad of paper towels. Matilda is in the middle of giving Dani a lecture on interior decorating when she notices me crawling around on the floor.

“Oh no! The dog didn’t pee on the hardwood, did he? By the way Dani, the new flooring really is gorgeous, although I wish you had listened to my recommendation and selected the style with blonder tones. It would have warmed up the space so much more.”

There is no need to answer her and I don’t. I wipe up the cleaner I sprayed and hope that’s good enough for Dani’s new floor.

I’m washing my hands in the kitchen sink when Dani walks in.

She opens the fridge and withdraws a platter of cut vegetables. “Did you see Cecile today?”

“I stopped there first. Didn’t stay for more than a couple of minutes. She was tired.”

My grandmother has yet to share the news with everyone that she’s terminally ill. Dani will be heartbroken. Maybe that’s why Cecile keeps putting it off.

Dani lowers her voice. “Did you see when the puppy jumped in Alta’s lap? I had to go hunt down a lint brush because she freaked out over the sight of dog hair on her sweater.”

No surprise. Gage’s mother is as sour as they come. “A night of football doesn’t seem like Alta’s social engagement of choice.”

Dani examines the veggie tray and dumps a few more cherry tomatoes into the mix. “It’s not. But ever since Gage and I got married she’s been making an effort.”

“What’s that look like?”

“Uncomfortable.”

I dry my hands on a dishtowel. “Is everyone here?”

“Tess is coming. Didn’t I tell you that? Be nice to her. I mean it.”

“I’ll try.”

She pokes a finger in my chest. “Do more than try. Her father’s damn campaign is taking a toll on her. She’s stressed enough as it is.”

Funny. I think I know just how to un-stress her.

The doorbell rings. Dani lets me take the veggie tray from her hands and carry it out to the living room where there’s a long table packed with food.

Matilda opens the door and in walks Tess Ballerini with a bottle of wine. “From the Silverton Winery up by Lake Poppy.”

“Ooh.” Matilda steals it from her hands and scans the label. “The 2015 Merlot, one of my favorites. Henley, sweetheart, would you mind opening this?” She passes the bottle to her husband, who does what he’s told like always.

Charlotte is excited to show off Total and Tess makes a fuss over the puppy, crouching on the floor to scratch his ears. Charlotte tries to persuade Total to perform tricks but the dog only sniffs and turns in circles like he’s picking out the next place he’d like to urinate.

“Outside.” Matilda snaps her fingers. “Charlotte, take the dog outside.”

Tess straightens up and finally glances in my direction. I could swear she blushes.

I have to admit, the fantasy Tess who has been living in my head all week and doing filthy things at my command isn’t as

good as the real version.

She went to some trouble tonight, wearing more makeup than usual and a blue party dress that's a sexy step up from her usual librarian-inspired wardrobe. Her dark hair is loose and bouncy, falling past her shoulders, just the way I like it.

Dani seizes Tess for a hug while Gage opens up the long glass slider to the back patio. They've got a hell of a setup out there with a retractable big screen and a giant stone fireplace.

I stand by the buffet table and say nothing because that's what I would normally do. Don't want to raise any red flags.

"Looks like I overdressed." Tess's eyes keep cutting to me.

I stare back at her.

It's true that everyone else wears comfortable game day clothes. Even Matilda is semi-casual in a pink and white football jersey with jeans and pink heels.

Meanwhile, Tess looks like she got lost on her way to host a cocktail party. Not that I'll be complaining about a view of her legs. That will give me something to think about during commercials.

Matilda is now grilling Tess about the campaign. I guess that's her right, considering she's got a lot invested. I have a feeling I'd laugh if I knew the exact dollar amount my mother had funneled to Stuart Ballerini's power quest. I'm sure she's salivating over the thought of how good it will be for business once she has the city mayor tucked away in her custom designed handbag. There's hardly a corner of downtown Em City that doesn't have Yellow Brick fingerprints on it and I know she's got her eye on gobbling up more.

Henley returns with the open wine bottle. He seems stupidly proud of himself for being useful. Matilda sends him

back to the kitchen to retrieve glasses.

Matilda now has a grip on Tess's arm and drags her my way. "You are such a credit to your father. And what a beauty. I cannot *believe* you are still single. Micah, can you believe our Tess is still single?"

Ah, this old game.

The '*Don't You Think Tess Is Pretty?*' skit that was acted out countless times throughout my adolescence. Matilda openly wished I'd take an interest in Tess, thinking some of Tess's hypercompliant energy might rub off on me.

Of course I could see that she was pretty. I'm not fucking blind. Tess was always one of the best looking girls at West Emerald Prep.

"No, I can't believe Tess is still single."

I don't mean to sound like a dick but now that I'm hearing the words out loud I sound exactly like a dick.

Tess must agree. She throws me a funny look.

Matilda is already finished with this conversation. She notices Charlotte chasing Total around the dining table so she runs over there to make sure no one has too much fun.

Out on the patio, Gage has the fireplace going and the screen set up. Alta and Dani have already wandered outside.

Tess lingers by the buffet table as the first notes of the national anthem blast from the television. "Are you guarding the food?"

I take a step to the right. "Help yourself."

She selects a celery stick and swirls it in a puddle of vegetable dip. She watches my face as she flicks out her

tongue and *very* slowly licks the dip off.

FUUUUCK.

And just like that I have a semi.

She sucks the stick for a few seconds before allowing it to pop out of her mouth. Then she smiles, like she's just won a contest.

I've been wondering nonstop how things would be the next time I saw her.

Now I have the answer.

She's been thinking about that night a whole lot and she wants me to know it.

Playing it cool in case someone is looking, I snag a handful of honey roasted nuts from a ceramic bowl. "Campaign going well?"

"The most recent polls are favorable." She cocks her head and holds my eye. "Unfortunate for the opposition, losing their campaign manager so late in the game. Apparently two broken legs are an impediment to job performance."

"Two broken legs, huh?" I toss a nut in my mouth and crunch. "Poor guy."

Pierce Carrington was unhappy to confront a squad of men in ski masks just outside his penthouse condo when he ventured out for his daily early morning run. I could have handled the task myself but wanted to make the ordeal extra terrifying for the bastard so I paid off three pals from the gym with the cash from my last fight.

Money well spent.

We dragged him to the nearest stairwell and tossed him down a narrow flight. When I was sure he wouldn't be walking again anytime soon, I crouched down by his ear while he cried so I could let him know where things stand.

“Count yourself lucky, motherfucker. If I ever hear about you trying to drug another woman I'll be back. And next time I'll take your shriveled balls as a souvenir.”

Then I flashed a knife just to make him scream.

Which he did.

He also pissed himself so that was a bonus.

I figured he'd never tell the truth and risk rumors of his misdeeds. He knows he had this coming. The story he fed to the press was that he tripped over his shoelaces. Just a clumsy accident, *HAHAHAHA!*

Tess appears unbothered by the fate of her archrival. She presses her lips together to try to keep from smiling.

Dani pops her head inside. “Game time. Can you guys grab the chips?”

Tess smiles at her best friend and struts to the patio with her arms around a bowl of potato chips. I hang back and admire the shape of her ass.

Maybe Total is offended by my crappy manners. He trots over and fires a volley of ear splitting barks up at me.

“Micah, you have to sit with me.” Charlotte starts pushing me out the patio door. Total bites my ankles on the way.

There's no shortage of comfortable seating on the patio. The sun is on its way down and the temperature is about to drop by about twenty degrees so there's good reason to have the fireplace going.

Tess has chosen the cushioned chair closest to where Dani cuddles on a loveseat with Gage. Charlotte insists that I need to share the hanging porch swing with her. Total wedges his furry body between us.

Alta sits apart, as far away as she can be and still technically be part of the gathering. I've never been bothered by my aunt's indifferent attitude. In my book, cold and unfeeling is better than fake and phony. At least you always know where you stand with Alta. There's a guarantee you won't stand anywhere good, but whatever.

The Cyclones will have the ball first. It's always wild to see Conner up there on the screen. He's serious about the game, both steadfast and focused. On the first play he fires a bullet straight into the hands of a wide receiver who runs it up the field for another twenty yards.

Matilda jumps up to cheer and nearly dumps her glass of wine on her husband's head. Gage claps loudly and Dani kisses him. Total decides he'd like to occupy my lap. I hope he doesn't opt to take a piss while he's there.

Charlotte is unsure of the rules of the game. I'm don't mind explaining. When I sneak a glance at Tess, I notice she's watching us.

Total is comfortable enough to help himself to a nap. For a little dog, he sure snores like a bastard.

Conner and the Cyclones dominate throughout the first half. Charlotte begins yawning and leans her head on my shoulder. When Henley sees this, he stands and announces it's a school night. Charlotte needs to get to bed soon.

A scowl of irritation crosses my mother's face but Henley wins this one. One feather in his cap is that he's not a rotten

father. He picks up the sleeping Total and Charlotte makes me pinky swear that I'll come over to see her again real soon.

Kills me every time, the fact that she gets so lonely. I'm grateful to Dani and Gage for staying here in the neighborhood to help look out for her.

Alta has barely said a word as she sits on the periphery and scrolls through her phone. But she doesn't leave so I guess she's where she wants to be.

Now that I'm not hosting kids and puppies any longer, I'm free to let my mind wander.

Tess occupies her chair like she's at a business meeting. Spine straight, legs crossed at the ankle, hands in her lap.

I'd like to wreck her makeup, mess up her hair, shove that prissy dress up to her tits and push my face between her legs.

In the middle of the third quarter, Dani is dismayed to see that the chip bowl is empty. She rises to go get another bag from the pantry but Tess volunteers to get it herself. Dani smiles at her best friend and snuggles close to Gage.

Tess steps through the patio door and the ball is snapped. Conner sends a bomb into the end zone where it's promptly caught.

No one pays attention when I go inside, acting like I'm heading for the bathroom.

Instead, I take a detour to the kitchen.

The pantry is the size of a bedroom. Tess stands in the middle with her hands propped on her hips as she scans the floor to ceiling shelves.

She flinches, instantly flustered, when she sees me. "I've never seen a color coded pantry before."

“Courtesy of my OCD cuz.” I point behind her at a high shelf. “There’s what you’re looking for.”

She turns, spots the red and white bag of barbecue potato chips and rises on her toes to reach it. “Did you have a good week, Micah?”

Listen to her talking all casual like I didn’t taste her pussy last weekend.

“Sure. Did you?”

“Yes.” She can’t quite reach the chips, even on tiptoe in her heels. “Just busy.”

I move in and reach over her head, plucking the bag off the shelf with ease. I drop it into her waiting hands.

We could waste an hour making polite conversation or I could just get to the point. I put my hand on her, flattening my palm on her stomach.

She inhales with a shudder.

Then she stiffens when my hand goes lower, straying between her legs.

“And how is *she*?” I bend my head to breathe in the vanilla scent of her hair while I stroke her through her dress.

Tess leans back, giving in to my control. Her voice is a breathy whisper. “Missing you.”

I press closer, right into her back, showing her how I’m hard enough to bruise her skin if I want. “Let’s fix that tonight.”

She nods, no hesitation at all. “My house is empty until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good.” My cock enjoys the thought of getting her filthy inside her dipshit father’s house.

But right now I need her to be so fucking worked up she’ll be walking out of here crooked.

My hand dives beneath her dress. She chokes out a moan when I find a sensitive spot.

I cluck my tongue. “Don’t understand why you wore panties when you knew you’d be seeing me, Tessie. They just got all wet and ruined, didn’t they?”

She moves her hips, trying to bear down on my hand. She breathes out a hiss. “Yes.”

“Yes what? You know I like to hear it.”

“Yes, my panties get wet when I see you.”

My thumb finds an elastic edge and ventures inside. She’s so slick and open she must be aching.

This makes me smile. And then I dip one finger inside her. It slides deep with ease.

The chip bag falls from her hands, dropping on the floor with a crackle. She goes limp against my chest. Making her come would probably take about three meaningful pumps of my hand.

But I want to save that for later. Let her spend an hour squirming and fretting over what she has to look forward to.

When I withdraw my hand, she lets out a strangled moan and grips the pantry shelf like she’s barely able to stay upright. A curtain of hair falls over her face but she flips it aside just in time to watch me suck my finger. The one that was inside of her a few seconds ago.

I don't know if she's shocked or frustrated but she gapes at me in silence. I've actually silenced Tess Ballerini. Who knew it was this easy?

I wink at her, feeling pretty fucking triumphant, before turning to listen at the doorway for a few seconds, making sure no one is around to see me walking out of here.

“Hey, Micah?”

When I turn around there's a ball of pink satin material clutched in her right hand.

“You might as well keep these.” She throws her panties at me.

They are damp and still warm from her body. They get tucked in my back pocket. “Just so you know, Tessie, you won't ever be getting these back. They're mine now.”

Fuck, the way she looks at me; her lips parted, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining.

Right now I bet she would follow me anywhere, do anything I demanded. The possibilities make my head spin.

There is still a game happening, though, and if we're gone any longer someone might start to wonder where the real party is.

I'm back in my seat before Tess returns. She carefully smooths her dress down before sinking into her chair. Then she keeps her eyes on the game and primly sits with her hands clasped together on her knees.

Dani reaches over to playfully smack her leg. “You look so gorgeous tonight.”

She does. She really does. Tess is beautiful without even trying but tonight there's an added layer of brazen sex appeal.

I have trouble taking my eyes off her and concentrating on the game. The fact that my cock doesn't want to stand down has something to do with that too.

Dani has no clue but not everyone is fooled. Gage is too damn smart. He looks at me, looks at Tess perched on the edge of her chair, blushing with her legs tightly pressed together, then looks back at me. He folds his arms and sits back.

I don't think he's angry. Why would he be?

But the pieces have clicked together in his head now, from my Pierce Carrington project to the way Tess and I took a short field trip inside the house at the same time.

The eyebrow he raises at me says, *You're really doing this?*

I stare back at him without moving a muscle. *Yup and I can't be stopped.*

He'll get the message.

Since I won't be driving far, I polish off two beers while watching Conner tear Miami a new asshole. Alta grows bored and decides to leave in the middle of the fourth quarter. I never take it personally when she fails to say goodbye.

The Cyclones win by a score of forty-five to seventeen. A reporter tries to corner a sweaty, grinning Conner for some lame questions but his teammates keep stopping by to smack his back.

Then the reporter asks him THE question.

"Last year you were shot by your own mother moments before her death. How has this affected your ability to focus?"

"Son of a bitch." Gage throws a wadded napkin at the screen.

Conner's smile falters and I crush the beer can between my palms because I can't crush that damn reporter's head. No one should have to answer a screwed up question like that. The constant remarks about Aunt Edie have subsided over time but now and then these nasty fuckers sneak one in.

Conner's never one to let his temper show. "I just do my best to get the job done."

The reporter tries to squawk out another question, but Conner steps back from the microphone and retreats into his sea of teammates.

Tess is careful to avoid looking at me as she gets to her feet. "Thanks so much for hosting. I had fun."

Dani jumps up. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, I should."

Now they hug. I don't know what the deal is with women and hugging. Gage doesn't expect a hug every time we run into each other for fuck's sake.

"You didn't walk over, did you?" Dani asks when they're finished with their Best Friends Forever embrace.

"I did."

"Let me get my keys. I'll drive you home."

"No need. It's two blocks."

"It's two blocks in the dark, Tess."

"I'll do it." I shake my keys and give everyone my best *'Look at me not being an asshole'* face. "Tess, I can drop you off on my way out."

Dani smiles, pleased with my sudden aptitude for politeness.

Tess also gives me a smile but it's a different kind. "If you're sure it's no trouble, Micah."

"No trouble. I don't mind giving you a ride anytime."

Gage nearly strangles on his laugh. He receives a warning glare.

Tess is also having trouble keeping her composure.

Only Dani is clueless as she picks up the empty chip bowl. "Good night, you guys."

I motion to Tess. "After you."

8. Micah

I was probably in grade school the last time I set foot in Tess's house.

Thinking back, I believe I was banned after ruining one of her birthday parties. The boys and I had a good time freeing the petting zoo and popping the inflatable slide. Matilda yelled for about six hours.

Tess has been fiddling with her phone since I started my truck. "You can park in the garage. Plenty of room."

"You're turning off the security cameras so your dad won't see I'm here, aren't you?"

She looks up with an apology written in her eyes. Tess shouldn't follow her father into politics. She wouldn't know how to lie. "He doesn't usually bother to check the cameras when he's out of town but yes. I did."

I don't give a rat's ass how Ballerini feels about me fucking his daughter. She's a fully functioning adult. She shouldn't allow him to keep her on such a short leash.

Tess interprets my silence as hurt. She lays a hand on my thigh. "I don't want you to think I'm ashamed of you."

"Why not?" I pull her hand to my cock instead. "You should be."

She actually laughs. But she also takes her hand away. “Garage is open now. Pull in next to my car.”

There’s a different energy about being with her tonight.

Last time we collided in the heat of the moment. The very definition of impulsive. Tonight is all intentional. I even stuffed a few condoms in my wallet once I knew I’d be seeing her.

While Tess unlocks the door I consider bending her over right here and now. When I remember that her panties are in my back pocket, my cock swells.

As I’m tossing around these fun ideas, Tess gets through the door and disappears into a dark hallway.

Something occurs to me that hadn’t crossed my mind before.

This was Olivia’s house too. At least for a while. I forget how long she was married to Tess’s dad. Around six or seven years. She was Tess’s stepmother, which adds another fucked up layer to the saga. I don’t know why, but I’ve never given much thought to how Tess must have been affected by Olivia’s deep dive into depravity.

A light flips on inside the house. If I stand out here in the garage any longer Tess will get curious about what’s keeping me.

She’s slipping her heels off when I find her in the living room. The place hasn’t changed much on the inside, still looks like it’s been vomited on by a beige monster. Matilda would be horrified by the blandness.

Tess, quick and cute in her bare feet, is already halfway up the stairs. “Aren’t you coming?”

Fuck yeah, I'll be coming on a lot of things.

But first my eye is drawn to the photos hanging in the stairwell. There's Tess in various stages of childhood. Thank god no pictures of Olivia are in sight.

Then I pause at a closeup of a beautiful redhead. Her head is tilted and there's a cunning sparkle in her green eyes, like she knows a secret the rest of us don't. Though she bears little resemblance to her daughter, I know who she is without being told.

At least her picture is allowed to stay up. My mother eliminated all photographic evidence of my father within days of his murder. Maybe she found his face too painful in the gruesome aftermath. She never thought about how I might feel.

Tess pauses at the top of the stairs, notices where I'm looking. "I don't remember her. I still wish I did, even if it would make the loss hurt more."

"You go to sleep now. We'll be up at the crack of dawn to get those bluegill. Your daddy loves you."

The last words he ever said to me. Other than all the screaming a couple of hours later.

In a few more steps I see Tess's mother again. This time she's got company. She beams as she stands beside West Emerald's current police chief in a cap and gown. He's so young there that it must have been his high school graduation. The wannabe Emerald City mayor stands on Josh Ballerini's other side, wearing his standard bogus politician grin.

Tess probably doesn't know that her uncle called me, right after the truth came out that I wasn't the one who set the freaking fire at the West Emerald Golf Club years ago. He'd

been the arresting officer the day I was dragged from my mother's house. He felt bad, wanted to apologize. His precious justice system had failed.

That guy's law and order conscience is his own fucking problem. Not sorry I hung up on him.

And there's no need to bring up any of that shit tonight.

Tess has already moved on to her bedroom, which looks like the cave of a fifteen-year-old girl. Lots of pastel colors, shelves full of trophies and framed motivational cat posters with lame captions like, "If you believe it can be done then you can do it." Doesn't make a damn bit of sense but I wouldn't take advice from a cat anyway.

She flashes a playful smile as she closes the bedroom door behind me. Her closet is open and I see familiar colors amid the neat line of dresses and sweaters.

"You still have your school uniform."

"Yup." She looks up at me and winks. "Still fits too."

I believe it. Her body is toned and compact and firm. My eyes skim over her. She has the kind of sweet little tits that feel good being cupped in my palm. Or better yet, filling my mouth.

We'll get there.

Right now the two beers I drank earlier have found my bladder. "Just need to have a quick nature call."

She motions to the attached bathroom. "Be my guest."

Tess's bathroom hurts my eyes. It's like an explosion of sunshine. There's yellow flowered wallpaper and fluffy yellow bath rugs and a yellow shower curtain.

After rinsing lemon-scented soap off my hands, I dry them on a yellow hand towel.

Then I open the door and receive a shock.

She waits in the middle of the room with her hands primly clasped in front of her. She's also wearing her old prep school uniform, plaid skirt and all. She even added white knee socks.

Tess clears her throat and tucks her hair behind her ears like she's nervous. "Micah, thank you so much for coming over on such short notice."

Huh?

She stares at me, her eyes wide and innocent.

Now I get it.

We're playing.

All right.

We can play.

I shut the door behind me and lean against the wall, crossing my arms and channeling my lost years as an obnoxious teenager. "How long do I have to fucking wait for you to tell me what this is about, Tess?"

"We've known each other forever, right?"

"All our lives."

She takes a deep breath, walks over, touches my arm. "I know we're not friends, but I was hoping you might be willing to do me a favor."

I'm sure I know where this is going. And I'm ready to bust through the zipper in my pants. "What kind of a favor?"

Tess chews her lip and her lashes flutter. “I’ve decided it’s time I lost my virginity.” She raises her eyes and clutches my shirt with a beseeching look. “Will you *please* help me, Micah?”

She’s crazy, this girl.

In the best way.

“Of course I’ll help you.” I pull my shirt over my head. “I’m really glad you came to me.”

She drinks in the sight of my bare chest, licks her lips. “I was so afraid you’d say no.”

“Not a chance.” I open my pants while she watches. “And don’t worry, this will stay between us.”

She gasps and covers her mouth.

“Something wrong?” I stroke my cock, running my thumb over the tip and finding a bead of pre-cum.

When she lifts her eyes again they’re full of panic. “I just wasn’t expecting...I mean, are you sure all of that will fit?”

Dying, I’m fucking dying.

“It’ll be tight at first, Tessie, but then you’ll feel so good it won’t matter.”

She bobs her head and chews the corner of her lip. “Okay, if you say so.”

“Trust me. I’ll teach you everything. Now take your shirt off.”

She obeys slowly and it’s hot, this shy act as she exposes a virginal white satin bra.

“You’re beautiful.” I’m not playing a role when I say this.

She walks backwards until she hits the bed. Then she takes a seat, opens her knees and gazes at me with those big brown eyes. “Micah, just promise you’ll be gentle with me.”

That just takes the cake. I can’t stay in character anymore. With a cough of laughter I yank a condom from my wallet right before I leave my pants in a puddle on the floor.

She shrieks when I charge the bed and tackle her. Then my mouth covers hers and a moan vibrates in her throat when she feels my tongue. Her legs wrap around my waist and she moves her hips in search of my cock.

She can have it. In a minute.

First, I want a mouthful of her tits. I shove one satin bra cup aside and tease the nipple with my tongue.

Her hands are in my hair. Her voice becomes dreamy. “I thought about you all week.”

She’s not playing a part now. She’s being real. I can’t name the feeling that churns in my chest but it’s there.

I take a break from sucking her tits and get up on my elbows. “I thought about you too.”

Not like that’s a declaration of love. But she smiles just the same.

My cock is right where it should be, ready to slide home. “You really want me to be gentle?”

She smirks. “Don’t you dare.”

Fine with me.

The first thrust is rough enough to be vicious. I pause to confirm she really wants to get pounded like this and she arches her back with impatience, gripping my arms, tightening

her legs around my waist to the point I can't stop a groan from ripping out of my throat.

This girl sure doesn't make it easy to hold the beast at bay. In order to avoid coming too soon I have to sidetrack myself with random thoughts, like the adrenaline rush of stepping into the ring and the smell of my neighborhood on garbage day.

I don't need to keep this up for long because Tess is already on the verge. Within two minutes her muscles tighten while she shuts her eyes. I've seen enough of her to understand she's getting close to her peak. There's one sexy tit already free of her bra and I liberate the other one, reaching around to pinch the bra clasp and then throwing the whole satin thing off the bed.

There's nothing sexier than watching her go over the edge, trembling and crying out. I rise up on my palms so I can see better while hammering away.

This time she doesn't try to cover her face with a pillow. She lets me watch every moan from her mouth and every quake of her body. She's on her way down from the cataclysm when I follow her. The fevered explosion is so long and crazed that I wind up sending my fist into the wall before sliding back down into sanity.

Then, because I don't want to crush her, I roll to my back, panting.

Minutes go by with us lying side by side, just trying to breathe normally. Eventually, she sits up and sees the dent I just added to her wall.

I watch as she traces the crack. "I can fix that with a little spackle and paint."

Tess tosses her hair over her bare shoulder and gives me a stubborn look. “No. It’s my souvenir. I want to keep it.”

Laughing, I grab her in my arms. “You’re a freak. And I mean that as a compliment.”

She giggles. “Don’t tell anyone.”

My fingertips travel down the sweaty contours of her back. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes, you’re the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“I know that already. Wasn’t my question. Why don’t you let anyone see this side of you?”

She yawns and snuggles closer. “Public nudity is frowned upon.”

“Wiseass.” I lightly pinch her. “Since we were kids you’ve gone out of your way to be seen as prim and proper. You’re not. You’re all kinds of crazy fun. You’re sexy and sarcastic and exciting as hell. We grew up together and I had no idea.”

She’s silent.

The silence stretches on for so long that I start to wonder if I’ve pissed her off. That was not my intention.

Finally, she sighs. “Sometimes I think I’ve spent way too much energy trying to live up to an ideal. Perfect at everything. On an endless quest to avoid letting anyone down.”

“Maybe you should think about what *you* want more.”

“Maybe. I have a problem letting myself go. I can’t stand being thought of as a disappointment.” She props herself up on one elbow and gazes around the bright room with a vague frown. “Sometimes I don’t like this room. When I was little I

would have this recurring nightmare about my father dying and being buried under the stone angel in the West Emerald Cemetery alongside my mother. Even when the nightmares stopped that was still my primary fear for a very long time.”

My arms circle her, partly to keep her warm, partly to chase her shadows away. There’s that unidentified feeling crunching inside my chest again. “I can relate to nightmares.”

She hugs me back. “I know you can, Micah.”

That’s the thing about a girl who grew up alongside you; there’s no need to go to all the fucking trouble of explaining your life history to her. What you’ve been through, what you’ve done, what’s been done to you. Tess already knows about all the ugliest parts.

And yet she’s here with me anyway.

She settles in, curling her body into my side. “You don’t let many people see you either. I had no idea that there was a protective, sweet guy hiding beneath all that muscled ink and attitude.”

I nearly choke. “Think you got the wrong impression. There’s never been anything sweet about me.”

“Oh yes there is.”

“Fuck no.” I roll over on top of her. “You take that back.”

Underneath me, her grin is playful. A second later, I feel her hand on my balls.

Her grin widens. “Make me take it back.”

Her hand squeezes lightly.

I hiss out a breath. I use my knee to nudge her legs apart. “Take your punishment, little girl.”

“Gladly.” She massages my balls and runs her lips over my neck.

“Flip over. I want to see that ass in the air.”

“But I want to drive this time.” She sucks at my skin and wraps her warm hand around my cock. “Please?”

You’ll never hear me refusing that. There’s almost no effort required to seize her hips and pull her with me as I roll to my back. Her prep school skirt, the only thing she’s still wearing, fans out over my hips.

There are more rubbers in my wallet but my wallet is across the room in my pants and I don’t feel like getting it. I feel even less like getting it when she sinks down, taking my cock inside of her.

“That feels so good.” Her head rolls back. “Can you pull out if we keep going?”

Normally, I never wage dirty battles without armor. Sex without a condom is not the kind of risk I’m interested in.

But with her...

I don’t know, it’s just different.

“Start riding, honey. I’ll let you know when it’s time.”

I’m deep inside her now and the feel of her pussy is insane. Her hair falls over her sexy shoulders and her tits bounce as she concentrates on getting what she wants. I like how she’s not shy about chasing her orgasm. I run my hands over her thighs, pausing to press a thumb on her clit. She likes that and moves harder. She shuts her eyes and braces her palms on my chest.

She’s good at this, screwing the hell out of my cock with a hard and fast rhythm.

She's *too* fucking good. I won't last long if we keep going.

"Baby." I say this as a warning, locking my hands on her hips so I can move fast if I get too close.

"I'm there. Fuck, I'm so there." Tess digs her fingers into my chest and moves with such sexy abandon that I'm ready to ignite.

I feel each spasm as she clenches my cock and she's so wet it's fucking unreal.

Tess is still gasping when I have to break free. Grabbing a handful of her skirt, I push my cock into the fabric and come all over the thing.

"That was nice." She looks down and notices that I've defiled the remainder of her West Emerald Prep uniform.

With a wry grin, she unbuttons the skirt and tosses it away.

We're both pretty drained for now. Tess falls back to the mattress and nestles her body against mine.

Usually I'm keyed up after sex, never having much patience for anything tender. But it's relaxing to hold her close. I have no urge to jump out of her bed and escape.

"Micah, do you want a shock?"

"Sure, let's hear it."

She drops a kiss on my chest and then lays her cheek down. "I might like you a little bit."

This offhand confession makes me strangely happy and for a while I just lie there thinking about it.

By the time it crosses my mind that I should respond, she's fallen asleep. I stretch my right arm to reach for a fuzzy yellow

blanket that's draped over a desk chair and use it to cover her soft body.

She's so damn cute, sleeping there on my chest. After I switch off the nightstand lamp, I stare at the dark ceiling and wonder how I'll be able to get up without waking her.

Or if I should get up at all.

I don't really want to leave. And she didn't ask me to leave.

I'm still mulling this over when my eyelids grow heavy and squeeze closed.

9. Tess

When Dani hears that I need to stay in West Emerald all morning on Thursday to take meetings on my father's behalf, she insists on having me over for lunch.

The invitation feels like a sign to come clean.

Keeping secrets from Dani is a foreign concept. Since our prep school days, she's been privy to all the messed up mechanics of my life and vice versa. But I can no longer dismiss this thing with Micah as a lone impulse.

A one night stand is no longer a one night stand when it happens twice.

Dani serves chicken salad sandwiches on buttery croissants and we eat in the sunny kitchen nook amid crystal vases of fresh flowers. She's happily chattering away about the row of rosebushes she and Gage have planted all along the property to please Cecile, who adores roses even if she cannot see them.

"Call it a blatant bribe to entice her to visit more. She needs fresh air." Dani's tone is full of affection as she speaks of the woman who she sometimes refers to as her fairy godmother. She has no clue about the turmoil churning in my head as I pick off a fragment of a croissant.

No matter how many times I've rehearsed the words in my head they never start to sound any better. Might as well just spit them out and get it over with.

"I had sex with Micah."

Dani's mouthful of chicken salad shoots out, landing with a plop in her water glass.

Her lovely amber eyes are wide and frozen. She opens her lips but nothing comes out.

I wince. "Please don't hate me."

She just stares without blinking.

Panic sets in. "Oh shit, are you choking?" I jump out of my chair and dash to the other side of the table, frantically trying to cobble together half forgotten first aid knowledge.

She fends off my efforts to smack her on the back and manages to squeak out a word. "What?"

At least she's not choking. No, she's just gaping at me like I'm a serial killer. "I said I had sex with Micah."

"What?" she repeats.

I think I've broken her. I've broken my best friend.

Now miserable, I plop back into my chair. "I know. It caught me by surprise too. I've been agonizing over how to tell you. You can yell at me. Call me a slut. I can take it."

Her eyes bug out. "Tess, why in the hell would I call you a slut?"

"Just seemed like a possibility. Micah is sort of your brother, after all."

"Give me a break. Micah's a grown man. He knows what he's doing." She picks up her water glass, makes a face at the

chicken salad tumor at the bottom of the glass, and sets it aside. Then she folds her hands on the table and attempts to remove the look of horror from her face. “Sorry, I’m sure you don’t need the added drama. It’s just that I wasn’t expecting to hear this kind of news today.”

“I know you weren’t.”

“Actually, I wasn’t expecting to hear this kind of news ever.”

“I know that too.”

“Now that I think about it, I would have been less surprised to see crocodiles fall from the sky.”

“I get the picture, Dani. Here, take my water. You look like you need a drink.”

She accepts the glass. “Probably need something a little bit stiffer than this, but thanks.”

I watch as she takes dainty sips, like she’s trying to stall for time and absorb this revelation.

The least I can do is explain. “The night with Micah was just supposed to happen once, never to be mentioned again. But after the second night I’m not sure what to think.”

She lowers the glass. “So you had sex with Micah *twice*?”

“Yes. Well, not exactly. I mean, it was a lot more than twice. Honestly, I didn’t count how many times we technically did it.”

“I see,” she says.

She looks like she’d rather *not* see.

But someone else sees. And he’s received an earful.

Gage Silvestro, man of the shadows, stands at the threshold of the kitchen. He leans against the wall and gives the impression he's been there for a minute or two. While Gage is famous for his inscrutable poker face, I would guess that he still looks the opposite of surprised right now.

“Did you know?” I ask. “Did Micah tell you?”

Dani whirls around and sees her husband. “You *knew*? I can't believe Micah told you and you didn't tell me.”

“Relax.” Gage is unfazed. “Nobody told me a damn thing.”

Dani frowns at him. “But you somehow knew. I see it in your face.”

He shrugs. “The two of them were acting like dogs in heat on Sunday. I mean, fuck, the mood was palpable.”

Dani turns back to me. “Sunday?” A light bulb goes off. “Whoa, that's right. He drove you home. And I was so proud of him for being civil.”

“Oh, he was plenty civil.” I gesture to Gage, who looks as if the conversation might be starting to bore him. “Why don't you pull up a chair and we can all have a nice group chat about my sex life?”

“Nah, I'll pass.” He opens a cabinet, pulls out a bag of granola, then stops by to leave a tender kiss on his wife's cheek before escaping. Gage's curiosity about other people's personal business tends to be somewhat narrow.

Dani, however...

“You and Micah.” She says this like she's trying to understand words in a new language. “You and Micah!” She smacks the palm of her hand on the table.

“Shocking, I know. Believe me, it was unplanned.”

She’s becoming more interested, leaning in to hang on my every word. “And?”

“Okay, one night I was stranded on the east side. Bad situation. Conversation for another time. But Micah came to my rescue. We started talking and…”

She’s already shaking her head. “You two don’t talk. You fire insults back and forth like warring armies until someone volunteers to be a buffer.”

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“We were at his apartment. We talked. We flirted. A dare was issued and I took my clothes off. Micah picked me up with one arm and *oh my god*, he is so strong.”

While I need a moment to swoon in my chair at the memory, Dani stares.

I have to clear my throat before continuing. “Anyway, no one can argue with the fact that Micah is ridiculously hot. Next he carried me to his bed, uttered filthy words that I won’t torment you with and dropped his pants. I’ll let you draw your own conclusions about what happened next.”

Her expression says she’s torn between being fascinated and being queasy. “Agreed. Certain details do not need to be shared.”

“Right.” I’ve been shredding my croissant again. I drop the pieces on the plate. “Carnal facts aside, Micah surprised me. Yes, he’s a little rough around the edges but he’s also thoughtful. Considerate in his own way. Definitely protective. And he’s funny. Did you know that? Yes, you probably did.”

She gasps, actually *gasps*. “You like him. You *really* like him.”

I feel like a child being put on the spot in a crowded classroom. “Maybe I do.”

“Listen to that. Tess likes Micah. Might be more shocking than your first confession.”

“I know.” I push my plate aside so I can bury my face in my arms. “Okay, I like him a lot. I’m crazy about him. In fact, I might be closing in on the status of pathetically infatuated. Don’t look at me.”

“Tess.” She reaches out to pat my hair. “Stop hiding. You and Micah are two of my favorite people. There’s nothing wrong you enjoying each other’s, ah, company.”

I manage to lift my head. “Points to you for the diplomatic turn of phrase.”

“When are you seeing him again?”

“I don’t know. That part has been left up in the air. He spent the night on Sunday but I had to usher him out in a hurry at the break of dawn the next morning when my dad called to say he was on his way home early.”

“You haven’t talked since then?”

“No. I know he’s been busy this week. But I’ve been busy too.”

She nods. “I remember Gage saying that Micah has a fight coming up. He does tend to disappear when he’s in training mode.”

I fork a bite of chicken salad into my mouth so Dani won’t feel like her lunch efforts were wasted. “I don’t want to bother him.”

She's amused enough to snort out a laugh. "Since when does Tess Ballerini hesitate to go after what she wants?"

The chicken salad gets stuck in my throat. "When my pride won't allow me to appear needy."

"You're not needy. You're just a girl who likes a boy. And you know what? It's absolutely adorable. I know you, Tess. It's rare to hear that dreamy tone in your voice."

I set my fork down again. "It doesn't make any sense at all, does it?"

"What doesn't?"

"Me and him. We've had plenty of opportunities to get to know each other over the years and clashed at every turn. We couldn't be more different."

She plays with her long brown hair and gazes out the window at her newly planted rosebushes while considering the problem. "So what? Nobody's heart asks for permission before feeling something. In Micah's case, he's more complicated than most men. You know that. Like you said, it's not as if you two just met. But I don't see why you should wait for him to come to you. If you really like Micah, go for him."

"There's rather a significant sticking point. Micah hasn't given me any indication he's interested in something more than some fun on the side."

"Why not ask him?" She hands me a plate of homemade oatmeal raisin cookies. "Give him a chance. Now eat some of these cookies or else I'll cry."

Because I'm hungry and because I don't want her to cry, I eat three cookies.

Dani tries to entice me to hang around West Emerald for the afternoon. She wants to show me the building she and Gage are buying to house their charitable organization. Inspired by our dear friend, the mission of Lita's Angels is to fund research and provide relief for those who have suffered traumatic brain injuries.

I'd much rather spend this lovely fall afternoon with Dani than return to the tense chaos of campaign headquarters. But I'm the one who scheduled this afternoon's meeting with the social media team so I can't flake out. While videoconferencing has its uses, my theory is that weekly in person meetings tend to keep people on their toes.

Dani ties a couple of cookies up in a napkin. "He'll be at the gym today. I can pretty much guarantee it."

"You mean Micah?" I have no clue why I asked this question. There's no doubt who she's talking about.

She sends over an *oh please* look. "Yes. Micah. Your *lover*."

I pretend to gag. "Why do you have to use that word?"

"Because it's accurate. Micah is your *lover*."

"Stop. That word belongs in a soap opera from another generation."

She hands over the napkin-wrapped cookie tower. "Lover lover lover. Tessie has a lover."

"Sometimes you're mean." I hug her and escape with my cookies.

Campaign headquarters is a noisy den of commotion located on an upper floor of a downtown building that used to be a newspaper office. Plastered to every wall are bold, in-

your-face, all caps BALLERINI signs. I've grown sick of the sight of my last name.

Conversations nervously pause when I stroll through the aisle while eating Dani's cookies. My father only appears now and then to shake hands and deliver motivational floor speeches. In his absence, I suppose I'm the boss, although I dislike thinking of myself that way.

I've been a source of speculation from the beginning. Young, inexperienced, the candidate's daughter.

This question came up in the last debate. My father's answer ended up going viral, reverberating through the endless corridors of social media.

"You've asked why my daughter is such a critical part of my team. I'll tell you the truth, like I tell everyone the truth. If not for my child, I wouldn't be where I am today. Fatherhood has been my number one motivator to create a better future. She's the reason why I'm standing here, and why you can count on me to fight for you."

The cascade of clapping was deafening. The applause might have been a little less enthusiastic if the audience knew the answer had been pre-scripted by our speech writing team.

Brushing cookie crumbs from my finger, I wave at the heads popping up from grey cubicles and proceed to the conference room. For the next two hours I nod along through meetings and presentations while my mind keeps wandering back to Dani's words.

She's right. I've never been a shrinking violet, too timid to speak my mind.

Why shouldn't I be the one to break the ice and ask Micah how he feels?

Sex with him is incredible. I can admit that without being prompted.

But there were other moments too. Tender moments, or at least Micah's version of tenderness.

When he was outraged over what Pierce tried to do.

When he insisted on dropping me off at my car despite my protests.

When he asked me why I always hide pieces of myself.

When he listened as I told him about the stone angel.

When he held me as I slept.

And throughout all of that, I felt *something*.

Enough of *something* that I was sorry to see him go the next morning after we spent the night in my bed.

Once my meetings are over, I pause at the desk of the young office assistant. "I'll be scouting some rally locations on the east side."

She's the nail-biting anxious type. "Aren't you taking some security with you?"

"No need."

She's gawking at me as if terrified of the fallout should I get damaged on my east side field trip, still watching as I disappear into the elevator.

Though the east side is as navigable as a hedge maze and populated with dead ends and one lane alleys, I have a good memory when it comes to directions and don't use GPS unless necessary. After struggling through only a couple of wrong turns, I'm back in Micah's neighborhood.

Nobody would call this area quaint or pose here on a sidewalk for scenic selfies. There's a grubby, dim cast to the general landscape, as if the color saturation has been intentionally reduced.

The sight of Micah's building brings a rush of heat to my belly as I flash back to the night I saw it for the first time. The pinkish 'Vacancy' sign still blazes next door. If I turn between the buildings I know I'll spot the fourth floor balcony where I found Micah quietly sketching in the dark.

"You can trust me, Tess. I promise."

There's more than just crude arousal zinging through my senses. The flutter in my belly is more complex, potentially more dangerous. I'm nervous about seeing him. Making a fool of myself is never high on my wish list.

Micah said his gym is two blocks to the north but I have to squint at the washed-out signage to figure out that the squat structure with flaking window images of boxing gloves and athletic shoes is the place I'm looking for.

The nearest parking lot is next door in front a sex shop. Just outside, a man sits on a bench, dressed like a penis. He grows more animated at the sound of my car engine and stands up to wave.

Another time I might be interested in browsing the store called the Candee Shoppe. I'm a big fan of battery-operated toys. Still, I have to admit that there's not a piece of rubber in the world that has a prayer of making me feel half as good as Micah's cock.

It's possible that the door to Golden Wings Gym has never ever been in touch with any kind of cleaning substance. Pinching my fingers on the filthy metal handle, I swing it

outward and am instantly met with a fragrant blend of rubber and sweat.

The first room probably qualifies as a tiny lobby. Cheaply framed photos, some of them faded from decades past, hang on the walls in a haphazard fashion. A black rubber mat stretches over cracked linoleum and two metal folding chairs are crookedly parked in a corner. The man seated behind a high desk holds his phone with one hand. He's likely my father's age, maybe a little older, but the deep lines etched into his broad face tell the story of a hard life. His eyes flicker to me, then return to his phone screen.

"Not buying," he says.

Hinges creak as the door swings closed behind me. "I'm not selling."

He lifts his eyes again and this time there's some wariness. "Who are you looking for?"

"Micah Lyonne. I'm a friend of his."

The wariness fades. "Yeah, he's around but he's in the ring right now so don't bother him."

"Mind if I take a seat?"

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

My plan to sit down stalls when I see that one of the folding chairs has a broken leg and the other looks to have been smeared with a substance that might be chocolate or might be a biohazard.

Keeping the strap of my purse firmly settled over my shoulder, I choose to lean against the nearest wall instead. Unfortunately, my back brushes against a picture frame. The thing crashes to the floor, cracking the glass.

Using caution, I pick up the frame. The grainy photo features a trio of unsmiling men with their muscled, bare chests puffed out. I can't really stick it back on the wall with a broken frame so I ferry it across the small room.

The man's heavy brows furrow when I lay the broken picture frame on his desk.

"I'm really sorry. I can get you a new frame."

To my surprise, he chuckles. "I stare at that thing every day and somehow haven't seen it in years." He stabs a scarred finger at the middle man. "You've heard of Elijah Romero?"

"No. Who is he?"

He grins, flashing a gold tooth. "You're looking at him. I was a big deal in my day."

I see it now, the likeness between the young man in the photo with his gloved hands lifted in a fighting pose and the older man in front of me.

"I used to sweep the floors in this gym. Now I own it." He jerks his chin at me. "What do you do?"

"Realtor. Well, usually. At the moment I'm Stuart Ballerini's campaign manager."

Elijah scratches his head. "Don't know him."

"He's running for mayor of Emerald City in the upcoming election."

Now he yawns. "Didn't say I don't know who he is. Just don't *know* him."

The man is interesting. I try not to pass up opportunities to hear what people have to say if they're willing to talk. "If you

had to pick an issue that's most important to you and your community, what would it be?"

"My community." His face puckers. "How the fuck should I know? I only speak for myself."

"Well, what's important to you?"

Based on his flat expression, I'm not sure if he's mulling the question over or wishing I'd shut up and mind my own business.

Loud rustling and heavy footsteps interrupt the exchange. A shirtless man with a gym bag lazily flung over one shoulder stands three feet away, peering down at me. He's roped with muscle, clearly a fighter, and wears ink, not nearly as artful as Micah's. A gigantic blurry shamrock covers the left side of his chest. The right side is decorated with a faded flag in the colors white, green and orange. Ireland, to match the shamrock. But when he opens his mouth, it's a clipped New York-style accent that comes barking out.

"What's with the girl scout visit?" His eyes sweep over me with more scrutiny than I'd like.

"Not a girl scout," I say.

"What are you then, a fucking missionary?" He slinks too close and reeks of male sweat.

I know the type, wades through life thinking he's the most intimidating thing on two legs.

With my head up and refusing to give an inch, I stare into his dull hazel eyes. "No, I'm not a missionary either."

Elijan opens a drawer and drops the wrecked picture frame inside. "She's here to see Lyonne."

The other man's face splits into a cold smile. "Doubt it. She looks too spotless to crawl around in the gutter with him."

The comment annoys Elijah. "You're just in a mood because he knocked you down one time too many. Get over it, Halligan. You won't beat him."

The dynamic is clear. One of these men is a friend of Micah's. The other is not.

Halligan, whoever he is, takes the liberty of slithering even closer. One more inch and his sweaty arm will brush against my silk blouse. Even though I catch a spark of something alarming in the depths of his narrowed eyes, I stand my ground.

"If you and your bad breath could kindly back up a foot or two, it would be appreciated."

Elijah laughs. Halligan doesn't.

He also doesn't move. "Why didn't someone warn me it was Bring Your Rich Bitch To Work Day?"

Elijah straightens up with a grunt. "Back off, Halligan. Let her be."

I should probably keep my mouth shut.

However, it seems that I can't.

"Sounds like impotent bitterness talking. Here's some free advice, Mr. Halligan. Revise the personality and hose yourself off. You smell like a kennel."

His eyes travel down my neck, crudely fastening on my chest. "Figures you've latched onto Lyonne. One uppity cunt deserves another."

“Says the loser who apparently can’t stay on his feet in the ring.”

That’s a mistake. A corded muscle pulses in his neck and the scarlet flush in his cheeks is pure rage. A sense of self preservation warns me to move back, maybe hide behind Elijah.

Stubbornness wins, won’t allow me to retreat. I keep staring him down. Or up, since he’s about a foot taller.

Elijah exhales noisily. “Halligan. Warning you. You’re done for the day.”

“What the FUCK is this shit?” Micah’s here and he’s furious. He stands there barefoot, sweaty, wearing only fighter gloves and a pair of black shorts. Before anyone answers, he rapidly assesses the situation and swiftly moves in.

Halligan finally takes a step back when Micah inserts himself in front of me. Micah gently nudges me back further and I feel Elijah’s hand on my arm as he tugs me to relative safety behind the desk.

The battle has now shifted and two strong men with an obvious rivalry breathe fire at one another.

“Don’t you *ever* fucking talk to her again.” Micah issues this as an order, an ominous one. “Or I’ll tear your ugly head off and drop kick it to the west side.”

Halligan glances at me and snorts through his nose. “Then tell your latest snatch not to flash her shit in my face unless she plans to be generous with the goods.”

Micah gives no warning. He levels the guy with a punch that’s so fast and brutal, Halligan buckles to the floor. Blood spits out of his nose, too much to be caught by his fingers. He

glares up at Micah with murder all over his face while Micah prowls, ready to pounce.

A distinctive click to my right sends my head snapping in that direction. The handgun in Elijah's hand is not being pointed at anyone, but he's making it clear that could change.

"Boys." He speaks in a weary tone that implies he's used to dealing with skirmishes such as this. "That's enough. It's over. Halligan, you've just earned a two week suspension."

"Fucking bullshit." Halligan gets to his feet, blood still pouring from his nose.

Micah glances at me and circles closer, just in case Halligan gets a burst of violent energy.

Halligan, however, has apparently decided to cut his losses. He slams out the door with such force I'm surprised it doesn't break. Micah keeps an eye on him, positioning himself at the door and watching his progress. Within ten seconds a noisy engine guns and an old green pickup truck roars down the street.

Micah nods to himself and finally relaxes a notch, losing some of the tension in his shoulders. He turns and looks right at Elijah. "Thanks, boss."

Elijah stows his gun in the same drawer where he dropped the broken frame. "He'll cool off. He always does." Noticing that I'm still standing around behind the desk, Elijah surveys me with a vague air of disapproval. "But you might want to escort your friend out of the eye of the storm."

Micah beckons like I'm a child. "Come on, Tess. We're going."

Since I've already caused enough trouble, I don't argue. I can hear Elijah chuckling as I exit while Micah impatiently

holds the door.

“You’re parked next door?” Micah keeps looking around, in search of any potential Halligan threats.

“Yes. Wait, you need to put on your shoes.”

“No, I need to get you the hell out of here.”

He steers me on the inside of the sidewalk, positioning himself as a shield closest to the street. It’s not a long walk to the Candee Shoppe. The banana/dildo must have taken a break. He’s not in sight.

There’s no trace of warm, fuzzy feelings coming from Micah. He flings open the door to my car the instant he hears me press the unlock button.

This sure gets his point across. He wants me gone. Immediately.

I was so stupid to show up here with no warning. “Is this going to be a problem for you?”

He scans the street. “It’s not great.”

“I’m sorry that you felt like you had to get involved.”

His blue eyes are icy when they find me. “Of course I had to get involved. Did you think I was just going to stand back and watch that prick grab you by the throat?”

“I’m sure he was all talk.”

Micah hisses through his teeth. “That’s the problem with you, Tess. You think you can handle things that are way over your head.”

I throw my purse in the car and try to keep my temper from rising. “If you’re talking about Pierce, that’s a low blow.”

“Hey, I’m not saying it’s your fault or even that it’s fucking fair. But you need to learn when to ask for help or to just back the fuck off.”

“Look who’s talking. When do *you* ever back off, Micah?”

He shakes his head with disgust. “Don’t pretend you’re stupid. Look at you and look at me. We’re not exactly the same. I can take any man apart with my bare hands. What are you going to do, smack him in the shoulder with your high heel and make a run for it?”

“Thank you for the lesson in chauvinism.”

“Christ.” He rips off one of his gloves. “I’m the bad guy for warning you about reality. My point is, you’re a five-foot-tall female with zero self defense skills.”

“I’m five foot one.” *Brilliant comeback, Tessie.*

Micah laughs at me. “Yeah, that extra inch will just make the Halligans of the world withdraw in terror.”

We’re falling back into our old bickering patterns. That’s the last thing I want to do.

He crosses his arms over his bare, sexy chest. He hasn’t shaved in a few days and the dark scruff of an early beard covers his jaw. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“I was in the neighborhood scouting rally locations and thought I’d stop by to say hello.”

He laughs again. “Never run for office. You’re such a shitty liar.”

Like I don’t know that.

Anyway, I’d rather not beat around the bush. I’m not good at it. “I thought you might want to go see a movie, get

something to eat, hang out, I don't know.”

A ripple of surprise pleats his forehead. “I'm not looking for distractions when I have a fight on the horizon.”

The heat in my cheeks is unpleasant, feeling too much like the threat of imminent humiliation. “Noted. You are busy hitting other men and don't want to take a break.”

His expression migrates to a full blown scowl. “Don't know why you're surprised. You want your pussy eaten out on the regular? I'm on the job. But if you need couch time and companionship, go borrow Charlotte's puppy.”

I shouldn't be shocked. Here's Micah saying horribly rude, Micah-type things. The fault is mine. I've misinterpreted our time together as something more meaningful than casual sex. To him, that's all it was.

And I'm a big, fat fucking fool.

Or, more accurately in his eyes, I'm a short, helpless fool, only good for fucking.

My breath stalls. The tightening in my throat warns of impending disaster. If I stand here and continue this argument, I'll do something I swore many years ago I'd never again do in front of Micah Lyonne.

I'll cry.

Instead, I swallow the sour thickness in my throat and force my voice to be steady. “Micah, I just wanted to see you.”

This is all I can manage to say without risking a very loud, heaving sob. Diving behind the wheel of my car, I slam the door closed behind me.

He knocks on my window, says my name, but I can't deal with looking at him.

If I look at Micah right now, I'll be reduced to that lonely little girl who sobbed out her heartbreak after yet another gesture of friendship was refused.

To preserve my remaining dignity, I drive off without a second glance.

10. Tess

After speeding away from the east side, I squashed my tears of embarrassment, worked on my laptop until midnight and then fell asleep on the couch.

Today, the sting remains.

But I'm about to be late for work.

The garage door is slowly creaking open when I see Uncle Josh's police cruiser pull up to the curb. He steps out and waits while I back the car to the end of the driveway and lower the window.

"I'm here bearing gifts." He hands over a white bakery bag. "Your favorite."

I peek inside and inhale sugary goodness. "Thanks. If ever there was a day that I needed cheering up, this is it."

Uncle Josh flattens his hand on the top of the car and leans in to take a closer look at my face. "What's wrong?"

Partial truth will have to do. No way am I about to vomit out all of yesterday's Micah angst.

A tension headache blooms at the back of my skull. Uncle Josh waits while I shake out a pair of Tylenol and down them with a mouthful from my water tumbler.

“It’s nothing. Just being dramatic amid a grueling campaign that’s taking a toll. Not just on me. I saw Dad taking his blood pressure pills this morning. He said his doctor had to increase the dosage.”

Josh peers into the empty garage. “He’s gone already?”

“Yes. He’s speaking at Em City Community College and then he’s having lunch with a group of donors. There’s some stuff at campaign headquarters that could use his attention but I told him I’d handle it.”

My uncle’s face resettles on me with concern. “You’re doing too much.”

“Me? No, I’m all right. I don’t mind working hard. Anyway, the day is fast approaching when I can go back to being an ordinary realtor.”

“Is that what you want?”

I realize I might have said too much to my uncle. “I’m not cut out for the high stakes world of politics. Not a word to Dad. Please.”

“No need to ask.” He slides his hand across the top of the car. “Don’t you know I’d never rat you out?”

One of the pills feels like it’s caught in the back of my throat. I take another sip of water. “He expects me to follow in his footsteps. At some point I’ll have to tell him that’s not in the cards.”

One of my favorite things about Uncle Josh is that he always listens and weighs every word I say. I was about five when I ran to him in tears after accidentally destroying an anthill. He took my concerns seriously and then patiently explained that the ants are very used to rebuilding their hills.

Josh's gaze wanders as he silently considers his next words, which I expect will be a pep talk. "Sometimes Stuart does a poor job of understanding other people."

It's about as close to criticism of my father as I've ever heard from him. Yet I doubt he's talking about himself. No, Josh has always received unwavering support from his older brother.

"I don't want to let him down."

His face softens, full of sympathy. "I know that, Tessie. But you have your own life to live, no matter what he says. How can I help? Can I take anything off your plate?"

He's already helped so much with the campaign. He's been a favorite at rallies and press interviews. If Stuart Ballerini gets elected, he'll owe an enormous debt to his younger brother.

"I hate asking you to do more. You've got your own career."

He leans in. "We're family, kid. I'm here for you. Don't forget that."

"I won't. Dad's got a heavy schedule all next week. He could use some support at his events in Em City."

"You got it."

"I'll send you a list so you can figure out what works with your schedule."

"Like I said, you got it."

"Thank you, Uncle Josh. Don't know what Dad and I would do without you."

He grins but I could swear his tired eyes get misty. “You’ll never have to find out.”

He sends me on my way with my chocolate scones. I’m hungry enough to eat them on the road. Last night I forgot all about dinner because I was busy.

Busy stewing in *feelings* because I’d begun to convince myself that I was falling for a raging asshole.

Ordinarily, I would have called Dani and cried on my best friend’s shoulder while eating junk food in front of a large screen that was broadcasting something iconic and emotional like *The Notebook*.

But Dani’s brother is the ‘asshole’ in the equation so I can’t go venting too hard to her. She and Micah have a close relationship. I’d never want to get in the middle of that.

When she asks about Micah, which she inevitably will, I’ll just make it sound as if I have no time for anything serious.

Really, I *don’t* have time.

The looming election date feels like a doomsday countdown. Or a liberation countdown. I can’t decide which.

Thanks to a comic book convention, my usual parking garage is full. The fact that I have a paid pass is meaningless when there are no empty spaces available. I end up traveling three blocks away and paying thirty bucks to squat in an underground lot beneath a modern Catholic church.

It’s kind of a pain in the ass, considering the route I need to walk is paved with dark yellow cobblestone bricks that some genius convinced city leaders to install decades ago. Perhaps they looked nice at one time but now they are just fractured, uneven heel traps.

At least the weather is perfect. This is the time of year when Emerald City shines.

Growing up in rich West Emerald, the city often felt like something distant, something menacing. A place where bad news happened. As an adult I've grown more fond of this city, enjoying the time I spent living downtown with Dani.

Then my family life imploded and I wound up back in my yellow bedroom, trying to snuff out stone angel nightmares.

Many months have passed since I last visited the cemetery where my mother is buried. After closing myself in the tiny office I use when I'm working at headquarters, I pull up my favorite local florist. Going back and forth between sunflowers and yellow roses, I settle on a mixed bouquet to be sent to the grave of Diana LaSalle Ballerini. The other flower arrangements on various sad, lonely graves all over the cemetery are usually shades of red and pink. But my preference has always been for the more cheerful yellow. Even if I never see the flowers for myself, someone else might see them and maybe feel a little bit better about the day.

The social media team has sent me a summary of all the activity for the last twenty-four hours. Skimming through it and finding nothing that requires an immediate response, I shift gears and open my laptop to sort through real estate listings. I've started a spreadsheet of all the things Conner is looking for in a home.

There are other things I ought to be doing right now but looking at real estate listings keeps my mind from going other places. Unpleasant places.

“You want your pussy eaten out on the regular? I'm on the job. But if you need couch time and companionship, go borrow Charlotte's puppy.”

There's no one else in the room. Yet I feel the urge to hide my face in mortification. I'm sure I'm not alone. Somewhere out there, perhaps in this very building, sits a girl licking her own wounds because the boy she likes doesn't like her nearly as much.

I feel sorry for her, this unknown girl. I feel sorry for me.

My phone jingles and I jump. It's the old fashioned bell tone I've assigned to my father. For a split second I think about letting the call go to voicemail.

"Hi, Dad. How did the morning rally go?"

He starts talking over me before I finish asking the question. His words are angrily clipped. "You said it would be in an auditorium."

"That's right. The Student Union Auditorium."

"Tess, the rally was held in a damn gym. Half a gym, actually. Intramural basketball practice was going on behind the partition. And I wasn't given a microphone so I needed to shout over the noise of bouncing balls and grunting teenagers."

I probably shouldn't feel like laughing. "Sorry, I'm sure it was just a miscommunication."

"And I counted less than fifty heads. It was a goddamn waste."

"They are college students. Many of them are probably voting for the first time. Maybe there's more work to be done to let them know you're listening to their needs."

"What needs do they have? They spend their time playing video games and watching people dance on the internet."

Grabbing a pen, I click it repeatedly to vent my annoyance. It's true that my father is stressed. It's also true that he sometimes has limited patience with the people he plans to serve. But once he's in office he'll be able to center all of his attention on solving real issues instead of hopping from one rally stop to another.

"Young voters have a lot of very relevant concerns. I will resend you the details from the last focus group and-"

"Moving on." He cuts me off with one of his favorite phrases. "I'll be at the golf club after lunch. Henderson wants to play a few rounds. I thought he was going to switch sides to Carrington but he's promised a big contribution for this last push."

"Well, he is an oil tycoon so I'm sure he'll be generous."

"Try not to interrupt me this afternoon unless it's vital."

"Yes sir." The words come out snappy and sarcastic.

A long pause follows. He must be riding in a car right now. I hear the whoosh of the wind.

"You know I couldn't do any of this without you, Tessie Belle. This is everything we've always worked for. It'll all be worth it. The Ballerinis are going to be the first family of Emerald City."

A woman's voice murmurs in the background. My father's muffled laughter indicates he's now covering the phone. I sit back in my chair and wait.

He returns to the line in a more cheerful mood. "Listen, I've got to go. I'm sure you have everything under control. My complete faith is with you."

He never says goodbye when he ends a call. I kill the connection before he does.

Is it wrong that I'm irritated? It seems I'm expected to work all hours of the day and be at his beck and call while he parties at the golf club.

Then I remember the strain in his face as he downed his blood pressure pills with a gulp of coffee. He waved away my concern and said his health was nothing for me to worry about.

Yet the usual bubble of fear isn't quite enough to overcome my frustration.

I need to get out of here for a little while. It's still a little early for lunch but no one is keeping track of my movements.

Impulsively, I reopen my laptop and fire off a message to the staff, thanking them for all their hard work and announcing that the office will close for the day at noon. My father is not usually included in these mass emails and I see no reason to include him now.

A murmur of excitement ripples through the room as I'm on my way out. Some of these people are volunteers and are not compelled to be here anyway, but I think the whole team could use an afternoon away from this freaking campaign.

I know I do.

Right now I just want to go home, nurse the invisible scars left by Micah Lyonne and try to forget that I made a complete idiot out of myself yesterday.

Unfortunately, forgetting about Micah will be harder now that I've exited the building and nearly tripped over him.

He leans against a wall to the left of the main door, casual as can be in a grey t-shirt speckled with illegible writing,

washed-out black jeans and another day of beard growth. When he sees me, he stands up straight and the two of us exchange a long, silent stare.

I break the stare by marching right past him.

“Wait.” He touches my arm but I yank it free.

“How long have you been standing out here?”

“A while.”

I drop my phone in my purse and start walking. He can trot along behind me if he wants.

“Tessie.”

I don't slow down and he sighs loudly before jogging to fall into step beside me.

“Tessie, let's talk.”

“Thought you were in fight mode and had no time for talking. Anyway, I'm *way* too busy.” My heels click on the mustard-colored pavers.

He snorts. “You're not running the country yet. You can spare a minute.”

“Actually, I can't.”

“I texted you last night.”

I stop in my tracks. “Right. I forget what you said. Let me take another look. Yes, there it is. You texted at eight thirty-seven p.m. and your message consisted of one word. The word was ‘Hey’. That's all. Just ‘Hey’. Very poignant.”

“You never answered me.”

“Such a mystery why.”

And he rolls his eyes. *Rolls his eyes.* The fucking nerve.

“Jerk!” I stamp my foot like a child.

I’ve stomped too hard and I lose my balance, rolling my right ankle, one wobble away from face planting.

Goddamn yellow bricks.

Micah catches me. One strong, inked arm snakes around my waist and won’t let go. His rock hard chest is pressed to my back. He smells freshly showered and vaguely minty. I might melt if I wasn’t so pissed at him.

“Let me go, I got it.” Wiggling away from his grip, I let him follow as I limp to the corner and out of pedestrian traffic.

“You hurt your ankle.” He reaches out as if to steady me again.

“No, I didn’t.” Not much, anyway. It just feels a little bruised. Like my pride.

He looks at the ground, stuffs his hands in his pockets, then lifts his head to torment me with his blue-eyed gaze. There’s something different there today. Something uncertain.

“Will you please let me apologize now?”

I cross my arms. “Go ahead.”

He doesn’t look away. “I’m really sorry, Tess. What I said came out all wrong. It shook me up when I saw you toe to toe with Halligan. He looked like he was about to snap and hurt you. My instinct was just to get you out of there.”

“You could have done that without insulting me.”

“You’re right.” He blows out a short laugh. “I’m an angry shithead with no clue how to behave. You know that.”

“I used to know that. Now you’re the guy I can’t stop thinking about even though I’m a joke to you.”

His brow furrows. “You’re a lot of things, Tess, but you’re definitely no joke. At the risk of sounding fucking pathetic, you mean a lot to me. I’m deeply sorry that I made you feel otherwise.”

There’s that unwelcome thickness in my throat again. I shut my eyes and wish it away. “What the hell are we *doing* with each other, Micah?”

“I don’t know.” His rough knuckle skims my cheek. His thumb slides along my lower lip, hard enough to smear my lipstick, which seems to be his intention. His tone grows more urgent. “But I don’t want to stop.”

A single touch from him is electrifying.

This is a power that he has.

Him alone.

It’s a power that makes my heart pound and forces honesty from me. I open my eyes and give him the answer he’s hoping for.

“I don’t want to stop either.”

He smiles. A smile from Micah is a vibrant rainbow arching across the sky; something rare and magnificent.

I can’t help myself. I throw my arms around his neck and pull him down for a kiss. Our mouths meet, his tongue finds mine, and the busy downtown scenery fades, even the loud traffic noise receding to a low hum. I could lose track of time this way, kissing him for hours, or days. He lifts me up, tangling his fingers in my hair and not caring to hide the fact that his stiff erection grinds into my body on a hectic street corner in Em City. He’s reckless and impulsive and so fiercely alive that I could easily get lost in him without complaint.

While I still have a little bit of sense remaining, I break away and tip my head back to look him in the eye. “I refuse to just be your fuck buddy.”

Micah touches his forehead to mine. “You’re not.” Then he grins. “Doesn’t mean we can’t fuck though, does it?”

“No. But it means you have to take me out tonight on a real date.”

I’m afraid he’ll balk at the word, laugh at the very idea.

He doesn’t.

“Sure. We’ll do anything you want. The fight’s tonight but I’ll be done by nine.”

“I’ll come to your fight.”

He shakes his head immediately. “No way, not the kind of place you would want to hang out.”

“Bullshit. I want to see your fight, Micah.”

His uneasiness fades, replaced with amusement. “All right. Conner’s planning to go. You can sit with him.”

“Good.”

Micah snorts and sweeps me up into his arms. “He’s gonna fall the fuck over when he sees this.”

“He’ll recover.” I snuggle against him, burying my face in his warm neck. “Will you be carrying me to my car?”

“Can’t have you limping around on a bad ankle. Are you in the parking garage next door?”

“No. Start walking. I’ll give the orders on where you should go. Perhaps I’ll make you walk a couple of extra blocks to atone. Feel free to grovel some more along the way.”

His chuckle vibrates in his chest. “In that case, I might just take you wherever I feel like taking you.”

I lift my mouth to his ear. “Do that.”

Because it’s possibly, maybe, *likely*, what I really want.

11. Micah

The hot water stings the shallow cut under my left eye. Other than that, a few ribs might be bruised by tomorrow but it's nothing. I've ended fights in worse shape with lesser opponents.

The rounds were quick and easy. A nice surprise because I've felt off all week and wound up half assing all my time in the gym. I always want to win, always plan to win, but it's rare to step into the ring with the kind of amped up fire I felt tonight unless the match is personal.

In a way, it *was* personal. My opponent never did anything outside the ring to get under my skin but the instant the bell rang he was toast. There wasn't a prayer I'd lose with Tess looking on in the audience. If she wants to watch a show, then I'd give her a show.

At the end, once the other guy was smearing his own blood all over the mat while trying to catch a breath, my eyes scanned the crowd for her. She was wedged right next to Conner, which is exactly where I'd ordered him to make her stay. There's too many fucked up characters in this crowd and I couldn't risk her wandering off and getting mauled while I was stuck in the ring.

She straightened up with a smile when our eyes met. My heart thudded, and not because I'd just been announced the winner. After shaking the loser's hand, I retreated to the shower, confident that Conner would continue to play bodyguard.

Speaking of Conner, he nearly crashed into a street sign when I told him about Tess. He could hardly even spit out a real question, kept sputtering the words, "WHAT?" and "HOW?" and "WHAT?" again.

Conner has always prided himself on his keen perception when it comes to detecting who's screwing around with who. Somehow this thing between me and Tess had slipped past his radar and his first reaction was to feel indignant that his internal fuck-meter had failed.

Though I'm in a hurry to get on with the night, I take a few extra minutes in the shower to drag a razor over my jaw. It's the least I can do to prove I'm taking this whole date night thing seriously.

That was a bad moment yesterday, watching Tess drive off right after I'd stuck my damn foot in my mouth. I'd been out of sorts all week, having a tough time keeping my head focused because it preferred to wander back to thoughts of the girl who kept surprising me. It also rattled my cage to find her getting bullied by Halligan.

And I said some shit I didn't mean. When I saw her jaw tremble and heard the slight crack in her voice, I knew I'd really fucked up in a major way.

Tess isn't the kind of girl who bursts into tears the first time she hears a harsh word. No, Tess will rise to any verbal challenge and usually make you wish you'd kept your own stupid mouth shut.

“Micah, I just wanted to see you.”

Those words destroyed me. Her soft, vulnerable tone was all I could think about as I paced the floor of my apartment all hours of the night until the tenant one floor down banged on the ceiling. I wasn't shocked when she refused to answer my text and I wondered if she'd be better off without some bad-mannered human wrecking ball shitting all over her life.

Tess is beautiful and she's intelligent and she's got her shit together. She's also humorous and sexy with the perfect dash of unexpected spice.

She's far better than I deserve. Yet for some reason when I'm with her, all the chaos and fury that always roars through my blood gets quiet.

That's why I struggled with an uncommon case of nerves as I stood outside her office for three hours. Nobody, including me, would blame her if she said this wasn't worth all the trouble.

Instead, that girl kissed me and said she wanted more. More of me, more of us, more than quick and dirty. I'm not the type to collect girlfriends but I can't stand the idea of letting her go.

Before leaving the locker room, I conduct a quick mirror check in front of the cloudy glass over the sink. I don't look fancy but I don't look too roughed up either. Besides, I get the feeling Tess likes my jagged edges.

Not everyone seated in the crowd has left. Some of them have recognized Conner. He scribbles an autograph for a guy who got flattened tonight in an earlier match that didn't include me. The dude's face looks like it just finished being on

the business end of a battering ram but he's cheerful enough to pose for a selfie with my cousin.

Tess stands back and observes the Conner Carnival while a woman who's probably older than my mother squeals and seizes him. Tess shakes her head with a laugh, clearly entertained as the woman cuddles Conner's beefy arm like it's her bed pillow.

She's still wearing her work clothes; a black skirt and a cream-colored blouse that's buttoned too high for my tastes. I wonder if she'll be mad when I rip the buttons off later.

This is my new favorite hobby; watching Tess when she doesn't know I'm watching. She's always alert, her sharp intelligence shining through as she keenly surveys her surroundings. She doesn't need to show skin to be sexy but I enjoy thoughts of liberating her from her clothes. She sleeps soundly and can spend an entire night tucked under my arm without moving a muscle.

Conner manages to extricate himself from his biggest fan and he checks to make sure Tess is all right. I'm glad he takes it seriously when I tell him his number one priority is to look after my girl.

My girl.

Yeah, I really just used those words. They were only in my head, but still. A foreign concept.

Tess turns her head, sees me, breaks into an instant smile.

My emotions collide.

I want to fuck her. I want to hold her. I want to argue with her. I want to see her in the morning light with her hair messy.

She's navigating around seats and random people to get to me so I meet her halfway. I'm not expecting her to leap into my arms but that's exactly what she does.

"You were amazing." She kisses my mouth, very briefly. "Seriously. I'm impressed."

I'm holding her up with one arm but I drop my equipment bag so I can circle the other arm around her body and lift her higher. "Then you need to give me a much better kiss."

Tess teases my lips with hers. "Yes sir."

Her eyes close and she gives me her mouth, which I gladly take. Her tongue gets used as I see fit and my hand slides up her back, pausing to tug on the outline of her bra strap before climbing higher to massage the back of her neck, ultimately twisting in her hair, pulling lightly until she breathes out the kind of soft moan that drives me up the fucking wall. Just because we've decided to be more than sex doesn't mean this is going to end as a PG kind of a night.

But we'll get to that.

First, I promised her a date.

With reluctance, I set her down and she sighs softly. She had to shed her heels in favor of flats after wrenching her ankle earlier and she feels downright tiny in my arms as she presses her cheek to my chest. I drop a kiss on the top of her head.

Then I look up to find Conner standing six feet away, gawking at us, his mouth literally hanging open.

I snap my fingers. "Pick up your jaw, dude."

"Sorry." He shakes his head. "It's just messing me up, kind of like watching Batman and the Joker make out."

Tess looks up at me. “That might be fun to role play. Which one of us gets to be Batman?”

“You. I’m a born villain.” I jerk my chin at Conner. “You finished with celebrity chores?”

“For now.” He checks his phone. “Think I’ll take off. Got a home game on Sunday so I need my beauty sleep.”

“All right, man, thanks for being here.”

“Sure.” He starts walking backwards, continuing to stare at us like he’s not sure we’re real.

Tess clucks her tongue as she watches him go. “He seems to be having trouble coping with the new normal.”

“He’ll adapt. What do you want to do now?”

“I’m hungry. The concession stands here looked disgusting. You pick the place since we’re in your neighborhood.”

There’s a lack of classy establishments in this area. I choose a retro family diner that’s in sore need of renovation but at least the food doesn’t taste like dogshit.

Tess eyes me as she chews a curly fry. “When was the last time you were seeing anyone, even casually?”

I squirt hot sauce on my burger. “It’s been a while.”

“How long?”

“Well over a year.”

That stops her as she thinks back on the events of last year. Her eyes lower to her plate. “Can’t blame you for that.”

The unspoken word is *Olivia*. Someone can haunt you without actually haunting you.

But I don't want Tess dwelling on that sordid crap. It's bad history. It's finished. "Well, I blame the fact that I haven't met anyone worth the effort."

She swirls another fry in a puddle of ketchup. "You may not have noticed, but at the arena the whole female sector of the audience started salivating when you stepped into the ring."

Nope, didn't notice. Or care. "Anyone hot?"

She kicks me under the table. "Jackass."

I catch her foot and keep it in my lap. "Is this your bad ankle?"

"It's barely swollen. I won't even feel it by tomorrow."

Slipping her shoe off, I slide my thumb along the arch. She squirms, ticklish. Gently, I explore the small bones. "Does this hurt?"

"No, it feels nice."

Massaging lightly, careful not to use too much pressure, I keep my eyes on her lips. "What did you tell the future Em City mayor about your plans tonight?"

"The truth. Told him I had a date."

"Did you tell him with who?"

She shrugs. "Surprisingly, he didn't ask. His only concern was that I would find time to double check every item on his schedule next week."

I'm not sure she hears the hint of irritation in her voice. Anyway, I don't want to waste time talking about her dickhead dad.

"So you're good to spend the night?"

She nibbles her lip and tries to be coy. “Are you assuming you’ll get lucky?”

Oh, I fucking *know* I’m getting lucky. And now I’ll make her admit it.

My hand leaves her ankle and skims up her leg, high enough to graze the creamy skin of her inner thigh. Her lips press together and she balls up a napkin. She could close her legs and shove my hand away if she wanted to.

“You kids want refills?” The chirpy red-faced waitress named Carla stops by to collect our empty glasses.

“Yes, please.” Tess keeps her eyes on me.

Carla whistles as she departs.

I have to lean forward and stretch my arm to reach my goal. I’m happy with what I find once I get there. “What did I tell you about wearing panties, Tessie?”

She slides down a few inches to give me better access. “Not to bother when I know I’ll be seeing you.”

“And yet you didn’t listen. I guess I’ll have to take these too.”

She jerks and lets out a choked noise when I move my fingers. “What did you do with my other pair?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve been putting them to good use.”

She’s interested. “How?”

“Can’t really describe it properly. I’ll have to show you.”

“Here you go!” Carla drops off two full soda glasses and a handful of fresh napkins. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No thank you.” Tess smiles at the waitress. “I love your earrings.”

I sweep my finger up and down a patch of damp satin fabric. Her muscles clench.

Carla, oblivious to obscene activities beneath the table, touches one of the blue dangling eyesores attached to her ears. “Thank you. A gift from my son.”

Tess clutches her napkin so tightly her knuckles whiten. “Lovely.”

Carla beams at us and deposits a slip of paper on the table. “Cashier is up front when you’re ready. No hurry.”

When Carla’s gone I pull my hand back. Tess shoots a pouty look of frustration across the table.

“Why’d you stop?”

I lay my open hand on the table. “Hand them over.”

“No.” She shakes her head with a teasing grin and uses my own words against me. “If you want something, you’ll have to earn it.” Then she flicks her tongue out to lick the end of her straw.

My cock begs for more. I plan to get *a lot* more.

We have a minor argument when the time comes to pay for the food. Tess is all about splitting the bill.

Nope, I don’t play that game. Call it a caveman quality but if she’s out with me, she’s not paying for a goddamn thing.

She rolls her eyes but holds onto my arm as we’re leaving. “Isn’t Haven’s club around here?”

“About three blocks away.”

“Let’s go.”

“To a strip club?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never been to one.” She squeezes my arm. “Please? I’m in an adventurous mood.”

Damn, she’s a fucking treasure.

12. Micah

Haven's club is busier than usual. It's Amateur Night, when anyone with an inkling to slide down a stripper pole can go make a fool out of themselves. Not shocking that there's no shortage of takers.

Andrei, who's as tough as a wild boar and kind of looks like one too, gives me a nod of acknowledgement and lets us through without paying a cover charge.

I keep my arm around Tess and feel the need to explain why I'm so well known at a place that features naked tits. "I work security here sometimes."

She nods. "I heard."

"What else have you heard?"

"That you're a gentleman."

Don't know about that. Since we left the diner I've been thinking about all the ways I'd like to dominate her sexy ass until she begs for a break.

The regular dancers are working the room, collecting tips and trying to rev up cheers for those brave enough to take the stage. A blonde named Rena, pissed that I've never accepted her offers of a private lap dance, pokes her lip out when she sees Tess tucked under my arm.

Too fucking bad. My arm stays where it is.

It's looking like we'll need to stand around and hope some seats open up at the bar. Tess wants a beer so I procure a couple of those and when I turn around I see her hugging Haven.

Haven Marchenko strikes me about as huggable as your average python, but there's something close to a smile on her face as she peers down at Tess. I get a more muted greeting, just a cool nod.

"Follow me. You guys can sit at one of the reserved tables."

Haven leads us to the VIP seating area that's raised a little higher for a good view of the stage. Right now a drunk soccer mom type in pink yoga pants and a glitter tank top is making herself dizzy on the pole, rolling around and round with her bare feet planted on the floor. She looks ridiculous but she's shrieking with laughter so I guess she's having a good time.

Andrei calls Haven away to deal with some club business and I get a kick out of watching Tess get comfortable, peeling off her Puritan cardigan and untucking her blouse. She takes a long swallow of her beer and looks around with bright interest.

The music is loud but not too loud to be heard.

I tap Tess's hand. "Haven didn't seem shocked to see us together."

She smirks. "She overheard my confession during a visit to Lita."

It's always a knife in the gut to remember Lita Marchenko sits day after day in a sterile room, staring at nothing while the rest of us keep moving through life.

Tess abruptly stands. “Hold my beer.”

“Why?”

“I’m going up on stage.”

“Are you drunk already?”

“No.” She pinches my arm and opens two of her blouse buttons.

My pulse quickens. “You’re serious.”

Her grin is all naughty fun. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep my clothes on. I just want to see what it feels like to be up there.”

“Not easy to swing around the pole.”

“As if you’d know. But I took dance and gymnastics for ten years. I can hold my own.” She dives in to kiss my cheek and nibble at my earlobe for one tantalizing second. “So enjoy the show.”

I’m still kind of dazed over how the gears got shifted so rapidly when she struts away, joining a crew of giddy hopefuls waiting for their turn to play at being strippers.

Tess never has an issue with talking to strangers. She strikes up a conversation with the woman standing behind her and within a minute three other women join in. Tess does a lot of the talking and she’s very animated, using her hands a lot. Laughter ripples through the small group.

I can’t stop admiring her. Compared to Tess, I’m like a wolverine with rabies. Not an ounce of charm.

While I’m watching Tess, Haven materializes out of nowhere and takes a seat. “Lyonne.”

Haven’s somewhat erratic. I brace for a surprise.

But she seems to be in a friendly mood. She nods to Tess. “I have a feeling her fuckface of a father doesn’t know about you two.”

“Don’t give a shit what he thinks.”

Haven mulls that over. “My own father keeps writing checks to that bastard. Thinks he will be good for business.” She toys with a purple string around her neck and frowns. “I don’t agree. He used to come in here sometimes, before he went high profile and started running for city mayor.”

“Yeah?” It makes no difference to me if Stuart Ballerini likes to drink and stare at tits.

Haven leans in and narrows her eyes. “I kicked him out once. Took a lot of shit from my father for that but I’m not changing my mind.”

“What did he do?”

She points to one of the dancers who parades around in a red string bikini with a tray of drinks. “You know her?”

I have to think about it for a second in order to summon her name. “Keely, right?”

“Yup. Who does she remind you of?”

Easy question to answer. “Dani.”

Not as pretty as Dani, but the resemblance is still strong.

Haven examines her talon-like nails. “Ballerini offered to pay any price for a night with Keely. Who happens to look very much like the girl who’s been his daughter’s best friend since high school. Funny, that.”

Her disgusted expression says she doesn’t find it funny at all.

Neither do I.

Haven sighs. “Anyway, you know I don’t sell women. A man who’s looking for that kind of action will be lucky if he doesn’t leave here through a plate glass window.”

The music changes. An old tune by the Beastie Boys.

Tess is being encouraged to take the front of the line. She laughs and lets herself get ushered onto the stage, kicking off her shoes before seizing the pole in both hands. She scans the crowd in search of me and smiles when our eyes meet.

She moves her hands up, spins around and around. Once she’s got momentum, she hooks one sexy leg around the pole and slowly spirals lower. Some of the men take an obvious interest, which doesn’t sit right with me. Two of them, expensively suited members of the CEO class, nudge each other and point. This is probably their fantasy, watching a beauty who could have been plucked from any executive board meeting act out with sexy abandon.

Tess takes another swing at the pole, this time getting high enough to hook her leg more firmly. She turns upside down, slowly spirals toward the bottom, plants her hands on the floor and dismounts with a flash of leg.

One of the suits shifts in his chair. His buddy pokes his arm. Red fucking meat to them.

A jealous fire starts boiling in my blood.

Unfamiliar.

Haven guesses my internal struggle and laughs. “If you don’t like it, go offer her some alternative entertainment.” She pulls the lanyard from around her neck and shoves it across the table. There’s a single key attached. “Here, my office is in the back. Yours for an hour. There’s a case of vintage whiskey

under my desk. The good shit. Help yourself to a bottle. Corkscrew should be on the desk. Don't worry about her purse. I'll take care of it."

It's a generous offer, one that I'm sure is only due to her affection for Tess.

Tess pauses to blow kisses to the crowd. A flurry of wolf whistles rains down.

"Over here, baby!" That comes from some red bearded fucker who looks like a demented leprechaun. "My lap is open."

Enough. Half these shitheads already can't walk a straight line. Putting them in their place would be easy if any of them make a move.

But something far more primitive demands that I haul her out of their sight and stake my claim.

Tess sees me coming and spins slowly down from the pole before halting and standing upright.

I crook a finger.

She props her hands on her hips, the message clear. *You want me? You come and get me.*

Damn right I will.

I hop on the stage, snatch her up with one arm and haul her over my shoulder.

"Micah!" She laughs and lets me carry her off the stage and down the hall that leads to Haven's office.

It takes two seconds to get the door unlocked and I kick it closed behind me before flipping the lock to make sure we won't get interrupted. Only then do I set her down.

“Jealous much?” she teases and that’s all she’s allowed to say before I take control of her mouth with a fiery kiss that rivals our very first one.

Tess yields right away, closing her eyes and becoming pliable to my whims. Now I have the chance to rip the buttons off that classy blouse and I take it, yanking the thing apart with one fluid move.

She doesn’t get mad after all. She tosses away the ruined pieces of her blouse and pulls my shirt up, in a fever to open my pants. My own shirt gets yanked over my head without destruction. At least there will be *some* intact clothing in the room. She sulks with adorable frustration when I back up and don’t let her have my cock yet.

Finding Haven’s whiskey stash under the desk, I grab a bottle and twist a corkscrew into the mouth, coming up with the cork in short order. I don’t want to be drunk so I only take one swallow before passing the bottle to Tess. Haven’s right. This is the good shit. Burns like hell going down but it’s a smooth kind of fire.

As Tess accepts the bottle, I help myself to a look at her perky tits, still cased in a lacy white bra. She tilts her head back to take a mouthful of whiskey and scrunches her face up as she swallows.

“Hold onto that.” I drop to my knees in front of her, push one hand up her skirt and snag the panties I’ve been waiting to see. They’re black. *Nice*.

She takes another sip of whiskey, grimaces again. “I left my purse out there.”

“Haven’s got it.”

“But that’s where the condoms are.”

I lift her and carefully set her down on the edge of the desk. “We won’t need those right now.”

She pushes the whiskey bottle under my nose. “Oh we won’t, huh?”

“No.” I don’t take another drink. Instead, I drop back down to my knees and move her legs apart.

Tess likes this, setting the bottle down and keeping her balance by flattening her palms on the desk. Massaging her thighs, I shove her skirt higher. One finger takes a trip up the middle and discovers what I already knew.

She’s so fucking wet for me she can’t cope.

“Right now I’m just going to worship you like the goddess you are. So lean back and get fucked by my tongue like a good girl.”

“Damn.” She throws her head back and lets me prop her legs up on my shoulders. “You are so insanely hot it should be illegal.”

If she has more to say, the words get cut off by a sigh of ecstasy when she feels the first stroke of my tongue. My cock throbs in my pants, no doubt envious of my tongue. I don’t need any damn whiskey. I can get drunk off the taste of her.

My tongue is just getting into the rhythm of teasing the orgasm out of her clit when her muscles tighten. She’s doesn’t hold back as she bucks her hips and moans out my name.

Note To Self: One of these days, get an audio clip of Tess when she comes.

Beats the stuffing out of any porn.

She’s still quaking when she slides off the desk. But she’s not too tired to make demands. “I want all of you. NOW.”

Sure, I can do that. My pants are down in a hurry and I flip her around. “Bend over, honey.”

Her ripe, toned ass is like the forbidden fruit of legend. So fucking tempting. But now’s not the time. My cock sinks into her pussy and now I’m the one who’s groaning. There’s nothing else like the feel of getting balls deep in her.

But her tits really deserve to be in my hands while I pound away so I tweak her bra open and cup my palms around them. We’re both sweaty and getting sweatier. She clenches around my cock and resists the rhythm on purpose. It’s taking every ounce of concentration to hold back the tide.

And I need to remind her of something. “You keep pushing back like that and you’ll wind up with Micah Junior in your belly.”

“Oh, fuck.” She arches her back and clutches the edge of the desk. “Don’t do that but keep talking about it.”

“Yeah, Tessie?” I push her hair aside. My cock swells dangerously close to eruption. “That’s the dirty shit you’re into, huh? You want me to finish inside you so you can feel my cum dripping out of your pussy until tomorrow?”

“Yes.” She’s whimpering now, shaking. “God, yes.”

FUCKING HELL.

This girl, I swear.

I’m crossing over to the danger zone but luckily she’s at her peak again. She comes so hard she lets out a scream. If anyone’s standing close to the other side of the door they might start to ask questions.

But I’m too close to the limit. I pull out and wrap my hand around my cock to release in my palm.

Miss Tessie has other ideas. She spins around, falls to her knees and moves my hand out of the way so her mouth can take over.

Perfect. If she wants to swallow then I'll give her something to swallow.

My hands rest on her head so I can set the pace. And the pace I want is hard and rough. She takes it, letting me use her mouth however I want and it's a damn shame that I'm already so close because I'd happily stay in this position for hours.

Tess doesn't pull away when I shoot the whole load, coating her tongue and her throat. I keep an eye on her, interested to see if she'll make a move to spit it out.

She does no such thing. She finally lets my cock pop out of her mouth, swallows hard, swipes the back of one hand across her lips and calmly rises to take a drink from the whiskey bottle.

Epic. Absolutely fucking magnificent.

Tess gives me the whiskey bottle and refastens her bra. Then she looks at the pieces of her expensive blouse and raises an eyebrow. I throw her my t-shirt.

She pulls it over her head with a laugh. "I like wearing your clothes. Reminds me of our first night."

I close my pants and take a seat on a black leather sofa, hauling her into my lap. She gets cuddly, nestling against my chest. We spend a few pleasant minutes like that, just listening to the thuds of the club music and the rowdy hoots of laughter.

Tess uses one finger to trace my ink. The spot she's focused on is an intricate skull wearing a spiked crown and a furious glare. My creation, the first piece I had stamped onto my skin after I got out of the prison cage.

She has a light, seductive touch. “Will you show me your art sometime?”

I never think of it as ‘my art’. I draw because my brain and my fingers get restless when I don’t. But what comes out are bleak, sharp images that populate the most furious corners of my mind.

She’d probably be disappointed. Or scared.

I wrap my arms around her and evade the question. “You want to go to my place now?”

She smiles and snuggles closer. “Yes. Can I take a shower there?”

“Only if I get to join you.”

“Naturally.” She kisses my neck.

Tess is ready to leave but I can’t stop holding her, keeping her right where she is.

We’ll go soon. I just don’t want to release her yet, not even for a minute.

13. Tess

The bad news: Shit has hit the fan.
The worse news: I'm internet famous today.

The viral social media clip is grainy and only ten seconds long but there's no denying it's me swinging on a stripper pole. I don't know who filmed me and it doesn't matter.

I'm not even naked and this shouldn't be newsworthy, but I'm not just the daughter of Stuart Ballerini. I'm also his campaign manager. And now the whole world has seen me getting freaky in an east side strip club.

My father isn't speaking to me.

Inconvenient, since we live in the same house and I'm still overseeing his campaign. Unless he fires me, which he might.

I wince at the trill of an incoming call, but luckily it's from one of the only two people I would like to hear from right now.

"Any better?" Dani asks. This is the sixth time she's checked up on me today.

"Jury's still out." I roll over on my bed. "My dad cancelled his appearances today. I'm still hiding in my room to avoid being glared at with shame-inducing disgust. My uncle's coming over in a little while to try and talk him down."

Her tone hardens. “Your father is being absolutely fucking ridiculous.”

I pick at a thread in my quilt. “I’ve humiliated him a few weeks before the biggest election of his life.”

“Oh Tessie, no you didn’t. Let me come and rescue you. We’ll eat cookie dough ice cream and watch vintage horror movies until your father recovers from his tantrum. And if he doesn’t, just stay here with us.”

I would love to go smother my angst in junk food on Dani’s couch. But this is my mess and I need to handle it.

“I’ll call you later,” I say.

“All right. Chin up. You are Tess Fucking Ballerini. You don’t back down to anyone.”

Dani’s pep talk is appreciated. But when I flop back on my bed and gaze up at the ceiling I’ve stared at since infancy, my self confidence leaks away. I’ve always been known for clapping back, for refusing to cower. Anyone who challenges me can expect an argument.

Almost anyone.

My father has always been larger than life in my mind. I’ve never overcome the terror of displeasing him. We don’t have honest conversations. That’s partially my fault and it’s long past time that I took steps to fix it.

When I sit up, my gaze lands on the dent in the wall, a recent addition, courtesy of Micah’s fist during a climactic moment. A crack splits the paint down the center. I run my finger over the defect and imagine being enclosed in the safety of his strong arms.

The phone vibrates beside me and this time it's Micah on the other end. The butterflies are instant and I feel myself smiling as I answer.

"I was just thinking about you."

His deep voice sends a thrill through my body. "Tell me more."

I get comfortable on my stomach. "Just wishing you were here. It's kind of a bleak scene right now."

"Your dad still giving you shit?"

"No, he's hardly said a word to me."

"He needs to thaw the fuck out. Why don't I come over to lighten the mood?"

I start laughing. Then stop. "You're not kidding."

"Nope. The least I can do is stand with you in the storm. Let the dickhead try to punch me if he wants."

"He wouldn't risk being punched back." I sit up and swing my legs around. "All right. I'm not going to hide from my daddy like a schoolgirl. What time will you be here?"

"What time do you want me?"

"I always want you." I bite my lip and wish I could suck the words back in.

But Micah just chuckles and drops his voice in a way that always sends my pulse racing. "I always want you too."

"Does six o'clock work?"

"Yeah, I can push my car out to West Emerald by then. I'll even bring a couple of pizzas as a peace offering."

I try to imagine my father sitting down and eating pizza with Micah. The picture doesn't leap to mind with ease.

Maybe it's not so far-fetched, though. He was once friends with Micah's dad. He's still friendly with Micah's mother and stepfather. There shouldn't be anything strange at all about Micah being here in the house.

"I would love that. Can you make one of those pizzas pepperoni?"

"You got it. And have a bag packed."

"Why? Do you think I'm going to be kicked out of the house?"

"No. But I know you're coming home with me tonight."

No argument here. I can almost hear my feminist independence evaporating. Some sensitive muscles still tingle because of last night. First at the club, then in Micah's shower, finally in his bed. He's insatiable and he gives as much as he demands. I'll even risk Stuart Ballerini's wrath for more nights of that.

"I'll see you soon."

When I hear the connection break, I spend a pleasant minute hearing the echo of Micah's voice in my head. I can't wait to see him again.

Those good feelings are interrupted by the sound of a door opening downstairs. Followed by the hostile sound of bickering male voices. Uncle Josh is here.

I feel silly creeping down the stairs like a grounded teenager. They are in the kitchen and there's an unusual dash of annoyance in Uncle Josh's tone.

"Come off it, Stu. This isn't a big deal."

“Like hell it isn’t.”

“Did you even look at the online chatter? Most people are taking Tess’s side. In case you missed the update, it’s no longer fashionable to shame a woman for having a good time.”

But my father’s laugh is humorless. “I’m supposed to cheer the sight of my daughter acting like a cheap slut?”

“Don’t talk about her like that. You’ll regret it later.”

“She should know better after all the years I’ve invested in her.”

“Tess isn’t your goddamn doll. She’s a grown woman who is free to make her own choices.”

As much as Josh has always been my ally, he tends to wither when confronted by his domineering older brother. I’m surprised to hear him challenging my father so openly.

The loud exhale comes from my father. His heavy footsteps pace. “Do you know who she was with last night?”

Josh’s voice becomes wary. “Yeah, I heard. So what?”

“He’s Ethan’s son. Let that sink in. ETHAN’S SON.”

“The kid’s suffered a few tough breaks.”

“He’s not a kid anymore. And he’s had his chances. Brings nothing but grief to his mother. Matilda did everything she could with him and still he acts no better than a street punk. Takes after his father in more ways than one. He’s nowhere near good enough for her.”

“Cut him some slack. The two of them have known each other since childhood. And Tess is no fool. Trust her to know what she’s doing.”

My father's bitter chuckle carries shades of cruelty. "That might be easier if she didn't make the most immoral choices the first chance she gets."

His words are like a spike of fury through my heart.

I'll be damned if I'm going to hide in the shadows and get gossiped about in my own house.

Uncle Josh is startled when I stroll right into the kitchen and take a seat at the breakfast bar, but he smiles.

My father, however, glances in my direction and looks away like the very sight of me shames him.

Folding my hands in front of me, I try to conjure some diplomacy so this doesn't end up being a shouting match. "Dad, I'm sorry that you feel embarrassed. I'm slightly embarrassed too. But I didn't do anything wrong and this is not the end of the world. Give it a day or two and people will find something else to talk about."

He's listening. I think. At least he stops glaring out the window and actually looks at me.

"I'm disappointed, Tess. My expectations are only so high because you have so much more potential than most people. I don't want to see you throw that away."

"I'm not throwing anything away. I was out having fun with a man I like spending time with. That's no crime."

As I gauge their reactions, my uncle listens earnestly and gives me a nod of encouragement.

My father's expression remains stubbornly critical.

I keep my head up and try to sound calm through my anger. "Dad, I've worked very hard for you and you know it. So *you* are disappointed? Well, guess what? I'm disappointed

that you would turn against me so easily. If you want my resignation then you've got it."

He's unable to hide his surprise.

And his panic.

His thick neck flushes and he clears his throat.

Then he raises a hand as if he's been reasonable from the outset. "Let's slow down here. It's important that we present a united front right now and-"

"Don't you dare talk to me about the fucking election when I just overheard you call me a slut."

He stiffens with shock.

Perhaps he thought his words wouldn't carry.

Or, more likely, he thought it would be easy to shame me into silence.

The flush crawls all the way to his cheeks. "I was hasty in saying that."

"Then apologize."

"Of course I apologize. I'm sorry, Tess. I did not mean it."

"I accept your apology." Even if I am mildly stunned. I don't think he's ever apologized to me for anything.

The silence in the room stretches as the seconds tick past.

Uncle Josh, likely coming from a long shift down at the police station, tiredly rubs his scruffy jaw.

My father, a big man who seems to be shrinking before my eyes, stares down at his feet, for once at a loss for words. He might be truly sorry. Or he might be preserving his own

interests, aware of how it will look if his own daughter abandons his campaign only a few weeks before the election.

The antique grandfather clock chimes in the dining room and I stand up slowly. “We’re a family, aren’t we? Let’s take the weekend off and remember that. Micah is coming over later and bringing some pizza. Dad, you know Micah and I trust that you’ll be civil. Uncle Josh, I hope you’ll stay for dinner.”

My uncle nods. “You bet.”

“Micah is always welcome here,” my father says, meaning he’s going to pretend he didn’t say the things he said.

It’s news to me that he and Ethan Lyonne had any serious issues but my memories of Micah’s father are vague. He told jokes, had a nice smile that he passed on to his son. He would hang out here often with my dad and Uncle Josh.

Olivia’s obsession with the Lyonne men might have something to do with my father’s resentment but that’s not a topic I’m going to touch.

“I’ll be upstairs until Micah arrives.”

Leaving them behind in the kitchen, I feel like I’ve won a small victory.

14. Tess

Micah rings the doorbell five minutes early with two pizza boxes casually balanced on one open palm. He grins and once again I'm startled by the depth of my own delight at the sight of him.

If we were alone I'd jump right into his arms and kiss his face until we were both breathless, but with Uncle Josh and my father standing somewhere behind my back, I settle for squeezing him around the waist.

"I'm glad you're here."

He returns my hug with his free hand and then lets that hand idly brush across the back of my jeans. "So am I."

"Micah." Uncle Josh steps forward first with his hand out.

Micah's not real big on formal manners but he shakes my uncle's hand after unloading the pizza boxes on the dining room table. My father is slower to approach, silently watching in the background with a cautious expression.

However, Stuart Ballerini hates to lose and he understands what this situation requires. He pastes on his dazzling grin and coats his voice with paternal friendliness as he pumps Micah's hand. "Hello, son. Good to have you in my home again."

Micah shows me a raised eyebrow. I wrinkle my nose as a sign that I'd like him to play along.

“Hello, sir. Yes, it's been *years* since I've been in your house.”

A flashback to my bedroom. The origin of the crack of the wall.

I squeeze Micah's arm. *Please behave yourself.*

He might. He might not.

If my father sticks to his polite act then there won't be a problem. But Micah's unlikely to hold his tongue if challenged by any openly rude comments.

Micah waits for me to sit and then takes the chair to my right. He's not a fancy dresser and he didn't break code tonight, choosing a plain black tee and battered jeans. It occurs to me that our styles match for once, as I'm dressed more casually than I ordinarily would be for a dinner guest.

His hand lands on my upper thigh the instant I'm settled in my chair. I curl my fingers around his, hoping he understands how much it means to me that he's willing to sit here under scrutiny and suffer through an uncomfortable meal with the Ballerini brothers.

At least my uncle is making an effort. He opens one of the pizza boxes. “Is this the new place that just opened up on Guild Street?”

Micah nods. “Conner swears it's the best in town.”

Josh takes a slice and passes the box to me. “He's having a great season. Tell him he's got a lot of die hard fans down at the station.”

“He'll like hearing that.”

My father stands, opens his wallet, and pulls out a handful of bills. “What do I owe you for the pizza?”

“Nothing.” Micah helps himself to two slices of pepperoni once I’ve added a slice to my own plate. “It’s on me.”

My father drops the money on the table anyway. Then he adds a crop of twenties to the pile. There has to be at least three hundred dollars there. “Take it. For your trouble. I’m sure it’ll come in handy.”

Micah bristles beside me. I can feel the tension lock in his muscles.

“Keep your money, Ballerini. Use it for your campaign instead.”

My father smiles but leaves the cash where it is. “Your mother says you make your living with your fists.”

Micah takes a large bite of pizza and eyes my father coldly while he takes his time chewing. “Not just my fists. I’ve got a pretty wicked kick too.”

Micah keeps the anger out of his voice. I don’t bother to keep it out of my own.

“Dad, Micah is a very talented fighter. He trains hard and he’s extremely impressive in the ring.”

My father sits back in his chair, taking in my harsh glare. I’m sure he also sees the way Micah turns to me with an appreciative grin.

Stuart Ballerini isn’t ready to stop poking the bear. “You know, Micah, there’s a big future waiting for you. If only you have the courage to take it. I know Matilda still has high hopes. After all, you’re the heir to Yellow Brick.”

“The *heir*.” Micah chuckles over the word. “Yeah, plenty of courage required to become my mother’s office pet.”

Uncle Josh stands and reaches for the bottle of red wine I opened right before Micah’s arrival. “This is a good year,” he says after examining the label. He knows nothing about wine. “What do you say, Tess? Can I pour you some?”

I’m grateful for anything to defuse the tension. “Half a glass only. Thank you.”

Josh pours sloppily and then tips the bottle to Micah. “How about it?”

“I’ll pass. You wouldn’t want me to be impaired when I’m driving your niece around, right?”

Josh lowers the bottle. “Right.” The word sounds a little flat. “So you two have plans this evening?”

Micah nods and pins my uncle with his fierce gaze. His hand remains on my thigh, even climbs a few inches higher, like he’s charting his territory. “Yeah, I’ll be keeping Tess busy all night long.”

Perhaps I should be cringing. Micah has practically announced to my father and my uncle that he plans to screw me later.

But instead of being embarrassed, I feel the urge to laugh.

My father forcefully clears his throat. He does this only for attention, as if we’re children who need to be scolded. He folds his hands on the table and appraises Micah the way a general surveys the battle preparations of his enemy. “I knew your father well.”

Micah’s jaw visibly tightens. “That makes one of us. He was gone before I got the chance.”

The cold smile on my father's face is a warning of things to come. "Ethan had a way of drawing all the attention in any room without even trying. He could also be imprudent with his choices at times. Good man, though, may he rest in peace."

Micah doesn't move a muscle. "That might be tough, the resting in peace part. Can't really be at peace when you're in pieces, can you?"

Clearly, my father is enjoying Micah's rising anger. "If he were alive, I'm sure you'd like to make him proud."

"Who says I wouldn't make him proud?"

"Ethan would want his only son to take advantage of his opportunities rather than tearing through life as a walking punching bag."

That's all I need to hear. Micah shouldn't have to endure these taunts about his dead father just because Stuart Ballerini is pouting that for once he doesn't have complete control over every move I make.

"We'll be leaving now." I stand up and throw a furious glare at my father. "Come on, Micah."

A wrinkle appears between my father's brows. This isn't his preferred outcome. I can feel his eyes on me as I stalk to the foot of the stairs and haul my packed overnight bag over my arm.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Dad." A very pointed message that I'll be spending the night elsewhere.

While my father's face turns purple and Uncle Josh doesn't know where to look, Micah rises with a smile.

"Here, let me carry that, Tessie Belle." With one finger, he easily plucks the bag from my arm. Then before I take a step

he slides his arm around my waist. He kisses me hard, with prolonged passion, insistently using his tongue and lifting me off the ground.

I don't resist in the slightest. I kiss him back just as feverishly, as if we're the only ones in the room, even wrapping my legs around his waist.

“GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!” For all his flaws, my father rarely loses his temper enough to erupt with obscenities.

“Stuart,” Uncle Josh warns.

When Micah finally sets me down, I confront the sight of both Ballerini brothers on their feet. My father's face is contorted with wrath and for once he has no words to express himself. Uncle Josh, on the other hand, looks as if he'd like to crawl into the wine bottle and escape this scene.

But it's Uncle Josh who tries to smooth things over. “Why don't you both sit down? We'll have a nice dinner, start the conversation over.”

“Thanks, Uncle Josh, but we'll pass.” I close the lid of the nearest pizza box and pick it up. “And we'll take the rest of the pepperoni to go.”

Micah keeps his hand possessively on my back as we leave through the front door. He chuckles softly once we're on the other side.

I elbow him in the chest. “Didn't think I had it in me, did you?”

He bends down and kisses the top of my head. “You have a way of surprising me.”

This is the first time I've ever defied my father so boldly. I'm unsure what the ramifications will be. Shockingly, I don't

care very much.

I love my father. I really do. But he's wrong here.

Micah tosses my bag in the trunk while I lay the pizza box down on the backseat. I'm about to climb into the passenger side when he pulls me against his strong body. The pleasure of being in his arms is overpowering. I'd like to stay here as much as possible.

But Micah doesn't kiss me like I expect him to. He just stares down and keeps me in place. I hook my arms around his neck and stare back at him. The carriage lights click on and a shadow appears at the front window.

"Let's go." I pull him down for a quick kiss and then duck into the car. It's unlikely that my father would risk a loud confrontation in front of the entire neighborhood. Then again, I've never made him this angry before.

Micah obnoxiously revs the engine once he's behind the wheel and snorts with laughter when I playfully smack his thigh. He drives slowly through the neighborhood and I stay quiet until we're past the gates. Unsettling memory threads are knitting together in my mind; blurred images and half forgotten conversations that were mysterious to a child's ears.

Ethan Lyonne waving from his front yard. Drinking a beer on our living room couch. Laughing at a Christmas party. Talking to my father downstairs in a voice that was loud enough to wake me up.

All separate events that somehow melt together to create a single confusing impression.

And then the sad day of his funeral.

For Micah, there's never been any closure. The awful sound of his father's murder lives in his head forever. One of

the killers bragged to an ex-girlfriend, then was stabbed to death in a jailhouse riot days after his arrest. His accomplice was already dead, a drug overdose the day after Ethan's murder.

And Micah was forced to live with the consequences. A lifetime of survivor's guilt, the taunts of schoolyard bullies. *"What are you gonna do, Lyonne? Go hide under a bed again? BWAHAHA!"*

He always felt like he had to prove himself, again and again. He still does.

"You've never asked me," he says suddenly as we pass the gaudy vision of the West Emerald Golf Club.

"About your father?"

"No. And don't go thinking I give a shit what your dad said about him. He was just trying to get under my skin. I meant something else."

With a sinking feeling, I know what the 'something else' is.

"You're talking about Olivia." My stepmother's name will always taste like rancid fruit.

"Yup."

"You don't owe me an explanation." And he doesn't. He was Olivia's victim; framed and manipulated and stalked.

"I want to give you one anyway." His eyes narrow under the glare of the freeway lights, or maybe it's a fresh wave of anger resurfacing. "Tess, I wasn't right in the head when I got out of prison. Took all I had just to survive in there. When I was released from that shithole, I was only eighteen and thought there wasn't much to look forward to. Olivia swooped

in and acted like she cared. It didn't last long at all and meant nothing to me. She went and married your father right after that. Even when she kept coming around for all those years, trying to restart something that was never going to happen, I never guessed what she was really like. And I'm still pissed at myself for not seeing it."

I swallow the bitter taste that always invades whenever her name comes up. "Micah, you're not the only one. She and my father didn't have a good marriage but Olivia was part of my family. She fooled me too." I reach for his knee. "I'm sorry for everything you went through. I should have tried harder to be a friend to you."

He keeps his eyes on the road. "I never allowed you to be a friend, Tessie, and you know it."

"We're friends now, aren't we?"

He laughs though his nose, picks up my hand and kisses my wrist like the gruff, tatted anti-prince that I never knew I secretly wanted.

And it's enough of an answer to satisfy me.

"Are we going to your place?"

"Actually, is it okay if we stop by Conner's first? He's got a home game tomorrow and even though he never admits to being nervous, I know he likes company before a big game."

"Sure, we can bring him some pizza."

"And I guarantee he'll eat it all."

Conner's current home is the penthouse suite at the glitzy Palace Hotel. I've attended events in the lavish ballroom before but the top floor suite is the next step up in luxury, with

more square footage than many houses and access to a huge balcony that includes a garden of miniature potted citrus trees.

“Are you sure you want to move?” I ask, standing at the floor to ceiling windows and gawking at the serene carpet of Em City lights below.

Conner already chews on a slice of pizza and joins me at the window. “It’s been a cool place to crash for a while, but I’m ready to spread my wings.”

“You mean put down roots?”

He grins down at me. “Yeah, that.” The rest of his pizza slice gets stuffed into his mouth.

“Well, I promise I won’t rest until I find you the perfect house.”

Conner looks over his shoulder at Micah. “Hey, you’re both coming to my game tomorrow, right? I don’t think I can win without my favorite pair of enemies cheering me on.”

“We’re not enemies,” Micah says.

“At least not anymore,” I add.

Conner flings a rather heavy arm across my shoulders. “Cheer me on anyway. I get lonely.”

“You’ll have fifty thousand fans screaming your name.” Micah grumpily removes Conner’s arm from my shoulders and replaces it with his own. “But we’ll be there. Just keep your hands to yourself.”

Conner is sulking now. “Be nice. The best ladies in my life are spoken for. First Gage takes Dani and now you have Tess all to yourself. Who do I get?”

Micah snorts. “Pretty sure Haven’s still single.”

Conner smacks the back of his cousin's head. "Shut your mouth."

He excuses himself when his phone rings with a call from his coach. I take the opportunity to check out the balcony up close. Micah stands behind me and the warmth of his body is a welcome shield against the cool night air.

I relax against his broad chest. "The city looks so much prettier at night."

"True. Even the east side doesn't look like shit from a distance."

The ends of my hair lift as a light wind rolls through and shudders the citrus tree leaves. My skin prickles with a shiver and Micah holds me closer, his mouth next to my ear.

"It's just a gentle ghost."

"What?" I'm not sure I heard him right. It doesn't sound like something he would say.

"Cecile says the softest winds are gentle ghosts. It was something her grandmother told her."

We live with the shadows of many ghosts, both of us. Some of them are bound to be gentle. Anyway, it would be nice to believe that my hair is being tenderly touched by the mother I never knew.

Micah props his chin on top of my head. "Do you mind if we stick around here for a while? Conner acts like a fool sometimes but I know he'd rather not be alone."

These boys have always looked out for each other. Closer than brothers. It's touching, and only cements Micah's hold on my heart.

“I don’t mind at all. When we were kids I wanted so badly to hang out with you guys.”

He chuckles. “And here I always thought you couldn’t stand us.”

“Oh, that was often true. But I still wanted to be included. Weird, huh?”

“Not weird.” He presses his lips into my hair. “Not weird at all.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say more, to tell him how he takes my breath away and leaves me in awe.

Micah is like no one else and I want to hope that what we’re sharing is the start of something with a real future.

But Conner pokes his head outside and asks us if we want to watch a Star Wars movie so I save the deep thoughts for another time.

15. Micah

My mother sure gets a lot of mileage out of her ludicrous ‘Everyone Look At Me’ toasts. She’s also really clueless when it comes to reading a room.

Cecile is already back upstairs, exhausted after an hour spent in the dining room where everyone heard the sad news that I learned weeks ago but kept to myself out of respect for my grandmother. Maybe she was hoping a second medical opinion would contradict the first. Now there’s no avoiding the truth. She’ll be lucky if she lives until the spring.

Dani can’t stop sniffing as Gage holds her in his lap.

Charlotte dries her tears with her red linen napkin and manages to smile when Conner promises they can go play catch with Total after dinner.

Alta keeps pouring glasses of wine down her throat like they’re vodka shots.

And Tess sits quietly next to me, with my arm resting on the back of her chair.

This is how things stand when Matilda decides it’s a fine time to stand up, tap her fork against her glass, and call attention to herself.

Henley, dutifully pussy whipped as ever, hangs on his wife's next word like a dog waits for scraps under the table.

“Ahem,” warbles Matilda. “Cheers to Cecile Higgins Kingston. My beautiful, tenacious, high-spirited gem of a mother. Being her precious firstborn, I feel like we sort of grew up together. Cecile has known much sadness in her life. But she's known so much joy too, thanks to the people in this room.”

Gage shoots me a *What The Fuck* look.

I feel the need to point something out. “She's not dead yet.”

Matilda ignores me and keeps chewing out every word like she's performing Shakespeare in the Park. “My mother has marched through the years with quiet grace even when the years were challenging...”

“Jesus Christ,” says Alta to no one in particular. Sometimes Alta gets it right.

“But she wouldn't want those she loved best to be unhappy. Just look at all we have to be grateful for. Henley, my true love, forever steadfast and devoted at my side. My darling Charlotte and my sweet Dani are the daughters of my dreams. And then there's my son Micah, who was lost to us for so long. He has now returned to the family fold, bringing with him a wonderful girl that any mother would be overjoyed to welcome to the family.”

I can almost hear Tess cringing in her chair. I hope Matilda is finished auditioning for whatever role she's playing in her head.

But nope, we're not done.

“And while I’m standing before you, let’s all share a silent moment together as we think of the election, only a week away, and wish our neighbor Stuart Ballerini all the success he deserves. We are so fortunate that the man who will be the mayor of the greatest city on earth is a close personal friend.”

Tess’s asshole father isn’t here tonight. Matilda asked her to invite him and she agreed. Then she didn’t do it, which is cool with me. Tess’s relationship with her dad has been a little strained the last few weeks. I’m sure it doesn’t help that lately she spends a whole lot of nights at my place.

For my part, I avoid the guy. He does his best to try and set me off so the only way around that is to keep my distance.

Tess breathes out a soft sigh. My hand goes to her leg. Just because I’m sure she’d be better off without Stuart Ballerini breathing down her neck doesn’t mean I need to broadcast this thought all the time. I would give a lot to see the look on the bastard’s face once the election is over and Tess tells him she’s quitting the political world. My guess is he’ll shit a brick. Hope he hemorrhages when he does.

Matilda’s moment of silence last only three seconds. Then she’s off and running on another monologue about some new Yellow Brick project. Like we all give two shits about an office building right after Cecile shares the news that she’s dying.

“Micah.” Matilda enunciates my name like she’s a teacher who has caught me slacking.

“Still here.”

She gives me a broad smile. Alarm bells clang inside my head.

“I was going to speak to you after dinner but there’s no reason to wait. We have a junior project manager position opening up. It’s a fantastic opportunity for you to get to know the business and you’ll be able to work your way up to management in no time.”

My mother completes her speech and keeps her smile, which now contains a pinch of victory. Matilda carried on like an enraptured lunatic when she heard Tess and I are together. Even said something about her prayers coming true. She thinks I’ve already become so fucking domesticated that I’ll throw on a suit and chain myself to a desk for the next forty years. She is out of her artificially blonde head.

“You will start in two weeks,” she says, a queen handing out decrees. “Which means you’ll have time to give notice to your, ah, *gym*.”

She says ‘gym’ like someone else might say ‘brothel’. Or ‘shithouse’.

“That’s great news.” Henley practically applauds. Because he’s a fucking idiot.

Dani, very familiar with Matilda’s manipulative tactics, tenses on her husband’s lap as she meets my eye, waiting to see what I’ll do. She doesn’t need to wait long.

Tess touches my hand. At least she won’t be surprised by my instant decision.

“You can go ahead and give someone else that opportunity. I’ve got other plans.”

“Plans?” Matilda blinks. “I’m sure they can be rearranged, Micah.”

“Afraid not. I’ve been invited to participate in a Las Vegas tour. Some fights but mostly it’s a skills exhibition. I leave in

two weeks and I'll be there through the holidays.”

“You didn't tell me that.” Tess is staring at me now. She's definitely startled, and maybe a little pissed.

Shit.

I keep my voice low because my next words are not for anyone else at the table. “I just got the offer today. I was going to tell you later.”

She nods but her lips flatten into a worried line.

Now I wish I'd kept my mouth shut and let Matilda carry on with her nonsense. Tess will think I'm bailing on her and that was never my intent. Of course I want her to come with me. She'll be finished with all this election garbage by then. We'll have a hell of a good time bashing around in Vegas until the new year.

But this isn't the place for an in depth discussion.

My mother's gaze shifts to Tess. Tess is just a useful tool to my mother, something she can wield to force me to walk a corporate path. Matilda is now composing some new dialogue in her head. I know the signs. But first she has to acknowledge Conner, who waves his hand in the air like a schoolboy.

“Do you have something to add, Conner?”

“Is there cake?” He keeps his hand up. “I thought I heard you say there'd be cake.”

“There *is* cake.” Dani jumps to her feet. “We brought a strawberry shortcake and Tess made a chocolate pie.”

Charlotte starts running for the kitchen. “I want chocolate pie with whipped cream and a maraschino cherry. No, *two* maraschino cherries.”

Dani communicates silently with Tess in some kind of best friend code and the two of them follow Charlotte to the kitchen.

Matilda props her hands on her hips, now frustrated that her thunder has been stolen by cake.

Alta snickers over her sister's irritation and pours herself more wine. She'll fall out of her chair if she gets any drunker.

Henley manages to be helpful and steers the conversation to football. Conner has another home game coming up this weekend. The Cyclones would probably be undefeated if the defense would pull their weight. Conner and the offensive line can't run the whole show.

My mother cares nothing for football and only takes an interest in Conner at all because of the status points that come with having a nephew who's a pro quarterback. She doesn't say a word during all the football banter and instead watches me like she's analyzing the best way to reformat a project she's dissatisfied with. That annoys me enough to do something I never do.

I'm going to mention my father.

"The anniversary is coming up." I say this loudly, cutting right into the middle of one of Henley's sentences.

Henley pauses, so puzzled that he looks like he's choking, but my mother's expression darts to wariness, shaded with something else.

Annoyance, or maybe pain.

There's no telling with her. Whatever feelings she has for her dead husband are kept under wraps. Always have been.

“I meant the anniversary of my father’s murder,” I say to Henley because he’s still sitting there like a baffled dumbass. “Ethan Lyonne. You might have heard his name once or twice over the years.”

Henley, to his credit, doesn’t snap back. “Of course. I’m sorry, I should have remembered the date is approaching.”

Alta decides to put down her wine glass and chime in. “Ethan was outrageously handsome. At least, from what I remember. I haven’t seen a photo of him in a while.” She looks pointedly around the room as if expecting one to appear.

Matilda doesn’t fire back at her sister. She’d have plenty to say if she did. Alta has her own dead husband. Gage’s father. A disgusting piece of trash named Christos Silvestro who stole Gage from his family, forced him to be a crime boss apprentice, and threatened everyone Gage cares about. Christos eventually choked on his own tumors. Good fucking riddance, asshole.

But Matilda doesn’t even appear to hear Alta. She just stares at me with abnormal ashen silence and now I almost feel bad for taunting her.

Charlotte returns waving a can of whipped cream in the air, breaking the tension and giving Matilda something else to get miffed about.

“Sweetheart, you need to put that can down before it explodes in your hand.”

Charlotte just shakes the can some more. “If I explode, do I get to stay home from school tomorrow?”

She cracks me up.

When Matilda starts to grow more agitated, Charlotte gently deposits the can on the table and turns to me with an

angelic grin.

“Look, Micah. I survived!”

Yeah, she’s definitely my sister.

Dani and Tess follow with dessert. Tess hugs my arm when she returns to her seat, meaning she’s not too annoyed after getting blindsided by the Vegas revelation. We’ll talk later. I’ll convince her that a prolonged vacation to Vegas is just the mental health break she needs. And if that doesn’t do the trick, I’ll give her a demonstration of just how talented my tongue is so she knows why she can’t live without it for two months.

After Conner has devoured half the cake on his own and Charlotte has finished her tower of whipped cream with a slice of pie, she wants everyone to run to the backyard. She’s going to show us how Total can catch a squeaky tennis ball.

Alta is the only one who refuses and stays put with her wine bottle. I doubt Charlotte cares. She’s already pulling Tess toward the grass in the dark backyard.

“And you need to give me your phone number because I don’t have it. I will send you pictures of Total every single day. I promise.”

“I’d like that,” Tess says and they start chasing after Total, who is busy finding filthy things of interest in the grass.

Matilda wraps herself in a thick shawl even though it’s not cold out. “Turn on the patio lights. And don’t let that dog near the pool.”

Total doesn’t even try to catch the ball. Despite Charlotte’s constant encouragement, he starts to run after it, loses interest, and finds something more worthwhile to sniff. Tess kneels right down in the grass and cheers for the two of them anyway.

Meanwhile, Conner and Gage have wandered off during a quiet conversation. They stand in front of the huge swimming pool, where the fake waterfall continues to run year after year and the diving board stands empty. It's a blast of memories, seeing my two cousins out there and recalling the endless hours we spent in that pool, in this backyard.

There are far less pleasant memories here too. If I look to the left, I'll see the dark quadrant where Olivia spoke her last words and then swallowed her death.

But I won't look to the left at all.

Instead, I look at Tess.

Dani sidles up next to me, somewhat subdued as she crosses her arms.

I take note of her red eyes. "Are you okay?"

She worries at her lip and looks down. "Cecile has forbidden me from crying over her. That will be a tough order to follow."

"She's one of a kind, that's for sure."

Dani perks up and raises her head before gesturing across the lawn. "Guess who else is one of a kind?"

Tess, still crouched in the grass, laughs when Total attacks her with his grubby little paws. She's wearing a dark purple dress that's now going to be covered in dusty dog prints but she doesn't seem to mind. Total's furry body shakes with glee as she lavishes attention on him.

Charlotte runs over and examines them with approval. "He loves you, Tess. And he doesn't love just anyone. If he loves you, then it means you're special."

“The dog has good taste,” I mutter out loud, unable to force my eyes away from Tess. Even in the dim twilight she’s luminous.

Fucking radiant.

I don’t know what it’s called when a girl can make your pulse race with a smile but it’s something I haven’t felt before.

Dani hears my comment and elbows me with a smirk. “Seems like you have good taste too.”

Not going to argue with that.

16. Tess

My brain pleads for calm but my heart capers in my chest like a frightened rabbit.

The drive from downtown to West Emerald has never taken so long. I blow through a red light only to get caught behind a minivan at the next one a hundred yards away.

Then I finally scream with frustration.

Less than thirty minutes have elapsed since my uncle's call yet I could swear I've been battling rush hour traffic for two days. At last I reach the neighborhood gates, tapping my fingers on the wheel while they swing open with maddening leisure. Within ten seconds my tires are squealing into the driveway. I don't even bother with the garage.

Josh must have been waiting by the door because he opens it while I'm galloping up the flagstone walkway.

"He's okay," my uncle assures me. "The doctor's with him."

I halt in my tracks and gulp in a breath of relief. "Where is he?"

"In his room."

My uncle trails my steps as I make a beeline for my father's bedroom. He sits on the edge of his bed, shirt opened

at the throat, noticeably shaky.

“Daddy.” Overcome by childish fears that never disappeared in adulthood, I drop my purse on the floor and go to my father. “Shouldn’t we go to the hospital?”

“He’s stable at the moment.” The man is tall and lean, easily overlooked in the corner of the room. He snaps a black leather bag closed and then extends a thin hand. “Dr. Reggie Spigato.”

“Tess Ballerini. Are you his regular doctor?”

Dr. Spigato glances at my father, waiting for permission.

He nods. “It’s all right, doc. You can speak freely in front of my daughter. I don’t keep secrets from her.”

Dr. Spigato’s long, thin face is kind, the sort that is used to calming worried people. “Your father began seeing me a few months ago for high blood pressure.”

“Right.” I bob my head, still feeling the adrenaline of fear. “He’s on medication for that.”

“True. But medication alone hasn’t been able to counter the added stress of your father’s extremely busy schedule. He began experiencing shortness of breath and dizziness. His blood pressure is under control for now, but if he worsens he will need to go to the hospital.”

My father is already waving a hand of refusal. “Can’t do it. Election is in four days. Carrington would have a field day with the news that I’m having health issues while he’s out there running a freaking ten K this weekend.”

I take a seat beside my father. Uncle Josh hangs out in the doorway, saying nothing for the moment.

“Dad, please. This is your life we’re talking about.”

He heaves a sigh, stubborn as always. “After all we’ve worked for, I won’t let a little fatigue get in the way. This is nothing. I’ll be fine after a good night’s sleep.”

Dr. Spigato clears his throat. “Stuart, if you keep pushing yourself right now, you will be at high risk for a serious coronary episode.”

Anxiety curdles in my gut. I know nothing of coronary episodes but it definitely sounds like something you don’t want your father to experience today, or ever.

Uncle Josh catches my eye and crosses his arms with a deep frown of concern.

Dr. Spigato retrieves his bag and attempts to talk sense into his patient for the last time. “It’s obvious that you have people here who care for you. Please consider the devastation of your loved ones before doing anything that will further compromise your health. You cannot be the mayor if you are dead.”

The words fire icy arrows of fear straight through my heart. Time shifts and once again I’m the little girl who cried alone in her room while whispering prayers to whoever was listening beyond the ceiling to *please* not steal her daddy and make him sleep beneath the stone angel with her mother.

As my thoughts race frantically through my head, I’ve missed whatever was said next but Uncle Josh is now walking Dr. Spigato to the front door.

My father’s stubbornness has faded. He studies me as I anxiously clutch my phone. The look in his brown eyes grows remorseful. “I told Josh that I didn’t want you to be upset with this news but he insisted on calling.”

“He was right to call me. I wish *you’d* called me, Dad.”

“I didn’t want to worry you, Tess. And things have been so strained between us as it is.”

The gentle affection in my father’s voice is enough to stir the threat of tears.

“I know and I really don’t want there to be tension.”

Stuart Ballerini is not one to show physical affection. I doubt he’s really hugged me since I was in the single digits. But now he reaches for my hand and briefly squeezes. “I’ve allowed this damn campaign to take over our lives, Tessie Belle. And I’m guilty of relying on you far more than a father has a right to rely on his daughter. But please understand that I see and appreciate everything you do, even if I don’t always show it.”

This is what I’ve always wanted to hear from him. *Always*. Throughout my life my one constant wish is to make my father proud.

For a few seconds I’m too choked up to speak properly.

Uncle Josh returns to the doorway and from the way his expression has softened, I would guess that he heard at least part of that heartfelt speech.

My dad nods to his younger brother. “Josh, I also owe you a lot of thanks. Your support has been vital.” He motions with his right arm in a sweeping arc. “We’re a *family*, the three of us. Sometimes we argue and say things we don’t mean. But in the end, what matters is right here in this room. At the moment I feel like I’ve taken you both for granted. And that eats at me a whole lot more than any damn election results ever could. If the two of you think it’s best to drop out of the race then I will. Because if I don’t have my family then I don’t have anything.”

I’ve never seen my father like this.

Contrite. Vulnerable. Almost tearful.

He's a man who doesn't believe in exhibiting weakness no matter what. A man who cynically turns every setback into opportunity. He's always taught me to mask my feelings behind a hard shell of self-control. But today his shoulders are hunched and his bleary-eyed gaze is almost fearful as it darts from me to Uncle Josh and back again, like he's afraid of what we might say or do next.

Uncle Josh is the first one to step forward. He offers a boyish fist bump but doesn't smile. "You know I've got your back forever, Stu. And no, I don't think you should drop out of the race. We're almost at the finish line. I'm here for whatever you need."

My father meets his brother's fist with a sober nod. "We'll finish this together, same as always."

The brothers face off with their eyes locked for longer than a few seconds. The ominous tickle up my spine is inexplicable.

Abruptly, they both turn their attention to me.

"Tessie Belle?" My dad speaks my name with the kind of gentleness that I craved so badly when I was a lonely child petrified of displeasing him. "Whatever it takes to get us right again, I'll do it. None of this is worth a damn thing if I lose my little girl."

How can I possibly turn him down?

He's spread himself so thin that his health is suffering and he's asking for my help.

"I can't win this without you," he adds. "Even though there are so many things I want to do to help the people of Emerald City."

Win or lose, I was planning to quit his political team right after the election. No one except Micah and Dani is aware of this.

I wanted to take a break. Recalibrate. I've been looking forward to being in Vegas with Micah through the holidays, intending to use the time to work on a business plan for opening up my own real estate office.

The two of them await my response. Seconds of silence seem to stretch on for hours.

My father turns his head away and examines a framed photo on his nightstand. It's me as a newborn infant, in the arms of my beautiful mother. Her smile reminds me of the one I see in the mirror.

I can't remember the last time I was in this room but that I know that photo didn't used to occupy such a place of honor. I suppose it couldn't, back when Olivia was in the picture.

Despite his tendency to brush off matters of the heart, my father has been through a lot. And I'd never forgive myself if I abandoned him when he's finally reached out with an emotional plea.

He's right. He can't do this without my help. No one else except Uncle Josh will care enough to make sure he doesn't work himself into an early grave.

Again, there's a shiver of panic as the worst case scenario zips through my head.

"Dad, of course I don't think you should quit a few days before the election. I'm still here. I'm still committed to helping you in any way I can."

I never thought I would see the day when my father's eyes would fill with grateful tears. He takes a deep breath and

carefully touches my hand before pulling back, struggling to get control of his feelings.

“Tess, your mother would be so proud of you.”

Now there are tears in my eyes too. My dad is not the type of parent who freely offers hugs but I take a chance and put my arms around him. He squeezes me back, both of us sniffing with emotion, while Uncle Josh retreats from the doorway to give us a moment of privacy.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too.” He pats my back and pulls away, perhaps embarrassed that he’s close to sobbing.

But there’s one more thing to talk about. “Dad, I need to tell you something and it’s a big deal.”

He’s wary now. “What’s that?”

“Micah’s part of my life. A big part. He’s extremely important to me and you need to accept him.”

He answers with a sigh and a raised eyebrow. But then he grins. “You must know that it’s tough for a dad to watch his baby girl grow up. But of course I won’t stand in your way. Micah is always welcome in this house. I can even see about getting him a job on the security team if he’s interested.”

I’m certain Micah would *not* be interested, but I’m grateful for the gesture.

Uncle Josh pops his head back in the room. “I can take a few hours off from work. How about we order some food?”

But my father gets heavily to his feet and brushes off this idea. “Raincheck on that. I’m supposed to be down at headquarters within the hour.”

“I’ll go.” I stand up and try to look severe. “As your very dedicated campaign manager, I’m going to insist that you rest, at least for today. I’ll go to campaign headquarters and if there’s anything that needs your attention I’ll dial you in for a conference call. Otherwise, you can trust that I will take care of it.”

My dad grins but addresses his brother. “We really lucked out with this girl.”

“Sure did,” says Uncle Josh, but he doesn’t grin back. He stares at me with a crease of concern in his brow.

Retrieving my purse from the floor, I repeat my demands. “I mean it, Dad. You rest right now. Let me take care of campaign business. Like Uncle Josh said, we’re almost at the finish line. We’ll need you to be sharp for the final days of the campaign. No arguments.”

He sinks back down to a sitting position. “Yes, boss.” But he’s still grinning.

“And you’re feeling all right?”

“Much better.”

“I’m heading downtown now. I’ll keep you updated.” Before leaving, I touch my uncle’s arm. “Thank you.”

His worry lines smooth out. “Always, Tessie.”

When I’m in my car, I remember that I have plans with Micah tonight. We were going to catch a late dinner once we’re both finished with work for the day. With a twinge of guilt and another of regret, I realize I’ll need to cancel those plans. Though I’d love nothing better than to be with him and fall asleep in his arms, my plate will be full in the final days of the campaign.

Micah might even be relieved. He has an upcoming fight on the night of the election. He's been training hard but could probably use the additional time to focus.

As for our Vegas plans, I'm not canceling. I just might need to modify them a little. Las Vegas is just a short plane ride away. I can easily make the trip on weekends.

Or maybe I won't even need to do that. After all, my father could actually lose the election.

I don't want that. Wait, do I want that?

A dark whisper from the recesses of my mind. *Maybe.*

The unwelcome thought is shoved somewhere deep and I steer the car toward the neighborhood gates. I'll text Micah when I get back to the office.

17. Micah

One of Conner's best qualities is that he understands when I'm feeling like shit and doesn't make me talk.

But he looks over from the driver's seat when I shift my weight.

"I've got a freezer full of ice packs in the penthouse," he says. "Always use them after a game. Will help the ribs."

"The ribs are fine." I punch the radio on. He bends the truck to the freeway exit.

He knows my ribs aren't in stellar shape because he had a ringside seat to the sight of them getting soundly thrashed. Yet it's nothing a dose of ibuprofen and a night of sleep can't solve.

The sting of humiliation might take a few days longer.

I keep spinning through radio channels, finding nothing worth listening to. With the next flip, a woman's ecstatic voice crackles through the din of loud cheering.

"We're here at the Palace Hotel ballroom where Stuart Ballerini's planned victory party is about to kick off. The Emerald City mayor's race was just called for Ballerini twenty minutes ago and Larson Carrington has already conceded. The new mayor elect is expected to take the stage shortly."

Conner glances over when I abruptly click the radio off. I don't feel like celebrating Ballerini's moment of triumph. At least the election is over and Tess will no longer be under the shadow of her father's relentless demands. We've hardly had a chance to connect the last few days. She's been working all hours of the day and night.

Not that I don't admire her determination. It's a quality I used to ridicule her for, wrongly assuming she was forever on a quest to outdo everyone else around her.

But no, I was wrong.

Tess simply does way too much for others, not enough for herself. Her father is at the very top of the 'others' list. All my life I've watched that jackass treat his daughter like she was born to serve him.

Well, Tess is not his fucking property. It's long past time she let him know this.

Conner tries to turn into the Palace Hotel parking garage and is met with a gaggle of unsmiling men in dark suits. Ballerini's security goons, I'm guessing. One of them raps on the window.

Conner lowers it. "How are you doing? I live here."

The guy is probably about our age, with a Marine haircut and a face like a sledgehammer. His eyes pop wide when he gets a good look at who is behind the wheel. "Conner Wiseman. Holy shit. Hell of a game last week."

Conner, used to random acts of adulation, doesn't tell the dude to piss off. Nope, Conner smiles and even agrees to autograph his phone case with a handy Sharpie.

Sledgehammer is so delighted he flashes a row of corn-like teeth before noticing that Conner has company in the

passenger seat.

“And your name, sir?”

I’m about to tell him that my name is Fuck Around And Find Out when Conner takes the lead and answers for me.

“That’s my bodyguard.”

Sledgehammer scans my face, probably thinking I can’t be much of a bodyguard slouched over here with a black eye. If he has more than a handful of IQ points it might occur to him why a pro athlete the size of Conner Wiseman would need a bodyguard at all.

“He’s shy,” Conner explains when I keep shooting out a death glare.

The guy nods and seems to decide he’s better off not asking more questions. He waves us through with no additional trouble.

Conner slow rolls through the levels all the way up to the roof, then parks and cuts the engine. “I can go down there with you.”

“No need.” I know he’d rather not. There will be a huge fuss in the room if he makes an appearance. Hell, Ballerini would probably haul him up on the stage and pretend they are BFFs.

“You guys coming up afterwards?” he asks as we cross the concourse to the hotel. The elevators are just on the other side of the door. He’ll be heading up to the penthouse while I need to get down to the ballroom.

“Don’t know. I’ll play it by ear, see what Tess wants to do.”

He nods and knuckles the elevator button. “Tell her congrats on the win in case I don’t see her later.”

“Will do.”

He looks me over as if he’d like to say something, but knows it probably isn’t a good idea.

Which it isn’t.

I don’t want to be interrogated or pitied. I just want to go kiss my girl and drag her away from her father’s clutches.

“Catch you later.” Conner disappears into the elevator.

The second elevator dings but I decide to punish myself and jog all the way down to the ground floor instead.

No bones got cracked tonight. I’m sure of it. I’ve done that plenty of times and the pain is sharper. This is nothing. Just bruises and a big fat fucking dent in my pride.

When I shove open the door to the ground floor it’s like I’ve walked into a three ring circus. There are flags and banners and random pieces of colored confetti littering the floor. Huge signs screech BALLERINI in every direction and giddy people draped in Vote For Ballerini crap are collected in groups.

If I’d stumbled into this nightmare to see anyone other than Tess I’d turn right around and run back the way I came.

Great. Here comes a trio of Sledgehammer’s suit-and-tie pals. They are marching this way after taking one look at me, concluding I’m a threat that needs to be escorted out of their dear leader’s airspace.

Without thinking, I square my shoulders and tense, ready to pounce.

This will go real fucking badly if they try to touch me right now.

“Micah!” Tess’s voice reaches me a split second before I see her. It’s always impressive the way her petite body confidently cuts through any crowd like butter.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” She stretches up for a kiss. I tip my head down to give her one. “Why didn’t you text that you were here?”

“You know how I feel about texting.” Roughly the same way I feel about root canals. Besides, now that I think about it, I left my phone behind in Conner’s truck.

Tess notices that we have an armed audience watching and flicks her hand to wave them off. “It’s all right. He’s with me.”

She wears a black dress that’s loose and cut too high for my taste. Her hair is pinned up in a clip that looks like a twin to the one she wore the night she tapped me on the shoulder in an east side bar.

Tess is always beautiful, but I’d very much like to get her alone, yank that clip out, wrap her hair in my fist and bend her to my will until she comes so hard she can’t speak.

But I sure can’t do that in a roomful of Ballerini worshippers.

“Hey, congratulations,” I say and I mean it. Tess works harder than anyone I know. That fucker who now gets to call himself the Emerald City mayor owes eternal gratitude to her for everything she’s done. He actually had the balls to offer me a job, a spot in his security entourage alongside Sledgehammer.

I took the offer for what it was; a bullshit showman act to impress his daughter. I didn’t tell him to go fuck himself, but I

did turn it down flat without a pause.

“Thank you.” She smiles and then takes a closer look at me, skimming her hand over my face with concern.

She’s been to my fights and is fully aware of what I do. She just doesn’t like to see the less glamorous evidence.

A blonde woman wearing rhinestone jeans and a shirt that plasters the new mayor’s face across her tits barrels this way and seizes Tess like she might eat her.

“We did it!” She tries to jump up and down with Tess in her arms.

I spot the wrinkle of annoyance in Tess’s forehead but ultimately she slaps on a smile as she disengages, taking a step back. “And our PR team was absolutely invaluable so thank you for leading it.”

“Only the beginning,” the woman says, then notices that I’m in the area. Her dizzy gaze scans me with sudden interest. “And you are?”

“Nobody.” Not in the mood to make new friends.

But Tess doesn’t allow rudeness. She slips her arm through mine. “Katie, this is Micah Lyonne. We grew up together. His family owns Yellow Brick Properties.”

Why the hell did she say that?

No need to name drop to make me sound more impressive than I am.

The woman lights up, hand to her heart. “How are you related to Matilda?”

“Micah is Matilda’s son,” Tess volunteers before I say something obscene.

I'm not enjoying this version of Tess, less like the feisty girl I carry to bed, and more like the pretentious class president who hands out lists of chores and a timeline to complete them.

Right now she'd fit more neatly into Matilda's circle than mine.

Either Tess senses my irritation or she worries I'll verbally abuse poor Katie. She begins tugging on my arm and trying to sidestep Katie with a promise they'll talk later.

Tess's name gets shouted from other corners of the room and that fake smile stays on her lips as she calls out greetings. I know better than anyone what her real smile looks like and I can tell when she's just going through the motions.

We pass the open door to the ballroom and it's clearly the party destination, all decked out like it's New Year's freaking Eve. I'm glad when she steers me past that assault on the eyes and down a corridor. She opens a door to the sight of some more Sledgehammer clones. They're hunched over a shiny table, playing with their phones and paying no attention to the screens that show various camera angles inside and outside the ballroom. Tess acts like she doesn't notice that they're slacking.

"Sorry to interrupt, but can I have a few minutes alone here?"

"Sure thing," says one of the guards and then hustles out of the room with his buddy on his heels.

Tess waits until the door closes and then throws her arms around me. "I've been waiting to do this all day."

I rub her back, inhale the scent of her hair. "You're not the only one."

She hugs my waist. “We’ll need to celebrate our dual triumphs.”

I grit my teeth when she presses on the most bruised area of my ribs. “Don’t have anything to celebrate.”

Her head tips back. She’s finally noticed that something is wrong. “What happened?”

“I lost.”

She’s shocked.

She should be.

I don’t lose.

And I have no excuse.

It’s true that I faced a seasoned pro tonight but it’s more true that lately my head just hasn’t been focused on the ring like it should be.

“Micah.” She molds her body to mine and hugs me more carefully. “I’m sorry. I should have been there.”

“Not a big deal. How long do you have to stick around here?”

I dislike the flash of guilt that skates over her face when she peers up at me.

“My father will be making a speech, then there’s the after party. And I know he wants to hit the ground running as far as getting his administration ready. There’s a lot of planning ahead.”

“I’m sure he’s got people on the payroll to help him with that.”

There’s that flash of guilt again.

“He’s entrusted me with the assignment of picking his transition team.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what the fuck that means.”

She purses her lips. “This is a huge job, Micah. And an unbelievably stressful one. But he can do a lot of good with the right team around him.”

“Tess, are you now planning to work for your father until the end of time?”

“His health has suffered due to the campaign. I can’t just bail on him.”

“So you’re going to fall on your sword so that he can play king.”

She huffs out an irritated sigh and backs away from me. “That’s unnecessarily melodramatic.”

She didn’t answer my question about whether she actually wants to keep working for her father. Fine, I’ll ask a different question. “Are you still coming to Vegas with me?”

She pauses for a breath, fidgets, stalling. Very unlike her.

“I would love to go with you. You know that.”

“Nice to hear. But not the kind of confirmation I was looking for.”

Her attention is drawn to the action on the largest screen where people are surging like rats to get close to a stage with a podium set up.

“Look, I’ll come visit you there whenever I can. And it’s only for two months, right?”

I can’t stand the way her voice sounds.

Mournful. Tired.

Like this is a moment of defeat and all the sparkle that I adore has been zapped right out of her.

Honestly, I have my doubts about Ballerini's so-called health issues. It seems like he's always ready with a convenient reason to reel his daughter back under his absolute control. Even if he does have problems, he sucks if he's using them as a means of guilting Tess into being his permanent servant. He doesn't give a damn if he crushes her dreams and steals her best years. As long as he wins in the end.

Ever since I can remember, I've watched that fucking manipulative prick treat Tess like she's merely an accessory for his image. I've had enough.

Pushing her hair aside, I make an obnoxious show of examining her neck.

She's startled and shakes me off. "What are you doing?"

"Thought I'd find a collar there. With a handy little tab so your father can attach the leash whenever he feels like it."

"Micah, that is not fair."

"Noted. Lots of shit isn't fair."

She softens. "I know you're upset about your fight. You don't have to lash out like this."

"Not lashing out. I'm telling you the truth. Someone has to do it. Come on, let's leave this shitshow behind. We can go right now."

"No, I can't just take off."

"All right. We'll hang out for an hour. Then we'll go."

She sniffs. "He needs me to be here."

I close the distance between us and tip her chin up with one finger. “What about us?”

Her sweet brown eyes grow sad. “I know you need me too right now and-”

“Dammit, that’s not what I mean.”

Of course I fucking need her.

I need her soft warmth and her smart mouth and her sexy body.

I need every part of her so much I can taste her but that’s not the argument in play.

“Tess, I’m not trying to *take* from you right now. I just want you to come clean about who you really are versus who you’re pretending to be.”

The set to her jaw says she’s not taking the accusation well. She jerks her face away from my grip. “I’m not pretending anything, Micah. I’m not required to fit into the box that someone else chooses for me, not even you.”

“Then don’t, for fuck’s sake. Do you know when you are at your best, Tessie? When you’re brazen enough to reach for what you want instead of just performing a role for someone else’s benefit. Don’t crush that fire until you get so bored and restless and lonely that it just vanishes for good.”

She pinches the space between her brows.

I recognize that look.

I’ve been on the receiving end plenty of times back in our warring adolescence. It’s a look that lives in the realm between *How fucking stupid are you?* and *Your face gives me a migraine.*

She lowers her hand. “Why are you doing this right now?”

I shrug. “Now’s as good a time as any. Let’s finish this lesson. You don’t belong to your father, Tess. You are not required to give up everything and stand beside him because you are not his damn wife. He’s had a few of those already. Remember?”

She stiffens, eyes wide, ready to erupt. “You asshole.”

“Yeah, always have been.”

“Are you expecting a trophy for consistency?”

“Are you expecting one for martyrdom?”

She’s ready to scratch my eyes out. “I take my responsibilities seriously. You, on the other hand, always do *exactly* what you want, Micah.”

“That’s right, and you seemed like you were getting the hang of doing the same for a while. Wasn’t it fun?”

Her answer is a dirty look. She huffs and crosses her arms.

It’s time to lay it all out on the table. “Know what kills me, Tess? You’re all tough and sure of yourself except when it comes to standing up to your dad. He snaps his fingers and you fall in line like the docile little minion he trained you to be.”

A nerve has been struck and her dark eyes flash with anger. “That is complete bullshit.”

“The hell it is. Your father is a manipulative sack of garbage. He doesn’t concern himself with your feelings and you know it. Stop being so afraid to defy him.”

Her laugh becomes hostile. “You do have a long history of being wrong about me. I’m not afraid.”

“Prove it. Leave this crap behind, quit being the mayor’s secretary and come to Vegas.”

“Don’t give me an ultimatum.”

“There’s no fucking ultimatum. Just a request to have the courage to do what you really want instead of what someone else demands. Look, if you really and truly didn’t want to come with me, then that would be fine. But goddammit, don’t waste years of your life trying to please everyone but yourself. The day will come when you’re bitter for all that you’ve missed out on.”

“Micah.” She struggles to control the emotion in her voice. “We’re very different in that way. You don’t concern yourself with consequences. You dive headfirst without checking the depth of the water.”

“And I won’t change. So if you’re waiting for an apology for that, you can just exhale and forget it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sounds like a great recipe for longevity.”

“Just who the hell says I want to live a long time?”

The look on her face is agony, like she’s just been kicked in the stomach.

There’s a terrible silence that stretches between us as we stand off.

On the screen to my right, the cheering has reached a crescendo as the new city leader steps on the stage. The motherfucker waves a chubby hand and soaks in the adulation of the howling crowd at his feet. In his own mind, he’s a king at his coronation.

Josh Ballerini, eternally a sidekick, stands to his brother's left and claps his hands so hard they've got to be getting numb.

"We did it!" Stuart Ballerini pumps his arms in the air the way some assholes do after winning a fight. "We won, and it's thanks to each and every one of you. But before I say a few words, I want to acknowledge my brother right here on the stage. Josh, your loyalty is everything. And where's my Tessie Belle? My daughter, my rock, my pride and joy. Tess, where are you?" He peers into the crowd, a twinge of irritation showing in the way his eyes narrow. He expects Tess to be front and center at all times, ready to be summoned whenever he has a use for her.

She snaps to attention at the sound of her father's voice and blinks at the screen.

"I've got to go," she says.

"Then you should go."

"Will you still be here later?"

"You know I won't."

Tess shuts her eyes and lowers her head, the picture of misery.

If she cries, I won't be able to turn my back.

If she runs into my arms and begs me to stay then I can't refuse her.

But she doesn't do any of this.

Tess Ballerini lifts her head, opens her eyes and stalks right out of the room, leaving me behind to watch her disappear while listening to the echo of her heels on the hard floor.

For the moment I remain in place, switching my gaze to the screen in front of me even though I know what's coming.

A path clears in the middle of the crowd as Tess makes her way to her waiting father.

She walks stiffly, her head held high, not smiling when she joins him on the stage. He hisses something in her ear and she finally issues a weak smile along with a limp wave.

The crowd roars.

I've seen enough.

With more heaviness in my heart that I would have guessed possible, I leave this shitty scene behind.

She's made her choice tonight.

And she didn't choose me.

Part II

*“It was always supposed to be us.
We just didn’t know it.”*

18. Tess

January days have a bleak feel to them even when the sun is shining. The temperature dropped overnight, not cold by the standards of most places, but chilly for Em City. People walk briskly on the yellow brick city sidewalk and shiver with their heads down.

The guard at the Green Mansion gate knows me by sight, yet I flash my badge anyway because rules are rules.

The man tips his head with a nod of appreciation and flips the switch to unlock the tall wrought iron gate. I wait while it slowly creaks open and then enter my father's fortress.

The Green Mansion isn't really green. A century ago, the broad four story edifice boasted green shutters. The shutters are long gone but the nickname has stood the test of time.

After another ID check at the front door, I'm given access to the place where the daily crucial business of Em City is conducted. My father was initially annoyed when I chose not to move into a suite in the residential wing like he did. Though I commute here every day to participate as an integral part of the mayor's team, I refuse to live in this hive of chaos and intrigue. Every night I go home to the lonely house in West Emerald and sleep fitfully with nothing to keep me company but my own regrets.

Micah and I haven't seen each other since the night of the election, when we exchanged bitter words right before I turned my back on him.

I was angry, stung by the things he said about my father, unwilling to admit that his perception was accurate.

But it was his final raw declaration that I can't escape from.

"Just who the hell says I want to live a long time?"

A knife through the center of my soul. The wound hasn't healed.

Because I know Micah. I understand who he is. A man shadowed by cruel demons. He will fight them to the death if he has to.

And I would not survive that kind of loss. So I ran from him instead.

He chose to leave for Las Vegas the next morning. Now every day without him is a bleak experience.

Over the last two months there have been a hundred times when I nearly drove to the airport and took the first flight to Vegas.

In spite of everything, if I'd been sure he still wanted me, I would have gone to him in a heartbeat. But too much pride and stubbornness stand in the way and I can't bring myself to ask the crucial question.

Do you miss me, Micah?

I've always thought of myself as confident. Self-assured. But when it comes to the man who unknowingly holds my heart, suddenly I can't find enough true bravery to tell him how I feel.

Our silent standoff ended on Christmas Eve when I received an overnight delivery. The heavily duct taped box took a full fifteen minutes to pry open. Inside, there was no note, no card. Just a jewelry box containing a pair of sapphire earrings. Sapphire is my birthstone. Strangely, the box was wrapped deep within the folds of a hooded black sweatshirt.

The thing wasn't new, and partially faded from being processed through wash cycles. But Micah didn't send it randomly, or just to give the earrings a cushioned ride. This was the closest he could get to sending a piece of himself. I held the warm fleece to my face, breathing him in as my heart cracked.

He'd put some thought into this wordless message. *I'm coming back.*

Yes, he's coming back. I'm just not clear on where we stand when he does.

The first floor is crowded with city officials and various employees going about their business. A few greet me by name. In the two weeks that have gone by since my father's official inauguration, he hasn't made much effort to get acquainted with the day to day operations of the city, choosing to delegate his tasks every chance he gets. I've heard enough whispers to know that I'm not the only one frustrated by this.

I'm not expecting to hear a dreaded, familiar voice at my back.

"Hello again, Tess."

Whirling around, I'm ready to go to war. My purse may not look like much of a weapon, but I carry around a lot of baggage and that sucker is heavy.

Pierce Carrington glowers in front of me, not even bothering to hide his malice.

“Find your own way home, you cold blooded little bitch.”

Though I’ve caught glimpses of him since that night, we’ve never been face to face.

I’m not pleased to be blindsided by him here today and I don’t bother to hide it. He breaks into a rubbery smile to show how much he enjoys my discomfort.

But he wouldn’t dare do something crazy here, not in the mayor’s house in front of a crowd of people.

My heart still pounds but the initial fear fades. I sling my purse strap back on my shoulder and give the bastard a charming smile. “How nice to see you up and about. Looks like you’ve recovered from your unfortunate accident. I meant to send a get well card.”

Pierce’s eyes are a strange shade of green. Colored contacts, most likely. To me, the tint adds to his coldblooded serpent vibe, but more than one passing woman gives him a very blatant second look.

He’s inspecting me right now, trying to figure out if his suspicions are true and that his attack had something to do with me.

I’d love to rub the asshole’s face in it, tell him he got what he got exactly what he deserved. But Micah’s words of caution come back to haunt me. He warned me against provoking an enemy I can’t beat.

Instead of taunting Pierce Carrington, I hold my tongue and take Micah’s advice.

I sure wish he was here beside me right now.

This is not a new feeling. I always wish for Micah, no matter where I am and what I'm doing.

"You'll have to excuse me," I say to Pierce. "I'm on my way to see the mayor."

I turn my back before he has a chance to respond. Yet I don't really exhale properly until I'm safely closed in the elevator.

Pierce Carrington is a weasel, but a dangerous one. I'll see what I can do about getting him banned from the Green Mansion. He doesn't belong here.

The mayor's official office is on the top floor, removed from the constant racket down below. On the short elevator ride up, I chew a peppermint and wish I'd grabbed a latte while I was out and about. Just being inside this building makes me want to take a nap. Somewhere far away.

The top floor is a hushed crypt compared to the ground floor bedlam. I have an office here, at the other end from the corner occupied by my father. Yet I try to find reasons not to stick around for longer than the bare minimum.

I do have some company on my walk down the long corridor. The oil painted faces of Emerald City mayors from days gone by glower from both sides. An unattractive bunch, if I'm being honest.

Up ahead, hinges squeal and laughter echoes. The door to my father's office cracks open and a woman steps out. She's distracted, fixing the top button on her blouse. Then she wipes her mouth with the back of her manicured hand.

Gross.

She takes two wobbly steps before freezing at the sight of me. "Oh. Tess." Her expression is instantly revised,

showcasing a collagen-enhanced camera ready smile that doesn't reach her icy eyes.

“Helena.” I'm sure my disgust filters through my tone.

She's a reporter for Channel Five. I'm not sure at what point she began screwing my father. Perhaps while she was still covering the campaign. Although I've been told nothing by him, it's reached my ears that Helena has become a frequent visitor all hours of the day. And night.

Helena Dixon pats long strands of brown hair back into place. Recently I looked up her bio and discovered she's the daughter of a scream queen actress. She's also just two years older than I am.

She shoots a rather annoyed look at the disapproval on my face. “Aren't you supposed to be handling some meetings for your father?”

Someone ought to tell her that a middle button is open on her blouse. Won't be me.

I don't bother to sound too friendly. “I wasn't aware that I'm now required to run my daily itinerary past you.”

Judging by the flare in Helena's eyes, I could swear she'd like to stab me for that.

Yet here comes her glamour girl smile again. “It's just that your father mentioned he didn't expect to see you here today.”

I don't smile back. “I see.”

Our conversations are always like this; short, unpleasant and passive aggressive. In the beginning I couldn't put my finger on why she gets under my skin. I'm long past the age where I'd be bothered if my father had a girlfriend. But there's just a false, calculating quality about this one.

She reminds me of...

Olivia.

That's probably unfair.

What are the odds that my father would find a second acid-wielding homicidal psycho?

I doubt they are very high.

In any case, I'm not above basic pettiness. Which is why I dig around in my purse and locate a tin of chalky peppermints.

"Here." I press them into her palm. "I'm sure you need these more than I do."

Content with taking the last word, I sidestep her and rap loudly on my father's door.

He bellows from within, sounding overly cheerful. "Still open, doll face. Just watching our latest hit."

I hold back a gag and push the door open. "It's not doll face. It's me."

He's leaning all the way back in the four thousand dollar desk chair that was a customized special order and upholstered in the most expensive buttery leather available. I tried to warn him that such luxuries on the taxpayer dime were unethical. He laughed at me.

He had been in the middle of watching a video on his phone. I want to believe that I did not hear pornographic moaning but I'm pretty sure I'm kidding myself. He abruptly cuts off the audio and drops the phone face down on his desk.

Instantly shifting his manner, he readjusts his chair and sits up straight. "Helps with the back pain."

Sinking into the black wingback chair on the opposite side of his desk, I take note of my father's disheveled appearance. His striped tie is loose and a smudge of lipstick streaks across his lower right jaw.

"I didn't know you'd been having back pain, Dad."

He drums his fingers on the desk and shifts his eyes to the window. "Old high school football injury."

"How's your blood pressure?"

"Depends."

"Are you still taking your meds?"

"Sure." He returns his gaze to me. "Thought you said you weren't going to be in the office this afternoon."

"The meetings wrapped up early. I had a long chat with Jamie Hiroto."

"Right." He nods but I doubt he has a clue who I'm talking about.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "As the City Council rep for the east side, he has a list of urgent issues that need attention. However, his most immediate concern is the number of schools in his district that either have severe mold issues or are one structural defect away from being condemned. He's begging for help. I assured him we would do whatever it takes."

My father rubs his chin. "Remind me what the voter margin was on the east side."

I bite my lip so I don't scream. "It barely tipped to Carrington but that doesn't matter. You are the mayor to everyone in the city, whether they voted for you or not."

The fact that I need to say this out loud is disturbing.

Today isn't the first time I've become uneasy over the fact that my father, so used to the easy job of overseeing wealthy West Emerald, is completely unprepared to manage a complex, sprawling urban center.

What's more, he doesn't seem interested in learning.

"Speaking of Carrington," he says with a loud clearing of his throat, "the campaign is over. Rivalries should be put to rest. Larson Carrington and I met for drinks last night. You know he's an important name in this town. It was decided that we would all benefit from having a member of his team on board. There's a lot we can collaborate on."

A terrible suspicion begins to form. On the heels of the unexpected encounter with Pierce Carrington, it's too much of a coincidence.

"Dad, it's fine if you want to have some level of cooperation with Larson Carrington. He's very influential and also involved in a lot of charity work. However, I don't believe it's a necessary gesture to hire one of his underlings."

Stuart Ballerini is already waving my words away. "I can decide what is and is not necessary. Larson's brother Pierce has a lot of experience, not to mention vital networking contacts. He'll be an outstanding addition around here."

My stomach tightens and my cheeks are hot. "I will *not* work with Pierce Carrington."

He sits up taller and exhales loudly. "That is the wrong attitude. It's always wise to cultivate new allies and-

"Dad, he scares me."

I just blurted the words without thinking. But now they are out there and I'll need to explain them.

My father's brow furrows. He knows that's not an accusation I would make lightly. He'll want the full story. When I share it, he'll be outraged. What father wouldn't be? I'll have to hold him back from charging downstairs to personally tackle Pierce Carrington.

While he waits in stunned silence, I'm piecing the words together in my head. I should have told him already. Of course I will leave out Micah's involvement, although he would likely be pleased to know that Pierce's crime didn't go unpunished.

However, I don't get a chance to explain anything at all.

In a moment when I'm struggling to find the right way to explain how I narrowly escaped the clutches of his new apprentice, my father leans back in his chair and eyes me with a critical glare.

"Tess, when you're in a position holding this much responsibility, there is no quality more important than self-control. You can't allow yourself to get carried away by emotion. And you can never let anyone know that they have a prayer of getting the better of you. I didn't just raise a daughter. I raised a warrior. You remember that."

Satisfied with his advice, he picks up a pen and jots down some notes on a legal pad. Perhaps he's recording his own words of wisdom so they can be reused another time.

He's not going to ask me why I'm frightened of Pierce Carrington.

He doesn't even want to know.

As far as his *self-control* nonsense, he seems to abandon the concept whenever he feels like unzipping his fly for a

pretty reporter.

The truth has always been right in front of me.

Stuart Ballerini is a complete fucking hypocrite and Micah was right about him.

Micah was also right about me.

I'm a grown woman who has not been brave enough to break free from my father's control.

I sacrifice the things I want for the things *he* wants.

I don't take risks. I can't tolerate the idea of losing.

Standing up, I clutch my purse in my arms. "I don't feel very well."

He continues to write, not looking up. "Fine, take the rest of the afternoon off."

Yeah, I was going to do that whether he gave me permission or not.

Though my chest feels tight with the sting of betrayal, the last thing I want to do is prove him right by bursting into tears. And I also refuse to be seen wandering the halls of the Green Mansion as a sobbing mess.

No, I'm going to hold my head up and remain clear eyed. No one will suspect that I'm crushed beyond words.

While I don't exactly slam the door to my father's office closed, I don't shut it softly either.

The eyes of dead Emerald City mayors leer at me from the walls.

I flip them off.

It's something Micah would do, which is exactly why I did it.

But instead of making more obscene gestures to dead men or running back down the hall to accuse my father of being a callous jerk, I do what I always do when I feel like the pressure is chewing me to pieces from the inside and I need to hear a friendly voice.

I call my best friend. "What are you doing now? Can I come over?"

19. Tess

Dani is spending the day with Cecile, who is now completely bedridden, never leaving her room at Matilda's house. Dani insisted that I come over anyway.

Gage is here too and he answers the door, delivering a cool nod before standing back to let me in. We never have much to say to each other. Still, he's given my best friend the happily ever after of her dreams and for that I'm grateful. Gage is a good guy, even if he doesn't allow many people to see that.

"She's upstairs with Cecile," he says. Standing at the base of the grand staircase, his right hand briefly taps the end of the dark wood banister. "Go on up."

"Thanks." I don't stare when he taps the banister again. I'm used to the sight of him working out his OCD compulsions. Dani has admitted that he stifles the urges when he needs to. I suppose I'm glad that he feels comfortable enough around me not to bother.

I'm less than halfway up the stairs when he says, "Micah's coming home."

I freeze. "Next week, right?"

“Nope. Cecile’s not doing great so he’s scrapping the rest of his tour and driving back tonight. He should be here by morning.”

I turn my head and look down at Gage Silvestro watching me with a little bit of curiosity. And maybe some amusement.

My hand flies up to touch a sapphire earring. I’ve worn them every day since Micah sent them. The desire to feel his touch is so overpowering I nearly sink to my knees right here on the stairs.

“Thanks for telling me.”

He doesn’t quite smile, but his mouth twitches like he’s on the verge. “Sure.”

Micah’s coming home.

Elation wars with anxiety as I climb the remaining stairs. The boy who was once my enemy now keeps my heart in his pocket and he doesn’t know.

Total barks from Cecile’s room. Dani lounges on the bed with Cecile as the puppy bounces on the mattress, wagging his tail.

I feel like I’m interrupting, however Dani springs from the bed and seizes me in a hug. She gives the warmest hugs.

“Come sit with us.” She flops back on the huge bed and scoops Total into the crook of her arm. Dani pats an empty spot atop the fluffy red comforter but I pull up a chair instead.

Cecile’s dark glasses are in place. She can see nothing behind them but I feel her scrutiny just the same. “Tess, you haven’t been here in weeks. Why?”

She’s lost weight to the point where she looks skeletal. Her skin is also a strange color, distinctly yellow, a sign of jaundice

I suppose.

“Tess has been extremely busy helping her father get settled into the mayor’s office.” Dani gives me a wink.

I lean forward, tempted to touch the hand of the woman who means so much to the people I love dearly. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around in a while. How are you feeling?”

“Terrible. But I’ll be dead soon so I suppose I should enjoy it.”

Cecile has a long track record of shocking with her blunt language but Dani’s lower lip trembles. She’ll be devastated when Cecile is gone.

So will Micah.

Growing up in a house full of secrets and tragedies with a mother who never had much patience for him, Micah’s grandmother was the one constant in his life.

“You must be glad that Micah is returning early.”

She sniffs. “I told him he should not change his plans just to sit by my bedside on death watch, but the boy is stubborn.”

Her words sound harsh, but they are also tender. She loves Micah a great deal.

Dani is paying careful attention to my reaction now that we’re discussing Micah. She knows most of the story, but not all of it. And Dani would never push.

“I remember your mother,” Cecile says, startling me. “A red headed spitfire if ever there was one. She could be very entertaining. I’m sure you don’t remember her.”

“No, I don’t remember her.” But I wish I did.

Cecile rearranges her position, suddenly agitated. “Tess, pay attention. There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you and this is probably the last chance I’m going to get.”

I look at Dani. She fusses with the blanket covering Cecile’s shrunken body. Total seems to be dozing off in her arms.

“Of course. I’m listening.”

Cecile removes her sunglasses. I’ve seen her ruined eyes before, reduced to slits inside a cage of badly scarred skin. It’s still jarring to be confronted with them up close. Yet I would never do her the insult of turning away.

Cecile can’t see me but she stares just the same. “Mostly I would say that a terrible parent is better than no parent but there are exceptions.”

That sounds like a hell of an indictment.

She hasn’t named my father yet I’m sure that’s exactly who she means. I don’t know why she would say such a thing right now, however Cecile is facing the end of her life and her mind could be wandering in any number of directions as she looks back.

She jabs a thin finger in the air. “Don’t be afraid.”

I have no clue what she’s referring to. “I won’t.”

Her dry lips bend into a smirk, like she’s charmed that I’m humoring her. “Don’t be afraid to lose, Tessie Belle. You can’t ever win if you’re not willing to take a chance that you might lose.”

I’m so shocked by the depth of her insight that I can think of nothing to say. The fact that her words penetrate so deeply, and sting when they do, is a sign of their accuracy.

Most people don't have the ability to say things so plainly.
She does.

And Micah. He does too.

He didn't inherit this quality from his mother. Matilda is as superficial as they come. Cecile's grandson gets his honesty from her.

The sudden commotion downstairs perks up Total's ears and he issues a piercing bark of excitement. Charlotte is home from school and she wastes no time thundering up the stairs.

"I thought school would never end." She takes a flying leap onto the bed and rolls to her back, holding her arm over her eyes in a dramatic pose while Total lavishes sloppy dog kisses all over her face.

Charlotte giggles and sits up. "Tess, I didn't know you were coming over. Sorry I didn't send you a Total picture yesterday. I had so much homework. I'll send you two today."

"Please do. I look forward to my daily Total pics."

Total, meanwhile, is wiggling and squirming with so much enthusiasm he nearly topples right off the edge of the bed. Dani averts disaster, grabbing him up, kissing his furry head and handing him over to Charlotte.

"Char, I think Total needs a pee break before he has an accident."

Charlotte wastes no time running out of the room with her pet. "Come with us, Tess. I'll show you how Total learned to roll over."

Cecile appears to have dozed off in the space of a minute. Her head lolls to the side and she breathes through her mouth.

Before leaving the room, I go to her side and peck her lightly on the cheek. “Goodbye,” I whisper, just in case it really is the last time I’ll see her.

Dani’s smile is wistful and sad. She pats the place above her heart.

Love you, friend.

I do the same.

Charlotte has already beaten me down the stairs and out the back door to the vast grassy yard. She holds a handful of dog biscuits and tries to tempt Total to cooperate.

Charlotte pleads with him to roll over.

He wags his tail and pants.

“Good dog,” she says and gives him a biscuit anyway.

While I’m watching the two of them, I get the eerie sense that someone else is watching me.

Turning, I find Gage has silently stepped out on the back patio.

I know he’s not likely to say a word unless I do. “I’m sorry, Gage. She doesn’t look good.”

He lowers his head. Cecile is his grandmother too. “I know.”

“Is she in pain?”

“She says she’s not.” He shrugs and rakes a hand through his thick black hair.

There were always rumors about his father. He was a depraved man who did unspeakable things. Dani has admitted the rumors are all true. Even as a child, I was aware that Christos Silvestro was someone to stay away from. It’s

unnerving how closely Gage resembles him; tall and strong with the same classic Italian looks. His pale eyes, however, are thanks to his mother.

“I’m sure your mother’s upset about Cecile. How’s she holding up?”

One dark eyebrow peaks. “Alta’s not the sentimental type. These days she spends most of her time downtown at the office, arguing with Matilda over who’s really in charge.”

“Sometimes it helps to throw yourself into work.”

He peers at Charlotte and her dog running through the grass. “Sounds like you really know what you’re talking about, Tess.”

It’s rare that Gage and I have a real conversation. I always end up feeling slightly off balance when we do. “Point taken.”

Yes, I tend to hide myself away in work. I also wonder what Micah has told him about our fight.

Gage examines me, likely guessing my thoughts. “How is the mayor’s office?”

It’s not the time to talk about my harrowing day and anyway, Gage wouldn’t be among my top choices to confide in. “This has been a busy time for all of us.”

Gage coughs out a disgusted noise. “Right. Busy. Let’s hope the *mayor* stays so busy he forgets how to play the dirty old man.”

For a second I’m sure I’ve heard him wrong. “What are you talking about?”

Gage blinks and looks away, the only sign that he wishes he hadn’t spoken so hastily. He starts to walk back inside but I grab his arm.

“Gage, what do you mean?”

He gives me one of his intimidating stares, the kind where it's impossible to guess what might be happening in his head. “Forget it. Just gossip.”

Bullshit. Gage never just blurts out gossip for the hell of it. There was genuine anger in his voice.

Gage is also not one to get bent out of shape for nothing. There's a reason why he said what he said.

A good reason.

Feeling uneasy, I release his arm. There's no point in trying to press the issue. If Gage Silvestro wants to keep secrets then he will.

“Forget it, Tess,” he says again, this time his tone almost apologetic.

He waits for a few seconds to see if I'll say anything else but the important question I need to ask is not for him.

“Total, wait!”

Charlotte tries to keep up as Total wiggles this way, now at the end of a red leash. His pink tongue hangs out as he careens from one fascinating smell to the next and then he leaps up to add his paw prints to Gage's immaculate black suit.

Charlotte tries to hold onto the leash as the puppy begs her cousin for attention. “Gage, I can only take Total for a walk if an adult comes with me. Dani's still upstairs with Grandma Cecile and Daddy is working on his new book. Will you come? Please please PLEASE?”

Gage hunkers down to scratch the puppy behind the ears. “You talked me into it.”

“Yay!” Charlotte notices that I’m here too and seizes my hand. “You have to come with us.”

As much as I’d like to take a nice walk with Charlotte and her puppy, there’s something I need to deal with. “Another time. I promise.”

Gage stands and shoots me a rather inscrutable look.

I stare back at him, just as deadpan.

The trio exits through the back gate and I wait until I’m sure they’re gone before returning to the house.

Dani is in the kitchen, pulling items out of the cavernous pantry. “Matilda is on her way home and I’m making pasta for dinner. You are staying. No arguments.”

“Not arguing. But I need to ask you something.”

She sets down a box of rigatoni. “Okay.”

“Does my father ever say things to you that he shouldn’t say?”

The question catches her completely off guard. She folds her arms across her chest and turns her head toward the window. “Not in a while.”

My father has known Dani since she was a teenager. The idea of him lusting after my best friend, the girl who is like a sister to me, is disgusting.

It’s like something Olivia would do.

She sighs. “He backed off once Gage returned last year. Now he hardly says hello. Which is preferable.”

“Shit.” I think I’m going to puke.

Dani grimaces. “Tess, he never touched me. He just shared some creepy comments and made it clear he’d given some

thought to getting a lot closer.”

Strange how ordinary events of the past suddenly sharpen into focus to explain themselves.

I remember it now, the way Dani didn’t enjoy hanging out at my house, always trying to find a reason to relocate to hers instead. She was making an effort not to be where my father was.

And it never occurred to me to wonder why.

The pang of guilt is real, that Dani felt like she couldn’t confide in me, and that I was too blind to see the truth. “I wish I’d known. I would have stopped him.”

She chews her lip. “I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. He’s your father. You’ve always idolized him and he was all you had. I couldn’t take that away from you.”

“NO!” I didn’t mean to shout and she’s startled. I take a breath and lower my volume. “He had absolutely no right to make you feel uncomfortable no matter who he is.” I move closer to the best friend I’ve ever had, will ever have. “I would have believed you. Don’t think for a second that I wouldn’t have.”

She grabs me in a hug. “I’m sorry, Tess. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. And you didn’t take anything from me. *He did.*”

She pulls away, hearing the fresh bitterness in my voice. “Something’s wrong.”

Many things are wrong. One more than any other.

I slump against the fridge. “I should have gone with him, Dani.”

She understands we are no longer talking about my father. “Stop. There’s no point in beating yourself up. Micah will be back here tomorrow. You can tell him that yourself.”

“He thinks I’m a coward.” The chill of the fridge seeps through my clothes. I rub my arms. “He’s right.”

Dani purses her lips. “The last thing you are is a coward, Tess.” The look on her face becomes smug. “By the way, Micah behaved himself the whole time he was in Vegas. Just trained and fought and spent his nights all alone in his hotel room binge watching zombie apocalypse shows.”

I snort out a laugh. “You interrogated him?”

She shakes her head. “No, he volunteered that intel with no prompting. I’m sure he was hoping I’d pass it along to you so there it is. I’m fulfilling my chosen role. Do you want to look in the fridge and see if there’s enough ingredients to cobble together something resembling a salad?”

“Sure.” It’s fun, helping her in the kitchen. Reminds me of all the happy years we shared an apartment. Plus, I appreciate the distraction. Without it, I might zip back downtown and scream a lot of very awful things in my father’s face.

If I did, he would deserve them all.

Dinner is mostly a Matilda-dominated event, but I’m relieved she doesn’t ask me any pointed questions about her son. She opens one of her vintage wine bottles, drinks three quarters of it herself and complains about various people I’ve never heard of.

Charlotte sits across from me. I’m forced to keep stifling laughter because she constantly makes hilarious faces every time her mother pops off.

However, a sense of desolation takes over once I'm back in my own car, rolling the short distance to my empty house down the street. Adding to today's unpleasant events is a new and awful suspicion about my father.

When I'm in the garage of my house with the engine cut, I pull my phone out and type in the name Dr. Reggie Spigato.

Two minutes later, I drop the phone on my lap and smack the steering wheel hard enough to hurt my hand.

“You son of a bitch.”

20. Micah

By the time I coast into town I'm clawing sleep out of my eyes and trying not to slide off the road.

An all night drive across a dull, flat landscape will do that.

The east side is as forbidding and dark as ever but it's a welcome sight. My apartment hasn't been ransacked in my absence, which is good news, and after hauling all my shit up the stairs I'm about ready to smack into the nearest wall if my brain doesn't take a break.

You know you've really hit the limit if you're a chronic insomniac who drops down and falls asleep on top of the covers with your clothes on.

The next time I'm conscious, the room is filled with the gray light of a cloudy morning. I waste no time showering off and heading out the door to grab breakfast on the way to West Emerald.

The manager of the exhibition tour was not too happy when I said I was cutting out a week early but tough shit. When I heard that Cecile had stopped eating, I was finished. If my reputation takes a hit then so be it.

West Emerald is unchanged; a lush, green oasis even in the mildly cool temps of January. Tess is on my mind as I pilot my wheezing car through the streets of my hometown but this is nothing new. Anytime I wasn't in the ring I was thinking about her. Missing her.

Every single day I've been banging my head against a wall over how I left things.

I've also been trying to come up with a strategy how to fix it once I returned.

Now I've returned and I'm still at a loss over what to do next.

Rolling to a stop in front of her house, I feel my pulse quicken as I think about how close she might be. The asinine political posters have all been taken off the lawn now that Ballerini has won his prize. The only oddity is that the ivy crawling all over the house walls looks more blighted than it did when I left.

Naturally, I could just walk up there and ring the doorbell. Or I could use my phone like any reasonable person and let her know that I'm back.

I know I'm bad at this.

Like *really fucking* bad.

This is why I've never had a real relationship, never even tried.

Tess makes me want to try.

No, it's more than that.

I would light the world on fire to romance the hell out of that girl. And I would enjoy every second.

Some harsh words were spoken the night of the election. Still, I'm not sorry for what I said about her dad. He uses her, manipulates her, and steals her time and energy. He's a shitty man and a worse father.

But I do regret what I said to her at the end.

"Just who the hell says I want to live a long time?"

And I regret walking out after escalating the argument into something ugly.

There was a whole lot of time for me to think while on my own in Vegas. And every time I reached the same conclusion.

No fucking way am I giving her up.

Tess has known me forever and she's seen the worst side of me. The selfish, insensitive asshole. Yeah, she knows him well.

But I've only given her short glimpses into the parts that hardly anyone else sees. Which is funny because I've accused her of hiding her real self. Turns out I'm a fucking hypocrite because I do the same.

For most of my life I've caged myself behind an impenetrable wall of anger that was born the night I hid beneath a bed and listened to my father die. A monster of my own making, it's both shield and barricade. When I'm with Tess, I can feel layers of that crust chipping away.

I was wrong when I told her I wouldn't ever change.

I've already changed. *She* has changed me.

And I'll do whatever it takes for another chance to be in her life.

With a glance at the time, I realize she's probably all the way downtown at work right now. Our reunion will have to be postponed. Anyway, I have an important obligation to fulfill. Soon I'll need to say goodbye to one of the few people on this earth I feel unconditional love and respect for.

We'll have our time, Tessie.

Count on it.

Henley answers the door at my old house, which is awkward as fuck.

He gives me one of his nervous smiles as he steps back from the front door. "Good to have you back."

I'm just glad he didn't make it extra weird by shaking my hand or something. "Good to be back."

He nods at the stairs. "The hospice nurse is watching over her. She's sleeping for now."

"Okay."

A long pause.

Henley rubs his jaw. "Your mother went into the office."

"Right." No surprise there.

"Charlotte is at school."

"I figured."

Another stretch of silence.

"Dani should be here soon." He looks over my shoulder at the front door, likely wishing for Dani to materialize and rescue him from this uncomfortable dialogue with his grouchy stepson. "She said she was coming over as soon as she finished with some conference calls."

Somewhere in the distance, Total lets out an ear piercing whine of despair because he's being left out of the greeting.

Henley's head swivels toward the sound. "I should let him out. He's been kenneled since Charlotte left for school this morning."

I jerk my thumb at the stairs. "Mind if I go up and look in on Cecile?"

"Not at all." He seems relieved. "And you don't have to ask, Micah. This is your house too."

That's funny. It's so funny that I nearly bust a rib trying not to laugh in his face.

This hasn't been my house since I was hauled out of here in cuffs before my seventeenth birthday. After that, it seemed like Henley and Matilda couldn't wait to paper over my existence. Whenever I come here it's never for my mother and her husband. The only reason I play nice is for Charlotte's sake. And for Cecile.

Jogging up the stairs, a thousand memories threaten to crowd in. I shove them all away. I don't want to be nostalgic about this freaking place.

The door of my former bedroom is passed without a second look. It's unrecognizable anyway.

Cecile's door is partially open. My grandmother lies in the middle of a bed that looks like it grew, but that's only because she has shrunk. Her mouth is open and she wears her sunglasses, but it's clear she's asleep.

Cecile flinches in her sleep and mumbles an indistinct word. The nurse who has been quietly sitting at her bedside gently checks her pulse and then tucks her painfully thin arm back inside a knit blanket.

Taking a quiet step back to avoid disturbing the scene, I retreat and go back the way I came.

Downstairs, Henley is no longer in sight. I'm tempted to just go hide out in my car until someone else shows up to break the tension but that's kind of a dick move and I'm trying not to be a dick anymore.

Following the sound of Total's bark, I find Henley and the dog in the backyard. Total comes running. He wiggles and even cries. When I take a seat he claws his way into my lap. Then he spots a bird on the far side of the yard and leaps away to go hunting.

"Charlotte sure loves that little guy," Henley says. For a writer, he's pretty crappy with words.

Not that I'm any better. "Yup."

I feel like I should ask him about what he's writing but I'd rather not admit that I haven't read a single one of his books.

"How was Vegas?" he says.

"Obnoxious. Decadent. Glad to be done with it."

He shifts in his chair. Hard to say which one of us is cringing harder over this sorry excuse for a conversation.

"Your mother will be happy to see you."

That's rich. I can't help but scoff with a laugh.

His gives me a sharp look. "I know how she can seem. But she loves you."

"If you say so." If he insists on going down this road then I'll take a nap in my car after all.

"Micah." He rubs a hand through his thinning hair.

I brace myself for a lecture.

That's not what I get.

"We didn't do right by you," he says.

He keeps his head up and looks me in the eye. I can at least cooperate by listening.

"We should have fought so much harder for you. I think about that every day, how you were just a kid caught up in a mess that wasn't your fault at all."

"Yeah, you've given me this speech before."

Last year, after Olivia made it known that she was the one who was responsible for sending me to prison, I got to be on the receiving end of all these, "*Gosh, so sorry we helped shit all over your life*" talks.

It's done. I'm fucking over it.

Henley doesn't waver. "It's okay if you don't forgive me. I'd feel the same in your shoes. I just wanted you to know that I wish I'd been a better stepfather. And this is always your home. I know that probably doesn't mean much but I needed to say it anyway."

Nope, it doesn't mean shit, but I won't savage the guy.

I watch the dog rolling around in the grass and say nothing.

Henley realizes that I'm not going to contribute to his Hallmark moment. He stands up and starts to return to the house.

"Hey, Henley."

He turns, looks hopeful.

"You're not as dickless as I've always thought you were."

He chuckles. "Best compliment I've gotten in a while."

Minutes later, I'm still sitting the backyard and watching Charlotte's dog alternate between digging in the dirt and licking his ass when I hear the chime of the front door.

Dani's voice drifts out. "How is she?"

Henley's murmured response is inaudible.

There's the approaching clip of heels on tile and I stand up just as Dani walks through the back door.

"When did you get in?" She hugs me tight. "Gage thought you were still on the road."

"Early this morning. I was going to shoot him a text in a little while. Is he with you?"

She shakes her head. "He'll be here soon. Conner too."

"Have you been to Con's new house yet?"

"Sure. It's quite a place."

"Top of the market and I still got him a screaming deal."

Her voice. Fuck.

Tess walks outside and my heart stills. Her hair is down, her look adorably casual. She's dressed in a pair of jeans and the black hoodie I sent her. She swims in the thing and it reaches almost to her knees. Even though I love her cute dresses and skirts, she's so fucking gorgeous right now in my old sweatshirt that I'm ready to fall at her feet.

As these thoughts race through my head it finally dawns on me that I'm standing here gawking at her like a creep.

"Hey, Tess," I manage to say. *Brilliant.*

She cocks her head, a small smile on her lips. "Hello, Micah."

Dani watches us like we're performing a very fascinating play.

Total gallops over with dirt on his tongue.

Dani picks the dog up. "Let's get you some water." She looks at Tess, then at me. "I'm going upstairs to check on Cecile."

Tess nods and stuffs her hands in the deep front pockets of the hoodie.

I stare at her lips and think about how they taste. "Let me know if Cecile's awake now," I say to Dani.

"Will do." Dani smiles and leaves us alone.

Tess evaluates me with those soulful brown eyes. "I saw you park in front of my house earlier. You didn't stay."

"Guilty. I thought you'd be at work." I want to touch her so badly my fingers are practically twitching.

A strange shadow crosses her face. "No, not today."

"So..." I let the word hang there.

Tess lifts an eyebrow and waits.

"Did you enjoy the holidays?" I can't fucking believe that question came out of my mouth. That kind of bullshit small talk should be outlawed.

She doesn't seem to mind. "Honestly, the holidays were nothing special. I worked too much. Believe it or not, I spent New Year's Eve with Haven. I went to visit Lita at the care home and Haven was there. We ended up ringing in the new year together with vending machine snacks. And you had a fight later that day. I really wanted to watch. I was disappointed it wasn't being streamed anywhere."

I'm kind of surprised she knows this. "It was supposed to be. Someone screwed up."

She nods and looks down at her white sneakers. Tess doesn't get nervous often but she's nervous right now. "What else did you do?"

Thought about you. Wished for you. Jerked off to you. A LOT.

"Absolutely nothing. My New Year's Eve was less thrilling than yours. I sat in my hotel room *alone* and ate a steak."

She notices the way I emphasize the word 'alone' and presses her lips together to hide a smile. In a purposeful move, she tucks her hair behind her ears. She's wearing her sapphire earrings, the ones I scoured jewelry stores on the Vegas strip to find.

"I know that I thanked you already, but thank you again for these. I wear them every day. And obviously I love your sweatshirt. I hope you weren't expecting to get it back. It's the best gift I ever received."

This girl. Doesn't she know that she's the keeper of my heart?

I'm not really getting anywhere by playing it cool. Might as well try some honesty.

"You're so beautiful," I say to her. "And you only got more beautiful while I was gone."

Her pretty brown eyes soften. "Micah."

I want to grab her up, haul her out of here, take her someplace where we can be alone, and show her what I've been thinking about nonstop for the last two months.

But Dani's back and she's upset. "Cecile's not doing well. The nurse says her pulse is very erratic. Henley is telling Matilda to come home and then he's going to pick Charlotte up from school. Cecile is awake now." Dani's chin trembles as she looks at me. "She's asking for you."

My stomach drops.

I can read the urgency in Dani's eyes. If I'd waited another day I might have missed the chance to say goodbye.

Tess moves closer and squeezes my arm, a sweet gesture of support. I'll take what I can get.

As I climb the stairs, the nurse passes me on the way down. We exchange nods. Must really suck to have a job where you need to watch decent people die all the time.

Cecile's door is still open. She hasn't changed positions, although it's obvious she's conscious now. Her chin tips up and her nose quivers like she sniffs the air.

"That better be you, Micah." Her voice, always so sharp and commanding, is quieter and laced with gravelly scratches.

"Yeah, it's me." I shut the door, flicking the lock. This is *my* time with my grandmother and I'm not sharing it.

"Dani says you left your tour early." Her face stays trained on my movements as I pull up a chair.

"It's not a big deal."

"Like I've told you before, you can't stop your life for death."

"You're not dead."

"I will be." She shrugs without a trace of self pity. "Very soon."

She's only speaking the undeniable truth and I've had time to prepare. We all have. Yet the sour taste in the back of my throat and the sting behind my eyes warns that I'm not ready to let go.

Cecile still muses over her impending fate. "Wherever I end up, I hope your worthless grandfather isn't there. I doubt I did anything so terrible in life that would sentence me to an eternity of listening to that man complain."

That earns a chuckle. She's still a pistol.

"I'll miss you, Cecile. More than you know."

"I know plenty. I worry about you, Micah. More than the rest of them. Tell me why Tess didn't go with you to Las Vegas."

"She didn't want to."

"Why?"

"Because I let her believe there was no future with me."

More to the point, I told her I was just fine with having no future at all.

Cecile purses her thin lips. "That's not true though, is it?"

"No. It's not true." I'm not one to make plans and map out the future but in the parts I do see, Tess is right there in the center.

"I'm glad to hear you admit it. Now get closer because I'm growing tired and I only have the energy to say this once."

"I'm here."

What's left of her sightless eyes bore into my face.

"My boy, courage isn't always defined by being the first one to run into the fire. I know what tears at your soul. The

things you've seen shouldn't be things anyone should see. You'd hardly be human if you weren't shaped by it. You've lived beneath the shroud of your father's loss, constantly driven to prove yourself when you didn't need to. But allowing yourself to love and be loved is also a thing of bravery. You do have that courage too. You always have."

Right after her last word she breaks into a hacking cough. Alarmed, I try to help her change position so she can breathe easier. Cecile shoves me away with impatience.

"I'm not done." She wheezes, her voice growing weaker. "Make peace with your mother, Micah. I know she's not a good mother. But then again, neither was I."

That's a tall order. But I'd never refuse to honor Cecile's wish. "All right. I will."

"One more thing. Don't you dare push her away when she comes to you."

"Who, Matilda?"

Cecile rasps out a laugh. "No. You know who I mean." She turns her face to the sunlight streaming in through the window. "I will be glad to see my girls again. Lynette. And yes, even Edie. Maybe death has the power to strip away the evil and leave only the good."

At the mention of my dead aunts, my gaze shifts to the framed photo propped up on the neighboring nightstand. Four little girls once smiled on a beach with their young, beautiful mother. Two of those girls are dead now and their mother is about to join them.

I'd like to think Cecile's hope is true, that there are other journeys ahead when the end comes.

Too bad there's no one to ask.

She's lapsed in oblivion again, sinking back on her pillows. Resting two fingers lightly on her neck, I detect a fluttery pulse.

She's alive, just resting. For now.

Getting closer to her ear, I hope these words find her in the last of her earthly dreams. "I love you, Cecile."

Then I touch my grandmother's hand for what I suspect will be the last time.

"Be sure to say hello to Ethan for me."

21. Tess

I find Dani in the kitchen amid stacks of food. “Here, let me help.”

She piles a tray with sandwich wedges and stands back. “It’s not exactly art but every decent caterer was booked.”

Rolling the sleeves of my black dress up to my elbows, I pump soap into my hands and run the tap. “Gage is taking care of the beverages. Conner and Micah ran to the store for additional provisions. We can get these trays finished in no time.”

She gives me a tired smile. “Always love your optimism.”

I wink at her and get to work.

Dani sighs and gazes out the window as she fiddles with the ruby pendant around her neck, a long ago gift from Cecile. “It was a nice ceremony, wasn’t it?”

“Cecile would have been pleased. Especially by the part when Gage released the doves right in the middle of Matilda’s eulogy.”

Dani chokes out a laugh and keeps her voice low. “She does tend to ramble.”

“My feet were falling asleep,” I whisper back.

She grins, then tilts her head, observing my every move in silence.

I select the sharpest knife to slice up raw veggies. “Something you want to say, BFF?”

“I was watching you with Micah.”

“Mmmm.” A noncommittal noise because I don’t know what else to say.

Micah didn’t move away when I stood right beside him during Cecile’s funeral. That cemetery has deep meaning for us both. My mother, his father, both buried there.

The whole time I stood at Micah’s side I was tempted to take his hand. I should have done that.

Dani gently prods. “You two still haven’t talked?”

“We’ve talked.”

“You know what I mean, Tessie.”

Of course I do. “I didn’t want to intrude on his family time.”

Cecile died only a few hours after she spoke to Micah. That was three days ago. But amid funeral preparations and sadness, there seemed to be no ideal opportunity to have a ‘*What are we?*’ relationship chat.

This excuse sounds hollow and it is.

I’ve long flattered myself that I’m a girl who goes after what she wants without hesitation.

Wishful thinking.

Because if that were true then I would have allowed nothing to stop me from telling Micah exactly how I feel about him.

“Don’t be afraid to lose, Tessie Belle. You can’t ever win if you’re not willing to take a chance that you might lose.”

Cecile. She knew a thing or two.

“Tess.” My father has tracked me down.

“Crap,” I mutter and dry my hands on a dishtowel. I’ve been dreading this confrontation.

He glowers from the kitchen doorway. Then he notices that Dani is also in the room. His eyes flicker over her body, lingering on her legs.

The urge to smack him across the face is damn near irresistible.

Dani throws me a look and balances two trays on her palms. “I’ll take these out.”

My father reaches for her, his tone suddenly much friendlier. “I can help with those, Dani.”

“No need, Stuart.” She steps around him and escapes.

His focus returns to me. He puffs out his thick chest and delivers the sternest of his authoritarian glares. “Young lady, are you going to explain the letter I received in my inbox this morning?”

“I sent it two days ago, Dad. You should check your email more frequently. We’re at Cecile’s funeral but if you insist on discussing this now, let’s get it out of the way. I’m resigning my position. I will not be working for you any longer. I hate politics and I’d much rather be a full time realtor. Besides, you are a terrible boss. I will help you find a replacement. It’s a dream job for someone. Just not for me.”

“If this is regarding our discussion about Pierce Carrington...”

“It’s not.” That was just the breaking point. Followed by another one. And then another.

Stuart Ballerini’s neck grows ruddy. He clears his throat. “I understand that I’ve relied on you more than a father should rely on his daughter but it’s only because I know what you’re capable of. Tessie Belle, I’ve always said none of this is worthwhile if I lose my little girl.”

“You’ve given that speech before, Dad. Try another one.”

He opens his hands in a helpless gesture. “Tess, I apologize if you’ve been feeling undervalued.”

“Undervalued.” That deserves a laugh. “Yeah, I suppose that’s accurate.”

My father’s mask of propriety slips and anger flares in his eyes.

Of course he’s angry. For once, I’m refusing to yield.

I’ve often thought back to the night of the election. Micah understood me better than I understood myself. Micah wasn’t trying to take anything from me. All he wanted was my happiness.

What a contrast to my father, who has never done anything *but* take from me. Every path I took was designed around his needs, not mine. And when it looked as if I might finally break away, he stopped low enough to invent health issues, guilt me into sticking by his side. My worst fear has always been that I would lose him like I lost my mother. He understood that and used it to his advantage every chance he got.

Apparently, he isn’t finished playing that card.

Why mess with a winning strategy?

He presses one forefinger to the opposite wrist and breathes heavily. “Could you get me a glass of water? I just need to take one of my pills.”

I roll my eyes. “Get a glass of water yourself. Better yet, just call Dr. Spigato and ask him to ferry one over here. He’s probably not busy, considering he’s been dead for four years.”

His hands fall to his sides. “You seem to be going off the deep end, Tess. Get control of yourself.”

“Come off it, Dad. Do I really need to spell this out? You sensed that I was finding my own way and would no longer be controllable. So you hired some shithead to pose as your doctor and invented a serious medical condition so that I would feel obligated to stay. You don’t care what I want. You never have.”

Picking up a tray of cut veggies, I head for the door, pausing to look up at my father.

“By the way, keep your filthy ideas away from my best friend or I’ll give Gage the green light to kick you in the balls.”

A mic drop moment if ever there was one.

The effect is dimmed a little when I collide with Uncle Josh’s chest on my way out of the kitchen.

“Whoa.” He rescues the tray before it suffers a fatality. “What’s going on in here? Sounded like you were arguing.”

I snatch the tray back. “Did you know?”

“About what?”

I take a look around to see if anyone’s in earshot because I’d rather not broadcast our family melodrama. “He faked his health emergency. He hired an imposter to pretend to be a

doctor. He lied to me in order to keep me in line. Did you know that, Uncle Josh?"

My uncle pales. He throws a look to his brother and then drags his eyes back to me. "Tess, I promise that I have no idea what this is all about but let's all go home and have a talk."

"Too late for that." I push him aside.

I'm not sure I've ever felt so triumphant and so crappy at the same time. Finally, I've stood up to my father in a meaningful way. I just wish it hadn't come to this. I'm not going to be able to forgive him anytime soon.

As I move to the back door I'm struck with a powerful sense of déjà vu. Ethan Lyonne's funeral is the first one I clearly remember attending. I was too young to have any memory of my mother's funeral.

The weather is warm today. Nearly all of Cecile's mourners are milling around in the backyard, amid white tables topped with red rose centerpieces. Cecile's favorite flower.

Micah and his cousins are back. No matter how many people surround him he'll always stand out. He's serious today in a white shirt and a loose tie. So handsome that the sight of him makes my legs weak.

Conner and Gage are talking to some neighbors but Micah sits alone, perched on the edge of one of the poolside chairs. Charlotte runs over to him. His head is down and he listens as Charlotte chatters right beside his ear. After a thoughtful moment he nods and she opens her arms to hug her big brother, who gently pats her back in return. Charlotte runs off with Total hot on her heels but Micah stays put, lost in thought, not even looking up.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the Ballerini men return to the backyard. I was hoping they'd just leave. Josh throws me a curious glance but my father is back in mayor mode. He drifts over to a quartet of men, one of them recognizable as the owner of a huge hotel chain.

Dani watches me place the veggie tray on a table covered with refreshments that few people seem to be eating. She understands my moods better than anyone. A perk that comes from all the years we were roommates.

“You okay?” she asks.

“Don't worry about me.” I look around and spot Alta. Gage's mother has been staying on the sidelines. She's startled when Charlotte tackles her with a hug. Alta has the temperament of a shark. Yet she doesn't have the heart to push a little girl away. Her mouth even curves to an expression that could be called a smile.

“Where's Matilda?” I ask Dani. “I haven't seen her since we returned from the cemetery.”

“She had a headache. I persuaded her to go lie down with a promise that I would deal with the guests.”

“Is she all right?”

Dani sighs. “Matilda and Cecile had a complicated relationship. They never did get along. But Matilda feels the loss. I know she does.”

I hook my arm through my best friend's. “Do you need anything? I know how much you loved Cecile.”

Dani holds back her tears with a sniff. “I did love her. And she loved me. Cecile had a way of knowing what I needed and making sure I got it. There's a reason why I call her my

irritable but endearing fairy godmother. It's going to take time to sink in that she's really gone."

My eyes search for Micah again. He hasn't moved. From now on, wherever I am and whatever I'm doing I'll always hungrily look for Micah.

Dani notices. "I want to tell you something that's none of my business."

"Go ahead. I could use some honesty right about now."

"As long as I've known you, Tess, you were never as happy as you were with him. And I've never seen you as miserable as you've been without him the last two months. As for Micah, he's a brother to me and I know he battles his demons. But while he was with you he was different. He was happy too. You're good for each other."

Dorothy Ann Gallagher Silvestro. There's always been an uncommon decency about her. Dani grasps the enigmas of the human heart better than anyone I've ever known.

That's why I don't hesitate to whisper a secret. "Dani, I love him so much it hurts."

"Tell him." She kisses my cheek.

Yes, I should have told him already. Life looks colorless without Micah.

Dani is trying to make me understand something I'm only just learning.

Don't be afraid of love. Don't bury it. Ignore it. Hide it. Run from it.

Be proud that you know how to love at all.

I am proud. And I'm going after what I want.

22. Tess

Micah sees me heading in his direction and he straightens his spine. He remains on the edge of the chair, a black funeral tie hanging loose around his collar, his shirt unbuttoned at the throat and rolled up to his elbows, enough to show the ink covering his skin.

My wild boy.

He watches, unmoving, allowing me to come to him.

This may not be the proper time for this.

So what?

I'm following my instincts anyway. The same instincts that led me to reach for him in the first place.

Micah is capable of the most fixed stare I've ever seen. I'm not even sure he blinks as he watches me cross the trimmed grass. I keep my eyes on him, away from the side yard oleanders where my stepmother inflicted her final act of revenge.

But Olivia can't haunt us if we don't let her.

He's still seated when I stop only two feet away from him. He stares up at me, stock still, those blue eyes unwavering.

“Micah.” For so many years his name was uttered with exasperation and a sneer. Now it kickstarts my heart. No one else will ever be able to compare to him.

He waits.

A soft breeze tickles my skin, somewhere between warm and cool. Not at all unpleasant.

A gentle ghost.

There are eyes on us. I’m aware that my father’s eyes are among them, that he’s judging, angry. That won’t stop me, not ever again.

I tuck my hair behind my ears, determined not to let this moment go by. “There’s something I have to say to you. I could say it in private but I don’t really care who hears. Maybe I even want everyone to hear.”

Micah remains stoic. Unmoving.

I’m about to bare my soul. It’s possible that I’ll be refused, which would be crushing. This should be a moment of extreme anxiety, yet I’ve never felt more sure of myself.

“We’re so different in many ways, you and me. We always have been. But there’s not a single thing about you that I would change.”

He listens. Everyone all around us listens.

And I pause, trying to choose my words in my head before speaking them out loud.

Then I give up all attempts to curate my feelings and just speak straight from the heart.

“Do you know what I’ve wished for every day since election night? I wish I’d had the courage to leave with you.

Because you were right about me. I've always been trying to live up to an ideal that doesn't exist. It stops me from going after what I really want. Nothing will stop me anymore. I love you, Micah. I'm not making any demands. I just wanted to tell you this because you deserve to hear it. I love you and I'm *in* love with you. Completely. Irrevocably."

The gentle wind subsides.

Micah watches my face.

There's a cough from somewhere behind me, a low murmur of male voices. Fine, let them listen and judge. I'm not ashamed of the truth.

Micah moves so suddenly I can hardly keep up.

One minute he's sitting in the chair and considering my words.

A fraction of a second later he's on his feet and pulling me against the hard wall of his chest. My eager arms hook around his neck and our mouths unite for a kiss that's hot and ravenous and long.

Micah lifts me off the ground. I feel his need and his hunger to be satisfied. The sudden ache between my legs begs to be answered.

We're fire and passion. We're tenderness and understanding.

We need each other. We belong together.

I hear the moan in my throat as his tongue meets mine and his hand slides up my back.

But I won't feel guilty for this, our intense physical connection. This is part of what we are.

Micah breaks the kiss and sighs into my neck. “God, I’ve missed you, Tessie.”

A tear leaks out of the corner of my eye and I cling to him, tightening my arms around his neck, unwilling to be set down and released.

We’re far from perfect, both of us.

That doesn’t matter.

He’s everything I want.

And if he wants me too, then I’m his forever.

Micah’s hand tangles in my hair and his mouth finds my ear. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Are you sure?” Though I’m frantic to be alone with him, this is still his grandmother’s funeral.

“Go.” Dani’s voice is nearby. “That’s an order.”

I turn my head to find her beside her husband. Gage’s arm is draped over her shoulders and she leans into him with a wistful smile.

Gage’s free hand waves. “Get lost. Cecile would insist.”

I believe that’s true. Cecile loved Micah. She would tell him to grasp at happiness wherever he can find it, however it comes.

Micah has decided his cousin’s advice is good enough. He does set me down but immediately circles his arm around my waist while steering me toward the backyard gate.

Conner holds Total like a football and sits at a table with Charlotte. He’s receiving instructions on a complex board game with many plastic pastel pieces. He salutes us with amusement. Charlotte pauses to see what he’s looking at and

waves. Henley sits at the same table and appears perplexed by the sight of us marching away, but he too waves with a smile.

However, not everyone watching in the backyard is pleased about this turn of events.

My father steps directly in our path, forcing us to stop or else collide with him.

“Tess.” He’s perfected this, saying my name as a threat.

Well, I’m tired of threats, sick to fucking death of his one-sided version of *self-control*. Weary of his lies, of his manipulation. Tired of living for his dreams instead of my own.

Micah tenses beside me. I get the feeling he’ll shove my father out of the way if the situation gets testy. Uncle Josh hovers nearby, a worried wrinkle between his brows.

I raise my chin and meet my father’s outraged gaze. “I’m going, Dad. There’s nothing more to say about it.”

His jaw works, like he’s gnashing his teeth. “You disappoint me.”

I never thought I’d laugh at those words coming from him. But now I look at my father and laugh right in his face. “Good.”

Stuart Ballerini’s eyes flicker with surprise, then narrow with anger. But he wouldn’t dare escalate matters, not here. The mayor of Emerald City cannot afford a public scene.

Uncle Josh moves in from the perimeter. He can be counted on to calm my father down when we’re gone.

My uncle gives me a nod. “You have yourself a good night, Tess.”

“Thank you, Uncle Josh. I will.”

Stuart Ballerini shifts his weight, his face reddening with each passing second. He can glare all he wants. Micah’s arm stays around me and I’m leaving no matter what.

We make it as far as his car and then I can’t hold back. I need to kiss him again. He torments my mouth with his tongue and grinds into my belly. He’s hard and wants me to know it.

I love everything about him. His strength and his passion and his refusal to conform. He excites me and he challenges me and he occupies my dreams.

I trail kisses along the column of his neck. “Take me to your place.”

“Way ahead of you.” Micah pulls the car door open and tucks me safely inside.

He rips off his tie once he’s behind the wheel. “For a second I was thinking about dragging you into the house and finding an empty room.”

“I wouldn’t have said no to that.”

He shoots over a look that sends a shiver of arousal through my belly before sinking lower. “Hope you weren’t planning on getting any sleep tonight.”

“Sleep is overrated. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Missed you too. You have no idea.” He touches my leg, shoving the hem of my dress aside and cupping the inside of my thigh, a purely possessive gesture. “Tess, there hasn’t been anyone else. I was never even tempted. You’re all I thought about.”

I place my hand over his. “I made a mistake, turning you down and staying beside my father. He’ll always be my father,

but he's not an honest man. I can't be a part of his world anymore, no matter what happens now."

Micah lets me lace our fingers together. "What happens now is *us*." He flashes a smile that lights up my heart. "Because this time I'm keeping you for good, Tessie Belle."

The narrow east side roads and alleys no longer look grim and uninviting to me. I'm happy to be back here. And by the time we park in front of his building I want him so badly I'm having trouble sitting still.

The instant he cuts the engine I dive right into his lap, straddling him with abandon. Our mouths collide. As usual, Micah isn't shy about doing what he wants and he rolls the zipper down the back of my dress, unfastening my bra. He bunches up the dress fabric in his fists and pushes it over my hips.

There's not a chance I'll stop him.

One hand is between my legs now, tormenting with a seductive stroke before his finger plucks the elastic band of my panties from my skin.

Gruff laughter outside the window draws my attention and two old men pass by with delighted grins at the sight of us dry humping in the front seat.

"Let's go upstairs," I beg. I can't wait another minute to have him inside of me, yet I don't relish fucking in public.

Micah throws open the car door but won't allow me to pull away. His arm stays tightly curled around my body as he climbs out of the car. He carries me all the way up to the fourth floor with my legs around his waist. At the door, he fumbles with the key and groans when I suck on his neck with impatience.

“Good thing you’re not in the mood for slow and sweet,” he growls as we fall into his apartment. He presses me against the closed door and grinds between my legs. “Because I’m about to fucking ravage the hell out of your pussy.”

I pull up the hem of his shirt, desperate to feel every inch of hard muscle. “Do your worst, Lyonne.”

A low chuckle rumbles from his throat. “Challenge accepted.”

My dress doesn’t need much coaxing to fall from my shoulders. He forces my legs down so the dress can puddle at my feet, taking my bra with it.

I thought he’d waste no time tossing me on the bed but there’s a wicked gleam in his eye as he drops to his knees. My panties are swiftly peeled down my legs, leaving me naked against the cold door.

Yet I have no objections as Micah parts my thighs, hooks one leg over his shoulder and goes to work with his tongue. He has a gift for teasing and he uses it, grazing his tongue over my clit and then withholding more until my hips buck and I seize his head, aching to push him in deeper.

He swirls his tongue, driving me wild.

I gasp and smack the door with the palm of my hand.

He pauses to chuckle. “Nothing like the taste of you.” He captures my other leg, hauling it over his shoulder so that I’m right where he wants me.

Wearing only my heels. Back to the door. Impaled on his tongue as his eyes watch me riding his face.

This is as hot as any fantasy I’ve had about him during our time apart and I’ve fantasized an awful lot. My nipples are

standing at attention as he licks and sucks and plays.

I want to come.

And I could come so freaking easily.

Heaven knows I've gotten myself off enough times while picturing moments like this.

But I hold the wave at bay and grip his hair. "Not yet. I want *all* of you. Give me everything."

After one last punishing stroke of his tongue, he carefully pushes my legs from his shoulders and stands. My fingers fly to his shirt, undoing the buttons so fast I'm surprised they don't pop off. He lets me, sinking his fingers into my hair when I shove his shirt out of the way and flick my tongue over his chest.

There haven't been words invented to describe how much I want him. I kick my heels off, losing a couple of inches, then let my mouth savor the complex beauty inked into his skin.

He's beautiful in every way, even in his dark moments where savage instincts rule.

I'll take that part of him inside me too.

Now I'm doing my best to release the hard, thick length of his cock, just out of reach inside his pants, but Micah has decided to seize control once more. The way he lifts me up, like I weigh no more than a pillow, is always dizzying.

Within three seconds I'm on my back, my knees up and wide apart, watching him shed the last of his clothes before he lowers himself to the bed.

I want to touch his face, memorize every angle.

My hand brushes his rough cheek. "I love you."

That's all I have time to say before he wrecks me with the first thrust. Every nerve in my body lights up, welcoming him back. The way we fit together is perfection.

I wrap my legs around him, greedy to force him in deep. All that tongue action by the door has left me close to the brink. Already I can feel the oncoming blitz of a shattering orgasm.

"Fuck, Tessie." He thrusts without mercy, again and again. "Missed you so fucking much."

I don't care that these words come out gruffly or that it's not a poetic declaration.

It's exactly what I want to hear and now I allow the surge to take over, to swallow every other sense.

I cling to him as I ride out the spasms, clenching, arching, sapping every last shred of pleasure.

And then refusing to let go when it subsides.

"Baby." He's moving hard, fast, with a new urgency in his voice. "I'm real close."

My answer is to tighten my legs around his body. *No, you can't go.*

I never ever want to let go of him again. He's mine.

Micah unleashes a husky groan when he realizes I have no intention of relaxing my grip. Still, it would be easy for him to pull away if he chose to.

But he doesn't break his rhythm, doesn't pull out. He shifts his hips and drives into me at a new angle, reaching a spot that makes me gasp, see stars and dig my fingers into his skin so hard I might be bruising us both.

He pauses, stares down at me with those ferocious eyes of his, then thrusts hard.

And again.

Finally, he cracks with a deep groan. The feeling is new, unique, as the hot wave of his release breaks inside of me. I relish every shudder that vibrates through him, loving the sensation of no barrier between us as he pumps himself into me.

Only when he drops his head and starts to slide away do I relax my taut muscles, regretting the loss of his body already and eager to have him again.

Micah breathes into my neck, both of us sweaty. Spent. Satisfied.

At least for now.

The moment we've just shared is supremely intimate, and possibly foolish.

But I won't be sorry. Not tonight or ever.

I run my fingertips over his skin and wish that there was no need to ever leave this position. Who needs work? I don't need anything but this.

Micah lifts his head, flashing one of his wolfish smirks. Without warning, his hand dives between my legs, dips one strong finger inside and then brings it to my lips. I take his finger in my mouth and suck it clean, enjoying the mingled taste of us.

And then my stomach decides to interrupt the sexy scene with a rumble because I haven't eaten anything since breakfast.

Micah, hair tousled, completely sexy, lifts an eyebrow. “Aw, do I need to feed you some more juice, honey?”

I make a face. “Maybe. I was so busy helping Dani prepare the food that I forgot to eat any.”

He runs his hand over my hip and leans down to drop a kiss there. “Hold on, I’ll go hunting.”

Micah, never one to have an issue with strutting around naked, springs right off the bed to rummage in the kitchen.

With the nerves between my legs still buzzing amid a sensual wetness from what he left behind, I roll over on my belly and enjoy the view of my naked boyfriend. It’s possible that his impressive muscles grew even bigger during his Vegas stint. “You mean you have real food here for once?”

He winks and flings open the fridge. “Took a rare field trip to the grocery store yesterday. I can make scrambled eggs. How’s that?”

“Sounds divine. Do you have coffee too?”

“Fuck yeah, I’m not a barbarian.” He opens a cabinet and pulls out a can.

“Is that instant?”

He throws me a look. “Don’t be a snob.”

With a laugh, I rub my arms. It’s a little chilly in here.

Micah sees and sets the carton of eggs on the counter before proceeding in all his naked glory to the battered chest of drawers. “Soon you’re gonna own all my hoodies.” He tosses over a plain grey one.

I slip it over my head, grateful for the warmth as I inhale his scent. “Maybe that was my plan all along.”

He smirks and starts cracking eggs into a bowl while I get up and wander around. There's nothing new, nothing different about his apartment. Micah never keeps piles of clutter lying around.

The sketchbook sitting in the middle of the kitchen table is the lone object of interest. I touch the plain black cardboard cover. He's always been hesitant to show me his sketches and I've never pushed, not wanting to intrude on something that might be deeply private.

“Do you mind if I look in here?”

He glances up from the stove. “Go for it. I did those while I was in Vegas.”

Feeling oddly nervous, I flip open the cover as Micah, still naked, whisks the eggs with a fork.

He works in pencil. And when he attacks a page he fills every inch of white space.

The images are familiar and whimsical, drawn with loving detail, a breathtaking display of his talent.

Charlotte laughing amid an explosion of flowers as Total capers at her feet.

Conner charging down a football field in a moment of glory as a full yet faceless stadium watches.

Dani and Gage wrapped lovingly in each other's arms, the Em City skyline in the background.

Cecile smiling on a beach in an alternative world where her eyes are intact.

Next is a man with mysteriously blurred features standing on the shore of a serene lake, a fishing pole in his hand. His stance and his shape look very similar to Micah's but I know

he isn't Micah. It's jarring to realize Ethan Lyonne wasn't much older than we are now when he met a terrible death.

Micah scrapes the frying pan with a spatula and drops scrambled eggs on two mismatched plates.

Then my finger flips to the next page and my breath halts.

A long time ago, a little girl held a flower and reached out to share it with a little boy in pain. He didn't accept it from her. But here, in this world of paper and graphite, he shyly meets her hand with his own.

Two heartsick children, reaching out and finding each other.

An ending that never happened.

At least, not back then.

The sting of tears gathers behind my eyes. We've never spoken about that day, the day of his father's funeral. Now it's the day of a different funeral and the whole of our long history is brought sharply into focus.

Micah, with his gift for silence, has prowled right behind me. His arms circle my waist. I relax into the warmth of his body.

"It's us, Micah."

"It is."

"I had no idea that you remembered the dandelion."

He nuzzles my neck and rocks me gently. "I remember everything."

We stay like that for a minute before he reaches out and flips the page, turning the book so that the blank back of the page is what's in front of us. With his left hand he plucks a

lone black pencil from the table and takes my hand, mixing our fingers together so that we're both holding the pencil. He has equal use of both hands but I'm strictly a southpaw.

Micah guides my hand to the paper and begins scrawling a message in tall, artful letters. I know what they'll say before he's finished and still I watch, mesmerized.

After the last letter, he drops the pencil but keeps my hand while admiring his handiwork.

MICAH LOVES TESS

Overcome by the current of emotion, I turn and press my cheek to his chest as his arms circle me protectively.

My heart is bursting and my soul is at ease.

I'm exactly where I want to be.

23. Micah

“I’ll go downtown with you.” I take one last stab at convincing her.

Maybe I’m being a shameless clinger right now.

Don’t care.

I’m not at all excited to let her out of my sight. Plus her old man is less likely to give her shit if he sees me standing by, ready to throttle his fat neck.

She stares out the car window at her house, which is currently wrapped in a cocoon of dying ivy. “As much as I don’t want to be without your company, I really need to face my father alone. He’s had some time to cool off and he’ll hesitate to put up a fight inside the Green Mansion. Anyway, I did offer to help him find my replacement and I don’t like going back on my word.”

Grudgingly, I can see her side. “You’ve got more integrity than most. Just one of the things I love about you.”

She blushes and her hand finds my knee. My dick perks up like he’s just been zapped.

“What do you want to do tonight?” I’m ready to agree to anything she asks, whether it’s ziplining or fucking on the roof of the Green Mansion.

She smiles and traces a heart on my knee. “More of what we did last night. Plus maybe dinner and a movie.”

“You got it. Now come over here and give me something to look forward to.”

She loves getting orders like this and slides right into my lap. We’re parked on the street we both grew up on, yet that doesn’t stop me from putting my hands all over her body and abusing her mouth with my tongue like we’re in the foreplay segment of a porno.

Tess sighs into my neck and tickles a kiss on my collarbone. “I should go. I have to get changed before making the drive downtown. Can’t really show up at the Green Mansion in yesterday’s dress and anyway, someone broke the back zipper.”

“Sorry about that.”

She snorts. “No, you’re not.”

Nope, I’m not.

I tug on a section of her soft hair. “What time will you be finished downtown?”

“Not late. Are you going to the gym?”

“I’m not on the schedule because I’m still technically supposed to be in Vegas but I’m sure Elijah could use some help with something.” I wrap my arms around her body. She feels so good and it’s not easy to let go, even if just for a little while. She and I did our best to make up for lost time last night. I’m hungry for more.

Tess, still straddling my lap, lays her head on my shoulder. She doesn’t seem so eager to get away either. My hand drifts

between her legs and she inhales sharply when I graze a sensitive spot.

“Are you sore?” I didn’t exactly take it easy on her last night.

“A little,” she admits. “Not that I’m complaining.”

I touch her lightly and whisper in her ear. “Let me kiss it, baby. I’ll make it better.”

She melts at these words.

Dissolves completely when I brush my thumb over her panties.

Her breathing picks up and she rocks her hips against my hand. “Dammit, I can’t say no to you.”

“Then don’t say no.” I stroke her gently, carefully, like I’m new to this and touching pussy for the first time. “The house is empty. Let’s pay a visit to your bedroom. I think the crack in your wall needs a friend.”

Tess moves her head and nuzzles my neck. “I think you’re right.”

She’s yanking on my zipper before we even make it up to her bedroom. I shove my pants down to make her happy, but before my cock gets a turn I’m going to take care of her.

“Just lie back and relax.” I drop kisses on her sweet tits and smooth belly, then get lower to rub my jaw over her inner thighs.

My tongue slides into her for a test drive and she sighs with pleasure, opening her legs wider so I can go to work. This is more tender, slower, than I’ve ever been. I want to savor her.

She’s so fucking perfect.

Her mind. Her heart. Her body.

And she wants to give it all to me.

I'm determined to be worthy.

She's got the rhythm now, moving her hips and letting out breathy moans that drive me crazy. I always know when she's about to come.

"Micah, I love you," she gasps out and grips fistfuls of the bed comforter as my tongue finishes her off.

Afterwards, she's feeling feisty and demands to suck my cock.

Won't see me turning that down.

To make the job easy, I plant my knees on either side of her shoulders and use her mouth exactly how she wants me to. It's always wild, watching my cock slide through her lips. This is a view I pictured for years before I got to see it.

When I hit the limit I slam my fist into the wall so hard that some books fall from a shelf. Tess swallows like a champion while I watch, mesmerized. Now I *really* don't want to leave and buy some time by suggesting a shower.

"You're a bad influence," she teases while I soap her back as hot water rains down and the air fills with steam. "Even if I hustle, I won't make it downtown before ten."

I kiss her shoulder and cradle her to my chest beneath the shower spray. "You love me anyway."

Her sigh is a happy one. "I really do."

"I love you too." Hard to believe I've never spoken those words to anyone. They come so naturally with her.

Shower time is loads of fun. I wish it didn't have to end but Tess drags me down to the kitchen and makes coffee in some super fancy machine with about seventy-five buttons. Then she plants a final kiss on my lips and sends me on my way with a hot mug of some fancy latte shit.

She blows me a kiss. "I'll text you as soon as I know what time I'll be done downtown."

I wink at her and sip my drink. It's not terrible.

Rather than heading directly to the east side, I opt for a detour. Conner had sent me the address of his new house. It's located in one of the sprawling neighborhoods to the north of the city where there are all kinds of properties listed on the historic register.

Conner's house isn't historic but it is pretty cool. Retro ranch style architecture with a full basement, it's got none of the West Emerald pretension.

He answers the door wearing nothing but a pair of boxers while eating a giant bowl of cereal. "Well, look who finally made it here."

He drips milk all over the floor as he ushers me inside. Conner never minds receiving company with no notice.

"Want some cereal?" He shovels another spoonful into his mouth.

"No thanks." It's loaded with bright blue marshmallows and looks disgusting.

"You didn't bring Tessie." He seems disappointed.

"Not my choice. She had to go argue with the mayor."

Conner swallows his cereal and grins. "I knew you guys would work things out. You belong together."

“I love her, Con.”

“Of course you do. She’s amazing. She’s TESS.” He sets his bowl down. “Follow me. I’ll give you a tour. My realtor did good.”

The house isn’t a mansion but it’s big enough, with six bedrooms and five bathrooms. The backyard boasts a swimming pool, a citrus orchard, and a built-in barbecue.

He’s proud to tell me that all of his new furniture was chosen by Tess. Conner assumed that houses always come with furniture. He was surprised to move in and discover he had nowhere to sit. Tess ran right over, opened up her laptop, helped him select everything he needed, then sweet talked the warehouse into delivering the same day.

When we get to his suite, he hesitates to open the door when female laughter echoes from the other side.

Laughter, and more than one voice.

Conner sees the question on my face. “I had some friends last night.”

“You mean you had some friends *over* last night?”

“Yeah, they were over here while I was having them.”

What can I do but laugh?

The door swings open and a woman blinks at us. Behind her stands a second woman in the middle of shimmying into her dress.

Conner lazily gestures to me. “Ladies, this is my cousin. Micah, this is Alice and back there is Andrea. Both outstanding members of the US Olympic ski team.”

Honestly, Conner isn't too picky when it comes to female companionship. But I know he has a special weakness for tall, athletic women and these two look like his dream dates.

Alice leans on the door and scans me with interest. "Well. You sure do grow them impressive in your family."

Conner snorts. "Don't bother with Micah. He's in love, practically married."

"True." I nod.

She twists her long brown hair into a pile on top of her head and secures it with a clip. "We'll be out of here in a minute."

"No need for you to hurry," Conner says. "I'm not kicking you out."

Alice pats her hair and swipes a boxy purse off the floor. "There's twelve inches of fresh powder on Mount Oz. We're driving up this afternoon. You're invited."

"Snow's not really my jam. But text me when you're back in town."

"You got it." Alice leans in and gives him a tongue kiss. "And thanks for last night."

Andrea moves in to take her turn at Conner's mouth. She's not shy, blatantly gripping his crotch while making out.

"You were incredible," she purrs when she stops sucking his face.

Andrea keeps rubbing her hand on his dick while Alice dives back into the action, throwing her arms around his neck and nibbling at his ear.

I'm going to throw up if this gets any more revolting.

Luckily, the girls make their exit after extracting a promise that Conner will give them a repeat performance soon. *Real* soon.

“What?” He rolls his eyes at the look on my face. “We can’t all be in love. Some of us just have to settle for friendly fuck parties to keep from getting lonely in the off season.”

“Hey, whatever makes you happy. Let’s talk about something, though.”

“Sure, let’s talk outside in the sunshine. I’m feeling depleted. Need some Vitamin C.”

“You mean Vitamin D?”

“That too.”

Out back, Conner stretches out on a cushioned lounge chair while I take a seat on a swivel stool at the built-in counter.

“What’s up?” he says. “Wait, let me guess. You need me to be the best man at your wedding.”

“Close. I was wondering if you’re still in the market for a roommate.”

He rockets upright. “Really? Fuck yes! You’re moving in today. Tess too. You both need to be here. That’s what I pictured when I bought this place.”

“You bought a house just because you thought I might move in and bring my girlfriend?”

“Not exactly, but the first time Tess showed me this house I could tell that she loved it. And yeah, I know it sounds corny but I could see us all being here, like a family.”

I don't even know what to say. Conner really does have a heart of gold. It can be buried under airheaded layers of jokes and sarcasm but my cousin is the best of the best.

"Why the switch?" he asks. "Never thought you'd leave the east side."

"I'm due for a change. And I want to show Tess that I'm serious about us. She's defying her father and I know she's not just doing that for me but I'm part of the deal. It's not fair to ask her to run back and forth across town all the time. This is a better location and certainly a better neighborhood. But I haven't said a word to her about it yet."

Conner claps his hands together. "That settles it. Let's go get you packed up right now. You think it can all fit in my truck?"

"Wait, we haven't talked about rent or anything."

"Rent." He makes a face like the word is offensive. "I'm not a landlord. My house is your house."

Yeah, I'm paying him rent whether he likes it or not.

But I don't want to dampen his excitement. He's ready to fly out the door and haul my shit over from the east side within the hour like he's afraid I'll change my mind.

No, I won't change my mind.

Even if Conner didn't feel like having a roommate I'd still be looking to move. Can't have my girl spending her nights in a place where the music of gunshots and sirens are everyday features.

I'm not a guy who collects possessions and we easily move all my crap in his pickup in two trips. Conner gives me a

choice of bedrooms. I pick a suite with a window that overlooks the backyard because I think Tess will like it.

“I’m starving,” he says the second we’re finished unloading. “Let’s go get sandwiches.”

He’s eager to show me a deli within walking distance of the house. One perk of this new living arrangement is that Conner is now extremely happy. His comment about being lonely wasn’t a complete joke.

At lunch, we talk about Cecile. And football. And Tess. He gets a kick out of the way I keep checking my phone to see if she’s texted yet.

Yup, I’m impatient to see her again. Sue me.

But it’s Gage I hear from first, just as we’ve returned to the house.

It’s not unheard of for him to call me out of nowhere but somehow a knot of tension crawls up my spine.

When I hear what he has to say, that tension blooms into a fiery ball of fury. “I’ll be right there,” I tell my cousin through gritted teeth. “Let her know I’m coming.”

Conner has already noted the look on my face. “What the hell happened?”

I blow out a seething breath and tell myself that murdering Stuart Ballerini isn’t an immediate solution.

Even though it feels that way right now.

“Micah.” He’s concerned now, recognizing when my temper is about to go volcanic.

“She needs me.” Snatching his keys, I push him out the door. Conner’s truck is faster than my sputtering car and

nothing will stop me from getting to her.

24. Tess

“Just call upstairs,” I tell the guard at the Green Mansion gate. “I’m sure it’s a mistake.”

There’s pity and an apology in his eyes, but his voice is firm. “No mistake. I got the call about half an hour ago. Your credentials have been revoked and you’re no longer allowed on the property.”

When I swallow there’s a sour knot in my throat. I expected my father to be angry. But he’s still my father. He wouldn’t humiliate me like this.

Besides, he’s nothing if not pragmatic. It’s in his best interest to stay on my good side, given that I know a few things he wouldn’t want to go public.

The gate guard watches me with some uneasiness. I try not to glare at him. He’s just doing what he’s told.

Even when I turn around I still feel his eyes on me while I make a call.

There’s nothing, not even a ring tone on the other end when I dial my father’s phone. Just a message saying the call will go straight to automated voicemail.

I try texting. **Dad. What’s going on?**

Chewing my thumbnail, I watch as the text is suspended briefly in the cellular ether.

And then shows as 'Not Delivered'.

No, I refuse to believe that my father would actually *block my number*.

Scrolling through my contacts, I locate the main number of the Green Mansion and ask to be connected to Katie Upshaw. Her office is right across from mine. Now and then we have lunch together. I would say we're friends.

"Tess." Her voice is cold. "I have no comment."

"I'm not a reporter, Katie. Why the hell am I being stopped at the gates like a trespassing criminal?"

"I have no comment," she repeats. Like a robot. Then a shuffling of papers and a low hiss of breath. "Go home."

"What do you mean *go home*? Where the hell is my father? I need to talk to him."

"Tess, go home right now." The words are nearly inaudible.

The connection breaks off suddenly.

I doubt it will do me any good to call back.

The guard is still watching me and pretending like he isn't. He averts his eyes when I stare.

Uneasiness grinds into a sharper disturbance.

"*Go home.*"

Katie wasn't just telling me to leave. She was giving me a message.

With one last perplexed look at the forbidding Green Mansion, I imagine my father watching from one of the many arched windows.

The dread in my gut is difficult to reckon with on the drive back to West Emerald. By now, I'm not naïve enough to believe this is a misunderstanding.

I've been excommunicated from the Green Mansion.

My father has blocked my phone number.

While waiting for a West Emerald traffic light to change, I tell myself it's not like my father to be so underhanded, especially not to me.

Then I remember Dr. Spigato and I'm not sure of anything.

"Watch out for those terrible boys."

There's never a warning when my stepmother's syrupy voice steps into my thoughts. It doesn't happen as much as it used to, but it does happen.

Nothing about the current situation mirrors Olivia's murderous schemes. Yet my heart hammers and my palms feel slick on the steering wheel as I direct the car through the streets of my childhood.

The memory of Olivia chose this moment for a reason, to remind me that an important lesson hasn't been learned.

People can surprise us in very bad ways.

I'm confused when I see the moving truck. None of the homes on my street have been on the market lately.

But there is a moving van squatting right in front of my house with the cargo door wide open.

Then I see a man wheel my white dresser up the ramp and into the truck.

“What the hell?” For a surreal second I’m sure that I’m hallucinating

Nope, there are the butterfly shaped knobs that Uncle Josh found at a hardware store many years ago.

A mattress is the next item to get carried out of the front door.

I know it’s mine because the light blue fitted sheet is still in place.

My first thought as I park crookedly behind the truck is that we’re being robbed.

My second thought is that the robbers have extremely strange taste, bypassing the big screen television, leather sofas and antique silver collection in favor of my chipped childhood bedroom furniture.

But the red Jag squatting in the middle of the circular driveway answers some questions and produces new ones.

I know whose car that is.

“Wait,” I tell the two men loading my mattress into the van. “Just wait a minute. This is my property and I have not given anyone permission to move it.”

They’re not interested.

“Talk to the boss,” huffs the one pushing the mattress from the back.

“Who is the boss?”

“Fred,” yells the other guy.

I’m about to start screaming. “Where is Fred?”

“In the house. Maybe.”

At the front door I find a man in blue coveralls removing the lock. “Are you Fred?”

“No, I’m Miguel.”

“This is my house, Miguel.”

He shrugs. “It’s nice.”

This is starting to feel like a carnival ride, only less fun.

Miguel steps aside long enough for me to walk through the open door.

There, in the middle of the living room, looking coiffed and glamorous, is my least favorite reporter, last seen exiting my father’s office buttoning up her blouse.

“Tess, hello.” Helena bares her teeth in a vicious smile, then calls to a man carrying cardboard boxes up the stairs. “Don’t worry about inventorying the boxes. Just get it all packed up as soon as possible. Remember that your gratuity is based on speed.”

I drop my purse on the floor. Then pick it up again in case someone decides to throw it in a box. “You have five seconds to explain before I call the police.”

Helena examines her manicured nails. “Excellent idea. The police can certainly assist with an eviction if the tenant is unwilling to leave.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Where is my father?”

She sighs. “Stuart would prefer to distance himself from this scandal.”

“What scandal?”

“The one you created with your lack of ethics.”

“My WHAT?”

Helena whips out her phone and starts recording. “Do you have a comment on the new revelations that you’ve been embezzling campaign funds to finance your drug use?”

“My comment is that you’re fucking crazy. WHERE IS MY FATHER?”

“Tess.” He stands at the front door, dwarfing poor Miguel, who now looks like he’d like to evaporate. “For god’s sake, I can hear you screaming from the front yard.”

“Dad.” Despite everything, my first instinct is to run to him, sure that he’ll fix everything. “What the hell is she talking about? Why is my furniture being loaded into a moving truck?”

He peers down at me. The only identifiable emotion on his face is annoyance.

It disappears when he looks over my head to address Helena. “Honey, thanks for getting this started. I’ll take it from here.”

Helena is not pleased to be dismissed from the action. “Stu, I can stay and see this through.”

“HEY!” I wave my hands in the air. “Nobody has informed me what THIS is.”

“Uh, who do I give the new one to?” Miguel holds up a silver key.

My father snatches it out of his hand. “Bill my card.”

Miguel collects a bag of tools, keeps his head down and sprints away. Can’t say I blame him.

Helena flattens her hand on my father's chest and breathes on him. "If you need me..."

I laugh my head off even though nothing is funny at all.

Helena throws an indignant glance over her shoulder. "Free ride's over, bitch."

Hell if I know what that means. I don't give a damn.

My glare is reserved for my father as he kisses his asshole girlfriend and watches her strut away.

Helena has hardly stepped out the door before one of the movers jogs downstairs with a box. The box hasn't been sealed closed and I spot books and dance competition trophies.

"Are you Fred?" I ask him.

He peers over the rim of the box. He's older than the other guys, maybe older than my father. "Yeah, why?"

I walk over and seize the box out of his hands. At least, I try to. The box is heavier than it looks and I'm not strong. The contents come flying out. A hefty dance trophy cracks one of the French door glass panes.

"Jeez," the guy whines, now looking at me like I just escaped from the zoo. He shakes his head and looks to my father. "You said we're going local but you didn't say where."

"That depends," my father says. "Tess, where would you like your belongings to go?"

"This is insane." With my legs now feeling a little unsteady, I lean against the nearest wall. "Dad, what in god's name are you doing? You can't just box up everything I own and get rid of me like I'm a stray dog."

He sighs and looks to Fred. “These kids sure don’t stop breaking your heart even after they grow up.”

Fred makes a grunt of sympathy. “I can relate. Got a daughter who works the streets, in and out of lockup. We’re raising her kid. No idea who the father is.”

With each passing second I can’t escape the sense that I have hurtled deep into the Twilight Zone. I dig my nails into my palm, just to make sure I’m really awake.

My father doesn’t even glance my way. “Stand by.” He pats Fred on the shoulder and opens the front door. “I’ll have an answer for you soon.”

Fred throws me a glare and jabs a finger in the air. “It’s tough being a father. But sometimes you’ve just got to cut your losses.”

“Amen to that.” My father shuts the door behind Fred, leaving us alone together.

Stuart Ballerini has always been stern and intimidating but I’ve never actually *feared* him until this moment.

I stand in the midst of fallen trophies and scattered books. “What are you doing, Dad?”

“I’m sorry it has to come to this,” he replies. “But I swore an oath to protect the citizens of Emerald City.”

“And Emerald City needs to be protected from *me*?”

His phone buzzes. He peers at the screen and holds up a finger. “Just a moment. I need to take this call. I suggest you use the time to figure out where you would like your possessions to be taken.”

To say I’m astonished would be a pitiful understatement.

My first thought is to call Micah.

Just as quickly, I reject this idea.

Micah would come charging in here like a raging bull. I have a feeling my father would love nothing better than to provoke him into a confrontation. That might even be my father's intention.

I can see it all play out as if it's already happened.

Micah runs to my rescue. My father taunts him. Micah throws a punch, or worse. Micah leaves in handcuffs while the mayor grins with victory.

Anyway, Micah is all the way over on the east side.

Dani is closer, much closer. Right here in the neighborhood.

My father keeps his back to me as he talks on the phone. He wants me to hear what he's saying, though.

"A tragic decision," he says. "But my obligation to the city will always come first, even if it means turning in my own daughter."

What the ACTUAL FUCK?

My head spins and my intuition whispers that I won't like the answer to that question.

Dani picks up her phone and I almost crumple with relief when I hear her voice.

"Are you home?"

"No, I'm downtown. Had some meetings this morning to make plans for the charity." She pauses. "What's going on?"

"Dani." I have to inhale deeply to chase away the panic. It doesn't work. "My father's throwing me out of the house. I

don't know what's going on. He has a moving truck here and everything and he's saying stuff about ethics and protecting Emerald City and I would say he's lost his mind but I don't think that's true and can I please keep my stuff in your garage for a little while until I figure this out?"

A beat of stunned silence.

"Are you there at your house?" she says.

My father finishes his phone call and turns to watch me expectantly. I think he might be enjoying my obvious distress. In fact, I'm sure he is.

"Yes, I'm here." I glower across the room and step over a broken dance trophy.

Stuart Ballerini calmly tucks his phone into an interior pocket of his blazer.

"Stay there," Dani says. "It'll be all right."

I nod my head even though she can't see me.

The mayor of Emerald City waits in impassive silence until I lower the phone from my ear.

"That must have been *him*," my father says, rather smugly.

"No, it wasn't Micah." I'll need to sound calm even if I feel like throwing sharp objects.

"So you'll let him defile you in my house but you won't call him when you need help. Strange."

He sees my confusion and cocks an eyebrow. "Did you forget we have security cameras? I saw you arrive at the house this morning looking like you'd spent the night rolling around in an east side gutter, which I suppose is what you did."

I refuse to feel ashamed. “Guilty. I had sex with my boyfriend. And yes, we did it upstairs in my bedroom. Because I’m an adult and I’m in love and I owe you no apologies for that.”

He seems to be giving this some thought. “True. And at times I’ve been too overprotective as a father. Maybe that’s why you felt like you had to rebel. But I placed my complete trust in you. I never expected that trust to be abused. I’m a public servant, Tess. Sometimes that means making excruciating choices.”

As odd as his words are, I also recognize his onstage voice, the one he uses when there’s a microphone in front of his face. Mayor Ballerini is performing right now.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Explain it to me.”

He gives me a thin smile. “Where is your phone?”

A weird question since he just saw me toss my phone back in my purse.

“Oh.” I pull the phone out. “You think I’m recording you. That’s why you’re following a script.” I toss the phone on the sofa. “Take a look. I’m not recording. Now can you climb down from your political pedestal and speak plainly?”

He conducts a cursory examination and, satisfied, leaves the phone where it is. A veneer of civility falls away and he gazes at me with sheer contempt. “All right, I’ll speak plainly. You don’t live here anymore.”

“Obviously. But let’s not forget that I moved back home because of you. After the whole Olivia scandal, you didn’t want to live alone. *You* asked for *my* help with your campaign. So you’re pissed that I’m in love with Micah? Too bad. You

wanted me to move out? Fine. Happy to. You didn't have to go all scorched earth like a lunatic."

He looks out the window and notes that the movers are milling around by the truck. "You should have chosen your family, Tess. Not some rage-addled hellraiser who will get a kick out of using you for a little while before you start to bore him." He whirls on me, eyes bright with fury. "Does it give you some kind of sick thrill to know that he fucked your stepmother first? That you're spreading your legs for Olivia's leftovers?"

The shock vibrates all the way to my toes. He's never talked to me like this before. Not ever.

Then again, he's never thrown me out of the house either.

"You know damn well that's not fair. Micah's an incredible person in spite of everything that's been done to him. We love each other. And nobody cares if you like the idea or not."

He chuckles at this news. "You are making a goddamn fool out of yourself, little girl."

I lift my chin. "Says the big city mayor who uses his office to fuck reporters on his desk."

His jaw tightens. Maybe he didn't expect an argument, or thought I'd just fall down and weep.

"You're the biggest liar I've ever met," I say. "But since we're airing all the grievances in this little family meeting, why don't we call Uncle Josh and include him?"

He throws back his head with a roar of disturbing laughter. It ends just as quickly as it began and the contempt returns.

"Tess, I almost envy your stupidity. You have no idea what's between me and my brother. You haven't got a prayer

that he would take your side.”

Doubt pricks at me.

For all my father’s lies, this last declaration is likely true.

The Ballerini brothers have always been and always will be a united front. Uncle Josh brings me baked goods, listens to my stories and encourages my dreams only because I’m his brother’s daughter. But Josh never does a thing without looking to Stuart for approval. We had that in common until very recently.

He’ll be unhappy about this rift for sure. But when the dust settles he’ll still be standing with his big brother.

While I’ll be standing on the other side.

Though I’m furious, the idea is still a desolate one.

I feel my chin trembling. The wave of emotion threatening to engulf me is horrible. It’s also necessary. It’s been building for a very long time.

“Self-control, Tess. Self-control.”

Fuck you.

Fuck you.

FUCK YOU!

Bending down, I pick up a fallen book that’s splayed open on the floor, an antique copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It belonged to my mother, one of the few possessions I have from her. The cover is scuffed, the spine cracked. I hug the book to my chest.

“Was I always just a servant to you? Tell me, Dad.”

The question should devastate him. Yet he simply scoffs and rocks back on his heels, refusing to answer.

His silence *is* the answer.

An unexpected shadow materializes in the hallway to my right. I nearly scream before I recognize him.

Gage Silvestro has arrived, summoned by Dani. He didn't come through the front door. Honestly, I have no idea how he got in. But he's Gage. He has his ways.

He stands just ten feet away but a wall blocks him from my father's view. I'm the only one who can see him.

Gage stares at me and it's the first time I can recall seeing compassion in his arctic grey eyes. Or at least compassion that's directed my way.

Heartless. Growing up, that's what everyone thought of him, me included. He's far from that. Otherwise Dani would never have fallen for him.

Gage watches me in silence like he's waiting for permission to act. I don't know what he would do. He doesn't have Micah's impulsivity but he's not a man who retreats.

"It's time to wrap this up," says the mayor of Emerald City. "You're no longer part of my life."

My head snaps back to face my father. "What the hell does that mean? You can't exactly fire me from being your daughter."

"You're not fired, Tess. You're just *finished*."

A beat of stunned silence follows as I try to absorb his last statement. And a terrible suspicion is born.

"What did you tell them at the Green Mansion?"

He shrugs. "The truth."

"Sounds ominous, coming from you."

He narrows his eyes and takes two steps in my direction.

Gage tenses, ready to intervene.

But my father doesn't raise a hand. He just gazes at me without a shred of love, which is even worse. "You've become addicted to prescription painkillers, Tess. I've begged you to get help but you refuse. And now, sadly, a reporter has uncovered evidence that you've used your position of trust on my team to steal campaign funds."

I can hardly breathe. "What? There's no evidence. None. You know that I'm not addicted to anything. Is this a story you've cooked up with Helena?"

He exhales and moves to the window, continuing as if I haven't spoken a word. "Naturally, as a father my heart is broken. I blame myself for failing to recognize the severity of your problem. But I cannot fight corruption if I allow it in my own family. There will be an outcry if you receive any special treatment. I'll do my best to keep you out of prison. But you will, of course, lose your professional realtor's license for this."

So far I've managed to remain standing in the face of his outrageous statements.

That streak might be about to end.

My legs feel awful unsteady as it dawns on me that my father isn't just throwing me out of the house.

Or simply kicking me to the curb on the professional front.

No, he's actively trying to *destroy* me. He wants to ensure that I can't make a living or recover my reputation.

The realization is physically painful in its cruelty.

Now I know what it feels like to have the solid floor you're standing on drop right out from under you. The thunder in my head is a panicked rush of blood. Flailing, I grip the back of the sofa in order to keep my balance while Stuart Ballerini looks on with indifference.

I have to gasp for breath. "All my life I've done everything you've ever asked of me." My voice rises to a scream. "EVERYTHING, DAD, EVERYTHING!"

I'm fracturing into a thousand pieces. Desperately, futilely, I wish for Micah. I need his strength to pick me up and hold me together right now.

Micah's not here. But his wingman has had his fill of being the silent observer.

Gage steps into the living room and cracks a cold smile when my father nearly jumps out of his skin.

"How the hell did you get into my house?"

Gage shrugs. "Unimportant. Do you remember my father?"

I'm sure Gage enjoys the way his opponent blanches at the mention of the fearsome Christos Silvestro.

Gage twirls a silver key chain around his forefinger and takes his time.

My father's face is flushed and sweating now. He looks at the door like he's considering making a run for it.

Gage prowls closer, now standing between me and my father. "You're small potatoes, little man. So if you want to keep your tiny kingdom then you'll take my advice. I'll give you twenty-four hours to undo whatever you've set in motion to ruin Tess. On second thought, twelve hours is all you get. It

was all a mistake. A big fat fucking mistake. You will publicly apologize to your daughter. Then you will resist the temptation to fuck with her life again. Otherwise, you'll find out just how many tricks I learned from Christos."

An impressive speech.

So impressive that I've lost the sense that the floor is about to swallow me up.

Gage turns to me with a friendly nod. "Why don't you go pack up whatever else you need? I'll stay right here and keep the good mayor company."

Taking my cue, I scamper up the stairs and waste no time hauling my entire set of luggage out of the closet. My dresser is already in the moving van but everything that still hangs in the closet needs to be stuffed into suitcases.

I move like a demon, anxious to be finished with this task. Books get thrown on top of clothes and picture frames get tossed into the suitcase pockets. There's not much left behind when I'm finished, or at least nothing that I'd be interested in keeping.

Gage calls up from the foot of the stairs. "You need help?"

"Actually, yes." There's a lot to carry.

He jogs up the stairs, takes stock of my luggage, and loads up his arms. "Now let's get the hell out of here."

Before leaving my bedroom, I take one last look back. This room is central to my earliest memories.

My eyes pause on the thin wall cracks, just above where the bed used to be. The cracks put there by Micah.

And some of my best memories.

I doubt I'll ever be standing here again.

My father refuses to look me in the eye as I trail Gage out of the house. The new front door lock clicks behind me.

Gage snaps his fingers at the movers and orders them to follow him for a short drive.

He watches me open the door to my own car. "You all right?"

Not really. "I'll live."

The day's turmoil has left me drained, exhausted. I'm glad Gage is willing to seize control of the situation. At the house he shares with Dani, he tells Fred to unload everything in the garage. As for my luggage, Gage carries that into the house himself.

Should you find yourself in the midst of a personal crisis, Gage Silvestro is probably not someone you would call for emotional support. However, today he seems like nothing less than a saint.

I'm still trying to gulp back my sobs before sharing these recent developments with Micah when I hear Gage in the kitchen, murmuring in a low voice.

"Don't get crazy. She's all right. She's here with me."

Micah.

He's talking to Micah.

A dull ache throbs behind my eyes and I wrap my arms around myself. It's going to take a while before the shock wears off.

Gage returns with a beer. "Here, you look like you could use this."

“Definitely.” I wait until he twists the cap off. “Thanks.”

Gage takes a seat in a suede armchair. He watches me drink the beer and taps his fingers on his knee. There’s a pattern, as always.

“Micah’s on his way,” he says. “And Dani will be here soon.”

I take a hearty swallow of beer. I wouldn’t mind being drunk right now. A loud hiccup rips from my throat. Spotting a set of cork coasters in the middle of the table, I use one to set the beer down.

“I owe you, Gage. Thanks for everything.”

He leans back in his chair and sighs. “I know how it feels to have an evil bastard for a father.”

“I’m sure you do.” The sour taste in my throat warns that there might be tears after all. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

He nods. “Yeah, but you learn to move on.”

I swipe a tear out of the corner of my eye before it falls. “I guess I’m homeless for tonight.”

“Nah, you can stay here with us as long as you want.”

I breathe through the pain. “I never knew my father could hate me.”

Gage frowns and taps his knee again. “I know his type. He’ll bleed you dry. Once you’re no longer any use to him he’ll make you suffer.”

“When you threatened him, was it for real?”

He raises an eyebrow and doesn’t blink.

Yup, it was for real.

“Good, it will give him something to think about.” I grab my beer again and hold it up. “Here’s to those of us born to rotten parents.”

He salutes. “I would drink to that. If I drank.”

It doesn’t take long before tires screech to a halt on the street outside. A door slams shut and seconds later there’s a thunderous banging noise.

“Hold on,” Gage grumbles and trots over to fling the front door open. “Damn, Micah. No need to break the thing down.”

Micah pays no attention and storms inside with Conner following at a far more leisurely pace. Micah sprints right to me.

“Hi.” I look up at him and hiccup again. “I’m not having a great afternoon.”

He drops down in front of me and holds my face, taking a close look at my tearful eyes.

“That motherfucker.” He kisses my lips and collects me close.

I wrap my arms around him and an internal dam breaks. I try not to sob in his arms but he feels my body shake as he moves to the couch and pulls me into his lap.

“Fuck him.” He kisses my lips, my cheeks, my forehead. “You don’t need him. I’m here. And I’m not going anywhere, Tessie.”

It’s nice to rest my head on his shoulder and let him hold me.

It’s so nice that my sobs cease and I’m able to breathe again.

25. Micah

They wouldn't let me come alone.

Conner and Gage know I've been simmering all week. They warned me to calm down before grabbing Ballerini for an inevitable chat.

The sight of Tess in pain has carved a deep hole in my chest. And the only reason I haven't yet crashed through a window of the Green Mansion and dragged the mayor's chubby ass out for a reckoning is because I don't want to cause her more grief.

But now I've waited long enough.

It wasn't difficult to discover where the mayor would be since he's always making a public spectacle of himself somehow.

Once we're in front of the Palace Hotel, I give my two cousins one final out. "You don't have to get in the middle of this."

Gage responds with an eye roll.

Conner crosses his arms. "Quit trying to shake us off. We're with you."

"Hey." Gage grabs my shirt. "Remember who he is. Don't give him any ammunition."

That's my cousin's way of warning me not to snap and take a swing. I know better than to do that. The sound of my girl crying in my arms is still raw and I won't give her anything else to cry about.

"I'll keep my temper."

Gage nods and releases my shirt.

Conner hands over the access badges that he was able to get because football players can call up favors like that on a whim. A very handy skill.

The last time I was here at the Palace Hotel was the night of the election. Not my favorite memory. I still kick myself when I think about the argument I started with Tess.

Not as much as I'd *like* to kick the shit out of Stuart Ballerini for what he did to her.

I won't be drawing blood because I promised. But I'm not letting that fucker skate through life thinking no one notices what he really is.

The security guard posted at the door to the ballroom eyeballs the three of us when we flash our badges.

I keep my face neutral, trying to look like the opposite of an extremely pissed off boyfriend. I guess it works because after a double take at Conner, the guy nods and lets us through.

The crowd is in the middle of a collective laugh, the sound of two hundred people snorting through their noses. I forget what this gathering is for; some city chamber of something-or-other rubbish. Not that it matters.

Ballerini preens onstage at the podium. He's raving about this being a new era for the city and blah fuckitty blah. I can't listen to his garbage and tune him out after about six words.

Conner points to some empty seats but I'd rather stand in the back and check out the scene. Besides, sooner or later Mayor Fuckface will notice me standing here and I'd like to be able to glare my heart out when that happens.

I'm so busy firing invisible bullets through my eyes that I don't even notice there are other people seated at a cloth-covered table onstage until Gage nudges me. My mother's up there, which isn't a shock. Matilda is not only a leading member of the corporate community but she has always been a big campaign contributor.

Anyway, she might have no clue about what happened with Tess. Whatever Gage said to Ballerini was effective and he squashed the so-called 'scandal' before it got traction.

Matilda's bright hair is piled on her head and she stifles a yawn as the mayor yammers on and on. Seated beside her and also looking kind of bored is the police chief of West Emerald in full uniform. Josh Ballerini sure seems to have an awful lot of free time to act as his brother's personal assistant. Gage says there's a rumor that Josh is favored to take over the much larger Em City force when the current chief retires next month.

Smells like crony bullshit to me. Typical politics.

Meanwhile, the sight of the three of us propped up against the back wall has stirred some notice.

Faces turn and a buzz ripples through the room. Reporters seated near the stage pivot and a few snap photos when they see who stands in the middle of our trio.

Conner had the right idea in thinking that the city's most beloved sports hero would give the mayor a solid reason to keep the peace. If Ballerini throws me out or tries to slap cuffs on, there's no way Conner would stand around and watch. No

doubt manhandling everyone's favorite quarterback would turn into a PR nightmare.

Not for the first time and definitely not for the last, I feel a rush of appreciation for the two men who walked in here with me.

These are my brothers. For better, for worse, for always.

The mayor's microphone crackles and he pauses. Finally, he's noticed our arrival and it's thrown him off. He clears his throat, pulls on his tie and glances back at his brother like he's expecting help.

I do my best to project the fire of my hatred to the stage. I hope he can feel the burn.

Matilda, however, has noticed nothing. She looks at her phone.

Ballerini wraps up his nonsense with some hasty thanks amid gushing about how he's honored to be the ruler of this great city. Polite applause swells through the room and expensively dressed people rise from their seats.

"What now?" Conner asks.

"We wait," Gage replies and throws me a look.

I shrug. Sure, I'll wait. Another minute won't kill me.

Then a face swims into view and I nearly lose my cool.

I haven't seen Pierce Carrington in person since the day I pitched him down a flight of stairs. Now I think I didn't go far enough. His bones have healed and he's walking around free and clear without so much as a limp. That sucks.

My face was covered that day. I shouldn't be recognizable to him. Yet he pauses six feet away. A flicker of something

menacing skates across his face. I stare back at him with a silent challenge. *Just give me a fucking reason, asshole.*

He works with Ballerini now. When I remember what he tried to do to Tess and how Ballerini didn't even want to hear about it, I have to scrape my tight fist on my jeans to stifle the lust for vengeance.

Carrington's throat bobs and he looks at Conner. Some part of his reptilian brain decides that a public clash isn't in his best interest. He leaves the room, but I was wrong about something. He does have a slight limp after all. Cool.

Matilda has finally noticed we're here. She stands on the stage, a baffled look on her face, and crosses her arms, no doubt suspicious about what we're up to.

Ballerini and his brother are in the middle of a private conference. The mayor runs his mouth like he's spitting nails and Josh shakes his head while occasionally glancing our way.

Aside from a few grim members of the security team, there aren't many people left in the room.

That's enough waiting. "Don't hold me back."

Conner shakes the hand of one last fan and Gage curses under his breath. I hear them fall in line behind me as I take a stroll down the empty aisle toward the stage.

Matilda thinks I'm on my way to talk to her. "Micah, what on earth are you doing here?"

Ignoring my mother, I set my gaze on the mayor. "Care to slither down off your perch for a chat, Stu?"

His eyes narrow for a split second before he remembers to hide his emotions. "I'd be glad to talk with you, Micah. Call my office and we'll set something up."

“Nah, that’s not gonna work for me.”

Josh Ballerini, looking uneasy, motions to the staff at the back of the room. “We’re good here, guys. Give us a minute.”

The security guards exit and the doors shut behind them.

Matilda has finally caught on that something is awry. Her head whips back and forth like she’s watching a tennis match. “What’s this about?”

“Ask your pal over there. The mayor knows why I’m here.”

Frowning, she focuses on Ballerini. “Stuart?”

Ballerini is already in damage control mode. He gestures with his hands. “There seems to be a little bit of a misunderstanding.”

I bark out a laugh at that shit. “There’s no fucking misunderstanding. You threw Tess out of the house and threatened to wreck her life.”

Matilda is still bewildered. “No, that doesn’t sound right.”

“It’s not right, but it’s fucking accurate. I won’t get into what a lying sack of horseshit he is and how he shouldn’t be in charge of anything larger than a dog kennel, but the way he’s treated Tess is downright sadistic.” I hop up to the stage. “You sure fucked up, asshole. Your daughter is the most amazing person. She’s got all the integrity you never had.” I smack my own chest. “You see me, don’t you? Make no mistake, I’ve got her back. We all do. I figured someone ought to tell you where things stand so there’s no confusion.”

He’s no longer bothering to smile. “For Tess’s entire life she was focused and motivated. Until she got mixed up with you.”

“Eat a bag of dicks. She’s not yours to kick around anymore. Get used to it.”

He puffs up his chest. “I suppose you’re congratulating yourself for turning her into a liability in record time.” He steps closer while I stay rooted to the spot. “Do I see you? Yeah, I see you, Micah Lyonne. Born with a silver spoon in your mouth and yet you’re just a rotten punk who gives nothing but grief to everyone around you.”

“Stuart.” Matilda gets in the middle and flashes an icy smile. “Something seems to be wrong with the acoustics in here. I’m sure I didn’t hear you imply that *my* son is not good enough for *your* daughter. And if I did hear that, then I’m certain you will waste no time correcting your error.”

Matilda isn’t the CEO of a multi billion dollar company for no reason. My mother is completely at home among the Em City elite and she is formidable.

Right now Matilda has decided that our family honor is on the line and she bristles accordingly.

Stuart Ballerini wavers. Visibly. He even appears to lose a couple of inches in height.

His eyes skim past Matilda and drift over me before taking in the sight of Conner and Gage staring stonily back at him.

He cannot afford to make enemies of us all and he knows it.

Even his own brother is regarding him with obvious unhappiness.

Matilda sees this too and her smile turns victorious. “Tess is a lovely young woman and we are all *thrilled* to see the kids so happy together, aren’t we?”

Ballerini works his jaw, scratches his neck.

“*Aren't we?*” Matilda insists.

Score one for Matilda. She's daring him to disagree. And if he does, she'll take her considerable influence and her big fat checkbook elsewhere.

My mother decides she's made her point even if the mayor won't answer.

“Boys,” she says as her heels click down the stage stairs. “We'll be leaving now.”

She motions that we ought to fall in behind her like obedient ducklings.

No, I've got one more thing to say to Stuart Ballerini before I'm done with him.

The man's cheeks are pink and he looks like he's being strangled by his tie. I'm sure he would like to take my head off already.

That doesn't stop me from standing toe to toe and sharing something that should keep him up at night if he has any shadow of a conscience.

“You know what should kill you, Stu? Tess wouldn't have ratted you out, would *never* have gone to the press with your lies or publicly denounced you. You pitiful little fuck. You lost your daughter for nothing.”

I jump off the stage and don't look back, leaving the mayor to marinate in his humiliation and regret.

“I think that went well,” Conner says.

Gage snorts out a laugh.

Matilda waits for us in the lobby and speaks briskly. “I need to return to the office. Am I right to assume that there will be no more trouble today?”

“Christ,” Gage mutters and steps away before he says something worse.

I’m still trying to figure out how to respond to my mother’s insane question.

Conner, however, gives her a charming grin. “You know we hate to cause anyone any trouble, Aunt Matilda.”

“That’s very good to hear.” She’s already done with us and scrolls through her phone. “Micah, you need to have Tess call me. We have *plenty* of opportunities at Yellow Brick for someone of her caliber. I can personally customize an ideal job description.”

She’s cracked in the head. Tess has no desire to work for her.

My mother, as usual, isn’t really waiting for a reply. She’s already heading for the door, assuming her wishes will be obeyed.

Sometimes I feel as if that woman has never actually met me.

“Are we out of here?” Gage says.

“Yeah.”

“Micah.”

His voice sounds just like his brother’s. It takes a few seconds for my muscles to relax when I see it’s just Josh Ballerini jogging over.

He throws a nod of acknowledgement to Conner and Gage before closing in to slap a hand on my shoulder. “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure.” In my opinion, the guy is a brainless doormat but I’m curious enough to find out what he wants.

Josh comes across as anxious, shifting his weight and looking down at his shoes. “All I was told was that Tess moved in with you.”

“She did. After that bastard changed the locks, shoved all her stuff in a moving van and made up a lie that she takes drugs.”

His head snaps up and he frowns. “This has to be a misunderstanding.”

“There’s no misunderstanding. And I don’t have the patience to listen to you defend that shit stain you call a brother so fuck right off.”

He grabs my arm. “Wait, is she okay? I called her but never heard back.”

“Then take the hint and keep your distance.”

His shoulders slump with distress. “Look, I’m not part of whatever happened. I knew nothing about it. Tess and I have always been close. I’m just worried about her.”

I bite back the urge to tell him to fuck off a second time. “I’ll pass the message along. Best I can offer.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” He holds out his hand.

I’m about to walk away and leave him hanging, then think better of it and shake his stupid hand. But I’m not above squeezing hard enough to crush his fingers until he flinches.

“I think that went well,” Conner declares when we’re on the road in Gage’s car.

Gage slides a glance over to me in the passenger seat. “He’s on notice. Maybe that’s all it will take.”

“Maybe.” I’m uneasy, and unsure if this mission accomplished anything. Then again, it’s possible that nothing short of cracking Ballerini’s jaw would have felt satisfactory.

“Where is Tess today?” Conner says. “I didn’t see her at home this morning.”

The day her dad kicked her out, Dani and Gage assured Tess she could stay with them as long as she wanted. But I won her over to the idea of moving in with me. It feels right, having her in my bed every night and waking up beside her every morning.

It feels more than right. Already I can’t imagine spending a night away from her.

Gage answers Conner’s question. “Dani said she and Tess had plans.”

At home, we find Dani and Tess hanging out in the backyard. They’re stretched out together on one of the patio lounge chairs and giggling over some silly social media videos. It’s a cute scene.

Conner thinks so too. He dives in and shovels them both up in his big arms, hugging them as if he plans to devour them. “My girls.”

Dani gives his back a friendly pat. “Our Conner.”

But I pull Tess right out of his grip.

Conner doesn’t get dibs on my girlfriend.

Tess slips her arms around my waist. “You better kiss me.”

Glad to. The second she feels my tongue she answers by molding her body to mine. It takes all my willpower not to pick her up and carry her to the bedroom. There’s a whole lot more to Tess than her body but that doesn’t stop me from wanting her. Endlessly. Relentlessly.

Elsewhere, Gage has taken Dani away from Conner and now Conner pouts on the lounge chair all alone, grumbling about feeling like a fifth wheel.

Tess comes up for air and smiles at me. When I inspect her face I’m glad to find no trace of sadness. Her father’s betrayal can’t crush her. Tess is strong. Nothing that asshole does will keep her down.

“You look worried,” she says.

“Not worried. Did you two have fun?”

She nods. “We went to go see Lita. Haven was there too.” She glances at Conner to see if he’s listening. He’s not. He’s placed his hat over his eyes and appears to be drifting off to a nap.

“Has anything changed with Lita?” Ten years is a hell of a long time to be asleep.

Tess shakes her head. “No change at all. Haven was actually in a good mood, although she seemed put out that you don’t want to pick up shifts at the club anymore.”

“Never liked the job anyway. I just worked there now and then to have something to do.”

She pokes me in the belly. “When were you planning to mention that you crashed the Chamber of Commerce meeting?”

“Now. You mad?”

“No. Kind of wish I’d seen that.”

“How’d you find out?”

“Uncle Josh. Twenty minutes ago he texted with a plea to call him.” She sighs and lays her cheek on my chest. “We only talked for a minute. He swears he knew nothing about my father’s schemes. He thought I just quit and moved out.”

“Yeah, he gave me the same story.”

“He wants to see me, meet for lunch or something.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“I should really talk to him alone.” She smiles up at me. “But I love that you said that.”

I plant a kiss on her forehead. For her, I would do anything. “It’s us now.”

“It’s us now,” she echoes and pulls me down for another kiss.

26. Tess

Josh has been on eggshells since he walked through the door. He said he'd meet me anywhere and the choice was mine. I decided I'd rather stay on my turf.

It's not that I distrust my uncle, not exactly. But after decades of observing his allegiance to his older brother, I'm wary when it comes to whose side he's really on.

"This is a nice house," he says as he trails me through the hallway. "Good location too."

The door to the bedroom suite I share with Micah is open. "That's my room."

He looks inside, notes the large, neatly made bed and the obvious signs that a man lives in there too. A pair of Micah's shoes are sitting outside the closet and a bag of his gym equipment rests on the floor.

My uncle withdraws from the doorway. "And what's Micah up to today?"

"He's working at his gym."

"Prepping for a fight?"

"He's not just a fighter. He's also a personal trainer and he does maintenance around the place as needed. He works hard."

My uncle's nod is polite. "How often does he fight?"

"Depends. Yesterday he received an invitation for one in a couple of months and it's a big deal. His opponent is a well known name and the fight will be live streamed on a major platform."

"I'd go to see that. He's good from what I understand."

"Yes, he is." I shut the door to my bedroom.

Uncle Josh hasn't given any sign that he disapproves of my living arrangement. Still, I don't feel like flaunting the fact that I sleep with my boyfriend every night.

This is the first time my uncle has ever seemed timid. He's dressed in street clothes instead of a police uniform and he's hesitant with his words, afraid of saying the wrong thing. He had a bag of my favorite scones in his hand when I answered the door a few minutes ago and he stood there shyly, waiting to be formally invited inside.

"Let's go to the backyard," I suggest when standing around in the hallway quickly becomes awkward.

Uncle Josh follows me wordlessly through the house. I wonder if he told my father he was coming to see me today. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that he didn't.

"Conner's not around either?" he asks as I slide open the door to the patio.

"No, I think he's at some golfing event. He does a lot of charity work in the off season."

"That's good," says Uncle Josh, although he still seems preoccupied. He stands on the patio with his hands in his pockets and takes in the view of the huge, idyllic backyard. "This is what you want, living here?"

“If I didn’t want to be here then I have enough resources to find a different place to live.”

He looks at me with worry in his eyes. “I just meant that you’re always welcome to stay with me. No questions asked. My door is always open for you, Tess.”

“Something you and your brother don’t have in common,” I mutter.

He looks away once more.

“Uncle Josh, I appreciate the thought but I’m exactly where I want to be. I’m staying with Micah for good. He makes me happy.”

Josh nods and stares at the sunlight reflecting off the pool water. “I had my doubts about him at first. He was always a wild kid. But there’s no way to deny that he really loves you.”

“He does. And I love him.”

My uncle turns his head and gives me a wistful smile. “Hard to believe that any man would be worthy of you, Tessie.

“Micah is.”

He nods. Shifts his weight. Returns his gaze to the pool water.

I clear my throat loudly. “Since you’re here, shouldn’t we discuss the obvious?”

He takes a seat in a chair at the patio table. He waits until I do the same before speaking.

“Stuart made a mistake.”

“A mistake would be forgetting my birthday. Not taking a blowtorch to my life and my career.”

“He’s devastated. He really is. That story, all of it, came from Helena. She convinced him that the evidence was undeniable.”

I’d laugh if the reality didn’t hurt so much. “Is *that* what he told you?”

He’s eager to explain now that we’re on this topic. “Think about it. He’s been devoted to you since the day you were born. It doesn’t make sense that he would just cut you off.”

“Sense or not, it’s what happened. My father made it clear he has no use for me. Then he tried to ruin my life.”

He grimaces as if in pain. “Your father loves you.”

“Oh, please. Don’t give me his secondhand excuses. He was already on thin ice after the Dr. Spigato drama. I’ll never believe another word he says, not ever. Where do you *really* stand on all this, Uncle Josh? Tell me so I don’t waste my time. I’m tired of being hurt by my so-called family.”

He exhales with a pained look. “Tess, please believe me when I say I didn’t have any part of what happened with that doctor. I had no reason to think Stuart’s health issues weren’t genuine.”

“So then he manipulated you the same way he manipulated me. I’m sure it’s not the first time. Yet you stay at his side. Why?”

Josh hangs his head and sighs. “Stuart took care of me when I had no one else. He cleaned out his own bank account to send me to college so I wouldn’t have to use student loans. He went above and beyond what any brother should rightfully expect.”

“And you’ve paid him back with your undying loyalty over the years, haven’t you?”

He raises his eyes and something flashes in their depths. “You might say that.”

In a way, I pity my uncle. “It’s not easy, is it? Seeing your hero for what he really is. I know the feeling.”

Josh blinks. “Yeah, I guess you do.” He pushes a hand through his thick, dark hair that still shows no trace of grey. “I’m sorry. I wish I’d been there when you needed me.”

“I didn’t call you,” I remind him.

He gives me a sad smile. “Why not?”

“I thought in the end you’d be Stuart’s ally, not mine.”

He leans forward. “You listen to me now, Tessie Belle. I love my brother. Even knowing what I know about him. But I will always and I mean *always* drop whatever I’m doing when you call. I’m on your side. That’s never going to change.”

Josh isn’t without his flaws. But I can’t call him insincere.

No, when he makes a pledge, then you can be sure he’ll follow through.

“Good to know.”

He leans back in his chair and his relief brings a smile. “It’s the truth.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Absolutely.”

“What was my father’s grudge against Ethan Lyonne?”

“Ethan?” Uncle Josh stares off at the water again. “The two of them were business partners. Friends.”

“I heard you both talking the morning after my viral internet infamy. He told you to let it sink in that I was out with

Ethan's son. There's a reason. What is it?"

Josh drums his fingers on the table, squints into the sunlight. "It's a touchy issue, especially because Ethan isn't here to defend himself. But I'll tell you what I know. Ethan and Matilda didn't have a happy marriage. He didn't come from money, not like her. He was trying to find a way to match her financially so he could fight for custody of Micah. He started gambling. At first it was just small scale sports betting, but then he quickly got caught by the habit and he wound up owing money to some pretty ruthless characters. There was never any proof that his gambling debts were tied to his death, but I've always wondered."

"Is all that really true or just something you heard from my father?"

The news is disquieting in any case. Ethan Lyonne's murder was always assumed to be a random act motivated by robbery.

He nods. "Ethan was also my friend, Tessie. I knew he had a problem."

I wonder if Micah's ever heard this. Maybe not. He doesn't often mention his father. Ethan's life and his brutal death have blended together in Micah's head, tainting his memories, making them uniformly painful. But he thinks about Ethan. I know he does. His sketch of the faceless man at the lake is proof of that.

"Can you forgive me?" Josh asks. "I'd give anything for the chance to be your favorite uncle again."

"You're my *only* uncle," I remind him. But a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

He smiles back.

I don't ask him if he plans to tell my father about this visit. It's going to take a long time before I'm willing to be in the same room as Stuart Ballerini.

In fact, that day might never come.

Josh can't stay long. He jokes that the criminal underbelly of West Emerald never sleeps. Micah told me about the gossip that Josh will get the nod to head the much larger Em City police force.

He leaves after extracting a promise that Micah and I will have dinner with him sometime soon, then lingers just outside the door, looking back in a way that makes me hesitate.

“Something wrong?”

His lips part and his forehead crinkles. But then he flashes a smile. “No. Tell Micah I said hey.”

“Will do. Thanks for the scones.” This time I shut the door.

The house is quiet enough to hear a pin drop once Josh is gone.

I miss working in an office, miss the energy radiated by other people when they're going about their tasks. Still, I laughed when Micah told me of his mother's job offer. Working for Matilda is just not my cup of tea.

Dragging my laptop to the kitchen counter, I flip the lid and snack on one of my scones. I've reached out to a couple of nearby independent realtor firms but haven't heard back yet.

With a sigh, I shut my laptop again and rest my chin on the counter. My restlessness, however, has little to do with recent family turmoil.

I'm not used to having idle time. I don't like it. Dani said if I was interested then she'd be glad to have my help with her

Lita's Angels charity. I should call her today.

The phone buzzes by my hand and it's not Dani.

I answer with a surge of delight that has become very familiar. "How did you know I needed to hear your voice?"

Micah's instantly alert. "What's wrong? Should I come home?"

Home.

I love hearing him use that word. "No need. I can't suck up all your time."

He chuckles. "Baby, you can suck my time and anything else you want to suck."

He knows exactly how to leave me breathless.

"I will. Later. Josh stopped by. He just left."

The shouts of men and the smacks of fists echoes in the background on the other end.

"How'd that go?"

"All right." I stand and stretch. "I think I'll make us all spaghetti for dinner. Does Conner like spaghetti?"

"You kidding? Conner would eat the contents of a landfill."

"Well, I'm more particular. I hope you are too."

"Slightly. Let me know if you need me to stop at the store."

Amazing, how just talking to him about mundane matters like dinner gives me all the butterflies.

We don't just share a bed. We share our lives.

There are moments when my love for him is so consuming it feels like my heart will bust right out of my chest and take flight.

Somewhere in the din and chaos of the gym, his name is hoarsely shouted. Micah roars back that he's busy.

“Sounds like you have to go.”

“No,” he says. “They have to wait.”

“I love you, Micah Lyonne.”

I do.

With everything that I am.

27. Micah

Tonight I'm home later than usual. Lost track of time while pummeling my way through training sets.

There are extra vehicles squatting in the driveway. A gleaming lifted black pickup and a white Tesla. Conner must be entertaining some guests.

The house smells like a bakery and the first thing I see when I walk in through the garage is my cousin getting pawed by two blondes wearing tank tops emblazoned with glittery Greek letters. College girls. A third girl, this one a brunette, mixes drinks at the kitchen island.

“Hey, man.” Conner waves to me with one hand. The other is slung around the shoulders of one of his new friends.

“Finally, you're home.” Behind me, Tess holds a sheet of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

She's a vision in a black slip dress underneath one of my old flannels. I'm a big fan of coming home to the sight of her in my clothes.

“Hey, gorgeous.” I hardly wait for her to set the hot tray down before grabbing her for a kiss.

She smiles against my mouth in between kissing me back. “Missed you all day.”

I curl my arms around her waist. “Missed you too.”

I’m so busy checking out my girl that I almost miss the fact that we’ve got even more company. He hovers by the oven and pouts at the sight of Tess hanging on me, a guy who’s used to getting any girl who catches his eye. Then he notices I’m watching and pastes on a smile.

“You’re Micah.” He holds out a hand. “Heard a lot about you.”

I don’t shake his hand because my arms are around Tess and I’m not moving them. “Didn’t catch your name.”

I know who he is. I’m just being a jerk. He’s Conner’s teammate, Blake Brinkowski, the game’s best linebacker. He stars in tire commercials and runs some animal rescue charity, a pro sports version of a saint.

And he’s polite too. “I’m Blake.” He pulls his hand back when he realizes I’m not going to cooperate. “It’s good to finally meet you. Conner talks about you all the time.”

“What did I do?” Conner looks up from his pile of hot girls.

Tess squeezes me around the waist. “You’ve been bragging on our boy.”

“Sure, Micah’s the shit.” Conner springs to his feet. “Do we have cookies yet?”

Tess glances at the double wall oven. “Yes. In fact, the second batch is about to burn.”

“I’ll get it.” Blake flashes a hero grin and stuffs his big hand into an oven mitt to rescue the cookie sheet.

Tess grabs a spatula and transfers the cookies to a cooling rack while Conner and the girls gather around.

“Grab a plate,” Tess says. “They’re best when they are still hot. There’s milk in the fridge for anyone who’s into tradition. And no, I will never share my secret ingredient so you’ll just have to wonder about it forever.”

She says this with a charming smile and stands back to allow the hungry horde to seize cookies.

“Tessie, you’re the best roommate ever.” Conner holds four cookies in each hand and returns to the couch.

“These are SO good,” says one of the girls.

“SO good,” agrees her friend with a moan.

“AMAZINGLY good,” says Girl #3 and feeds one to Conner before claiming a seat in his lap.

Not everyone drifts to the living room.

Blake is still hanging out in the kitchen. Boy Scout that he is, he pours himself a glass of milk and selects two cookies. “Even my mom can’t make cookies from scratch this fast. Tess, I have a feeling there’s nothing you can’t do.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t know about that. Baking is my only kitchen talent.”

But this Blake asshole is standing there gazing at my girlfriend like she’s the answer to his prayers.

I understand his thinking. Tess is not only beautiful but she’s witty and whip smart. She’s not going to just sit on the couch and giggle idiotically like Conner’s new gal pals.

She’s also mine. *MINE!*

I’ve decided I’m in the mood for a beer and I throw open the fridge door. Blake gets accidentally smacked in the arm. His fault for standing too close while eyeing my girlfriend.

He throws me a hard look.

I stare back at him, twist open the beer bottle and let the cap drop on his shoe.

In a silent standoff, I hold his eye while pouring the beer down my throat. He looks away first.

I win.

Tess is oblivious. “You haven’t had a cookie yet.” She stuffs a warm cookie in my mouth. I grab her wrist and slowly lick a spot of melted chocolate from her fingers.

She watches my tongue and practically pants as her cheeks turn pink. Then she takes a closer look at my face and grows concerned.

Shit, I forgot about the shiner already.

Her gentle fingertips move to my cheek. “Bad sparring match today?”

No. This afternoon I took an elbow to the left eye when I broke up a grudge match between two of the boys. Elijah was getting upset that they were making such a mess. Then we found it was a fight over a woman and he got so annoyed he booted them out for a week. I’ve already iced the bruise and the swelling is minimal.

Anyway, she knows this is nothing as far as my battle injuries go.

And not all of them come from the ring.

Like what happened six months ago when I was leaving the gym late and ran into a situation. One of the weaker guys who hangs around the gym, always trying to acquire skills he’ll never have, was in the middle of getting jumped by two

masked fuckers trying to snatch his phone. I ran right into the action, broke it up with ease. The assailants took off running.

Still high on adrenaline, I sprinted after them, catching up within a block. The first one was leveled with one hook to the jaw but the other was scrappier and started swinging a knife around. Before I swept his legs out from underneath him and pounded his face, the blade ripped a slice through my right forearm. Needed twenty stitches to close the cut, which left a scar.

Tess was mildly horrified when she heard that story. “But *why* did you chase them?”

Why *wouldn't* I chase them?

They got exactly what they deserved. And I'm no worse for it. The scar is hidden under my ink.

Right now Tess is still gazing up at me with concern. She gets too upset by the idea of me getting hurt.

“Just the usual,” I tell her and drain the rest of my beer.

She withdraws her hand but still looks worried.

I can't let her be worried.

The empty beer bottle gets plunked down on the counter and I tip her chin up. She smiles in anticipation of the kiss.

Tess knows I don't hold back and I'm not starting now. I kiss her like I'm starving for her, which I am. Always. She hooks her arms over my shoulders and yields, pressing her body close.

The rest of the world falls away whenever we kiss. Dimly, I hear Conner finishing a joke as the girls shriek with laughter, but it may as well be noise on the television for all that I'm paying attention.

Tess grins up at me and rubs her hand over my ass. “Are you tired?”

Fuck no. Neither is she. “Exhausted. We should go to bed.”

“Yes, we should.” She’s already pulling on my arm. “Good night! So nice meeting you girls. Thanks for hanging out tonight and don’t let Conner eat all the cookies.”

“Bye Tess!” They all wave at her like she’s their long lost best friend.

She forgets to say goodbye to Blake. He’s left behind in the kitchen all by himself.

How sad.

Maybe one of the college girls will take a liking to him.

Tess waits until we’re at our bedroom door before she nudges me. “You’re so cute when you get possessive.”

I flip on the wall light switch. “No idea what you mean.”

She shuts the door and slips the flannel off her shoulders. “Please. You practically pissed a ring around me to mark your territory.”

Good thing I’m still wearing gym shorts. Makes it easy to drop them to the floor in one second flat.

I wrap my hand around my swollen cock. “I can make that happen if you’re into it.”

She watches as I stroke myself. Presses a finger to her lower lip. Then pulls her dress over her head.

“Another time.”

“You made a mistake,” I tell her as I advance.

She props her hands on her hips. “What *mistake*?”

I'll just have to show her. "You forgot to get rid of these." I grip the fabric of her black panties. "Now they'll have to be destroyed."

Tess tries to fight a smile. "If you had your way I'd have no panties left."

"Damn right." I tear through those freaking things like they're paper.

She laughs and pulls me to the bed. "I expect to be compensated."

I shove her knees apart, *far* apart. "And here's your payment."

My cock wastes no time sliding home and Tess moans so loudly that Conner and Friends can likely hear her.

Excellent.

Let everyone in the house, in the zip code, *in the fucking country* know that she's all mine.

I didn't forget a condom, not exactly. I just didn't put one on. The feel of my bare cock inside her is addictive. She'll tell me what she wants me to do next.

"I've been waiting for you all day." She locks her legs around my waist. "So you better fuck me like you mean it."

No need to say it twice.

If she wants hard and rough, I'll give her hard and rough.

The headboard bangs against the wall with each graphic thrust. If the rest of the house hadn't heard us before they sure as shit hear us now.

"That's it, that's fucking *it*." She writhes underneath me, giving into the rhythm and letting it sweep her away. She digs

her fingers into my arms and carries on like a porn star.

Fuck, I'm lucky.

She's still clenching and gasping as she slides down the pleasure curve when her eyes flip open.

This is how I always want to see her; wild-haired and messy and flushed from the side effects of getting her pussy rocked.

Then she smiles and says something that wrecks me to the core.

"You can come anywhere you want tonight."

Jesus. The possibilities...

But I'm about five seconds away from the inevitable.

Pulling out, I slide up on my knees and rub my cock on her tits. There's not much time to enjoy the filthy significance of coming all over her nipples before it's actually happening and I'm painting her chest in hot bursts as she watches the show.

But I'm not finished.

Tess stares as I swipe a finger through the thickest line of my own cum. She licks her lips, already anticipating the dirty move I'm about to make.

Too bad I have a different one in mind.

Shifting position, I part her legs and kneel between them. Then I watch her face as I slip my soaked finger inside of her.

Her eyes widen. "Oh, god. Micah. FUCK."

I'm inside her to the second knuckle now and she clenches, arching her back, bearing down on my finger.

“That’s right, baby.” I roll my finger and use her pussy as a crude canvas. “I’m deep inside you and I’m fucking staying there.”

She tries to squeak out a word and can’t. Spasms shake her and a wave of new wetness coats my hand, making me smile.

This never gets old, seeing her laid out and at my mercy.

We’re not this risky regularly and I know we shouldn’t do it at all.

She knows that too.

Maybe that’s why we both get off on it so much.

There’s something unspeakably primal about putting my mark on her this way. It’s just this side of slinging her over my prehistoric shoulder and dragging her to my stone cave.

“I love you, Tessie.” I never forget to tell her this.

She’s still quivering but her brown eyes are open and gazing at me with so much vulnerable trust that my chest crunches. “I love you too, my filthy prince.”

Tess enjoys being held after sex and I’m always on the job. Laying on my side, I gather her close and grab a blanket, knowing she gets cold easily.

She sighs with happiness and slings an arm over my chest. I tuck the blanket around her body and she snuggles as close as possible.

“Is there a date set for your big fight?”

“Six weeks from tomorrow.” I tickle the back of her neck and feel her shiver. “How do you feel about New York?”

“It’s big. It’s loud. Why?”

“Elijah’s been in touch with one of his contacts there. They’re looking for some gaps to fill this summer.”

“In New York?” She sits up on one elbow and peers at me. “How long would you need to be gone?”

I think I might have overstepped because now she looks anxious. I pull her back to me and kiss her. “Hey, I wouldn’t be going anywhere without you. Just because something comes up doesn’t mean I have to take it.”

Tess checks out the bruises on my face and worries at her lip as she touches my cheek. “Do you like fighting?”

Strange question. “If I didn’t like it then I wouldn’t do it.”

She nods but still looks troubled. I’m not sure where this is going. She’s aware that there’s a shelf life attached to this career. It’s not something I’ll be doing twenty years from now, but I don’t think about what’s going to happen in twenty years so that doesn’t bother me.

“I just worry about you,” she says and lays her cheek over my heart.

I’d like to steer her away from this heavy cloud. “How was your day?”

“Good.” She lifts her head and sounds more animated. “Had a video conference with the Woodson Real Estate folks. I’m starting there next Monday. The office is just ten minutes from here. I don’t need to actually be at the office every day but I like the idea of having a base and a team.”

“They’re fortunate to have you.”

“Only *you* really have me.” She kisses my lips.

Won’t take long for me to get hard again lying beside her naked body.

I wrap my arms around her and haul her on top of me so I can feel more of her skin. “So what’s that secret ingredient you put in the cookies?”

She cracks up. “Nothing. The secret ingredient is *saying* there’s a secret ingredient. The recipe comes from the back of the chip bag. I just like to keep people guessing.”

This girl.

She lights up every corner of my heart.

Even the darkest places that no one else has ever been able to touch.

28. Tess

There's no easy way to maintain your dignity while wearing a paper gown and watching your legs swing from the edge of the exam table, miles from the green tile floor.

No more than ten minutes have elapsed. Yet I feel as if I've been waiting here for hours while a cup of my urine hangs out on the counter.

Just when I'm about to hop off the table to retrieve my phone so I can have something to look at other than a cup of piss, the door swings open.

Dr. Redondo strolls in with a tablet in her hand and a friendly smile on her lips.

"Hello, Tess. Good to see you again."

I force my legs to quit swinging. "Better late than never, right? I know I was due for my annual six months ago but I'm here now."

She nods with a smile and scrolls through her tablet with one finger. She glances at the cup on the counter. The nurse had dipped a standard test strip and left it across the rim.

Since the doctor isn't saying anything, I might as well fill the silence.

“For starters, I’d like to discuss birth control options while I’m here. The pill is definitely not for me. I’m sure it’s somewhere in your notes that I tried taking it years ago and suffered a bad reaction. Worst migraines ever.”

She checks her tablet again. Raises her eyes, tucks the tablet under one arm, and doesn’t beat around the bush.

“Tess, your pregnancy test is positive.”

“That’s impossible.” I have no idea where those automatic words came from.

I know they aren’t true.

Of course it’s possible.

Dr. Redondo waits for me to come to grips with reality.

“But I’ve had my period,” I explain. “I’m not even late.”

“You indicated on your check in paperwork that your last period began twenty-two days ago.”

“That’s right.”

I’m not wrong about the date. I remember how I brought a heating pad to bed to ease the cramping. Micah had a better idea, helping me find relief with some manual stimulation. His tactic worked. After two delicious orgasms I drifted off to sleep and didn’t wake up until the squawk of my morning phone alarm.

“Did it seem like a normal period?”

“Yes. Well, no. Lighter than usual. Only lasted two days.”

She nods as if unsurprised. “It’s common to mistake implantation pain and light bleeding for a period.”

I clutch the spongy edge of the exam table. Otherwise, I might fall off. “What are the chances the test is wrong?”

But I know it's not wrong.

I just...*know*.

And what right do I have to be stunned?

DUH, Tessie.

Unprotected sex has consequences.

Dr. Redondo takes pity on me and offers an immediate ultrasound. This way I can see the evidence for myself and be sure.

But I'm sure even before I lie on a table in a dim room and watch blurred images roll across the screen.

"There it is." The technician points to a shape that resembles a kidney bean.

I almost lose the ability to breathe. "Holy shit."

I'm not expecting to feel joy and yet I do. Instant and uncompromising.

Having a child was always a desirable but very distant wish. The abrupt ache of longing as I watch the shape wiggle on the screen is staggering.

Out of nowhere, I can see myself as a mother and want it desperately. When I imagine holding a tiny, unique human that's half me and half Micah I want to weep with joy.

The ultrasound tech notices my reaction and hands me a tissue box. "Do you need a minute alone?"

"No." I pluck a tissue out in case I need to dab at my eyes. "No, I'm fine."

Yet I'm still caught in a surreal daze by the time I leave the office. I wander to the parking lot where I sit in my car and urge my brain to catch up with my heart.

I'm pregnant with Micah's baby.

We were careless and completely aware that we were being careless.

But just because I'm happy about the consequences doesn't mean he'll be happy too.

Now that my immediate euphoria is beginning to fade, there's an acid aftertaste of uneasiness.

Micah is impulsive, unpredictable. Qualities I love about him. Yet right now I'd sacrifice a whole lot to have some idea how he'll react to the news.

Sucking my lower lip through my teeth, I check the time. He'll be at the gym right now. Between training for his big fight in a couple of weeks and helping his boss manage the gym, Micah warned that he likely wouldn't be home before ten tonight.

No, I can't wait that long.

I need him *now*.

I need to feel his arms around me and know that no matter what, we're in this together.

The traffic is light heading to the east side and as I roll through Micah's old neighborhood, I'm troubled by the fact that I can't predict what he'll say. No matter how hard I try, the script in my head just won't write itself.

Me: I love you so much. And by the way, I'm pregnant.

Micah:

"Shit," I mutter to my steering wheel.

The sudden bubble of queasiness might be due to my new hormones or from angst. In any case, I dig through my purse

with one hand and pop a stick of spearmint gum in my mouth before swinging into the cracked asphalt parking strip in front of the sex shop.

The walking dildo is outside today. His mouth splits in a joyous, creepy smile and he waves as if we're old friends.

I don't wave back or look his way again.

Elijah is behind the front desk when I step into Golden Wings. He winks at the sight of me. "Hey, sweetheart."

Elijah is wonderful when you get to know him, and he's brimming with fascinating stories of the old school scrappy fighting world. I thought he'd refuse when I invited him over for dinner a couple of weeks ago but he accepted with delight. It's clear he thinks very highly of Micah and for that he receives all my goodwill.

Any other time I'd be happy to stand around and enjoy a leisurely chat. "Is it all right if I go in?"

He nods but rises from the desk. "Yeah, I'll go with you."

Understandable. That dickhead who confronted me the first time I visited is likely to be around. Micah remains wary of Sean Halligan but insists they're cool with each other and are back to being sparring partners.

It never fails to amaze me how men can do that; brawl like animals and then shake hands.

Still, I'd rather not encounter the guy on my own if it can be avoided.

Elijah walks with a limp yet always manages to move fast. The night he visited for dinner he cheerfully informed us that his doctors recommend a foot amputation due to the years of damage caused by his diabetes. He said they could haggle over

which parts of him to cut off after he quits breathing for good. Until then, everything will be staying in its original package, thank you very much.

The gym is a dim gladiator battleground of sweat, violent collisions and vintage heavy metal music. This is Micah's favorite place, where he gains a sense of belonging that eludes him elsewhere.

When I spot him, my breath catches.

Bare chested, a monument of ink and sculpted muscles, he's like an Olympian god, too perfect to be real. His shorts hang low on his hips, showcasing ridges of a flawless pelvic V that I have a habit of running my tongue over.

He stands casually between a pair of hanging punching bags, his focus on the two men battling it out within the ropes of the nearest ring. Micah smacks his hands together with approval when one of them knocks the other to the mat. Another man walks by and barks out a comment that inspires Micah to crack up laughing.

As always, the sight of his smile electrifies my soul.

Elijah bellows with a wave. "LYONNE!"

Micah spots me and after a flash of surprise his grin returns. But before he moves, he conducts a rapid scan of the room. His eyes zero in on Sean Halligan, who is currently in a far corner trying to kick the stuffing out of a punching bag. Halligan doesn't even look up.

Micah, satisfied that no threats are imminent, rips his gloves off and closes the distance between us at record speed. Showing up here with no warning isn't something I've done since that first visit. Not because he's told me not to but

because this place is both out of my way and out of my league; a part of him that doesn't have much to do with me.

I see the question in his eyes and give him the answer before he can ask.

“Nothing is wrong.”

Micah nods but his initial smile has dropped off. He glances at Halligan again even though Halligan is paying no attention to us. Tension now coils through his sweaty muscles, his street instincts launching into protective mode.

Being here right now is a mistake. I'm intruding on his private world and I'm about to make a life altering broadcast.

But Micah captures my waist with a possessive arm and I press my body to his, not caring that he's all sweaty.

“I'll leave you to it.” Elijah smacks Micah's arm and limps down a corridor.

Micah peers down at me with a mix of curiosity and concern. “What's going on?”

He knows me too well. And I'm rotten at hiding my feelings.

I hug him. “Will you walk me to my car?”

“Couldn't stop me.”

The second we step outside into the sunshine my nerves start firing on every cylinder.

The walk to my car is short and silent. He's waiting for an explanation but I can sense he's distracted.

I hang on him with no shame, forever hungry for his touch. “Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you when you're in the middle of training.”

“You can interrupt me anytime.” He slides his hand up and massages the back of my neck. “And don’t apologize for it.”

“Okay, I’m not sorry at all.”

“That’s better.” He tickles the hollow at the back of my neck.

The sex shop mascot is cemented to the same spot. He looks a little glum but perks up when he sees us and starts to dance.

Micah spares him a glance and snorts before turning me around so we’re face to face. “You sure everything is fine?”

“Yes. I was just missing you and wanted to give you something.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“This.” It’s always a stretch to throw my arms around his neck and pull him down to my level.

He comes willingly, fastening his mouth to mine with the same ravenous heat that rules every time we touch. Even on a day that has sent my emotions spiraling in unexpected directions, my response to him is sensual and instant.

I’ll never stop wanting him, never escape this craving. Micah Lyonne is my obsession for life.

Micah’s never shy about putting his hands on me no matter where we are and he’s not shy now, feeling my hips, cupping my ass, bending away from my mouth to map kisses up and down my neck before lifting me up.

I hold him tight as my feet leave the ground. “Micah, I love you so much.”

He pauses and sets me down, pressing his forehead to mine. “I love you too, baby.”

The next words are stuck in my throat. They want to fly out but I hold them back.

A more practical argument is beginning to win out over impulse.

Hearing news of this magnitude is going to throw off his training routine. The upcoming fight is a big deal to him. The event will be live streamed on a channel that boasts five million subscribers. His opponent is tough and Micah is hell bent on winning.

Messing with his head right now will only jeopardize his goal.

Anyway, two weeks is no big deal.

For crying out loud, I won't even be showing yet.

“Tessie?” He sifts his fingers through my long hair, catching my mood shift. “Something's up. Tell me.”

I inhale deeply, exhale slowly, scattering the threat of emotion. “It's really nothing. I was just having a bad moment and needed to see you.”

He sweeps his lips across mine, the tenderest of kisses. “Is the bad moment over?”

I'm sure he thinks I'm still fretting over my father's rejection. In truth, I haven't thought about Stuart Ballerini at all today.

“Thanks to you.” I give him one more lingering kiss, and then a smile before I open my car door. “Go kick ass. I'll see you at home.”

I see him in the rearview mirror, watching me drive down the street. I wonder if I've just made a mistake, if I should have found the courage to cough up the words right now.

Micah doesn't make elaborate plans for the future, or really think too far out past his next fight.

I understand what I've signed up for with him and I regret nothing.

But with Micah, there will always be another fight ahead. Always.

29. Micah

They call this place The Catacombs, which makes little sense. It's not nearly that interesting or exotic.

On the far edge of the east side, the industrial site used to be a factory compound, complete with a warren of buildings and dilapidated worker housing. A few years back someone got the bright idea to buy it for peanuts and turn it into an entertainment venue. Now surrounded by high metal fences and drizzled with bad graffiti that never gets scrubbed off, I suppose it has kind of a post apocalyptic charm.

I have no clue what this, the largest of the intact structures, used to be for and I don't care. It's been hollowed out and repurposed as a fight arena.

Mine isn't the only fight tonight but it is the last. The seats are filled to capacity. In fact, I'd say they're overcapacity. It wouldn't shock me if the Em City fire department storms the scene and declares it a hazard.

The knowledge that Tess is out there in the crowd makes me uneasy. Lights flash, camera crews jostle for a good position and the raucous audience bays for blood.

Tess could have comfortably watched the live stream at home but she was hurt when I tried to push this idea. At least I can breathe a little easier knowing Conner and Gage are both

sitting with her. Even Tess's uncle is here in some unofficial police role. She's safe.

So why does an inexplicable icy sensation keep inching up the back of my neck each time I scan the audience?

Over the last week it's occurred to me that I should have turned this fight down. I've been spending far too much time at the gym, rolling through the front door long after dark, obsessed with the next chance to beat another man until he falls.

Tess hasn't breathed a word of complaint. Yet she's been unusually quiet.

I've been neglecting her and I'm sincerely fucking pissed at myself for that. I chose a selfish option when I should have stayed a hundred percent focused on her at a time when she needed me.

I'll do better, Tessie.

Today I told Elijah I'm not accepting anymore fight invitations for the time being. He lifted both eyebrows in surprise but has known me long enough to understand I don't share details unless I feel like it.

After the fight I'll tell Tess. She needs to hear that I'm completely dedicated to her. Nothing in the world is more important.

"Gentlemen," says the ref, motioning to us from opposite corners, "bring it in."

I know all about my opponent. Teal Lazor is on the edge of retirement. But anyone who assumes he'll be easy to beat is mistaken. A man with something to prove on his way out is a man not to be taken lightly.

“War Lion!” Two drunk girls scream for me in the front row. One flashes her tits and the cheers become deafening.

All I do is look away.

The nickname is one I gave to myself years ago, back when I was fresh out of lockup, compelled by fury and outrage. Clever, I thought at the time. A play on my last name. Lions don’t apologize when they crush bones and draw blood. No one expects them to.

Yeah, I was ready for a war in those days. It’s a drive that clings stubbornly, even now.

But I have the ability to mute it when I want to.

And I do want to. For the sake of the girl I love.

“Touch gloves, if you wish,” says the ref and backs away.

Lazor shows his back rather than make the sportsmanship gesture. Doesn’t bother me a bit.

My eyes scan the audience one final time.

I hope she sees this and understands it’s her I’m searching for.

The buzzer sounds. It’ll be three rounds at five minutes apiece.

I’m ready.

Lazor charges and he’s got skills. I knew that already thanks to the hours spent watching footage from past fights.

I never keep an eye on the clock. Minutes are irrelevant. There’s only the next kick, the next pivot, the next punch.

When I’m clocked on the chin it’s a solid hit and I stumble back, momentarily stunned. Lazor seizes the chance to rain down blows on my ribs.

However, he has his weaknesses and I know what they are. Once he starts hitting he's got tunnel vision, paying no mind to peripheral threats. He's totally stunned when my foot smacks into the side of his head.

He bleeds first, somewhere in the middle of the second round. It drips down the side of his face like gruesome paint.

Yet blood never tells the whole story. It's possible to make the other guy turn the mat red with a dozen cuts and still lose.

I don't plan to lose. Not with Tess watching.

Lazor is tiring, his swings becoming lazy. He doesn't have a potent kick. If he can't win with fist jabs then he's in trouble.

He lands a blow to my right cheek and I feel a trickle of blood when my skin splits open. It was a lucky shot, the last one he'll get.

Next he attempts a takedown move, trying to wrestle me down. I see this for what it is; an act of desperation. Still, he's probably surprised when it backfires.

I allow Lazor to think he's got a chance to take me to the mat. Then I swing my arm around, crack the hell out of his head and slam him to the ground.

Buzzer.

Fight over.

Lights and howls from the crowd.

Everyone knows that ending scene from the old movie *Rocky*, where the guy is snorting out his blood, too fucked up to even see straight, while microphones get shoved in his face. All he does is roar out the name of the girl he loves, over and over.

I feel a serious kinship with that dude right now.

Whether in victory or defeat, all I want is Tess.

Elijah, always ringside for local fights, wades through the action and smacks my back in appreciation while I rub the blood from my face with a towel.

“Good show,” says a man in black suit who I’ve never laid eyes on before. His shock of blonde, almost white, hair is startling and he jerks a thumb. “You’ll need to hang around for a couple of interviews.”

“Yeah, who the fuck says?” My ears are ringing and I’m more than ready to find Tess and leave this scene behind.

The man shrugs off my attitude. “The contract you signed for this fight. You get paid when all obligations are squared away.”

Elijah steps in to smooth things over, his tone laced with urgency. “Micah, you haven’t met Estes Marchenko.”

Marchenko. Shit.

Not at all excited to cap off the night by dealing with a member of Haven’s demented crime lord family.

The man scratches at his jaw, showing off inked fingers loaded with silver rings. “The press interviews are required. Part of our agreement with the streaming platform.” He notes my lack of interest, becomes amused. “I’ll tell you a secret. As of midnight, we own this place. Got to turn a profit. You understand. Be more talkative for the cameras.”

He walks away without a second glance.

Elijah watches to ensure he’s gone before leaning in. “You might want to consider staying off his bad side.”

He doesn't issue such warnings lightly. But I'm not enough of a fool to collect enemies like the Marchenkos. I'll play along with their interviews or whatever if that gets me out of here and off their nutty radar.

“Micah!”

Even surrounded by noise I can instantly pick out her voice. I jump to my feet, searching the sea of heads, most of them moving toward the exits.

Conner is easy to spot. He stands taller than most other men, his light hair a crown under the harsh light. Fans shout his name and he waves to them with a smile.

Gage is also visible, though unsmiling and tensely alert to his surroundings.

Finally, the crowd thins enough so I can see Tess safely being escorted between my two cousins.

She stops walking and gives me one of her radiant smiles, lighting up my heart.

Hopping out of the ring in a blink, I sprint over and grab her in my arms, even though I'm all sweaty and gross.

Tess doesn't mind. She kisses me, examines my face with care and then presses her cheek to my chest.

“You were magnificent.” She clings to me tightly.

There are so many things I want to say to her, right here and now.

I'll have to wait. I'm being tapped on the shoulder by some blonde woman in a red blazer. She crisply informs me that I'll be the last interview and I ought to go wait on the other side of the ring for my name to be called.

Tess looks up at me. “I guess we can’t leave yet?”

I kiss her face. “Soon.”

She smiles. “Hurry. I want to take you home.”

What a pain in the ass to stand around in my shorts and listen to other fighters mumble their way through answers to silly questions. Even the losers don’t escape this fate and Lazor in particular grits his teeth as his blood dries on his swollen face. It’s embarrassing when he’s asked to describe what he was thinking the moment he realized he’d lost the final fight of his career.

While I’m waiting for my turn at the gauntlet, I keep an eye on Tess. Gage and Conner aren’t going to let her out of their sight and knowing Gage, it’s a safe bet that he’s in violation of the venue’s ‘no firearms’ policy. She’s perfectly safe.

Their group grows when Elijah stops by for a chat. Josh Ballerini joins them. He’s in uniform tonight so I guess he wanted to make a show of being the law enforcement god. It’s now public knowledge that he’ll be receiving the honor of top cop in Emerald City.

The room has mostly emptied out by the time I get my chance to supply lame answers to the microphone. I’m not risking any Marchenko-style trouble right now so I swallow my irritation and try to be less of a prick.

When I’m done, there are very few people remaining. Elijah is gone but Josh Ballerini stands beside his niece and extends his hand.

“Micah, hell of a fight.”

Tess is clearly pleased to see me shaking hands with her uncle. I’m still not quite sure what to think of the guy but he’s

important to her so I'll be nice.

At least the mayor knew better than to show his face here. He's been on a quest to slither back into Tess's life. So far she's ignored him. I hope she keeps doing that.

Josh can't stick around because he's got some cop shit to take care of. Once he's gone I nod to Gage.

"Are you taking off too? I'm sure Dani's waiting." The reason she's not here tonight is because she was looking after Charlotte. Matilda and Henley had plans.

He takes stock of the nearly empty room. "I can hang around a little while longer."

"Go home to your wife," Tess tells him. "Remind her that she's having lunch with me tomorrow."

Conner flexes. "I'm more of an ideal bodyguard anyway."

Gage looks at me and I shrug.

"I just need a quick shower. We'll be out of here in ten minutes. Go home."

He thinks about it, then finally nods. "All right, I'll talk to you clowns tomorrow."

I slip my arm around Tess's shoulders. "Why don't the two of you follow him?"

"Without you?"

"I needed to be here early, remember? I've got my car." I can't put my finger on why, but I'm on edge. "Go on, you'll barely beat me home. I'm just going to jump in the shower."

Tess gives me one of her stubborn looks. "We're waiting for you. Right, Conner?"

He grins at me. "You heard the lady. We'll wait."

I don't like this answer. "Stay right here."

He rolls his eyes. "As opposed to what, taking a sudden detour to Disneyland?"

I'm having second thoughts about chasing Gage off. On the surface, there's nothing alarming happening. The audience is gone. The cleaning staff is at work. All I need to do is rinse off and grab my shit.

When I reach the locker room I find Lazor. His hair still drips from a shower and he's stuffing gear into a duffel bag. He looks up, glares, and jerks the zipper of his bag closed.

Just a sore loser. Not uncommon.

I don't acknowledge him.

My stuff awaits in the locker, right where I left it. Elsewhere in the locker room there are muffled voices, the squeak of shoes on tile. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Less than five minutes have elapsed when I exit the shower and listen for echoes. They are more distant now. It's possible I'm the last one in here.

My bag is still on a bench within arm's reach of the shower. I barely towel off before throwing on my clothes in haste.

"Hell of a fight."

I know the voice. My tension is automatic but I keep my voice neutral.

"Halligan, didn't know you were here."

He leans against a row of lockers, arms crossed, looking casual. His manner isn't menacing in the slightest. That doesn't mean I'm in the mood for a chat.

“Elijah needs you,” he says.

“Didn’t he leave?”

“No, he’s having chest pains.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, I tried to get him to go to the hospital but he says he’ll only go if you take him. You know you’re his favorite.”

I ignore the dig. “Where is he?”

Halligan sighs. “He complained that people were staring at him. The old corporate office is in the building next door and it was unlocked. I took him there so he could sit down.”

“I’ll take care of him.” I sling my bag over my shoulder.

He pushes away from the lockers. “Need any help?”

“Nah.” I pause and jerk my chin in his direction. “Thanks for looking out for him.”

Halligan doesn’t blink. He doesn’t smile either. “Sure.”

I’m halfway to the locker room exit when it crosses my mind to ask if anyone else is with Elijah right now. When I turn around, Halligan is gone.

The cleaning crew must work at lightning speed. When I return to the arena the only crew in sight are a couple of men finishing a sweep of the back row.

This setting has an odd vibe even when it’s full of people. When it’s nearly empty it becomes downright spooky.

Conner and Tess have followed orders. They are right where I left them.

Tess is alarmed when she hears about Elijah and wants to call an ambulance. I shake my head, knowing how he hates

that sort of fuss. I'll take him to the hospital myself.

However, it seems I can't stop Conner and Tess from tagging along to the building next door. The exterior floodlights have already been switched off and it's dark as a tomb outside. I'm forced to halt and squint to get my bearings.

Hard to believe that an hour ago this scene was crawling with people. Now it's empty.

Statistically, it's wiser to be somewhere without people as opposed to somewhere with people.

Tell that to my gut, which is has solidified into a heavy knot of dread.

Reaching in my bag, I hunt for my phone to call Elijah and let him know I'm on the way. I could have sworn it was tucked inside the interior pocket. It must have fallen out and sunk to the bottom of the bag. Or maybe Halligan fucking stole it.

Surrounding us is a city-within-a-city. The hulking shapes of deserted structures are scarcely visible beneath the half moon and I haven't been here often enough to memorize the layout. The dirt parking lot is a ten minute walk beyond the fences. With all this in mind, I wouldn't feel comfortable sending Tess and Conner off alone.

"Stick close to me." I keep my hand on Tess to get my point across.

"Is that it?" She points to a modest two story building.

I recall seeing the thing in the daylight. It's composed of red brick and is in slightly better shape than most of the other buildings. I wonder what the hell the Marchenkos would want with a place like this. Seems like a money pit.

The door is a challenge to locate in the dark, even with the flashlight from Tess's phone. I'm sure I hear footsteps but when I strain to listen more closely there's nothing but silence.

The ding of an incoming message comes from Conner's phone. "It's Gage, wanting to know if we've left yet." He presses the call button and lifts the phone to his ear. "We're still here. Micah's pal Elijah has a medical emergency. No, we're walking into some other building."

I shout into the open door. "Elijah?"

Tess touches my arm. "Why would he be sitting here in the dark?"

Good question.

Conner still has the phone to his ear. "There's got to be a light switch in here somewhere." He moves past us and feels along the wall.

"Con, wait." I surge inside to grab him, keeping Tess under my arm.

It's blinding, the way the lights blast on with no warning. Tess is right beside me. Conner hasn't put his phone down and he holds up his other hand.

"I didn't do it," he says.

"El?" I call. "Elijah?"

There's no furniture in here. There's no Elijah either. It's just a big, empty room. Above us, the second floor hallway is open to below, secured by a metal railing. The blank doorways lining the upper hallway aren't notable, not until I see shadows moving within them.

"Fuck." I push Tess behind me. There are no weapons in my bag. Nothing that would be of any use. *Nothing.*

When did I become such a damn idiot?

The door we walked through slams shut.

Conner moves closer to us and lowers the phone. His eyes cut to me. He knows. We're in deep shit.

Remains to be seen how deep.

They show themselves one by one.

There are five of them; three now lined up along the second floor railing and two down here, one behind us, one in front of us, presumably covering the exits. Their identities are a mystery. They all wear identical skull masks.

No matter who they are or what they're after, they'll never get their hands on Tess as long as I'm still breathing.

The man in the middle of the upstairs pack is the one to speak. "Shouldn't have brought your friends, Lyonne. Now they'll get to pay for your debts too."

He's elbowed by the man on his left, who points to Tess and shakes his head, not pleased, not expecting to see a woman involved.

The leader hisses out a curse that makes the protester shrink back. Dissent in the ranks of your enemy is always good. If they wanted me dead they would have shot me. They want something else.

And it's not a coincidence that the man who sent me here was the one I have a sketchy history with.

"I know that one of you is Halligan. Don't be a fucking coward, Sean. Step up."

Nothing. Five impassive skull faces leer back at me.

My first impulse would be to snarl out a blue streak of threats and curses. But right now Tess's life is on the line. And Conner's. I need to bargain.

“Let them go. This is the goddamn quarterback for the Cyclones and the daughter of the Emerald City mayor. Imagine the hell that'll rain down on your fucking heads if you touch either one of them.”

“Huh. Nice of you to think of our well being but we'll take our chances.” The leader leaves the upstairs group and casually walks toward a spiral staircase. He drags something behind him, letting it intentionally scrape along the ground. “Cute girl you've got there. We'll enjoy having some fun with her. We'll even let you watch.”

Tess grips my shirt in fear. Conner inhales sharply and jostles my shoulder. Between the two of us, we can take five men.

We can.

We *have* to.

The leader pauses at the top of the stairs and raises a long machete in the air above his head. “Does this look familiar, Lyonne?”

Yes. Yes, it does.

The first time I saw a tool like that was when it was used to hack up my father.

30. Tess

I've been frightened before.
Who hasn't?

This is different, a visceral taste of terror from the threat of physical danger.

I'm afraid for me. For Micah. For Conner.

And for the tiny life inside my belly that only I know about.

I had planned to tell him tonight. At home, after the fight.

Micah and Conner stand shoulder to shoulder, shielding me as best they can.

Separately, they are dauntingly powerful.

Together, they are practically impenetrable.

"I'm with you," Conner mutters to his cousin. He passes his phone back to me. The call to Gage is still connected.

"Before they get down here," Micah hisses back.

I understand. He plans to make a move before the three men on the second floor run down the stairs.

"Tess." He reaches back and grips my hand. "Stay against the wall. Run if you see the chance."

I'm too terrified to do anything but squeeze his hand. My mouth is dry and I can't breathe.

"Break," growls Micah. He pivots and seizes the man blocking the door we came through.

As ordered, I flatten my back against the wall.

Conner charges across the room and barrels right into the man guarding the opposite door.

Micah has a head start and disposes of his opponent first, picking the guy up and slamming him into the floor like a ragdoll.

The man with the machete curses and starts down the stairs, followed by his buddies. They are hampered by the fact that the staircase is metal and rickety. It wobbles under their weight, sending them scampering back to the top. The sight would be comical if I wasn't scared out of my wits.

"Come on, baby." Micah grabs my hand, pulling me toward the opposite door in the hopes we can escape before the three maniacs on the second floor get their bearings.

Meanwhile, Conner has tackled his opponent into submission, punching him for good measure when he's down.

"Conner!" Micah pushes the door open and hauls me through it.

Behind us, the man with the machete has nearly reached the bottom of the stairs. He shouts at his companions.

We're met with pitch darkness and an unfamiliar landscape.

Conner tries to pull in one direction. "Exit's this way."

“No,” Micah says. “Too easy for them to cut us off. We’ll find another way out.”

The perimeter of The Catacombs is surrounded by high fences. The property is immense in all directions, likely pushing a hundred acres. That’s common knowledge.

But as Micah ushers me through the night another piece of information nags at the back of my mind. Something my uncle told me.

“There’s an access point through the old worker apartments. Uncle Josh mentioned it tonight, said it’s always being propped open no matter how many times the cops chain it shut. Maybe it’s open now.”

A crash and a flurry of curses are close, too close.

We’ve paused, clustered around the corner of a different building. A cloud covers the scant light of the moon. I have no idea where we are. It’s like navigating a labyrinth while blindfolded.

“LYONNE!” The furious voice cuts through the night. “Come here and take your fucking medicine.”

Lots of cackling and ominous hoots echo the comment.

“Micah.” I pull on his shirt. “Let’s just hide and call the police.”

He shakes his head, his words a sharp whisper. “We caught a break once. Can’t count on catching another one if they all find us.”

Conner nods. “We keep moving.”

“LYONNE!” A different voice now. “Time to say hello to your daddy.”

“Your daddy misses you,” declares yet another voice, and then breaks into hysterical, braying laughter.

The sound that vibrates in Micah’s chest is close to a feral growl.

I know him. I understand his anger and the toll of being plagued by taunts and the never-ending trauma of what he witnessed as a child. It’s taking every ounce of his willpower not to run out there and meet their challenge.

In fear and desperation, I pull him down for a kiss. *Stay with me. STAY WITH ME!*

Our lips only meet for a second before Conner nudges us.

“Let’s move. The apartments should be straight back.”

Only now do I recall the phone in my hand. Conner’s phone. The one that’s still connected to Gage.

This has the feel of a waking nightmare. Same surreal quality. Micah’s arm stays around my waist, his night vision superior to mine. All I see is impenetrable blackness and above us, an indifferent night sky.

Conner stops. “We’re here. You see the fence up ahead?”

“I see it,” Micah says.

I press the speaker button on the phone. “Gage? Are you still there?”

“I’m here.” There’s engine noise, like he’s traveling at high speed.

Micah grabs the phone. “Back of the complex. The worker apartments. Call it in. The sound of sirens might make them scatter.”

A bright light flares behind us. The arena building blazes to life.

They've figured out how to turn on the floodlights.

More lights switch on.

If this keeps up, the whole place will look like daytime in a minute.

"Found it," Conner announces. "Here's the gate. It's propped open with a rock." Rusted hinges scream as he pushes it open. "Shit, that's loud."

Micah herds me over there. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

But now there are tires squealing through the narrow lanes of The Catacombs. A voice heckles from a bullhorn, ranting in a deranged singsong. I know that voice. Once it called me a rich bitch.

"RING AROUND THE ROSIE.

WE'LL FUCK YOUR GIRLFRIEND SLOWLY.

THEN WE'LL SLICE YOU. AND WE'LL DICE YOU.

TILL YOU'RE WITH YOUR DAD!"

There are sirens now, distant ones. But it's the east side. Sirens are a constant soundtrack. No way to tell if they're on their way here or not.

"Dammit," says Conner as he takes stock of what's on the other side of the gate. "All open ground."

Open ground. Nowhere to hide.

We're far from the parking lot, even farther from any retail or residential areas.

Our choices are bleak.

Stay here, huddled in one of the crumbling buildings and pray we're not found.

Or else make a run for it and hope we can move faster than they do.

I've never felt my own limitations more acutely. I'm neither fast nor strong.

Micah has already made a decision. "Time to leave."

He pushes me into Conner's chest and Conner narrowly keeps me from stumbling.

I expect Micah to be right behind me.

The gate shrieks closed.

With Micah on the other side, locking himself in.

He looks at us through the fence grate. "You need to get her out of here, Con."

"FUCK!" Conner gives the gate a savage pull. It shudders but holds. "No fucking way, not leaving you."

Desperate panic leaves me breathless. We're still on one side of the gate and Micah is on the other.

With men who intend to kill him.

"Go now." He takes a step back.

Somewhere behind him there's a screech of brakes and the revving of an engine. They are closing in.

"NO!" I rattle the gate with all of my strength, even knowing the futility. If Conner can't budge it, I certainly won't be able to. "Micah, NO!"

“Conner.” Micah smacks at the gate to get his cousin’s attention. “You have to save Tess. That’s what I need you to do. So you better fucking do it.”

Conner charges at the gate the way he would charge down the football field. It stays intact.

“I’ll put up a fight,” Micah says. Another step back. Already conceding that he’ll go to his death if that’s what it takes. “I love you, Tessie Belle. Damn, I never knew I could love anyone the way I love you.”

I blink and he’s gone, vanished into the night. I cry out his name and hang on the gate, trying to force the bars apart.

When I’m lifted off the ground I can’t figure out why.

Conner pries my hands off the gate with ease. He’s taking me away. Away from Micah.

“STOP!” I flail and try to get free. “No, I’m not leaving him!”

Conner’s muscled arms cradle me and it’s like being wrapped in bands of iron.

“Stop, Conner. PLEASE! Let me go. LET ME FUCKING GO!” I beat my fists on his shoulders and my chest craters with a painful howl of grief.

He’s not listening. He walks rapidly, nearly running, ignoring my pleas and my fists.

My lungs hollow out. “I have to tell him. He doesn’t know.” I choke on the last words. “Micah doesn’t know he’s going to be a father.”

Conner slows to a stagger and I feel his chest heave. Now I realize that he’s crying too.

Headlights flash in front of us and a car skids to a halt. Gage jumps out, gun drawn. His shrewd eyes rapidly assess the situation.

“WHERE?” he demands when he sees Micah is not with us.

Conner jerks his head. “Locked himself in behind the gate. There’s five of them.”

“Keep going, Con. Get her out.” Gage ducks back behind the wheel and hits the accelerator. Within seconds, there’s a colossal crash as Gage barrels into the gate at full speed.

This can’t be real. It can’t be.

But it is. And I know it’s real because I’m still trapped in ridiculously strong arms.

“Conner.” I hope saying his name calmly will do the trick. “You need to put me down now.”

“No.” He keeps marching away with me. “You’ll run right back there.”

He’s right. I would.

“I won’t let him down, Tessie. I won’t.” Conner’s voice cracks and I understand this is killing him.

It’s killing me too.

More lights are up ahead, along with the slow whine of a siren. A police cruiser stops and my uncle jumps out.

“Tess!” He runs over and tries to take me from Conner but Conner refuses to hand me over. “Are you hurt? I heard the call come through on the radio.”

“I’m fine.” I grab at my uncle’s shirt. “But please, Micah is still in there. They’re going to kill him. Please help him,

PLEASE.”

“Tess, honey, I’ve got to get you out of here.”

“NO! You have to help Micah. I’m having his baby, Uncle Josh. PLEASE. I’m begging.”

My uncle quits trying to extract me from Conner’s grip. “You’re pregnant?”

“Yes,” I wail. “He doesn’t know.”

There’s a sudden crack of multiple gunshots. A scream rips from my throat. Distantly, I hear Conner tell Uncle Josh that Gage has already stormed inside.

“Tess.” My uncle’s voice has changed to something decisive and strict. “I’ll go in there after Micah if you swear you’ll stay right in here with Conner.” He opens the back door of his car. “Promise.”

“I promise.” There’s nothing I wouldn’t have agreed to.

“Conner,” Josh barks. “She doesn’t leave your sight.”

With that, he draws his gun and launches into a full sprint. I try to crane my neck, desperate for any glimpse of Micah. There’s nothing but my uncle’s distantly running figure and clouds of dust that were kicked up by all the turmoil.

Conner tucks me into the backseat and climbs in beside me. He gives me a look that makes it clear he’s not going to allow me to stray more than a few inches.

We regard each other in the dark, desperate silence. If not for me, Micah would never have locked himself in there. He wouldn’t have forced Conner to leave him behind.

I wonder if Conner hates me for that.

There are more sirens bleating but I see no other emergency vehicles yet.

Conner's broad chest rises and falls. He leans back into the seat with a bleak stare. "Is it true?"

I don't need to ask what he means. "It's true."

Conner coughs out a sound of agony that mirrors the tortured state of my heart.

A tear rolls down my cheek and I turn my face toward The Catacombs. "I was going to tell him tonight, after the fight."

Conner says nothing.

The sudden glare of lights is sharp enough to hurt my eyes. Then I realize I'm staring into the high beams of an approaching vehicle.

Conner freezes. "Gage's car."

Even a great quarterback can't stop me from lunging out the door and straight into the headlight beams.

The front of Gage's car is severely dented from crashing through the gate. It stops and the passenger door opens. My eyeballs wince from the light and I can't draw a breath. But then Micah emerges from the car and I gasp so sharply it hurts.

No matter. I'm racing to him. And then I'm holding him, wrapping my arms around his neck and celebrating the solid feel of his body.

His face is even more battered than before and his bloody shirt is draped over his right arm but he's upright and he's saying my name so he can't be hurt that badly.

A few feet away, Gage mutters something to Conner and from the way Conner's head drops, the news must be bad.

The threat of a different kind of grief smacks into me.
“Uncle Josh, where is he?”

Gage gives me a strange look. “He’s fine.”

“I’m going to help search,” Conner says and I don’t know what this means but Gage knows because he nods.

Conner runs away at full speed, back to The Catacombs. Behind us, emergency lights flash.

“Get in,” Gage says. “We’re going to the hospital.”

He doesn’t sound panicked. Only grim.

Micah is still dazed but he makes sure I’m safely inside the car before following.

Gage glances back to confirm we’re both secure in the backseat before he takes off, bypassing the fleet of oncoming emergency vehicles.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” I whisper to Micah and run my hands all over him, frantic for reassurance that he’s here and he’s safe and he’s whole.

And then I realize...

He isn’t.

31. Micah

In the end, I know I cracked a few bones. Drew an adequate amount of blood.

But there were just too many of them and Halligan wasn't the only one with fighting talent.

Even as they held me down, even as rancid breath mocked from inches away, even as I felt the vicious cut and saw my father's face through the haze of agony, one singular thought kept me sane.

Tess is safe. Tess is safe. Tess is safe.

Because my faith in Conner is unwavering.

When I saw him follow my command, picking her up even though she cried, retreating with her into the darkness, the wave of relief was overwhelming.

It's what gave me the strength to face what was coming for me. I wasn't going to make anything fucking easy for them and I didn't. Every second I held them at bay was another second that would allow Tess and Conner to escape.

Gage crashed through the gate just as they were holding down my left hand, preparing to deliver the same treatment they'd already given to my right.

They were unprepared for the likes of Gage Silvestro to come out with guns blazing. An expert marksman, he shot two of them in the head without breaking a sweat.

The third man, Sean Halligan, had a gun of his own. But the motherfucker forgot that I was still part of this world. From the ground I kicked his knee out, which sent him sprawling. Then I slammed the back of my foot down to crush the bones of his face. While he was flailing and choking on his teeth, I pushed my knee into his windpipe until I felt something break. Sean Halligan didn't move anymore after that.

The fourth man, the one wielding the machete, was trapped and tried to charge. He ended up shot between the eyes by Josh Ballerini.

The fifth son of a bitch was the only one who got away. For now.

Tess didn't scream when I showed her the bloody end of my arm. She briefly clapped a hand over her mouth, shuddered, and threw her arms around me while Gage silently piloted us to the hospital.

There is, however, someone else screaming right now, carrying on like a manic banshee.

Matilda is here.

My mother has heard the news that I'm now missing a hand and she's promptly lost her mind. She keeps running around the hospital corridor screeching, "JUST LIKE ETHAN! JUST LIKE ETHAN!"

Henley tries his best to calm her down but she ignores him and keeps howling.

Even though I can't stand the noise and I'd really like her to shut the fuck up, I still feel kind of sorry for her. I'm the first one to admit when my mother is being a phony idiot. Even Matilda is not enough of an actress to pull off this level of anguish.

Finally, she lets Henley carry her away and take her home. The noise level immediately bottoms out.

"Dani's with Charlotte," Gage says. He stands guard in the corner of the room.

Tess sits beside me, holding my remaining hand while my mutilated arm is positioned above my heart. Something about blood flow. The end is wrapped for now and a surgical team is standing by. The doctors already advised that for the moment we wait. Conner and Josh and half the Em City police force are out there searching for my hand. If they can find it within about five hours after it was severed, there's a chance it can be reattached.

If not...

Well, I'd rather avoid thinking about the 'if not' factor just yet.

"Does Charlotte know?" I ask Gage.

Tess lifts her head to hear the answer.

The thought of my baby sister suffering through the pain of yet another family catastrophe makes me want to put my fist through a wall.

But I can't do that because I don't exactly have an extra fist to spare at the moment.

The thought produces a snort of badly timed laughter. Tess widens her eyes in astonishment. Which turns to concern. She

places her palm on my forehead, like I might be running a fever.

“I don’t think Charlotte knows yet,” Gage says. “You can be sure that Dani will say nothing until she has to.”

My eyes stray to the wall clock above Gage’s head. Two hours are already gone. And the clock just keeps ticking.

“No word from Conner?” I asked this ten minutes ago.

“Not yet,” Gage replies.

I know how badly he’d like to give me a different answer.

Tess smothers a yawn. She’s exhausted. This night has been excruciating for her and it’s far from over. My gut clenches every time I spot the agony in her eyes.

I won’t insult her by telling Gage to take her home. She would never agree.

Instead, I pull her onto the bed with me. There’s not much room, but then again she’s not very big.

Tess drapes a careful arm across my bare chest. The soft warmth of her body is a reminder that I’m still here, still capable of feeling. My dick even stirs as she exhales a gentle sigh.

Gage decides to bow out of this tender scene. “I’m gonna go hunt down some coffee and make a couple of calls. You need anything?”

I could use my hand back, for starters.

“No.” I tickle the back of Tess’s neck. “What about you?”

She doesn’t hear me. She’s fallen asleep for now.

Gage dims the lights a little on his way out.

I stare at the clock until my eyelids grow heavy. The physical pain is no fun but it's not the worst I've ever suffered. Initially I refused the offers of painkillers, only relenting when Tess got upset. Then I swallowed a couple of pills just so she'd breathe a little easier.

A nurse stops by to check my vitals. She's brisk as she goes about her task but allows a sad smile to touch her lips when she looks at Tess cuddled up next to me. I shake my head when she offers more painkillers.

At least Elijah didn't really have an emergency. He was astounded when the cops showed up at his door. He had no idea why Sean Halligan would orchestrate something so sadistic.

I don't think he did. Halligan is no mastermind.

Right now I might call Elijah if I knew where the hell my phone was but I don't.

Man, I'm just losing all kinds of shit today.

Phones. Hands. What's next?

Tess stiffens and unleashes a small yelp in her sleep. I rub her back and murmur in her ear until she relaxes.

The wall clock keeps ticking.

I'm expecting another nurse when the door opens but Haven Marchenko is definitely not a nurse. She peers at us while two husky male shadows hover at her back.

"Back off," she tells them. "I'm going in alone."

Haven doesn't wait to be invited. She walks right up to the foot of my bed and takes in the sights.

I keep my one good arm curled around Tess. “You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t wave.”

Haven smirks and plops down in the chair Gage was using earlier. She’s wearing one of her typical oversexed gothic getups and about three pounds of makeup. But her face softens when she gazes at Tess.

She sighs. “Sorry, this sucks.”

I take a pointed look at my stump. “No kidding. What are you doing here? How did you even get in?”

“I slipped the head nurse a twenty.”

“Really?”

“No.” Haven taps her ringed finger on the metal arm of the chair. “I’m here as the family ambassador. My father is pissed. My uncle is even more pissed. Somebody spilled blood all over his brand new investment tonight and never asked for permission. You simply can’t slice off limbs on the east side without asking for permission from the Marchenkos. It’s just not acceptable.”

“What do you need from me?”

She leans closer. “Whatever information might be useful. We already know that one of those fuckers got away. He won’t last. The cops will never find answers before we do. We’re going to track down anyone else that had a role in this shit and make a very gory example of them.”

“Fine by me.”

Haven is pleased. “I knew you’d say that.” Then she looks at Tess once more and her smile vanishes. “I should leave and let her sleep. I saw Gage wandering around. I’ll go interrogate him instead.”

She rises from her chair but instead of stalking to the door she looks around, searching for something. When she spots a hospital blanket folded at the foot of the bed she snatches it up. I'm kind of stunned to watch her cover Tess with the blanket, as gently as a mother tucking in her child.

Haven Marchenko meets my eye again. "You take good care of our princess, Micah."

She exits quietly. I resume staring at the clock.

Three hours gone.

And counting.

32. Tess

When Dani arrives she insists on taking me for a walk to get coffee.

My muscles are stiff and sore after hours of tension. Stretching them is probably not the worst idea.

The hospital windows are still black with the cover of night. They need to stay that way until Micah's hand is found. Every minute that passes lessens the chances that his hand can be reattached at all. When the night's over it will be too late.

I'm walking like an old woman in pain. Dani slips an arm around me for support.

"Do you need the bathroom?" she asks softly.

My stomach pitches and rolls. No telling if the surge of nausea is from tonight's ordeal or from the pregnancy. I nod and cover my mouth.

She steers me to the nearest restroom and waits just outside the stall as I dry heave into the toilet. When I stagger out she's ready with cool paper towels to mop up my sweating face.

"Sit down." Dani deposits me on a cushioned bench.

Hugging my belly, I lean forward and try to breathe through the waves of nausea. Dani hands me a stick of gum and I shake my head.

She moves my hair out of my face. “What can I do?”

“I don’t want him to see me crying.”

Dani rubs a comforting hand up and down my back. “There’s nothing wrong with crying, Tessie.”

I chew my lip to try and stave off the tears. I lose that battle and allow them to fall. “Tonight I almost lost him forever.”

“But you didn’t lose him. He’s here and he’s strong.” She digs in her purse and finds a package of soft tissues.

I take a tissue and dab at my eyes and my nose. “His hand, Dani.”

She sniffs. “I know.”

“Time is running out.”

She knows that too.

Everything Micah does is connected to his hands. His drawing. His fighting. He’s a man of raw physical might. Losing a hand will shatter him.

I’m shattered already. For two weeks I’ve been sitting on a massive secret that I had no right to keep. If I’d told him about the baby, his choices might have been different.

Maybe he wouldn’t have closed that gate. Maybe he wouldn’t have been willing to sacrifice himself.

Maybe. Maybe.

Dani is watching me with sadness and worry etched into her face. “He’ll get through this. No matter what. You both

will.”

I need another tissue. “Do you remember what you told me about him once?”

She’s thinking, hesitant to give the wrong answer.

“You said Micah always seemed like he was willing to fight to the death. Like he was hunting for the chance.”

She shuts her eyes briefly. “Tess, I don’t always know what I’m talking about.”

But I think she does. That’s the problem.

Dani’s phone buzzes inside her purse. She grabs at it and I hold my breath, hoping it’s Conner with some good news.

She makes a face. “Shit.”

“What?”

“That was Gage.” Her eyes have shifted to anger. “Your father has called a press conference here in the hospital.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s the middle of the night.”

But it figures. Stuart Ballerini has sniffed out a publicity opportunity. This is low, even for him.

I stand up, my tears gone, temporarily replaced with wrath. “Let’s crash that press conference.”

It’s not difficult to locate the scene of my father’s public spectacle. The conference room by the cafeteria is crowded with reporters, though when I scan their faces I notice not one of them is Helena Dixon. I suppose she’s outlived her usefulness.

Stuart Ballerini holds court behind a thick wooden table and makes a proclamation in his booming voice. “As of right now, my number one priority as the mayor of this great city is

reining in the lawless crime and corruption infecting the east side.” He pauses for effect, inserts emotion into his tone. “Tonight’s atrocity is very personal to me. My own daughter was nearly a victim. I promise you that today is the dawn of a new era in Emerald City.”

If I stay in here for another second I’m going to start gagging again. Dani follows me out the door as the mayor fields questions.

“The absolute fucking nerve.” I lean against the nearest wall and seethe. My father doesn’t actually give a damn about what happened to Micah. And instead of behaving like a caring, worried parent, he makes a beeline for the cameras.

Out of tragedy comes opportunity.

Dani seethes with me. “He has no shame, that’s for sure.”

My head is starting to hurt. “Can we go find that coffee now?”

“You bet.”

Before I take two steps, the conference room door swings open. Stuart Ballerini rushes this way with a squad of reporters in his wake. His arms are wide open. “Tess, thank god you’re okay.”

He grabs me in a hug before I can fend him off. Funny. Even when I was small, my father didn’t hug me.

“I was worried sick,” he declares while more than one phone camera records us. “A father’s worst nightmare, getting that call tonight.”

I grit my teeth and keep my arms at my sides. “I cannot deal with you right now so back the fuck off before I start screaming.”

He pulls back. His chin quivers. “You’re exhausted. I understand. This has been a horrible night. But I’m here for you, sweetheart.”

The hell with him. I’m no longer his marketing prop.

Dani chases me when I march down the hall, trying to get away from Stuart Ballerini as fast as possible without running. She takes my arm in solidarity. I’m grateful to have it.

I’m not paying much attention to which direction we’re going. We wind up in the lobby of the Emergency Room. The sight of the wide glass doors upsets me and for a second I don’t understand why.

Then I do. I can see through the glass. It’s no longer pitch black outside. The sky lightens with the approach of dawn.

I’ve never hated sunrise before. I hate this one.

While I stand in the middle of the ER, glaring in pointless fury at the night’s end, two men walk through the glass doors.

One of them is Conner. The other is my uncle.

Conner is bleary-eyed and filthy after spending a night crawling through dumpsters and scouring the grimy corners of the east side.

It’s my uncle who looks me in the eye and delivers the painful truth with a sad shake of his head.

They have not found Micah’s hand.

And the night is over.

Uncle Josh walks my way and wraps me in a gentle hug. He murmurs his sorrow and I don’t push him away. He risked his life tonight only because I asked him to.

Dani is trying to speak to Conner. He doesn't appear to hear her words and instead looks right over her head at me.

"Conner." I go to him and he breaks into a sob, falling to his knees with his head lowered.

"Forgive me," he chokes out. "Forgive me, Tess."

I don't know which of us is more heartbroken.

Conner did absolutely everything he could. I whisper this in his ear as I bend down and try to pull him to his feet. He's my friend. My family. He kept me safe like Micah told him to.

Dani watches us, her tears falling freely, and I pull her over so she can help me hold Conner together. He gulps in air and allows us to hug him tightly.

I know we're being watched but when I raise my eyes I'm surprised to see Haven is among those watching us. As always, Haven Marchenko is difficult to decode but there's sadness there, especially when her gaze centers on Conner.

Gage sends a text to Dani. Micah is going to be wheeled back to surgery soon. Now that there's no hope of reattaching his hand the wound will need to be closed up.

"I have to see him first." I pull back from Conner and Dani. "There's something I need to say."

The walk down the corridor feels like an eternity.

Micah sits up in bed. His remaining hand is clenched in a fist as he glares darkly out the window at the rapidly lightening sky.

He's furious and he looks it. Who wouldn't be?

"Can I have a minute with him?" I say to Gage, who sits in the chair at Micah's bedside.

“Of course.” He gives his cousin a mournful glance before leaving the room. Gage loves Micah like a brother. I’ll forever be grateful to him for what he did tonight.

Micah turns his head to me as I take Gage’s place in the chair. We stare at each other wordlessly for a moment.

His fist remains clenched so I move it to my lap and unroll his curled fingers, placing my palm against his.

I wish I’d told him about the baby the day I found out. The words wouldn’t come to me then. I have to find them now.

“Don’t cry, honey.” He threads his fingers through mine and tries to put on a brave smile. “Conner would be the first one to remind you that even Luke Skywalker is missing a hand, remember?”

Oh, how I love him. Fiercely. Infinitely.

“I’m pregnant, Micah.”

The news doesn’t seem to register immediately. His blue eyes cloud with confusion.

He looks down as if he’s expecting to find a huge belly has sprouted in the last minute. “For real?”

“Yes. There’s no doubt. You know we weren’t always careful. I have ultrasound pictures at home. I was going to show them to you when we got home after the fight.”

He just stares in shock.

“I love you,” I tell him, desperate for some kind of reaction.

Micah finally moves my hand to his lips. He kisses my hand tenderly. “I love you too.”

Then he swallows and glances at his arm.

There has been a hell of a lot of news to get used to in one night. There are still many words left unsaid but there's nothing I can't face.

As long as I still have him.

Micah helps me crawl into bed at his side. His muscled arm circles my body with protective strength and I listen to his strong heartbeat.

A nurse pops her head in and gently says the surgical team is ready. In a minute Micah will be moved to the operating room.

Micah sighs. "I'm ready."

I raise my head to look at him. "I'll be right here when you get out. Micah, I love you with all my heart."

He strokes my hair. "Ah, Tessie."

Then the medical team arrives to take him away.

I wait until they are gone before allowing myself to cry again.

33. Micah

It sure does fuck with your head, the way the shade of sleep can make you forget current events. Even after a week my brain always needs a minute for the update to register.

Then I have to look for myself to see if it's true because I could swear I was just flexing my fingers a second ago.

Nope, just those phantom sensations the doctors warned me about. My right arm still ends in a stump.

This happens all the time in stories. Losing a hand has been the fate of heroes and villains alike. A criminal's punishment. A soldier's casualty of war.

I don't know where I fit in. Doesn't matter. This is my reality anyway.

Tess, still asleep, stirs with a soft noise of anguish and burrows closer. She grimaces in her dreams, maybe replaying pieces of that goddamn awful night.

I drop a soft kiss on her brow and the lines of distress on her forehead smooth out. She whispers my name and my heart clenches.

"I'm here," I whisper in her ear. "Everything is okay."

Tess sighs and settles down, hopefully sinking into dreams that are less terrifying.

What I hate the most about this shit is what it does to her. While I haven't seen her crying much, her eyes are often red. I know she cries in private.

Fuck, I would have given up both my hands to spare her this pain.

I slide out of bed with care and tuck the covers around my girl.

Every act has become more complicated now. Things you don't think about, like brushing your stupid teeth and getting dressed, all become a pain in the ass. Before leaving the hospital I was given all kinds of informational brochures about how to do life one handed.

Meanwhile, Tess has collected a list of physical therapists, occupational therapists. She and Conner have been hassling me to make appointments. Like I need someone to show me how to shower with only one hand.

I'm not going the route of doctors and therapy and self pity. I'll figure this out for myself.

The bed is empty by the time I exit the bathroom. I find Tess in the kitchen, urging Conner to eat like she's his mother.

"Here, you love these." She shoves a cheese pastry in front of his nose.

My cousin has the look of a man who's emerging from a three day bender and is trying to puzzle out what day it is. He hasn't shaved and the hollows beneath his eyes indicate he hasn't slept much either. He's barely upright in his chair, like slouching is the best he can do.

“Better eat it,” I say as I grab a coffee mug from the cabinet. “Or I will.”

That should result in a sarcastic reply. Conner and I share a lifelong trend of banter and mockery. It’s how we are with each other, how we’ve always been.

But his bloodshot blue eyes are devoid of humor as they blink at me, then stray to the emptiness at the end of my arm. He swallows and looks away.

Tess throws me a helpless look and immediately covers it with a smile as she tries to cheer up the room. “We have cherry too. But if either of you makes an obscene comment I’m eating them all myself. Don’t think I won’t. Pregnancy cravings are no joke.”

She hands over a plate with two sticky pastries stacked in the middle. Then she realizes I’m already holding a coffee cup and don’t have a spare hand to accept it.

The plate wilts in her hand.

“For fuck’s sake.” This has got to stop, all this walking on eggshells like I’m a helpless victim. I set the coffee mug down hard, snatch the plate and take a seat.

Two bites later, I notice the two of them are eerily silent. Tess fusses with the belt of her robe and Conner stares at his lap, his hands clenched on the table. Then Tess quietly fills the mug I left on the counter and places the coffee beside my plate, her movements cautious.

I can’t fucking stand it.

“Come here, baby.” I pull her into my lap because I still have the ability to do that.

She doesn't resist but perches on my knee and turns her head, looking into my eyes. She's beyond gorgeous right now. As always. Her dark hair is still messy from a night of sleep and her big brown eyes are free of makeup. She's wrapped in a pink satin robe that I won't mind tearing off her sexy body the next time we're alone.

But I guess I'll have to be more careful now, and not because of my missing hand. Tess is pregnant and I'm not sure how that changes what she's in the mood to do. We've hardly talked about the baby since she shared the news in the hospital.

A shadow dances at the edges of the window and my muscles freeze. The fury builds instantly and I'm ready to dive through the window and strangle the first threat I find.

"Relax, it's just one of Gage's guys." Conner knows my mind almost as well as I do.

He's sitting up straight now, paying close attention. He gestures to the window as the shadow moves out of sight.

"You know they've been around, just in case."

Relaxing with a grunt, I take a sip of my coffee. "Yeah, I guess I forgot."

Gage insisted on hiring a security team to keep an eye on the house twenty-four hours a day. I don't argue because of Tess and Conner. Anyone who comes here looking for me will also find them.

Nobody can make me believe that the attack was random or inspired by some petty macho pissing contest. No, Halligan isn't quite dumb enough to make that kind of a plan without the promise of a hefty paycheck. He also has no friends who

would be willing to risk a fall for him. His accomplices were also paid off.

And whoever is pulling the strings decided to make it personal.

Very personal.

I could name a list of punks I've grappled with over the years. But I also have instincts and every one of them is saying that this doesn't have the flavor of an east side grudge.

This is deeper, uglier.

While these thoughts swirl around in my head, here comes the palpable itch under my skin. This longtime enemy is recognizable as my own rage. It propelled me into endless battles from the time I was in grade school. It kept me alive in prison when I had to do vicious things or else suffer having them done to me.

I've kept the rage under control for a while, properly channeling it into a career in the ring. I won't be able to do that anymore. The rage knows it no longer has an outlet and is hunting for another way to show itself.

"I need to get the hell out of here." Gently, I push Tess from my lap and leave the table.

"What do you mean? Where are you going?" She's panicking, looking to Conner for help.

Fuck, how I hate doing this to her. "I just need to go somewhere alone and think. It's not a big deal."

Tess's face crumples. I want to punch myself with my remaining fist.

Instead, I grab a set of keys from the ring by the door. "I'm taking your car. I'll return it soon."

Conner stands so quickly he knocks his chair over. “I’ll come with you.”

“No, you won’t.”

His jaw sets and he issues a stubborn glare. “The hell I’m not. You can’t stop me.”

My laughter sounds crazy. “You’re right, I can’t stop you, Conner. You’re the big, strong quarterback with both hands. And me?” I wave my stump in the air. “I’m *this*.”

The blood drains from his face. Tess covers her mouth like she might vomit.

Still, I won’t back down, no matter how big of a piece of shit that makes me. “You’re not coming, Conner. And don’t send any of Gage’s fucking goons after me either. This is a solitary mission.”

I’m fast, out the door and backing out of the garage before anyone has time to recover. A black Escalade with tinted windows, undoubtedly one of Gage’s boys, tails me through the neighborhood and I let him think it’s allowed until I reach the freeway. Then I hit the accelerator and leave his ass behind.

I had no destination in mind when I set out, but it’s probably not a coincidence that I keep traveling east. As if my subconscious is leading me back to the place that was more than a second home. The place where I learned how to control my temper and found acceptance. Even friendship.

Golden Wings looks no different from the outside, but the twinge of loss in my heart is real. There’s really not a place for me here anymore.

Next door, the walking penis has a new costume. He wears a *Scream* mask with a huge pink inflatable dick strapped to his

middle. He waves at traffic. He waves at me. I don't wave back because I never do and I see no need to break from tradition.

Elijah is behind the front desk, as usual. He drops his phone when I walk in.

“Hot damn, there's my boy.” He charges from behind the desk and crushes my ribs with a rare hug. “Good to see you, kid.”

I thump his back until he lets go. “Sorry I haven't called you back. I know you've spoken to Tess too.”

“Hey, no worries. Let's go have a talk in the office.”

“Actually, I came to clear a few things out of my locker.”

His brows pinch together. “No need for you to do that.”

If I can't hide from the truth, neither can he. I hold up my arm. “I'm not a fighter anymore, El. There's no point in pretending otherwise.”

Elijah sinks heavily into one of the ugly folding chairs parked against the wall. I never think of him as an old man but right now he looks like he's earned every step of his sixty-five years on this earth.

My friend and mentor scrubs a hand over his face and gestures to the chair beside him. “Won't you sit down for a minute?”

Sure, I'll cooperate because I owe him this much. Actually, I owe him a hell of a lot.

He waits until I'm seated. “How are things at home?”

“Great.”

He gives me a thin smile, not fooled. “You better not be fucking things up with her.”

“Trying not to.” I pause before saying the next words because I have yet to speak them out loud. “We’ve got a kid on the way.”

“No shit.” His smile widens and he shows off all his gold teeth. “That’s a piece of good news.”

“Don’t know what kind of father I’ll be.”

He bobs his head. “I have faith in you. So does she. You’ll figure it out.”

There it is again, the ghostly sense that my hand is curling into a fist. Maybe it would disappear if I knew what the fuck became of my hand. Conner and Josh Ballerini scoured the whole area for hours, finding nothing.

And dead men don’t talk.

“Halligan wouldn’t have planned this on his own.”

Elijah’s smile falls. “Yeah. The guy had a chip on his shoulder the size of Mount Oz but he had a long list of enemies and I doubt you were at the top. He wouldn’t have made that move without being backed by someone.”

Which leaves the question...

WHO?

My first thought was Pierce Carrington, that maybe he’d snapped some pieces together and figured out who was to blame for his tumble down a stairwell. He’s certainly not above brutality, given what he tried to do to Tess.

“Now you know how your daddy felt.”

Those were Halligan's words. But someone gave them to him. Someone who wanted to be sure I made the connection to my father's murder. Someone who was determined to not only break my body but my mind.

Could have been Carrington.

Conveniently, he's been out of the country but the Marchenkos are looking at him for sure.

Yeah, it definitely could have been Carrington.

Elijah watches me with growing concern. "Be careful what you do next, Micah. You've got a family to think about now."

I get it. He's afraid I'll go running off to war. "I know that." I take a look around. "Gonna miss this place."

"We'll be right here. There's always a spot for you in my gym, no matter what."

"You've been good to me, El. I won't forget."

"Maybe you and your girl will invite me over for dinner again sometime."

"Count on it." I get to my feet. "I know you're short on space so I am going to clean out my locker after all. Make room for the next angry guy with too much shit to prove."

He rises to stand beside me and bumps my shoulder. "Nah, you were an angry boy when I met you. Raging at the world. But you're a man now. And a good one, whether you believe it or not."

I don't know if I do believe it. Still, I appreciate the thought. "Will you come along for one last walk through the gym?"

He grins. “Sure. By the way, you and I will have something in common now.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m getting the amputation.” He taps his leg. “Last time you’ll get to see me on two feet.”

“Hell, we should start a club.”

He snorts.

The second I stroll into the gym, all action stops and the other guys crowd around, some of them jumping out of the ring in the middle of a sparring match in order to say hello and slap me on the back. In a weird way I feel like a celebrity. This must be what happens to Conner all the time.

Elijah helps me pack up the gear in my locker. I don’t even bother to take everything, leaving some stuff behind for whoever needs it.

Then I sling the gym bag over my shoulder, bid my old friend farewell for now, and leave the way I came in.

After dumping the bag in Tess’s trunk, I give Dildo a wave with my handless arm. He stares through his Scream mask for a second, then enthusiastically waves back.

Once I’m behind the wheel I realize two things.

First, I left my phone back at the house.

Second, I’m fucking starving because I only ate two bites of breakfast.

The first oversight I can’t do much about, even though I’d really like to call Tess and let her know there’s nothing to worry about.

The second item I can solve with ease.

My favorite lunch spot is a taco truck that usually hangs out next to a local park on weekdays. The girl who takes my order acknowledges me with a nod, recognizing that I'm a frequent customer. She does a double take when I pull out my wallet and it becomes clear that I've lost something since the last time she saw me.

If anyone wants to know what happened I'll tell them the truth. She's too polite to ask, handing over a bag and a soda without a word.

An empty bench overlooks the park where some guy plays catch with his dog on the dead grass. The playground, badly in need of repair, has yellow caution tape around it.

While I stuff my lunch in my mouth, a woman and her son stand beside the taco truck and wait for their order to be called.

"Mommy, that man has NO HAND." The kid points and bounces on his toes. He's excited, having discovered something novel and different.

My stump waves him.

His mother looks, becomes mortified. "Liam, don't point. It's not kind."

There's an apology written on her face.

And pity too.

She feels sorry for this unfortunate fucker who's slumped on a park bench and missing something important. Maybe she'll dig around in her purse for some spare change.

The thought strikes me as hilarious and I bark out a loud laugh, which prompts the young mother to get alarmed and quickly usher her kid out of my sight. She looks over her

shoulder with fear in her eyes and then I feel like crap because I didn't mean to scare her.

But I'll take this as a sign that I'm not doing anyone any favors by squatting on a public bench and glowering at the world.

After the woman and her kid are out of sight, I make one more trip to the truck and order a dozen tacos to go.

The ride out of the east side is bittersweet. This was home for a long time and I don't know when I'll be back.

Traffic is light and driving with one hand isn't hard. Like a lot of things, it'll just take some getting used to.

There's still tons of shit to figure out. Before that can happen I need to know who did this and why.

More than that, I need to make sure the fallout isn't going to endanger the people I love.

Yet if the plan was to break me then they missed the mark.

I'm not broken.

I'm fucking pissed.

But I'm not broken.

Losing Tess would break me for sure.

Not this.

But when I flash back to the stricken expression on Tess's face before I stormed out of the kitchen earlier, I know I'm not doing nearly enough for her.

I'm not broken. But she might be.

34. Micah

As I'm rolling into the driveway, some lantern-jawed dude wearing dark sunglasses jumps out of the bushes with his gun out. The guy's seen one too many movies.

I poke my head through the open car window. "Back the fuck off."

He relaxes, lowering his piece, but still looks annoyed as he waves me in like I need his damn permission to go home.

I know Gage means well, but after today I'm ordering him to call off his troops. I'm capable of loading and firing a handgun. Between me and Conner, nobody's getting in here and coming out in one piece. I'd prefer that we take care of security ourselves instead of running into some panicky fool every time I step outside.

The kitchen is empty when I dump the tacos in the fridge. I'm about to go hunt for Tess when I catch a glimpse of Conner. He's sitting on the edge of the pool, which isn't weird. But his legs are in the water while his shoes are still on, which *is* kind of weird. His broad shoulders droop and he stares moodily at the sun's reflection in the water as if he's watching a movie that he doesn't like.

I open the sliding glass door and step out. “Don’t fall in. I might have a tough time rescuing you.”

Conner lifts his head and the desolation in his eyes punches the air out of my lungs.

“What happened? Where’s Tess?”

“Nothing happened. She’s in your room, I think.” He drops his head and resumes his new hobby of watching the pool water.

Okay, so nothing happened while I was gone but this isn’t normal behavior, even for Conner.

He doesn’t look up when I crouch beside him on the concrete deck, opting to keep my feet out of the water.

“Hey.” I elbow his arm. “What’s up?”

He sighs and shakes his head. His jeans are soaked almost to the knee.

“If I agree to ruin my shoes too, will you tell me?”

Connor looks down and frowns as if he didn’t realize what he’d been doing. He scoots backwards until his legs are on dry land.

I think I might have missed a step here. Conner wasn’t quite the same after his mother shot him and then took a swan dive off a downtown high rise. Something is eating at him right now and it’s bad.

“Talk to me, Con. What’s going on with you?”

He inhales loudly, exhales deeply, says nothing.

“Look, I’m sorry if it’s been a bit much to have us living here in the middle of all this drama. We’ll be looking for another place soon and-”

“You’re sorry?” He jumps to his feet, balls his fist up and punches the air. “YOU ARE SORRY? Fuck, Micah, I’M THE ONE WHO’S SORRY!”

I’m stunned into silence. Conner doesn’t really go off like this.

He falls back down on the deck and turns his head. There’s so much grief in his face that I don’t know how to react.

“I left you.” His voice is thick with heartbreak. “I fucking left you while Tessie begged me not to. She cried, Micah. She even hit me. All she wanted was to get back to you. But I left you anyway. Right now you’d either be dead or missing both your hands if Gage hadn’t been there. You were getting cut to pieces while I was running away like a coward.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“I left you,” he repeats and spreads his arms wide, a beseeching gesture. “You’re a brother to me and I left you. I can’t fix this, can’t make it right.”

“Conner.” I grab his shirt.

He flinches away.

“Conner, fucking look at me. You did what I told you to do, what I *wanted* you to do. There was nothing more important than getting Tess out of there. You know what they were planning to do to her. Tessie is safe because *you kept her safe*. I owe you everything for that and don’t you dare regret it.”

He’s still miserable, lost in the agony of that night, and he lets out a low moan. “I looked everywhere, Micah. I swear I did. I would have given anything to find it for you.”

Goddammit, he’s talking about my hand.

“It’s gone, Conner. You did everything you could.”

He shuts his eyes and lowers his head.

I grab the back of his neck. “Listen to what I said. Let it sink in.”

But he shoves me off again.

“Conner!”

He spins and throws me another wounded look.

The years melt away for a second and it feels like we’re boys again.

One summer day Conner was trying to keep up with my daredevil shit while we were climbing a gnarled mesquite tree. Gage shouted from the ground that the branches were dead and wouldn’t hold our weight. Gage usually knew what he was talking about but I didn’t listen so Conner didn’t listen. He kept climbing higher. A branch did break and the fall knocked him unconscious for a while. Conner woke up but that fall had cost him a hell of a lot. Memories, skills, knowledge. He was held back a grade while a team of tutors tried to get him caught up. Before the fall, Conner was an outstanding student. After the fall, he always had trouble with school.

And always, at the back of my mind, was the tortured thought that his fall was my fault. If I hadn’t been climbing so high, always dancing a dangerous edge to prove how fucking brave I am, then he wouldn’t have followed.

“Conner, please listen.”

His eyes are red and tormented but he’s listening.

“You saved Tess. I meant it when I said I’m grateful. I know what it took for you to follow those orders. I’m not sure I would have had the courage to do the same. Don’t be sorry.

And stop beating yourself up. Can't deny that I sure do wish I had my hand back, but if this was the price I had to pay to keep her safe then it's worth it. Do you hear me?"

He looks at my arm, blows out a thick breath. Then he nods. "Yeah."

"Good."

He arches a brow. "You're not really moving out, are you? I mean, I get it if you guys want to get your own place, but I don't want you to go. You're my family. This really only became a home when you both got here."

I sling my good arm over his shoulder. "We'll always be family."

"So you're naming the baby after me, right?"

"That's the wiseass Wiseman I know." I grip him in a headlock.

He snorts and breaks free.

"There's tacos in the fridge," I tell him.

He scratches his jaw, which looks like it hasn't been shaved in days. "Now that I think of it, I'm kind of hungry."

"Knock yourself out."

"Think I might." Conner nods to the house. "Now go see your girl. She's hurting too. She's hurting a lot."

I was afraid of that.

Tess sits on the edge of our bed, still wearing her robe, her legs bare, no makeup, her soft dark hair parted in the middle and hanging loose past her shoulders.

She's an absolute angel.

“I’m home.” I shut the door behind me.

She sets her phone down on the nightstand. “I heard when you first came in.”

I close the distance between us and kneel at her feet. “Can we talk? *Really* talk?”

She nibbles her lower lip and nods.

“I wish I hadn’t run out of here earlier. I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m not angry. I understand if you need some time alone.” She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “My heart is just broken for you, Micah.”

I rise up to her level, sit on the bed and pull her close. “I’m not heartbroken. My heart’s just fine. And no, I don’t want to be alone. I want to be with you.”

She lays her head on my shoulder and lets me rock her for a minute.

Tess is puzzled when I start to pull away. I need to see her face so we can sort something out.

“You knew you were pregnant before the fight.”

She hesitates. “Yes.”

“How long?”

That’s a question she’d rather not answer. She bites her lip and turns her head away.

Too late. I’ve already figured it out.

“The day you showed up at the gym. You had a doctor’s appointment that afternoon. You came to see me because you’d just found out, didn’t you?”

She nods but I have to cup her chin in my hand to get her to look me in the eye.

“That was weeks ago, honey. Why didn’t you tell me? Did you think I’d turn my back on you and take off?”

“No.” She squeezes her eyes shut for a second, like she’s trying to handicap her own tears. They come anyway, her tears. “No, I didn’t think you’d leave, but I wasn’t sure what you’d say or how you’d feel. And I knew how important the fight was to you.”

It kills me that she’s not aware of something crucial. “Nothing takes priority over you. *Nothing*. How is it you don’t know that?”

Tess hates to cry as much as I do. Which is why the sight of a tear rolling down her cheek is a searing knife to my heart.

“I’m so sorry. I should have told you. If I’d told you sooner then...” She chokes on the next words and drops her head with a sob.

I’m not too happy that she didn’t feel like she could immediately run to me and share the most important news of both our lives. But I’ll fix this. From today on, she’ll never have a single doubt that she can share everything with me.

However, Tess isn’t finished with the worst of the thoughts that have been tormenting her.

“If I’d told you about the baby, then you wouldn’t have run back in there, ready to die.”

The blood freezes in my veins. “What in the hell does that mean?”

She pounds a fist on the bed. “You’ve always been so hell bent on proving your courage, not caring if you go down in a

blaze of glory. But I could have given you a reason to live.”

That’s what she thinks? Jesus, no wonder she’s been in agony.

“I never wanted to die. Never. Do you understand? It’s just that I was *willing* to die. *For you.*”

“Well, DON’T.” She smacks my chest. “Don’t you fucking dare die, Micah.” She smacks me again and then throws her arms around me. “Don’t you EVER leave me. I couldn’t take it.”

At least I’m still able to wrap my arms tightly around her. “I love you. I’m not going anywhere. And I’m not saying that just because of the baby. It was always supposed to be us, Tessie. We just didn’t know it. You’re part of me and I don’t ever want to be away from you.”

“I love you.” She kisses my neck, my jaw. “I love you so much.”

Our mouths meet.

My tongue pushes past her lips. She greets me with an eager moan and melts in my arms.

It’s not enough. I need more. We both do.

Tess climbs into my lap and I move her knees apart until she’s straddling me.

“I want you.” She sucks on my neck and pulls my shirt up. “Please.”

I yank the shirt over my head and throw it across the room.

My hand finds the knot in her belt robe and pulls it apart. The robe falls from her shoulders. The white tank top she wore

to bed last night also has to go. A strap gets ripped when I tug it off but that's okay. I'll buy her another one.

Right now I need to corrupt every inch of her and nothing's going to stop me.

Then I remember something important.

“You sure you're okay to do this?”

She grinds against my swollen cock and flicks the button of my jeans open. “Are you kidding? These pregnancy hormones are driving me wild.”

My mouth finds her tits and plays with one hot nipple and then the other one. She's always so fucking eager and sexy.

In fact, I need to find out just *how* eager she is.

Tess is unhappy when I take my mouth from her tits but she'll forgive me. I need to see her. All of her.

When I get her on her back I take a good long look at her body. She's beyond exquisite. And she's all mine.

I run my hand over her skin, pausing to detect the slight change in her belly before traveling between her legs.

My cock throbs with the demand to be set free. He can wait a minute.

“Now, Tessie.” I cluck my tongue and slide my thumb into her panties, teasing her with the first game we ever played. “What have I told you?”

She quivers when I stroke her. “You said don't bother wearing panties when I know I'll be seeing you.”

“Why do I say that?”

“Because you know how much I always want you. You know that I'm yours.”

“Damn right.” I tug her panties down. She helps the process along, wiggling out of them.

My thumb is back on her clit and she moans. I push one finger inside her and she grips the comforter.

“Now use my fingers like a good girl if you want to have my cock.”

She’s ready to follow directions, moving her hips and trying to get off on my hand. “What you do to me, Micah. Every single time. You have no idea.”

I think I do have a pretty good idea. My cock wants in on the action so bad I’m about to break the zipper.

Tess clenches around my fingers and then I feel the muscle spasms as she rides out the orgasm. When she relaxes, I remove my fingers and suck the taste of her off them.

I know she’s not done. She always comes in waves, one right after the after.

“More,” she begs, pulling at my pants.

I wouldn’t mind teasing her for a little while longer but the situation in my pants is becoming an emergency. I shove them down, along with my boxers. My dick is so impatient that my goddamn balls are ready to explode.

She closes her hand around the shaft and pushes her knees up, laying that pretty pussy all out for me to take. She’s impatient to guide me in but I pause before letting her get what she wants.

“I love you,” I say one second before I drive into her.

Her head rolls back and she stretches her legs around me. She’s complete perfection.

Yeah, I'm the lucky one here.

Next time I'll take her slowly and savor each push into her sweet body. Right now I'm in a possessive fever to have her, to overwhelm her, to leave no room for doubt that it's me and her. ME AND HER. All the way. For good.

"I love you." She shatters and shakes underneath me.

My heart is about ready to burst out of my chest.

She's everything.

And I'll *give* her everything. All that I have and all that I am.

"Look at me, Tess."

Her eyes, heavy with passion, focus on my face.

The dam breaks and I hold back nothing, pumping every bit of myself into her until I'm tapped out.

Then I kiss her softly and roll to my side, collecting her to my chest. This time when she releases a sigh it has the tone of contentment.

There might be some tough times ahead. I'm sure there will be. We won't think about those right now.

Whatever may come, we're both home as long as we're holding each other.

35. Tess

It's so liberating to walk through the heart of Em City again.

For two weeks I've stayed close to home as the authorities competed with the Marchenkos in the hunt to find out who ordered blood to be spilled at The Catacombs.

Sean Halligan was paid off. So were his three dead companions. The funds were routed from an account in the Cayman Islands and the account's origins were murky, filtered through half a dozen different countries first and difficult to unravel.

My uncle surely broke a few police rules when he shared information that hasn't been public knowledge. He also said that evidence was increasingly pointing to Pierce Carrington's guilt.

But Uncle Josh wasn't the one to drop a hint that Carrington might have wrestled with a shark in the Mediterranean Sea. Carrington had been hiding out on the yacht of a billionaire crypto king. No one saw him fall overboard. However, two days ago his decomposing body washed up on a Corsican beach, minus some important parts.

If there really are sharks in the Mediterranean, they must have a taste for garbage.

When I said this to Haven, she nodded solemnly. “Indeed,” she deadpanned. And nothing more needed to be said.

Micah is healing. He has his quiet moments. He’s entitled to those. I’m glad he decided to work with an occupational therapist after all as he figures out how to navigate life one handed. When I check the time on my phone, I realize he should be at an appointment right now.

Up ahead, the slanted spire of Matilda’s building eats up the sky. I doubt she’s inside. Dani says she’s taken a leave of absence. Alta is running the company for now. Dani is concerned. Lately Matilda spends most of her time in her bedroom, not saying much. It’s difficult to imagine loud, vivacious Matilda being depressed but people are complicated.

The day is beautiful and I’m glad to be out and about. The morning has been productive, between a meeting with my new real estate team and checking out some downtown condo listings for a client.

Uncle Josh has been asking me to meet him for lunch the next time I’m downtown. I’m running a few minutes late so he’s probably already waiting at the Emerald Café. Last week he was sworn in at the city’s new chief of police.

Paused at a crosswalk as I wait for the light to change, I watch a commuter trail roll by and place a hand on my belly. I’m not really showing yet but the waistline of my clothes is becoming a little tighter every day. I can’t wait to buy maternity clothes. It won’t be long.

Not everyone knows about the baby yet. Dani and Gage know. And Conner obviously knows. Micah still hasn’t told his mother. I can’t really lecture him about that when I haven’t told my father. Uncle Josh assured me that he has no intention of spilling the beans unless I give him permission.

All morning I deliberately avoided looking in the direction of the Green Mansion. My father and I haven't spoken since the hospital press conference. I'm not sure we'll ever speak again.

The light changes and I take brisk strides across the street in the company of a dozen other working folks on their lunch hour. When I step up on the curb my heel briefly wobbles on a corner of one of the cracked golden cobblestones that pave the sidewalks in this part of the city.

Goddamn yellow bricks.

Not far from here is where I wrenched my ankle last fall.

The memory makes me smile. Micah swept me into his arms and carried me through the busy streets.

Last night at dinner I asked him if he's made a decision about a prosthetic hand. He joked that he ought to get a hook and look the part of a proper villain.

But Micah Lyonne was never a villain. He was meant to be my hero.

The café is just steps away when my phone rings. By the time I dig it out of my purse I'm standing in front of the huge window facing the sidewalk. Uncle Josh is already seated at a table in the middle of the restaurant. He sees me on the other side of the glass and breaks into an immediate smile.

I hold up one finger and turn away to answer the call from Haven.

"Where are you?" she says instead of a hello. The hard clip in her voice is not unusual, not for her.

"Downtown. Why?"

"You're not driving, are you?"

“No.”

“Good. Because if you were, I would tell you to pull the hell over before hearing this.”

Now I’m nervous. Instinctively, my hand goes to my belly.
“What’s up?”

She exhales loudly. “Damn. Wish I didn’t have to say this but you need to watch your back. The fifth man.”

“What?”

“The fucker in a skull mask who lived, the one who got away. My father’s boys finally found him holed up on Canal Street.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? But Pierce Carrington is already dead so it’s not like his testimony will be needed.”

“Pierce Carrington didn’t hire him.”

“What does that mean?”

Silence. Haven isn’t a girl who hesitates.

“Haven?”

“Tess, I’m so sorry. I really am.”

The next sentence she utters steals my breath.

I want to turn back time a day, an hour, to anything before I had this knowledge.

The taste of bile is on my tongue and my voice scratches.
“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. He could have gotten off easy by naming Carrington and he held out.”

I shut my eyes. “Oh.”

“We’ve dealt with him. But that still leaves another problem.”

“Right.”

“Tessie?” Her voice becomes more gentle. “Are you okay? I’m at the club right now. I can come and get you.”

“I’m fine.” Except I’m not. I’m screaming inside.

“Text me later so I know you got home all right,” she says.

I look up and see Uncle Josh is watching me. The look on my face must be pretty transparent because he stands up.

“Will do,” I say to Haven and she clicks off without saying goodbye.

I need a minute. I need to think. I need to breathe.

I need Micah.

But I also need to sit down. If I don’t, I might collapse out here on the yellow bricks.

My uncle is about to come out and ask what the hell is happening.

There’s no way I can tell him. I need to sort this out in my racing mind before confronting the consequences.

I’m not hungry in the slightest but standing out here in a state of shock while my uncle worries isn’t a solution.

My troubled mind asks if there’s any way Josh Ballerini could have known.

Flashing back to the events of that night, I think not.

No, Josh couldn’t have known. He risked his own life.

Josh leaves the table when I finally walk through the café door. “You look like you’re going to pass out.”

“Just morning sickness.” I flash a weak smile. “It’s actually not just for mornings.”

He gets me settled in a chair and passes the bread basket. “Try and eat something. Maybe it’ll help.”

I select a buttery herb roll and nibble on a corner as a waiter fills my water glass.

“Could I get a green mint iced tea please?”

“Absolutely.” The waiter hands me a laminated menu.

Josh seems satisfied that I’m being taken care of. He scans the menu. “How’s Micah today?”

I sip my water. The butter roll sticks in my throat. I swallow hard. “He’s seeing his occupational therapist. I’m glad he’s started drawing again. Thanks for checking up on him all the time. The pep talks you give him do help, even if he doesn’t admit it.”

My voice sounds ridiculous to me. Having a normal conversation is a challenge when a tornado rages inside my head.

Josh doesn’t appear to notice. His eyes stay on the menu and he smiles. “Glad to. Micah will figure things out. You two have a lot to look forward to.”

The waiter brings my tea. Despite raging inner turmoil, my stomach rumbles with hunger. Perhaps it’s better to confront devastation on a full stomach. I order a standard burger and fries.

“How’s the new job?” I ask.

“Challenging. Can’t deny that I’m getting some side eye for being the mayor’s brother. I don’t blame anyone for that. I’m the one that’s got to prove myself.”

I nod along and ask more questions, trying to keep up my end of a normal conversation on a day that now feels anything but normal.

Our food arrives in record time and Josh dives right into his steak and potatoes.

“You’re not hungry?” He asks when he sees me just picking at my plate.

“Plenty hungry. I plan to milk this eating for two concept as much as possible.” I pat my belly for emphasis.

Josh stiffens and his steak knife clatters out of his hand.

“Nobody shared the good news with me.” Stuart Ballerini’s voice hits me like a bucket of ice. “It seems congratulations are in order.”

My father pats my shoulder. I flinch. He drags a chair over from a neighboring table.

Uncle Josh glances at me and his eyes narrow into a glare before landing on his brother once more. “We didn’t have any plans today, Stuart.”

“True.” He takes a seat. “You didn’t answer my text this morning. I called your office, reminded them I was the mayor. Your assistant is a nice girl. Mary, right? Don’t fire her. I demanded to know the whereabouts of my chief of police. I’m sure she thought she was doing you a favor when she added that you were having lunch here with my daughter.”

I push back from the table. Now that he’s here, all I want to do is run away as fast as possible.

My father turns his head and examines me. “So who’s the father, Tess?”

“Stuart.” Josh growls out his brother’s name. “Don’t do this.”

“It’s okay, Uncle Josh. I don’t mind answering the question. Dad, you know it’s Micah’s baby. But you’ll never meet him. Or her.”

My father shakes his head. “No ring on your finger, I see. Careful what you say right now. You’ll come crying to me when that worthless criminal is done having his fill.” He gestures with disgust. “What a disgrace. After everything I’ve invested in you, this is what you turn into.”

His words can’t hurt me anymore.

“I’m not some property that you own. And as of today I’m not your daughter anymore either. You told me once I was *finished*. Guess what? Karma’s a bitch and she’s about to smack you sideways.”

This makes no impression on him. He hails the waiter. “I’ll take a Tom Collins please.”

Josh watches us uneasily, his shoulders hunched with tension.

I should just get up and leave. My uncle would come with me if I asked. He’d make sure I got safely back to my car.

Yes, I should do that. But I can’t.

Not while Stuart Ballerini sits here calmly awaiting his drink and believing he’s untouchable.

“Where’s your entourage?” I look around for any sign of my father’s security guards. “Did you leave them outside? We have to make sure the mayor is safely guarded at all times.”

Slowly, my father turns his gaze back to me. He sits up taller.

The waiter drops off his drink and my father keeps his calculating eyes on me.

I take a sip of my water. “Sorry to hear about your pal Pierce. I imagine you’re pretty shaken up. You were such good friends.”

He looks around to see if anyone is listening. “Carrington and I weren’t friends. We were associates. You never did understand the difference.”

“Oh, take your definitions and shove it. When I tried to tell you that I was afraid of him because he attempted to drug me at a bar you could not care less.”

“What?” Josh gapes at me in horror. Then his face collapses. “Tessie.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” my father replies smoothly. “But in business and in life there are always choices to be made.”

“Choices, huh? Yeah, I can see your guards now. Two of them are standing just outside by the door. How did you *choose* which one to send with Pierce’s thugs to mutilate the man I love?”

He falters, then smiles. “Do you need help finding a doctor, Tessie Belle? The proper meds should help with those hallucinations.”

“Just *stop*. It’s over. The man talked. If he’s still alive he’s not in great shape. But he was a member of your security team. You paid him to go with those bastards Carrington had assembled. You said you needed to have your own man in there to make sure this task was *done right*.” I can’t stop my voice from shaking. With rage. With grief. “You were trying to

inflict maximum suffering, to destroy Micah simply because you didn't get your way. You're fucking evil."

At last, he can't stay composed. He shifts in his chair and his forehead breaks out in a sheen of sweat. "Trauma inflicts a lot of mental damage. That's the only way I can explain how you came up with such an insane story."

"Trauma my ass. Did you kill Micah's father too? I think maybe you did."

Josh has been sitting across the table in stunned silence, but now he looks up and breathes fire. "You swore to me, Stuart. You swore to me on the graves of our parents, on our brotherhood, that you had *nothing* to do with the attack on Micah."

People at surrounding tables are now beginning to notice the commotion and stare.

Stuart Ballerini takes note and sweats even more. "Josh, let's go back to my office and-"

"YOU FUCKING SWORE TO ME!" Uncle Josh slams his hand down on the table so hard it cracks.

Gasps rain down from all directions. My father's security guards run in but halt at the door when they see the chief of police.

Josh is looking downright murderous. "She could have been killed. *Tess could have been killed.*"

In the wake of this accusation, my father remains completely still.

Then his mask of civility finally slips off. The sheer hatred on his face is cold enough to penetrate my bones.

My uncle sees it too and grabs for me.

“Tessie, get behind me right now.”

I scamper out of my chair, glad for my uncle’s protection.

Stuart Ballerini sits back and stares at us, an odd gleam in his eye. “Well, isn’t that cute. The two of you.”

Josh plucks a radio from his belt. “I’m bringing you in, Stuart.”

“The hell you are.” He spots the steak knife Josh dropped and seizes it. He runs his thumb lightly along the blade.

The radio crackles in Josh’s hand. “Need backup at the Emerald Café. Suspect’s name is Stuart Ballerini.”

My father draws a drop of blood on his thumb and gapes at his brother. I believe he’s honestly shocked. He thought he’d be able to talk his way out of this, that Josh would never turn him in.

He gets to his feet.

Josh draws his gun.

People scream and crawl under tables. Some of them run through the door. The mayor’s security guards watch the scene with their mouths open. Their boss marches right past them, out the door and into the bustle of downtown.

“Stay here,” Josh hisses to me and then addresses the room. “Everyone, remain inside. This is a matter for the Emerald City Police.”

My father stands on the sidewalk in front of the café. He’s perched on the edge of the curb, facing away. He looks up at the tall buildings, then holds his arms out like he’s directing traffic as he wades into the busy street. Vehicles honk and slam on their brakes and nearly collide.

Not everyone has obeyed Uncle Josh. The door to the café is being propped wide open by people who can't help but watch the spectacle unfolding right outside.

Though I know it's a bad idea, I can't stop myself from joining them. Whatever is going to happen, I need to see it.

Josh Ballerini crouches on the sidewalk with his gun warily trained on his brother. "Stuart, come with me. This ends now."

Stuart Ballerini whirls around in the middle of the street. "Don't you ever forget that I fucking made you, little brother." He's still holding the steak knife and uses it as a pointer. "Both of you. *I fucking made you.*"

Three police cars pull up and multiple officers exit, guns already out.

"THIS IS MY CITY!" Stuart Ballerini spreads his arms wide and takes a step backwards.

Right onto the metal tracks that run straight down the middle of the road.

He never sees the commuter train before it slams into his body.

36. Micah

Josh Ballerini took care of the messy details. He saw to the cremation so Tess wouldn't have to do a thing. He gets my gratitude for that.

The official story is that a week ago today, Mayor Stuart Ballerini had a mental health incident in a downtown café, threatened a bunch of people with a steak knife and was instantly killed when he stepped in front of a train.

The rest of it was kept out of the news. I know Josh is to thank for that as well. The bad guy is dead. Adding to the tabloid fodder won't do anyone any good, especially Tess.

Still...

That fucking vile bastard.

I'm not a real firm believer in the afterlife but I hope Stuart Ballerini's skin is being flayed off one centimeter at a time in the pits of hell right now.

These are the thoughts I'm entertaining myself with as I roll through the gates of my old neighborhood in West Emerald.

Dani has asked me to go visit Matilda. I probably should have come before this. My mother isn't doing well. She hardly leaves her bedroom. It's getting ridiculous. She really needs to

get her shit together for Charlotte. I'm not sure how seeing me will do any good but if I can help then I will.

My foot presses the brake, slowing down as I pass Tess's old house. Josh has the key and told Tess she ought to come by at her leisure and take whatever she wants. The ivy covering the stately walls looks brown and crisp and completely dead now.

Seems like there's symbolism in that fact.

Henley opens the door to my old house. He beckons with a tired smile. "Micah, come in."

His eyes automatically stray to my vanished hand, then flash away just as quickly. It's just something I'll have to get used to from everyone.

Total issues a belated bark and comes galloping into the room.

"Hey there, watch dog." I bend down to give him a pat on his excited little head.

Henley shuts the door to stop the dog from escaping. "Charlotte's at a friend's house. It's good for her to get out of here for a while."

I get to my feet while Total pulls at the hem of my jeans. "I'm actually here to see my mother."

He's shocked. But he recovers enough to be gracious. "Of course. She's in the bedroom. I'll go see if she--"

"Thanks, I know the way." I'm already walking down the hall before he can interfere. No offense to Henley, but it's high time my mother and I had a one on one talk.

I rap my knuckles on the door and my mother's voice, less animated than usual, answers with a sigh.

“I’m awake, Henley. Just come in.”

I crack the door open slowly. “It’s not Henley, Mom.”

“Micah.” She gasps out my name, perhaps not even noticing that I’ve called her something I’ve refused to call her since I was a teenager.

The way she sits propped up in bed amid a cloud of pillows is an eerie reminder of Cecile. It’s two o’clock in the afternoon but she wears pink silk pajamas and her legs are covered by a fake fur blanket. She lowers the tablet in her hand and blinks behind a pair of gold-framed glasses I’ve never seen her wear. I didn’t know she needed glasses at all.

“Is it all right if I come in?”

“Yes, I can spare a minute.”

She can SPARE a minute?

I’ll just have to let that one go by. Hell, I didn’t come here to find things to get annoyed about.

My mother watches me drag a hideous gold chair away from the wall. I’m sure she’d like to order me to be nicer to her ugly designer furniture but at least she holds the words back.

Taking a seat, I appraise my mother for the first time in a long while. She looks about as exhausted and unglamorous as I’ve ever seen her. Unlike her husband, she doesn’t glance at the place where my hand used to be. In fact, it seems like she deliberately avoids noticing the void hidden by the cuff of my flannel shirt.

“How are you doing?” Yeah, it’s a dumb question but I’m at a loss how else to open this.

She looks down at her hands. A couple of her fake nails are missing. “Charlotte wants to quit ballet. She keeps asking to play soccer. Tess didn’t come with you?”

“Nope, she’s downtown helping her uncle clean out some shit from the mayor’s office.”

A nod. “I’m sure this ordeal has been excruciating for her. But I will set up an appointment for her with Layla at the club’s spa. She works absolute wonders on the massage table.”

“Great. I’ll pass the message along.” I will. And Tess will probably laugh.

Silence ensues.

I wrack my brain for something relevant to say. “Turns out you can sell artwork online. Tess set up a website. I slapped some of my stuff on there and I’m already getting orders. Customized logos and shit.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you could...” She trails off with a limp gesture.

“Yeah, I can still draw.” I hold up my left hand. “Ambidextrous, remember?”

“Yes, I should have remembered that. I *do* remember that.”

“Maybe I could show you my work sometime.”

She nods. “That would be nice.”

I point to the tablet in her hands. “Were you watching something?”

My mother looks down. “No. Well, not really. I was looking at old movies.”

“Like black and white old movies?”

“Not quite that old.” She smiles faintly. “Old videos of your father.”

News to me. I assumed she’d long ago destroyed any visual evidence of Ethan. “I didn’t know you had any.”

“I have pictures too. In a box in my closet. I should give them to you.” She looks down and navigates the tablet. She finds what she’s looking for and sighs before passing it over. “A family vacation. You were six months old here.”

I’m unprepared for the intuitive recognition that hits me when I look at my father. I can identify the view of Lake Poppy in the background as the sun sets. My father sits on the edge of a short wooden pier with me in his lap and points to the water.

I see myself, not in the infant yawning and staring at a scene he’ll never remember, but in the span of my father’s broad shoulders and the way he cocks his head.

Matilda was the one behind the camera. She calls Ethan’s name and he turns. Smiles. Holds me up and moves my little arm in a waving motion. He kisses my cheek and then cradles me to his shoulder.

The video cuts off. I hand the tablet back to my mother.

“Thanks for showing me this.”

“I have more. I’ll make sure to send them to you.”

“I’d like that.”

She hugs her tablet to her chest. “Ethan and I got married very young. We weren’t always a good match. But we tried.”

I think that’s her way of saying that she really did love my father. “I didn’t realize how much I look like him.”

“You *do* look like him.” She picks at a loose silken thread in her comforter. “He wouldn’t be very happy with me now.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I failed to protect you. From Olivia. From Stuart. From... everything. Ethan would never have forgiven me.”

Truth be told, I don’t forgive her either. She didn’t exactly bend over backwards to help me beat the charges for the fire. Then after I got out of prison she acted like the sight of me embarrassed her. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit how that fucked me up.

Matilda expects me to say something about how I don’t blame her. It’s not one of my habits to lie, so I say nothing, even when she wilts into her pillows some more.

Though I’m not sorry that I can’t give her the unconditional forgiveness she craves, I promised Cecile I would make amends with Matilda. And there is something I can offer my mother after all.

“I came here in person because I wanted to give you some news.”

She stops examining her blanket. “Oh, yes?”

“Tess is pregnant. It wasn’t planned but it’s definitely happening. You’re going to be a grandmother.”

Matilda’s mouth falls open and her eyes grow wide behind her glasses.

Her expression looks like a close relation to panic. My mother has always been keen on appearing more youthful than she is, injecting junk into her face to smooth out lines and admiring the results in every mirror she passes. To her, image

is everything. Being called ‘Grandma’ is probably not high on her list of goals.

“A baby,” she says softly, almost like she’s talking to herself. “You and Tess are having a baby.”

It’s been a surprise to me how I’ve already grown ferociously attached to the idea. “Yup, we’re having a baby.”

That’s all the adrenaline she needs. She flings her covers back and jumps to her feet.

Throwing a pink shawl over her shoulders, she’s off and running on a monologue. “The golf club is the ideal wedding venue and I’m not above twisting a few arms to reserve the ballroom on short notice. Our Tess will have the wedding of her dreams. I’m still heartbroken that Dani insisted on marrying at the courthouse.” She claps her hands together, struck with inspiration. “A spring wedding, think of it. Tess will be a stunning bride.”

Matilda has conveniently forgotten that Tess is still trying to come to terms with learning her father was a homicidal maniac right before watching him become roadkill. We haven’t discussed a wedding in so many words but I doubt she’s up to going to dress fittings and selecting floral arrangements today.

There’s also the fact that I’m without a hand at the moment and not a prime candidate for a photo shoot.

But hey, chalk it up to my mother not to let a little mayhem and missing limbs interfere with planning the next social event.

There’s no way to let Matilda down gently without provoking a tantrum so I just let her carry on.

However, I'm caught off guard when she swoops in with the world's most melodramatic hug. I choke on a mouthful of her blonde curls.

"Micah, you've made me so happy." She rocks back and forth, clutching me with sudden maternal enthusiasm.

It's weird. And not altogether comfortable.

But I guess this beats having my name cursed so I'll just let it ride and hold back from spitting out some sarcastic comment.

I'm relieved when we're interrupted by Charlotte's voice as she arrives home.

"Micah's here? Where?"

"He's in here, my darling." Matilda releases me before patting my head like I'm Total. "And we have some wonderful news to share with you."

Matilda can't be stopped from broadcasting the latest developments. I don't mind, especially when I see the way my kid sister's face becomes radiant when she hears that she'll be an aunt.

"Can I babysit? I'm not afraid to change diapers. I'll even change poop diapers."

Henley stands in the doorway and grins at me while everyone carries on about diapers and weddings.

Charlotte twirls with excitement. "Micah, can we take Total for a walk to Dani's house? Please?"

"Charlotte," Matilda scolds, "your brother is in no condition to walk a dog."

The flash of pain in the kid's eyes is crushing. "Micah, I forgot. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. Last I checked, I still had two legs." I smack one thigh to make the point. "Leash up the dog. We'll leave right now." I nod to Matilda. "Does that suit you, Mom?"

Any objection she might have had is smothered when she hears me call her that for the second time today. I never knew she cared either way. But her face softens and she moves closer to her husband.

"Yes, that's fine," she says, taking Henley's arm and giving us a fond smile. Henley wraps an arm around her and she rests her head on his shoulder, her eyes filling with sudden tears. "Just look at my babies."

Charlotte gives me an eye rolling look that says she's used to these theatrics.

"Let's go." She pulls at my arm, then yanks her hand back, her face falling when she realizes she's touched the arm that is missing something.

There's no need to hide from the way things are. I wave my arm and the cuff of my shirt flaps. "I've been tossing around the idea of getting one of those bionic hands. What do you think?"

She giggles. "That would practically make you a superhero."

My little sister scampers off to attach a leash to the dog. I'm about to follow her but Matilda says my name.

Then she smiles. "You're going to be a good father."

I hope like hell that's true.

37. Tess

I want this to be the last time I'll ever set foot inside the Green Mansion.

The Emerald City PD has already combed through the office. This is a courtesy, and a nod to Uncle Josh's status, that they allow us to come here and privately collect any personal effects.

Micah didn't want me coming down here without him but I'm safe with my uncle. I feel like this unpleasant chore is something Josh and I need to finish together.

Uncle Josh holds an empty file box and murmurs a word of thanks to the Em City cop who unlocks the door to my father's office.

"Take as long as you need," says the officer. He positions himself just outside the door.

Uncle Josh lets me take the lead. I ignore the dread curling through my gut as I step over the threshold into the office my father coveted, won, and only occupied briefly.

I was afraid I'd sense his presence in here somehow, a shadow of his ghost, perhaps a whiff of his overpowering cologne.

But no, there's just an empty chair behind a desk. The room smells strongly of lemon soap, having been scrubbed already in anticipation of the new mayor.

Still, my bulky cardigan isn't enough of a buffer to guard against the chill that comes from within.

Tucking my phone into a large sweater pocket, I drop my purse on the floor and wander to the window.

Emerald City winks back at me, unaware that its fate has changed hands in a violent way.

The city's people might be better off. In the end, I had to admit to myself that my father was solely motivated by ambition and had no intention of improving a thing for anyone who couldn't be of use to him in some way.

Uncle Josh tiptoes behind me and sets the empty box on top of the broad desk. "Where do you want to start?"

Turning around, I'm struck by the thought that my uncle has definitely seen better days. His brown eyes are bloodshot and sunken. He wears his police uniform, though judging by the wrinkles he might have slept in it.

I'm not the only one who's suffering right now.

Josh has not only lost the big brother he's idolized forever but he was the one ultimately responsible for taking him down.

Even though we've lost so much, our link is unbroken.

We're still here and we're still family.

I'm sure he's surprised when I reach out for a hug. "Love you, Uncle Josh."

"Love you too, Tessie Belle." He rasps out the words but he gently hugs me back.

Despite the raw feeling in my throat, I won't cry. I've shed more than my fair share of tears lately.

Let this be a day of closure, when all of us begin to heal and move forward.

Uncle Josh agrees to look through the desk while I search the shelves and bookcases for anything personal that would be worth keeping. My father wasn't one to accumulate knickknacks and memorabilia. The lone succulent cactus can be left to the next resident. Same with the thick clothbound volumes on Em City laws and history that line the shelves for aesthetic purposes and have almost certainly never been cracked open.

Uncle Josh is collecting the gallery of framed photos lined up on the windowsill.

"What are you looking at?" I ask because the expression on his face is sad.

He sighs and turns the photo around to show me. "The day I graduated from the police academy."

The Ballerini brothers are posed proudly side by side on a grassy field as people mill around behind them.

"Make sure you take that," I tell him.

With a nod, he sets it in the box.

"Ah, one of my favorites." Uncle Josh holds the silver framed portrait of me in my cap and gown on the day I graduated from West Emerald Prep. Not a bad photo, but certainly not a recent one.

A cold finger crawls along my spine as I flash back to the exact moment it was taken. My brand new stepmother was playing photographer and kept ordering me to smile in

different poses while my cheeks ached. I counted down the minutes until I could escape and go hang out with Dani. My father, I recall, wasn't paying attention, even during the ceremony. He was busy networking with the wealthy parents of my classmates.

I don't think of it as a happy day.

But Uncle Josh doesn't have the same feelings. He gazes at my teenage smiling face with fondness before adding the frame to the box.

My eyes are drawn to another object on the windowsill and I cross the room for a closer look.

Uncle Josh watches me pick up my parents' wedding photo. They were young here, both just a little older than I am right now. The wedding was held at the old country club in West Emerald, long before it was damaged by fire and replaced with the glitzy new version.

My father towers over his petite bride. She beams at me from the past, with no idea that she would someday have a daughter that she wouldn't live long enough to raise.

Pictures have a way of reminding us that we're all made from threads of history, some of them frayed and irreparable. But they exist nonetheless.

"I'll bring this one home." I place the frame in the box.

The sight of my father's face will never be a welcome one. Yet this photo doesn't just belong to me. My child will also have a history to reckon with.

"Are you all right?" Uncle Josh wears a worried frown.

When I rub my stomach I can detect a new roundness in its shape. "I'm fine. Just missing my mother right now."

Uncle Josh stuffs his hands in his pockets and gazes out the window. “Sorry things turned out this way, Tessie.”

“It’s not your fault.” I chew my lip, wondering if this is an okay time to bring up a question that’s been stewing. “Do you think we could talk about my mother sometime? Growing up, she was always this sort of mythical figure. Yet there were no funny tales, no sentimental stories. I never had any grandparents I could talk to and she was an only child. You’re the only one left who remembers her. I guess she’s just been on my mind now that I know I’m going to be a mother too.”

Josh stays by the window. His eyes dart to my belly and he scrubs a hand through his hair. “Sure, we can talk about her. Diana, I mean. Your mother.”

The flat quality in his voice doesn’t escape my notice. Something occurs to me that had never occurred to me before.

“You didn’t like her, did you?”

It’s odd, the way he shifts and avoids making eye contact.

“She wasn’t a good mother.”

The statement couldn’t be more jarring. My father only ever discussed Diana in the most glowing terms.

She was beautiful. She was kind. She loved everyone and everyone loved her.

“Look at the stone angel, Tess. Her face is your mother’s face. So she would always be here to watch over you.”

But the blank, cold stare of the angel statue in the cemetery only gave me nightmares instead.

“They weren’t happy together, were they? My parents, I mean.”

Josh considers the question and it's impossible to read the look on his face, which is a new challenge. Josh has always been an open book. Completely forthright. What you see is what you get. "No, not in the end."

Peering inside the box, I take a second look at my young, smiling parents.

Stuart Ballerini always refused to see people in their full human complexity. We were all designated a role to play in the drama of his life, of which he was the sole star.

Josh was his trusted, loyal brother.

Diana was his saintly lost love.

Olivia was the evil witch who nearly cost him his kingdom.

And me?

I was the perfect daughter. Designed and trained to help him achieve his goals, and devoid of any troublesome wishes of my own.

"Let's go." I pick up the box. "There's nothing else in here that I want."

Josh takes the box from me. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I don't want to spend another minute in this damn place."

After one last look at the Em City skyline, I do make a silent wish that the city's new guardian will be far better than her last. The city deserves that.

People gawk at us with morbid curiosity as we walk the hall for the last time and take the elevator to the parking garage.

Uncle Josh's trunk is full of police equipment so he deposits the box in the backseat.

"Oh, shoot." I already have the door open to the front passenger seat when I remember something.

Uncle Josh raises an eyebrow.

I shut the door. "I forgot the paperweight."

"Paperweight?"

"The personalized crystal paperweight that my mother gave my father on their first anniversary. He always keeps it on his desk. You didn't grab it, did you?"

"No." He shakes his head. "But now that you mention it, I do remember seeing it beside the file tray. You hang out here. I'll go get it."

"Are you sure?"

He nods. "I know you don't want to go back up there."

I don't. I really don't.

"Thanks."

"I'll be right back." He's already walking briskly toward the elevator.

Once I'm closed into the car, a sense of tranquility moves through me. I wouldn't say I'm at ease. Recent events have been earth shattering and will take a long time to recover from.

But after today, I'm only going to look ahead. To the life Micah and I will share together.

My hand automatically covers my stomach. This has become a habit, touching my belly and anticipating the day when I'll be able to feel tiny kicks coming from within.

Every night before we settle down to bed, Micah gently lays his head on my stomach. When I see him this way, and I think about the new life we've made that's half him and half me, I'm overcome with such blissful happiness that I can hardly breathe.

This is enough to eclipse all the anguish and sorrow. We're free to love each other and await the arrival of our baby.

It's always intense, the yearning to hold him close, breathe in his warmth, feel his heartbeat. I can't wait to be with him again and I know I won't have to wait long. We'll enjoy a quiet night at home. Maybe get some takeout food, watch a movie, make love for hours. Such ordinary nights are the stuff happiness is made of.

As I tenderly rub the vaguely swollen hill beneath my hand, again I think of my mother.

Over the course of my life, she became more legend than human. Uncle Josh's blunt words were troubling. I'll never truly know who she was and I can only guess what would have been different if she'd lived.

I'm going to blame my sentimental hormones for the intense urge to look at her face right now.

There's a metal grate separating the front seat from the backseat in Uncle Josh's police cruiser. From up here, it's impossible to reach back and access the box we took from my father's office.

Leaving my purse behind, I exit the passenger seat and open the door to the back. The box sits on the opposite side so I slide over and reach inside.

The first picture I pull out isn't the one I was looking for. This is the one taken at Uncle Josh's police academy

graduation. The Ballerini brothers are shoulder to shoulder, Uncle Josh looking very much like a younger clone of his big brother. Both of them black-haired and handsome and likely hopeful for the future.

I'm sure Uncle Josh will always feel pain when he looks at pictures like this, but the passage of time will go a long way toward healing him as well. He's the closest thing to a parent that I have left and I hope he wants to remain a big part of my life.

Just as I'm about to set the picture aside and reach for a different one, a face catches my eye. It's a slightly blurry face, in the background just off Uncle Josh's left shoulder. The man smiles for a different camera. He also wears a police uniform.

And I've met him before.

Here, the years have melted from his face. After all, this photo must have been taken almost two decades ago. But that long pointed chin is distinctive and I have no doubt in my mind that I'm looking at the man who was once introduced to me as Dr. Reggie Spigato.

Uncle Josh swore up and down that he had no idea my father was lying about his health issues. He insisted he was just another innocent party who got swept into my father's web of lies and manipulation.

This photo casts doubt on everything I thought I knew.

It's not plausible that Josh wouldn't recognize a man who had obviously graduated from the police academy the same time he did. All along, I assumed my father had hired an actor to masquerade as the doctor.

The truth, however, appears to be more complicated.

What if the imposter was a friend? A friend who had been asked to perform a small favor and put on a brief act for an audience of one.

Me.

Whatever the case, it's obvious that Uncle Josh told a whopper of a lie.

And if he's lied about that...

What the hell else has he lied about?

"Got it." My uncle opens the backseat door and triumphantly presents the crystal paperweight that's etched with my parents' wedding date.

He tries to hand the thing over and becomes concerned when I refuse to take it.

"Tess, what is it?" Worry lines appear on his forehead. "Is it the baby?"

He drops the paperweight on the floor and reaches for me but I recoil from his hand.

Uncle Josh shrivels with anxious confusion.

I hold up the photo. "You didn't realize he was in the background, did you? Take a good look at Dr. Spigato."

He's no longer confused. Now he's alarmed. "Tess, I-"

"What's his real name? And don't lie to me."

The air goes out of his lungs. He glances around, then ducks inside the car, closing the door behind him. I hear a lock click and understand that I have made a terrible tactical error.

I should *never* have confronted him here. Alone.

Uncle Josh stares at his hands and nods to himself. “All right. This has been a long time coming.”

“What has?” I’ve been inching my hand over to the door handle. I’m not shocked to discover I can’t open it.

He notices and gives me a grim look. “He’s a buddy of mine. Very into theater. He’s best known for playing Ebenezer Scrooge every holiday season at the Em City Concert Hall.”

“Like I give a shit about his resumé.”

Uncle Josh scowls at the profanity. “I’m trying to explain this to you.”

I need to get away from him somehow. “Great. Let’s go get some lunch and you can explain the whole situation.”

He mulls the idea over. “No, that won’t work.”

“Sure it will. I’ll listen to whatever you have to say. I’m sure you have a good explanation. But right now I’m hungry and so is the baby.”

His answering chuckle is devoid of humor. “Stuart always said your biggest flaw was too much honesty. You weren’t like us in that way. I don’t agree that it’s a flaw. But it means you can’t fool me.”

My heart pounds. “Uncle Josh, let me out of here right now.”

He rolls his head back on the seat, then slowly looks my way. “Sorry, I can’t do that.”

Terror takes over and I try the door handle again. When it doesn’t budge I pound on the door itself, then the window. “HELP!”

But Uncle Josh has no patience for hysterics. He grabs my right arm. I try to punch him with my left fist but he snatches that with no problem, pinning both my wrists together in one of his large hands, then clucking his tongue, like restraining me is annoyingly easy.

“Let. Me. GO.” I flail and struggle and get nowhere.

“Tess.” He barks my name in his stern cop voice, something he’s never used on me before.

“You need to calm down and get yourself under control.”

My god, he sounds *exactly* like my father.

“Fuck you.” Bold words when I’m trapped in the back of his police car and his iron grip is preventing me from moving.

With all my might I try to yank my arms free.

“Stop it. You hear me? You’ll hurt the baby.” He cuffs my wrists together.

His face is only inches away. I wish my nails were longer so I’d have a prayer of clawing his eyes out.

I have no idea what he plans to do next.

The blunt surge of panic is not for myself but for the tiny life growing inside me.

This is a protective instinct unlike anything else, bonding me not only to my child but to the man I love.

Micah, I won't let him harm our baby.

Physically, I’m no match for an average man, let alone a man like my uncle. But the rush of adrenaline multiplies my strength.

I’ll fight him like hell.

Uncle Josh, however, has temporarily lost all traces of anger. He drops my cuffed wrists and retreats, sinking into the seat. The glances he keeps shooting my way are worried, apologetic.

“I didn’t want it to happen this way.”

His calm statement is almost more frightening than the fact that he has slapped me in handcuffs.

“What the FUCK are you talking about?”

“You’ll see.” He reaches for the seatbelt and I try to kick him.

All that happens is that I bump my knee and my shoe rolls off.

Who am I kidding?

Shit. I’m no fighter. Even if I were free, I could punch and claw like mad and I still wouldn’t have a prayer of overpowering him.

Uncle Josh clicks the seatbelt closed. He checks my cuffs.

“Please don’t hurt me, Uncle Josh.” Reasoning with him. Begging. It’s the only chance I’ve got.

A flash of pain swirls in his eyes and he sweeps the hair from my forehead.

“No. Don’t be afraid, Tessie Belle. We’re going home. It’s time.” He plants a gentle kiss on my head.

My shudder of revulsion makes him sigh.

When he exits the backseat and gets behind the wheel I take a chance and scream at the top of my lungs.

Nothing happens.

Nobody comes running.

We're surrounded by empty vehicles. And even if someone did see, it looks like I'm the one clearly at fault here. After all, I must have done *something* to wind up handcuffed in the back of a car belonging to the chief of police.

Josh is annoyed by my little outburst. He slams his door shut and swivels to give me a hard look through the grate.

“Promise me you won't do that again.”

Eat shit, you asshole. “Okay, I promise, Uncle Josh.” If I keep saying his name, then maybe sanity will click back on inside his head.

Satisfied, he nods and starts the car.

There's no siren and his speed is unhurried as he steers out of the parking garage and through the dense maze of downtown Emerald City.

I keep wracking my brain for something to say but I can't think straight through the hazy buzz of fear.

Up front, my uncle keeps driving, signaling to merge onto the freeway as if he's just out for a routine drive and doesn't have his pregnant niece handcuffed in the back of his squad car.

The radio crackles and a woman's voice blurts out some police jargon but he presses a button and the sound disappears.

He's given no hint about our destination but I can't just sit back here and hope for the best. Something has gone very wrong inside my uncle's head.

Or, more chillingly, something has *always* been wrong inside his head and I've discovered this a little too late.

But when I sift through my memories at lightning speed I can't think of a single occasion when my uncle treated me with anything other than patience and love. He attended my dance recitals and ferried me to doctor's appointments when my father didn't have the time. He brought me bakery treats and sent care packages while I was living in a college dorm.

Of course, all that warm and fuzzy history went out the window the second I saw that photograph. I just can't make sense of what has happened since then.

We're picking up speed now, rocketing down the freeway and leaving Em City behind. In a futile move, I try to break free of my handcuffs and only end up bruising my wrists.

If Uncle Josh overhears my struggle he doesn't say a word. I glare at the stoic back of his head and wish for very bad things to happen to it. If only I hadn't left my purse in the front seat. Maybe he wouldn't have noticed if I sneakily used my phone.

Then a revelation hits me.

I would have smacked my forehead if my hands were free.

While I did leave my purse up front, *my phone is not with it*. Earlier, as I walked into my father's office, I stuck my phone in the deep front pocket of my sweater. I was so flustered that I forgot.

But it's still there.

Keeping a wary eye on my uncle, I want to weep with happiness when my fingers dig into my pocket and close around the shape of my phone.

The happiness is short lived when I slowly withdraw the phone, press my thumb to the screen and watch it flicker to life.

Now what?

I can't call the police. They aren't going to believe a word I say with their chief sitting right there and he can make up any story he likes.

Worse, my battery is low, barely a sliver. It can't be at more than one or two percent.

With my wrists still cuffed, I don't have much range of motion. My efforts are clumsy and I bite back a curse when I accidentally click on the last text received. It was from Charlotte. No words, just a picture of Total.

Uncle Josh must have eyes in the back of his head because somehow he knows that I'm up to no good.

"Put it down." He's so exasperated you'd think I was a child who got caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

He glances over his shoulder at my frozen face.

"Just toss the phone into the box and don't touch it again. We're going to talk, you and me. *Nothing* is going to get in the way of that. Do as I say, Tess, and do it now."

What will he do if I disobey?

Crash the car?

Shoot me?

The phone is about to die anyway.

And he's watching.

In a hasty move of desperation, I press the green call button. The buzzing ring is barely audible on the other end.

Then, with a gulp, I throw the phone into the box. There's a crack of glass, likely the impact breaking one of the framed photos.

Uncle Josh grips the steering wheel with both hands and keeps hurtling down the freeway. We're heading toward West Emerald.

Think.

Dani always enjoyed watching true crime shows. Sometimes I'd watch them with her. In one of them, a psychologist was interviewed and gave advice about what to do if you're ever kidnapped.

First, do whatever it takes to get away.

However, we must be traveling at about seventy miles an hour and I'm handcuffed in the back of a police car. Getting away isn't an immediate option.

The next piece of advice was to talk to the kidnapper, remind him of your humanity. Attempt to generate some sympathy.

"I'm scared, Uncle Josh." That's no lie. I'm terrified.

He doesn't look back again, but his shoulders suddenly sag. "You don't have to be afraid, honey."

"But I am." I look out the window. We're rapidly approaching a greener landscape and he switches lanes to get off on the next freeway exit. "We're going to West Emerald, aren't we?"

He doesn't answer.

I try again. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home." He spits out the word with exasperation, like he can't believe he needs to remind me of this.

"Whose home?"

"Ours, Tessie Belle. Where we began."

I don't especially like the sound of that. He seems more unhinged with every passing second.

My beloved uncle has been like a second father to me. Now I need to come to grips with the fact that, like my father, I never knew him at all. I really have no idea what he's capable of.

I swallow hard and breathe through the sting of oncoming tears. "Uncle Josh, why are you doing this? I don't understand."

He exhales loudly as we approach the neighborhood gates. "Like I told you Tess, you will." The gates swing open. "It all has to be over now. And I promise you will understand everything."

38. Micah

Total could use some training when it comes to walking on the leash. He zigzags and lunges and tries to devour every object he sees.

What should be a ten minute walk to Dani's house gets stretched into twice that long. I don't mind. It's fun, listening to Charlotte make plans out loud about how she's going to be the best aunt in history.

Dani is home alone, although she urges us to hang out for a little while because Gage is expected to return shortly.

She sets out plates with cheese and crackers on the back patio and the three of us watch Total defile the purity of Dani's backyard lawn.

Charlotte gobbles up her snack like she hasn't eaten all day and shares the very complex trials of the fourth grade.

“And Corey likes Adele but she's not my friend anymore because she told Rico that I like him even though I stopped liking him when he spilled his chocolate milk on my ham sandwich just to be a jerk.”

Dani meets my eye and smothers a laugh.

The entire sleeve of crackers is gone so I volunteer to visit the pantry and retrieve another one.

I haven't been in here since the night of the football game last fall. As I search the shelves for the box of crackers, it occurs to me that the pantry is totally unaware that it witnessed a notable moment that I often enjoy replaying in my head.

“Just so you know, Tessie, you won't ever be getting these back. They're mine now.”

And I've kept them ever since.

Just like I'm keeping her.

I chuckle to myself and grab the entire box of crackers.

Out in the backyard, Dani and Charlotte are chasing Total, who is thrilled to be chased.

As soon as I reclaim my chair I check my phone, wondering if Tess is finished with her task at the Green Mansion. There's no word from her so she must still be busy.

“Micah!” Charlotte bounces up and down. “Come help us chase Total.”

Chasing a puppy around a backyard with my sister is the ideal way to get some exercise. I'm faster than Total but I don't want to put an end to the fun so I pretend I can't catch him. At one point I even fall into the grass and let him slobber all over my face, which Charlotte thinks is just hilarious.

When Total gets tuckered out and flops into the grass for a nap, Charlotte starts looking around for her phone.

“I brought it. I know I did.”

“I think I saw it on the kitchen counter, Char.”

She races indoors upon hearing my advice.

Seconds later, she returns. “I wanted to show you this picture I took this morning. Oh, I have a voicemail. It's from

Tess.”

Weird. I know that Tess and Charlotte communicate via text but I don't know why she'd call unless she was looking for me. I check my own phone again to see if she's called or texted but there's nothing.

Meanwhile, Charlotte listens to the message. Then she frowns. “I think it was a butt dial. I can hardly hear anything.” Her puzzled look deepens and she looks at me. “The police chief is her Uncle Josh, right?”

“Yeah.” I can't explain the sudden stir of dread. “Why?”

“I think I heard her say she's afraid. Then she asked him where he's taking her.”

My blood stills. “Give the phone to me, Charlotte.”

She sets it on the patio table. “Here, I'll replay it on speaker.”

At first, the primary sound is the constant swish of rushing air. The sound of a car traveling at high speed.

Then, as if from far away, Tess's voice. Muffled, but still audible, most of the words able to be picked out.

“I'm scared, Uncle Josh.”

“We're going to West Emerald, aren't we?”

“Whose home?”

Josh Ballerini's answers are too indistinct, unclear even when the volume is pushed to the maximum.

What *is* clear is that Tess is terrified.

It's also clear that she's in a car and her uncle must be driving. He's taking her to West Emerald.

The call abruptly ends. The voicemail is time stamped twenty minutes ago.

I don't know what 'home' means, if he refers to his house or hers.

Her house is closer. I can sprint there in less than sixty seconds.

"Micah?" Dani's voice filters through my panic.

She moves close to Charlotte, placing her hands on the little girl's shoulders. Charlotte looks up at her, then back at me, now horrified as she understands that something is very wrong.

There's no answer when I call Tess's number. Straight to voicemail.

Dani wraps her arms protectively around Charlotte. "Micah, please wait. You don't know what you'd be walking into and Gage is almost home. You can't..." She glances at the place where my hand used to be and winces, the words unspoken but obvious.

You can't fight with one hand.

"Micah, don't go." Charlotte sniffs.

The frightened faces of my sisters beg me not to run into battle alone.

But if they know me at all then they know it doesn't matter if I'm one handed, or no handed or reduced to slithering on my belly.

Hang on, baby. I'm coming.

"Stay here," I tell my sisters and break into a run.

Nothing on earth can stop me from getting to Tess.

I meant it when I said I'd lay down my life for her.

I wouldn't even hesitate.

And I've got one more fucking fight left in me.

39. Tess

He parks in the garage, right where my car used to go. I try to scream again while the garage is open but he just sighs and presses the button to close the door.

Then I resist getting out of the car so Josh lifts me right up and carries me. I'm deposited gently into a cushioned dining room chair.

I haven't been inside this house since the day my father threw me out.

Josh takes a seat across from me. "I wanted to bring you here because right here, right at this table, is where everything started."

"Great. Can you remove my handcuffs now?"

He makes a pained face and flies over with the key ready. "I'm so sorry." He sees the red marks on my wrists and becomes even more anguished. "Forgive me, Tessie. I'd never hurt you."

That seems to be debatable in light of current events.

"Can I please call Micah and let him know I'm all right?"

He shakes his head with a sad smile. "Not yet."

My fear has receded a little.

Josh may be crazy but he doesn't seem like he wants me dead.

In fact, he keeps shooting wounded glances across the table, like he's terrified of what I'm thinking.

"Uncle Josh, you said I'd understand everything. I don't understand."

He sighs very deeply. "What I have to tell you will be hard to hear."

"I'm listening."

He taps his fingers and gazes at the other end of the table as if watching something only he can see.

"It was my first year at college. I came home for the holidays. Here, to this house. Stuart and Diana had been like parents to me ever since I lost my own. It was just the three of us at dinner on Christmas night. There was a lot of alcohol on the table and with Diana's encouragement, I drank more than my fair share. Stuart was the one who made the request. Diana moved to sit beside me, holding my hand while he talked. They'd been trying for a child for years. After a series of medical tests, it was confirmed that the issue was with Stuart. He would only accept a child that was of his blood and he didn't want anyone to know. He made it sound like such a small thing, such an inconsequential favor for the big brother who had taken care of me when I needed him, who would give me the world if he could. Now I could give something to him. I don't remember if I actually said yes to their plan but I let Diana lead me to the bedroom. She touched me and asked if I wanted her."

His voice cracks and his breath shudders. “And I *did* want her, god help me, I did. I know it sounds bad, but I was drunk and I’d never been intimate with a woman before. Diana was very beautiful. Anyway, the first time was over quickly. I remember looking up and seeing Stuart’s shadow right outside the door. When I left the room he hugged me, something he never did. He said he’d forever be grateful. Then he handed me another beer and sent me back to the bedroom. For the next two weeks I spent a lot of time in that room. Then I returned to school and we never talked about what happened. But a month later Stuart called to tell me he was going to be a father.”

I don’t know how to process this.

You live your life under the assumption that you came into the world one way.

And then you find out it was all a lie.

A lie to cover something twisted and sordid and sick.

I’ve already come to terms with the fact that my father wasn’t who I thought he was. But it’s a crushing blow to learn that my mother was also horrible. She seduced her teenage brother-in-law in order to use him as a sperm donor.

“Why should I believe you?” I challenge him. “If what you say is true then you’ve been lying to me for my whole life.”

He nods. “Fair question. I have lied to you. I’ll never lie to you again.”

Josh watches my face, eager to be told that all is well and I’ll just accept the truth with a smile.

“You could have shared this confession without cuffing me in the back of your police car and scaring the living shit out of me.”

His mouth droops. “I’m very sorry. I panicked. I’ve gone over it in my head a million times over the years, how I’d tell you. This was never what I imagined.”

What a comfort.

“So that’s the reason why you didn’t like my mother.”

“I tried not to hate her. How could I hate her when she helped me make you?” He gives me a loving smile. Then it falls away just as quickly. “But I couldn’t forgive her for trying to take you away.”

“What does that mean?”

He glares toward the stairwell, where the best family photos artfully decorate the wall. “Diana wasn’t real interested in being a good mother. She just wanted to party with her friends and spend Stuart’s money. She was also erratic, had mental health issues that she refused to get treated for. Then she decided she’d rather not be a wife either. She knew she could get a better divorce settlement by threatening to take full custody of you. She was going to use you as nothing but a pawn to squeeze Stuart for everything he had. When I confronted her and said I’d tell the court that you were mine, she laughed and said she’d claim that I assaulted her. She had all of us over a barrel and she knew it. She was going to take you and move to Denver, keep you away from me out of spite. I couldn’t let you grow up like that, with nobody around who loves you.”

His first revelation was bad. I have a sick feeling the next one will be worse.

“What did you do, Josh?”

“Nothing,” he says, then sniffs and smacks his hand to his head. “Dammit, I said I wouldn’t lie to you anymore.”

“Then *don't* lie to me.”

He blows out a breath. “The only way Stuart was going to get full custody was if Diana was unfit. She was already halfway there on her own, treating life like a constant party and forgetting to even change your diaper. But I couldn't leave anything to chance where you were concerned. Diana, as always, had some party to go to. The sitter canceled and I was home from college for the summer. She knew I'd come running at the chance to spend time with you.” He breaks off to smile at the memory. “You'd recently started walking. Tessie, you were such a happy baby girl.”

I'd like to smack the creepy smile from his face but that's not really an option.

“And then what?”

The smile disappears. “Diana had quite a pill collection, everything from opioids to Adderall, depending on the kind of mood enhancement she wanted. Stuart didn't know but I found them. She was getting ready for her damn party when I showed up. You were crying in your crib. Your diaper was soaked and your cheek was red, like you'd been slapped. Diana took a phone call and she was laughing. I just fucking snapped. I took a bunch of her damn pills, crushed them into powder and added them to the water bottle she left sitting on the counter. It had vodka in it already so I figured she wouldn't notice the taste.”

“My god.” I thought I was prepared to hear this. I'm not. “You killed her.”

“No, I didn't mean for her to die. I swear to god I didn't want to make you an orphan. I wasn't thinking clearly. I figured she'd get picked up for impaired driving or maybe

make such an ass out of herself it would give Stuart ammunition for the custody case.”

“You killed her!”

He flinches at my shout. “She passed out in the swimming pool at her friend’s house and drowned. I read the toxicology report. She had a lot of Percocet in her system. I’ll never know if she took them on her own or if she drank from the bottle. But she was gone. And you were safe.”

The man has a very odd notion of ‘safe’.

“Did my father know?”

Josh nods. “I was crippled with guilt. I told him what I had done. To my shock, he wasn’t angry. He said what was done was done and that sometimes out of tragedy comes opportunity. As far as anyone else knew, he would be the grieving widower and devoted single father.”

I can’t even speak. I don’t know if Josh would stop me if I tried to run out of the house right now. I just know that I’m afraid and I wish for Micah. I want to bury my face in Micah’s chest and feel his arms around me and make these horrors disappear.

Josh, however, has deluded himself into believing that we’re going to be a happy family now. “Tessie Belle, I love you more than anything in the world. You’re the reason why I’ve always stayed right here, why I remained under Stuart’s thumb and even sacrificed my own relationships. So many times I wanted to tell you the truth. But I was young when you were born. And I truly thought Stuart was a devoted father. All I’ve ever wanted was to protect you and-”

“Did the two of you kill Ethan Lyonne?”

Josh isn't surprised by the question. "I had nothing against Ethan. He was a friend. But he was also kind of a hothead with an unshakable sense of right and wrong. Stuart was the one with the gambling problem, not Ethan. It's true that Ethan was hoping to divorce Matilda and take Micah. He was livid when he found out Stuart was bleeding the partnership dry. Ethan promised to expose Stuart. It was a foolish move that cost him his life."

"You didn't actually answer my question."

He leans back in his chair. "No, I guess I didn't. I swear to you, I tried to talk Stuart out of it. He reminded me that I had a secret of my own. I couldn't let you lose everything. You were just a little girl. Stuart wasn't planning to kill Ethan. He was trying to send a message. Your father hired those thugs on his own. Turns out they were a couple of drugged out psychos. I didn't help at all but I knew what he was planning the weekend Ethan went up north with his son. And I gave Stuart one ironclad condition. No matter what, nobody could lay a finger on Micah. Otherwise all bets were off and I wouldn't stay quiet."

He shares this last part like he's proud of himself. *See what a good guy I am, Tess? I wouldn't let your father kill a six-year-old child.*

"Micah watched his father get murdered. Do you have any clue what that did to him?"

"That wasn't supposed to happen. Ethan fought like a tiger and those two animals Stuart hired took it too far."

"Do you think that helps? Does it change a fucking thing?"

His shoulders twitch when I raise my voice. Odd how he can sit here confessing a list of terrible crimes and still get

upset when I yell at him a little.

“I can’t change what happened,” he says. “But look at the two of you now. You and Micah. It’s like you were meant for each other. In the beginning I was worried he’d be too wild and break your heart. But I saw how happy you were with him. You deserve to be happy. I’m sorry for what happened to Micah. I would never have allowed Stuart to pull that off if I’d known. I’m devastated that you were in harm’s way and I’m so grateful that you’re safe. Micah will be all right. And there’s no longer any doubt he’ll stay put. Now he’ll be good to you and the baby.”

Out of tragedy comes opportunity.

A sick life philosophy followed by my father. My *real* father.

Josh was the first one to search for Micah’s hand. Gage, concerned with Micah’s blood loss and the possibility of shock, had escorted him off the scene, leaving Josh alone. He had a head start of at least a couple of minutes before Conner went running over to help.

“You found Micah’s hand that night, didn’t you?”

Josh is a gifted liar and still he can’t scrub the guilt off his face fast enough. But from his lips, a denial. “Of course not.”

I shoot to my feet and bang my fist on the table. “NO MORE LIES!”

He hangs his head but refuses to confess to this final outrage.

In Josh’s mind, his demented act was justified. There would have been time to reattach Micah’s hand. But Josh wanted to make sure Micah was left with fewer options.

And worst of all, he truly believes he did this for me.

I could kill him. I really could.

“You sick motherfucker.”

I was thinking this. But Micah’s the one who said it.

He stands less than ten feet away, at the mouth of the long hallway leading to the room my father slept in, the same room where I was conceived. I don’t know how he figured out I was here or how he got in without making a sound.

The hatred on Micah’s face is intense. Consuming. Downright murderous. I’d shudder to be on the other end of a look like that. I don’t know how long he’s been listening but he’s heard enough to know who his enemy is.

But then his gaze cuts to me and his expression switches to alarm. He eats the distance between us in three strides and hauls me out of the chair. “Come on, Tessie.” He pushes me behind him and keeps a wary eye on Josh. “Time to go.”

Josh clicks something under the table. “Sit down, Micah. You’re not taking my daughter.”

“Your WHAT? Never mind. Fuck you. We’re leaving.” He nudges me backwards until we’re through the doorway and in the hall. Then he turns his head and whispers. “Go, baby. Run. Window in the bedroom is open.”

I trust Micah completely. Josh is vile but he has no reason to harm us.

On the contrary. Josh convinced himself that he has acted in the best interests of his child. *Me*.

I haven’t made it more than two steps before there’s an ominous crack and a curse. With a terrified scream, I turn around and see Josh has his taser out and Micah is on the floor.

“Bastard.” Micah, struggling to recover from the impact of the taser, tries to get his legs underneath him.

“Calm down, son. You’ll only hurt yourself.”

Micah coughs. “You’ll die screaming, you fucker.”

Josh sighs. “Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

“I’ve got enough strength left to send you to hell with my bare hands.”

Josh cackles. “Bare *hands*? Kind of an empty threat, Micah, don’t you think?”

“What I think is that I’ll enjoy watching you choke on your own blood.”

Josh is not amused. He drops the taser on the table and chooses his gun instead. “Your father’s mouth got him in trouble too.”

“FUCK YOU.”

“Yeah, you say that a lot. I don’t know why you can’t learn. I’ve given you every chance but you still allow yourself to be ruled by your anger. You’ll never be good enough for her.”

Micah breathes hard, still unable to stand, and glares into the barrel of the gun. “Whatever you’re gonna do, don’t you make her watch.”

“NO!” This isn’t happening. I drop to the floor and throw myself over Micah. My ears pick up a dreaded click and I know Josh has his gun cocked.

“Get out of here.” Micah tries to push me away. “Go on, baby, you need to go. Don’t look back. He won’t shoot you.”

No, Josh won't shoot me. But there's no way I'm leaving without Micah.

"Move aside, sweetheart." Josh's voice is so gentle and mournful it's hard to believe he's pointing a gun. "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

Never.

I'm not strong. I have no weapon. Except one.

I squeeze my eyes on purpose and purge the tears. Then I turn my head so my father, my *real* father, can see them streaking down my cheeks. "If you love me, then you won't hurt him."

The gun shakes. Josh swallows and works his jaw.

Another tear slides down. "Please, Daddy. I'm begging you."

He crumbles. The gun is lowered and his brown eyes fill with tears. "You don't know how much I've always wanted to hear you call me that."

The distraction is enough to give Micah a chance. He's recovered from the initial taser shock. With lightning quick movements, he rolls over and kicks his leg out, connecting with the gun and knocking it out of Josh's hand. It bumps against the wall and skates away beneath the sofa.

Josh scrambles for his taser but he has no time. Micah sweeps his legs out from underneath him and Josh hits the floor, smacking the back of his head on a dining room chair on the way down.

Scrambling to the floor, I grab for the gun beneath the sofa.

Josh has fatally underestimated his opponent.

Even with only one hand, Micah is uncannily strong. He's now positioned on Josh's chest, squeezing his knees to keep Josh's arms pinned while his hand crushes the neck of the man who wronged us both.

The only noise is the desperate sound of choking coming from Josh Ballerini.

I'm rooted to the spot, holding a gun and watching my real father flail around on the floor as Micah squeezes his life away.

Then Micah turns his head.

"Tessie," he says.

I read the look in his eyes. He's asking for permission. He will kill if I give the order.

And part of me wants to say yes.

There's been so much pain already. I want it all to be over.

Too much death, too much suffering. Josh's death at our hands will not end anything. The act will hang over us forever.

Keeping the gun trained on the man I thought was my uncle, I shake my head.

Micah nods and releases the pressure slightly. Josh's purple face gasps for breath.

A thud hits the front door. Then another one and the door cracks open.

Here's Gage, gun drawn, astounded by the scene in front of him. "What the fuck?"

The gun I'm holding gets dropped to the floor. I never want to touch another one.

Sirens scream in the background.

I've heard them far too often lately.

But now Micah comes to me, opening his arms and letting me fall into them.

"I've got you, Tessie," he says and he holds me close to his chest so I don't have to see anything as we leave that house for the last time.

40. Tess

It's not often that I wake up before he does.

Right now Micah is serene in his sleep, lying on his side with one arm curled tenderly around me. I turn over very carefully, trying not to disturb him. I just want to look at his face.

He's beautiful.

My partner. My lover. My protector. My future and my forever.

I would lean in to steal a kiss if he didn't tend to wake so easily.

With extreme care, I slide out of bed, sorry to leave the warmth of his body but needing to deal with a basic fact of nature.

My bladder is thankful for the relief. Before leaving the bathroom I take a moment to explore the contours of my belly. The maternity clothes I ordered online will come in handy real soon.

Micah is still sound asleep in the bedroom. I'm tempted to crawl back into bed with him even if I'm not tired. Instead, I pull one of his immense hooded sweatshirts over my nightie

and pad down to the kitchen. I'll make breakfast, fill the house with the smell of baking cinnamon rolls.

Conner is home but he tends to sleep late. He'll be glad to wake up to hot food. Every day he reminds us that he hopes we'll stay. There's a bedroom across the hall from ours that will be turned into the perfect nursery. Although the day may come when we might cramp Conner's style and move on, for now we're all content to stay here together and enjoy being a family.

Micah and I plan to get married but we've decided to wait until after our baby is born. He was amused to see me jump at his mother's offer to throw us a wedding. I would marry Micah anytime, anywhere, but Matilda is thrilled that she gets to help plan the event. And maybe it's silly, but I can't deny that I appreciate being fussed over.

When we do marry, I'll be taking Micah's name. I don't want to be a Ballerini anymore.

The man who is my real father is now in prison. He'll be there for a long time. The history of the Ballerini brothers has been examined far more closely, uncovering a litany of crimes. For decades Josh was the enforcer of Stuart's schemes. Josh has denied nothing. He spilled his guts with something close to relief.

I'll never be able to fully untangle or understand the relationship between the brothers. They were the men who raised me. All those years I never suspected that I was living among monsters.

As Micah would say, it really fucks with your head.

Last night Dani and Gage were over here. We all sat around the backyard firepit for hours, a scene of love and

friendship and deep, indestructible bonds.

Conner was a little drunk when he got to his feet and raised his half empty beer bottle in the air. “Always the rejects but an honor to be rejects together.” He lowered his bottle and grinned at the sight of me curled up in Micah’s lap. “And you are ours now, Tessie. One of us.”

It was one of those moments when you know a good memory is being made and you’re already looking forward to summoning it in the future.

Now I’m smiling as I slide the first batch of cinnamon rolls into the wall oven.

I ought to take advantage of the quiet house and haul out my laptop to get some work done. I have a new client who is looking to buy a home in this neighborhood and I want to send her a batch of listings to consider. I’ve also been helping Micah manage his new graphic design website. His outstanding talent is already in high demand.

Normally I love work. Sometimes I love it a little too much. This morning, however, I’m not in a productive mood. I just want to look out the window at the sunlight playing on the surface of the pool water and daydream about the years ahead.

This is what I’m doing when my hair is pushed to the side. Micah kisses my neck. As always, I lean into him automatically. He curls his arm around my middle, pausing to deliver a loving pat to my belly.

Every touch from him is a thrill. Every single one.

The oven timer dings and I plant a quick kiss on his lips before rescuing my cinnamon rolls from the heat.

Micah has already become very adept when it comes to doing things with one hand. He often wraps his arm in a black

sleeve, self-conscious about the way it ends in nothing. He doesn't have it wrapped today and I'm glad.

Micah starts the coffee and makes me a mug of green tea while I transfer the rolls to plates. Three plates, because I know Conner will be roused any minute by the smell of food.

Sure enough, I've hardly taken a sip of tea in Micah's lap before Conner's bare feet shuffle down the hall.

He rubs his eyes and cracks a yawn. "You made me breakfast."

"I sure did. Sit down with us."

He pours himself a cup of coffee. "How's baby Conner?"

Micah snorts. "How many times are you going to make me break your heart with the news that we are *not* naming the baby Conner?"

"Besides," I remind him, "the baby might be a girl."

Conner considers that fact while he shoves an entire roll into his mouth. He drops crumbs everywhere. "Okay, Conner can be a girl."

I watch Conner Wiseman shovel food into his mouth like a bear. Good thing I made two trays of cinnamon rolls or there would be nothing left.

"Are you coming with us today?"

He shakes his head. "Don't want to make it weird."

I turn my head to look at Micah. He shrugs.

Maybe it's for the best. Haven still has her sharp edges. There's no telling what she'd say if Conner showed up with no warning to visit her twin sister.

Once he's had his sugar and coffee fix, Conner wanders outside and jumps right into the pool without bothering to change.

When Micah slides his hand up my thigh I take it as a signal that he's impatient for breakfast to be over.

"Take a shower with me?" With one finger I trace the fascinating ink shapes in the middle of his chest.

"We can shower." Micah boldly pushes his hand between my legs. "After."

And I'm into it. As always.

He's more careful these days when he carries me, when he undresses me, when he conquers my body. He tastes like coffee and cinnamon. Our mouths play while he's inside me.

When I'm getting close I want to touch myself. Micah lifts up on his elbows to watch. He moves slowly as my thumb searches for the right spot between my legs.

"Love you, Tessie," he says while I quiver underneath him.

Then he lets himself go and I feel the rush of his release. I wrap my legs around him to keep him inside as long as possible.

Then we do shower together and it's hot and intimate. Micah kisses me everywhere and regards my changing body with reverence.

I tease him when he touches my stomach. "Will you still think I'm sexy when I'm big enough for the pregnancy waddle?"

He peers at me through the steamy water and cups my chin in his palm. "To me, you're sexy forever."

“And I love you forever.”

He smiles. My heart takes flight.

Conner was kind enough to leave a few cinnamon rolls behind. Moving them to a plate, I cover them with foil and then follow Micah out the door.

Our drive runs through the middle of Em City. Critics often accuse the city of being ugly. Too sprawling, too lacking in character.

This city isn't ugly to me. Sometimes the people living inside of it are ugly but there are still far more good people than bad.

I insist on believing this.

When we find Lita's room, Haven is already there. She's leaning close to Lita's seated figure, murmuring to her sister in a low voice. She stops abruptly when we shadow the doorway.

I hold up the plate of rolls. “Is it okay if we come in?”

Haven nods and slides away from her twin. “Sure, but you know she can't have outside food.”

“That's fine.” I set the plate down on a nearby table. “These are homemade cinnamon rolls and they are for you.”

Haven looks at the plate. A ripple appears on her brow.

“Lita, I brought Micah here with me today.” I touch his arm with a nod of encouragement.

Micah clears his throat and steps into the room. He's never been here.

“Hey, Lita.” He leans against the wall and waits for me to take the lead.

I don't mind. I pull up a chair and tell Lita all about the baby and about how we'll be getting married next spring. No need to share anything negative.

Haven is silent, examining her painted nails while I talk. She looks a little different today. Less makeup and a long black open cardigan partially covers her provocative dress.

Eventually I run out of things to say and the ring of silence falls over the room.

"Thanks for the food," Haven says. She hasn't touched the plate. I think this is a signal that she'd rather be alone right now.

I stand up. "Maybe we could meet for lunch sometime."

Her eyebrows shoot up. Despite her best efforts to camouflage her natural beauty, Haven is still stunning.

"Maybe," she says. She gives a nod to Micah before returning her attention to me. "In the meantime, if you guys need any asses kicked, remember that you can always call on the evil witch of the east side for help."

Haven is startled when I swoop in and hug her but she doesn't resist.

This makes me bold enough to whisper in her ear. "You are *not* an evil witch. You are my friend."

She doesn't reply but I catch a glimpse of a tiny smile on her face.

A moment for the books.

Micah slings his arm over my shoulders on our way out. "Where to now?"

"Let's go eat. Baby Conner is hungry."

He rolls his eyes and groans. “Don’t even start.”

I poke him. “Baby Conner wants to know why you’re mad.”

Micah smothers all my teasing with a long kiss. He hasn’t shaved in a few days and I like the rough scratch of his early beard growth.

There’s a lot to be said for sharing an uneventful day with the man you adore.

After a nice lunch we decide to see a movie and even though the movie isn’t memorable, I feel absurdly happy sitting in that theater and watching an onscreen battle between two giant robots while laying my head on Micah’s shoulder.

Keeping one hand on my baby bump and the other on Micah’s knee, I want this to be another of those memories that gets saved for future reference.

Dramatic orchestral music blares.

The words ‘The End’ flash up on the giant screen.

We made it, Micah.

He already knows.

It was always supposed to be us.

Epilogue

MICAH

I'm not sure if Matilda's going to agree to leave tonight.

At the moment my mother holds Tess captive on a patio sofa. She talks a mile a minute and pauses on occasion to lovingly pat Tess's growing belly. Then she returns to waving her arms around and waxing poetic about next spring's grand wedding plans.

After yesterday's ultrasound, I argued that a phone call would suffice to break the news that we'll be having a son.

Tess disagreed. She wanted to invite everyone over to share our happiness in person.

Now I'm glad we did this her way.

The backyard is a hub of action and for the moment I'm just watching.

Conner cheerfully mans a crowded grill while ignoring Gage's critical appraisal.

"Stop, nothing is burned." Conner flips the spatula in his hands. "This is what well done meat looks like."

"No, that's what charred beyond recognition meat looks like."

Charlotte throws a squeaky tennis ball. Total bounds through the grass to search for it. “Can I go in the pool? It’s hot and I have my swimsuit on under this.”

Matilda snaps away from her conversation with Tess. “Of course not. No one else is in the pool.”

“I’ll go in the pool,” Conner says.

Gage snatches the spatula out of his hand. “Good idea. You go in the pool. I’ll rescue dinner.”

Conner chooses to let this insult go by. I doubt anyone expects him to jump into the pool with his clothes on but that’s exactly what he does. At least he kicks off his shoes first.

Charlotte screams with delight and attempts to follow him while fully dressed but Henley stops her before Matilda has hysterics.

Dani spots me standing alone in the grass and walks over for a chat.

“I thought your antisocial days were over,” she laughs.

“Sometimes my asshole origins resurface.”

“No.” Dani crosses her arms and gazes at Tess. “The two of you bring out the best in each other.”

I move to scratch a sudden itch on my jaw and then remember that I need to use the arm that still has a hand. Sometimes I just forget.

Tess did not come along when I drove to the prison hellhole where I’d once been locked up. I had a question for Josh Ballerini.

He gazed out from the incarcerated side of the glass; a sad, ruined man who lost everything and knows he’s at fault. He

looked like he'd aged ten years since the day I wrapped my hand around his throat.

The morbid urge to know what the hell happened to my hand had been bothering me. I thought that since all is said and done, he might tell me what he did with it.

Then I decided I'd rather not know after all.

I left without asking the question.

But Josh had one for me. "Is she happy?"

"Yes," I replied. "And I'll make sure she stays that way."

I have no doubt that was the last time we'll ever speak.

Dani watches me bend down in the grass. "What are you doing?"

"Just getting something." I tuck the object inside the front pocket of my shirt.

It stays there until later, much later.

After all the overdone meat is eaten and Matilda has been dragged away from the mother of my child and twilight begins to shadow the sky.

Tess, adorably very pregnant in a yellow maternity top, leans into the canopy of my arm on the patio sofa and we watch the sun disappear together.

I can't properly explain what the sight of her does to me.

Then I remember that I have something better than words.

My fingers pluck the dandelion from my pocket and I lay it down on her belly.

"Look at that." She's charmed, smiling broadly.

I flatten my palm on her stomach. “Are you happy, Tessie Belle?”

She gazes at me and cocks her head. “As if you really need to ask.”

Under my hand, our son kicks hard to remind us that he’s there.

She looks down. “Did you feel that?”

“Yup, there he is.”

Tess sighs and adds her hand to mine. “I didn’t know I wanted a boy until I heard he was a boy.”

“If he’s anything like me, he’ll be a hell of a challenge.”

She snuggles closer and her voice grows dreamy. “I hope he is. Boys are wonderful. I hope he’s *just* like his daddy.”

As the sun sinks lower and I hold my little family in my arms, I’m reminded of my grandmother. Her last words to me were of hope and bravery.

I wish Cecile could see me like this. And Ethan too.

Maybe they can.

If so, I hope they realize that I understand something important now.

I know what it is to love someone more than you love yourself.

To give her the key to your heart and show her your flaws.

Then to let her love you anyway, the way that you love her.

Yes, it is an act of courage.

And someday, that’s what I’ll tell my son.

A VERY WICKED WEST CHRISTMAS

(A Short Holiday Story)

Christmas Eve

MICAH

He has his mother's dark hair.

Lots of it.

It's the first thing people always notice about him, probably because most babies are bald or close to it.

Not my son. He has Tessie's eyes too; dark and alert. But the poor kid is stuck with my nose and my chin.

We call him Dash but his birth certificate says Dashiell Ethan Conner Gage Lyonne. Quite a mouthful. I hope he forgives us for that. I like to think someday he'll appreciate the honor.

"Look at that one." I shift my position to show him the angel. It's composed of popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners and hangs from a low branch. "Your Aunt Charlotte made it just for you."

Dash is listening and he blinks, a solemn expression on his little face. He appears to be considering my words with dignified maturity.

You'd never guess he puked breast milk all over his mother five minutes ago.

"I can take him." Dani is holding her arms out. She looks for any opportunity to be the doting aunt and I hand him over

willingly.

Today I'm not wearing the prosthetic hand. I don't wear it most of the time. Just seems to get in the way and makes me feel like a damn robot.

Dani seizes my son and she's already cooing some high pitched blend of goo goo talk as she cuddles him close.

Gage waits a few feet away, watching his wife with amusement as she settles down on the sofa with a dreamy smile and looking like she might stay there all night.

"Stop judging," she scolds us as she tenderly rubs Dash's back. "Baby fever is an involuntary condition."

I look at my cousin to see how he handles that news but he takes it in stride, even breaking into a goofy grin, something you just don't see everyday from Gage. Kind of makes me wonder if the two of them are planning to jump on the parenthood bandwagon soon.

If so, I like the idea. Dash would have a cousin close in age. Growing up, my two cousins were always my brothers. Best friends I could ever ask for. And as I watch Dani fawning all over my son, it's pretty clear she's eager to become a mother herself.

"Oh, who's got the hiccups?" Dani's using her baby voice again as she pats Dash's back and rocks gently. "Our little pumpkin has the hiccups, that's who."

Gage lets out a sniff of laughter before taking a seat at his wife's side. He plucks a blue receiving blanket off the coffee table and folds it around my son's body. Then he pauses to gently cup a big palm over Dash's little head. Dani notices and smiles.

This is one lucky kid. My boy will be growing up with more love than he knows what to do with.

Speaking of all the reasons why my son is the luckiest baby in Em City, here comes the reason at the top of the list.

Tess retreated to the bedroom to change after Dash decorated her dress with a portion of his latest snack. Now she returns, wearing black leggings and one of my old hoodies. Her hair is down. The sight of her steals my breath for a few seconds.

She was always a beautiful girl. Always.

I thought so even when we couldn't stand each other back when we were kids.

And she grew up to be a stunning woman.

But even that is nothing compared to the radiant vision of Tess as a mother. I'm in awe of her. There are days when I still can't believe that I get to be the one worthy of her love.

I can't *fucking wait* to make her my wife. I would marry her today. Yesterday. Anytime. Anywhere. But there's a big spring wedding planned and it'll be the day of her dreams. I'll make sure of that.

Tess pauses at the living room entrance and smiles at the view of our baby boy being lovingly rocked in the arms of her best friend.

She rolls up the sleeves of her sweatshirt. "How about some hot chocolate? After all, there are still gingerbread men to behead."

"We should be on our way soon." Gage tries to send his wife a meaningful look but Dani is too busy humming *Silent*

Night in Dash's ear. It doesn't seem she'll be willing to move anytime in the near future.

"Looks like you're overruled," Tess informs him sweetly. "So stand by for my overachieving version of hot chocolate. Be impressed. I even have peppermint sticks."

She pauses in front of me and brushes her hand over my chest. It's not meant to be a seductive gesture but my dick goes spiking just the same. Can't help that. Don't want to.

Tess proceeds to the kitchen and heads for the walk in pantry. I follow like a puppy dog on her heels.

There's a good reason. I'm fucking STARVING.

Just not for food.

I really am doing my best not to be pushy.

It was only eight weeks ago that our son was born after a difficult labor resulted in an emergency c-section, a terrifying moment that has every other terrifying moment in my life beat by a mile.

After ten hours of labor where every one of Tess's pained cries was like a knife in my chest, the baby's heart rate started dropping. I've never felt so helpless as I trotted alongside Tess's bed while it was rolled to the operating room, where a frenzy of doctors and nurses waited to take rapid action. My Tessie tried so hard to be brave but tears leaked out of her eyes. I kept saying that I loved her and that everything would be all right even as I felt like my heart was splintering into pieces.

And then it came, the miracle of hearing our son's first hearty cry as he joined the world.

But Tess has been through a lot, between giving birth and getting used to the demands of motherhood. She's nursing and it's not easy. While I help with feedings from the bottles of pumped milk in the fridge, she's the one on the endless cycle of breastfeeding and pumping.

It's a fine line I'm trying to walk because I want her constantly. I want her so fucking bad that I have to jerk off three times a day to various Tess fantasies just to keep my head on straight.

It's a chore to keep reminding myself that she doesn't need that pressure. I swore to myself I'd wait until she's ready, even if it halfway kills me.

Which it might.

Seriously, the dam is about to bust wide open.

Yesterday was Tess's follow up appointment with her doctor. When she arrived home she cheerfully shared the news that all was well and I started making plans, but then we had Charlotte's holiday play in the evening, followed by one of Dash's fussy nights when he'd rather sleep on my shoulder than in his crib. By the time I got to bed she was sound asleep and I didn't have the heart to wake her.

I'm not complaining. I'm just horny as fuck.

Which is why I'm nearly panting as I stare at Tess's ass and follow her into the pantry.

"Are you volunteering to be my helper?" She throws a glance over her shoulder.

I'm not imagining the naughty gleam in her eye.

I think about dipping my tongue into her pussy. My cock swells.

“Is that okay? In case you forgot, I’m *really* good at helping you, Tessie Belle.”

There’s no way she can miss hearing the layers of lust in my voice.

And she doesn’t.

Tess halts in the pantry doorway, turns around and lets her eyes flicker over me.

We don’t have an audience right now. Which is why I’m free to brush my hand over my crotch. Let her see how hard I am.

Yeah, she sees. She sucks in her lower lip and slowly lifts her eyes to my face.

I know that look, complete with her *fuck me now* eyes.

Damn good to know I’m not the only horny one in the room.

She reaches for the pantry light and flips it on. Takes a step back.

On the other side of the wall in the living room, Dani has moved on from *Silent Night*. She’s now singing *The Twelve Days of Christmas* and trying to force Gage to join.

I charge into the pantry and shut the door behind me. Tess giggles and reaches up to hook her arms around my neck. The feel of her soft body this fucking close is the best kind of torture. I groan and grind into her.

She responds with a breathy sigh that almost makes me come in my pants.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispers and trails kisses along my neck.

She melts when I stroke her between her legs. I'm gentle for now, running a finger over the fabric of her leggings, teasing the damp cleft, enjoying the way she moves her hips in search of more.

She'll be getting a whole lot fucking more.

"Let's fix that tonight," I whisper back.

Words I've spoken to her before. Another time, messing around inside another pantry. My hand exactly where it is right now.

Tess nods, just as she did then.

But then she abruptly tilts her head back. A strange look flashes across her face.

"Something wrong?" I pull my hand away, just in case.

"It's silly." She chews her lower lip and exhales.

"Tell me anyway."

She wrinkles her nose. "I had an idea in my head that I was going to be all sexy for you. I even bought some hot new lingerie. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite fit yet." She glances down and clucks her tongue. "I guess I was overly optimistic, thinking my body would have bounced back already."

Bounced back?

Shit, is she joking? She's so insanely sexy that I have trouble functioning even when she's not this close to my cock.

Nope. Hell no. FUCKING hell no.

I seize her long hair in my fist, hard enough so that she knows I'm being serious.

She's startled. *Fine*. She needs to hear this.

“Let’s get something straight first, Tessie Belle. There is nothing to *bounce back* from. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen and sometimes I don’t know how I get through the day without fucking you senseless but tonight I’m going to do dirty things to you until you can’t catch your breath. Now nod your head like a good girl and tell me that sounds nice.”

She swallows. Her breathing picks up. “It does sound nice, Micah.”

“Good.” I brush my lips over hers, release her hair and push my hand into the elastic of her leggings.

Then I’m shoving the freaking things all the way down over her hips because I’ve decided she needs a preview right here and now.

That’s right, I’m not letting her walk out of here until she feels every bit as sexy as she really is.

“You’ve been thinking about me.” I cup my hand between her legs and rub the cotton fabric of her panties between my fingers. “That’s why these are all wet.”

She sucks in a breath and braces her palms on my arms. “Yes, that’s why.”

I toss around the thought of asking Dani and Gage to hang around and babysit for an hour so I can carry her off to bed and do this right.

Nah, I’m getting her off *now*. Right here.

“I’ve been thinking about you too, baby.” My finger slips into her panties. “All the fucking time.”

“Micah.” She gasps out my name and closes her eyes.

My fingers find her clit and she inhales sharply. She squeezes my shirt in her fists and smothers a gasp. She's so ready her knees are weak.

"Shh, let it happen." I know exactly what I'm doing and it won't take long. "I love you, Tessie."

"I love you too." She can hardly talk. Her breath shudders.

I work my hand. "Then come for me right now like we both fucking know you want to."

She shakes.

I smile.

"HO. HO. HO."

What the fuck? I didn't say that. And Tess sure didn't say that.

She freezes and her eyes flip open.

The front door slams shut.

"I SAID, HO! HO! HO!"

Sounds like Conner. Which is weird because Conner is in San Francisco. He's playing in the prime time game on Christmas Day.

Tess looks at the closed pantry door. "Is that Conner?"

"Maybe."

"What's he doing here?"

Don't know. We'll sort that out later. I'm on a mission at the moment.

But Tess is already pulling away and yanking her leggings back up. She reaches for the door.

Letting out a growl, my arm circles her waist and I haul her back to my chest.

“We’re not finished,” I bury my face in her neck and breathe her in.

She bends her head back to give me a consolation kiss. “To be continued.”

I’m prepared to pout.

But she unwraps my arm from her waist and leaves me standing alone in the pantry with a crushing case of blue balls so there’s nothing I can do.

However, I need a few seconds to breathe before facing scrutiny.

Even from the pantry I can hear Conner, still carrying on and belting out Santa Claus lines. He must be dressed for the part because Gage informs him that his beard is on crooked and Dani points out that his suit is too small.

“Merry Christmas, Conner.” Tess greets him with a laugh. “Does this mean the Cyclones are going to be without a quarterback tomorrow?”

Now curious, I step through the pantry door and return to the living room where I find my cousin dressed in a cheap Santa Claus costume, complete with a tangled white beard that hangs from his chin like a dead animal.

“What the hell are you doing?” I bust out laughing. This is just so *Conner*.

He grins a mile wide. “Merry Christmas, cuz.”

I’m glad he’s here but I have to ask. “Does the team know you’re AWOL?”

“Nope. I’ve got to be back at the airport in an hour. Hitched a ride on Harold Foley’s private jet. He had to take a quick trip to Em City to drop off some gifts so I tagged along.”

Tess’s mouth falls open. “THE Harold Foley?”

Conner rearranges his beard. The thing only looks worse. “I think so. I only know one.”

Dani is also impressed. “Did he show you his collection of Oscars?”

“Ha. No. Does he have one?”

Conner is bullshitting. I pay no attention to Hollywood garbage and even I know that Harold Foley is one of the biggest movie stars on the planet.

“Good to see you.” I smack his massive shoulder. “Even if it’s just for a little while. You’ll be missed tomorrow.”

He sighs. “Yeah, I would much rather be with you guys. But hey, just put me up on the big screen and pretend I’m in the room.” He takes a seat beside Dani and peers down into Dash’s wide-eyed face. “I needed to see my little partner on his first Christmas.”

Conner’s voice changes when he addresses the baby. He may look like a hulking brute but he’s really just a big softie. And he absolutely adores my son. The first time he held Dash he got so choked up he couldn’t even speak.

Though Dani is always reluctant to give up possession of the baby, she hands him over to Conner without an argument.

Tess sneaks up beside me and curls an arm around my waist. I hold her close and drop a kiss on her head. We watch Em City’s most beloved sports hero turn to mush as he gazes down at our baby boy.

Conner moves the silly beard out of the way. “Merry Christmas, kid.”

Dash stares up at the man in the red suit. He always looks as if he’s carefully weighing every situation that presents himself. He recognizes Conner’s voice and breaks into a wide toothless smile, unleashing a soft little gurgle of happiness.

And Conner melts. I think we all do.

Tess remembers that she never did manage to bring out the promised hot chocolate after I sidetracked her. This time Dani offers to help, which means there can’t be any fun in the pantry right now.

Bummer. But there will be time for romance later. I’ve got a promise to keep. Nothing is going to get in the way.

Conner has brought a big red sack with him. Inside is a stack of presents for Dash. There are stuffed animals and multiple footballs and an Emerald City Cyclones jersey that should fit the kid in about ten years.

Tess unwraps the final gift, which is a miniaturized version of the Em City skyline. “Look, Dash.” She turns the silver key under the base and the globe lights up amid flurries of snow and the tinkle of musical notes.

“What is that?” Dani asks. “I know the tune but I can’t remember what it’s called.”

Tess looks at the box that the snow globe was packaged in. “*Over the Rainbow*. An old song.”

Dani lays her head on her husband’s shoulder. “That’s right.”

Conner drinks three cups of hot chocolate and eats no less than a dozen gingerbread men. Sure hope he doesn’t suffer a

sugar crash before the game tomorrow.

Soon enough he receives an alert on his phone that a car is out front waiting to pick him up.

Dani happily resumes the chore of holding Dash.

Tess leaves my side to give Conner a friendly hug goodbye. She always looks tiny next to my cousin. “We’ll be watching you tomorrow. Good luck, not that you need it.”

“I’ll take it anyway,” he says and hugs her back before bending to give Dani a quick squeeze.

Next, Conner grabs Gage for a hug, which is awkward as hell to witness.

Then he hugs me too whether I want to be hugged or not. It’s kind of like being mauled by a bear, minus the claws and teeth, but I don’t mind.

No, I don’t mind at all.

Conner seems a tad misty eyed as he turns around for one final look at the lot of us. “Love you, family.”

I meet his eye. “Love you too, Con.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds. There’s a lot packed into that stare. History and brotherhood and an unwavering bond that will stand the test of time forever.

“Merry Christmas,” says Conner Wiseman. For some reason he sticks that ugly beard back on his face before exiting through the front door.

Once Conner’s gone, Dash starts to get sleepy. Dani grudgingly hands the baby back to his mother and Gage takes the opportunity to pry his wife off the couch. He snakes an

arm around Dani's waist and whispers something in her ear that makes her blush and bite her lower lip.

"We should really get going now," she blurts, still blushing.

Gage looks a little smug as he keeps his arm around her. Guess I'm not the only one with big plans tonight.

"Good night, little one." Dani runs a gentle finger over Dash's cheek and lowers her voice. "We love you so much."

Tess leans over to peck Dani's cheek. "You still want us at your house around two tomorrow?"

Dani nods. "Or earlier. I think Charlotte is planning on dragging Uncle H and Matilda over as soon as she finishes opening her presents."

"Sounds good."

I'd been focused on my son's face but now I look up to see that Gage is watching me.

Sometimes it's tough to guess what's going on in my cousin's head.

This is one of those times.

Maybe he's thinking that it's a hell of a trip seeing me in the family man role.

A year ago tonight, I was sitting alone in a Vegas hotel room and agonizing over the possibility that I might have really screwed things up with the girl I love.

Since then, there have been a lot of changes. Immense changes.

Some of those changes were agony. For me and for Tess.

But as I stand here with my young family and look my cousin in the eye, I have no regrets.

Only love.

My grandmother has been on my mind a lot this week. Tess placed Cecile's picture in a small silver ornament frame and hung it in the center of the tree. I wish Cecile had lived to see this outcome. But maybe she knew all along this is how we'd end up.

And maybe that occurs to Gage as well.

"Merry Christmas, Micah," he says.

"Merry Christmas, Gage." The two of us are not huggers at all, not like Conner. But I grab him for a hug anyway because I can and because I should.

And for good measure, I hug Dani too. She's as much of a sister to me as Charlotte is. We don't need to be blood for that to be true.

Tess stays under the canopy of my arm as we stand at the front door, watching Gage and Dani Silvestro drive down the street.

It's just us now. The three of us.

Tess wants to nurse Dash one more time and get him ready to settle down so I volunteer to clean up the kitchen. The dishwasher is running and the countertops are spotless by the time I wander down the hall.

Dash is adorably exhausted now that he's been fed and burped and bathed with his lavender-scented baby soap that's supposed to help him sleep. I watch from the doorway as Tess bends over the changing table and buttons him into a soft red onesie.

“Mommy loves you.” She kisses his cheek.

Dash yawns.

My heart becomes a puddle of goo.

Tess notices me gawking at the door and motions that I should dim the light. She lifts Dash and he scrunches his little body up against her shoulder as she carries him to his crib.

After turning the light down to a soft glow, I join her at the crib and switch on the overhead mobile with whimsical animal shapes that turn in endless circles to the sound of a lullaby.

Tess sets him down and he waves his tiny arms before blinking sleepily up at his animal friends. He stares, hypnotized, at the rotating mobile. After a minute, his eyes slowly shut.

My arm circles his mother and she presses her cheek to my chest.

“Look what we made,” she whispers.

I kiss the top of her head. “We made us.”

As my son drifts off to sleep I wonder what he dreams about. Someday I’ll be able to ask him. For now, I check to ensure the baby monitor is functioning and steer Tess out of the room.

As soon as we’re in the hallway, she hugs me around the waist and looks up with a smirk.

She’s wearing the sapphire earrings I sent her last Christmas.

If I have my way, and I *intend* to have my way, in a minute she won’t be wearing anything else.

“I think it’s our turn to exchange gifts,” she says.

There's a new smart watch waiting under the tree for her. But I doubt that's the kind of gift she wants right now.

I know I've got something a little different in mind.

Grabbing her wrist, I direct her hand to my cock. "Yours to unwrap anytime you want."

She flicks open the snap of my jeans. She smiles. "Oh, I want it all right."

I bite back a groan so I don't wake the baby. Shit is about to get loud. We need to move this party out of the hallway.

Tess stifles a yelp when I lift her. Then she giggles in my ear and eagerly wraps her legs around my waist for the short trip to our bedroom.

And it's fucking *on*. It's been too long.

I have to resist the urge to shred every stitch of her clothing and slam my cock into her.

She comes first. *Literally*. I'm not getting mine until I'm sure she's taken care of.

Our mouths lock together and she's hungry for this. I can tell by the way she rocks against me like her pussy is desperate for relief.

She'll get it.

First, she needs to be naked.

And if she talks any more nonsense about her body *bouncing back*, whatever the fuck that means, then I'm not letting her sit up again until she understands that she stars in every one of my filthy fantasies for eternity.

Tess, now on her knees atop the bed, is in a fever to get my shirt off and I manage to rip the thing while hauling it over my

head.

Don't care.

I'll rip everything if that's what it takes.

She kisses my chest and I nearly lose it when her tongue flicks out to lick my skin. Gritting my teeth, I peel her leggings down and she helps out by kicking them away. Without hesitation I push her arms up and yank off that sweatshirt, throwing it somewhere unimportant.

Underneath, she wears a white bra and white panties. Gorgeous.

I take a step back and she frowns.

"Come here." She's pulling at my pants.

I push the zipper down and get rid of the jeans but leave my boxers on. For now. My dick is so hard, straining to be unleashed, that I swear the fabric might split.

I have a dilemma.

There's just about nothing hotter than making her come with my tongue. I'm dying to taste her and she fucking loves feeling my head between her legs.

But then I can't watch her and right now I *need* to watch her.

"Take your bra off." I stroke my cock when I say this.

I have no doubt the order will be followed. Which it is.

She slides one strap down and then the other. She sweeps her eyes from my face down to where my hand toys with my cock. She licks her lips and pinches her bra open.

I groan and push my boxers down.

Her bra falls. “What else do you want to see, Micah?”

Fuck me, she’s got her hand on her pussy now. She touches herself and moans when it feels good.

You win, Tessie.

My dick is going to declare war on me if I don’t take her soon.

She’s surprised when I sweep her knees out and send her flat on her back on the mattress. She watches me, squirming, as I pull her panties off.

“You can turn out the light,” she says, as if there’s a single good reason on earth why I’d want to do that.

No way. I’m watching everything.

I kneel between her legs. Her dark hair is splayed out on the pillow. She’s now wearing only her sapphire earrings, just as I predicted. But a spark of uncertainty in her eyes makes me realize I need to make an extra effort tonight.

“You’re so damn beautiful.” I touch her between her legs, caressing her thighs and briefly slipping my thumb inside her. Then I touch her belly. Gently. Admiring the new marks she earned when she carried our son. And then the scar that came from bringing him into the world.

These aren’t imperfections. Not even fucking close.

Her body now tells our story.

Every mark on her binds us together even more.

“I love you, Tessie.”

One finger slides into her. My thumb finds her clit and plays.

“Micah.” She arches her back and moans.

She's perfection and she's mine.

Within a minute she's clutching the comforter and flexing as she gets overwhelmed by the force of the orgasm.

"More," she begs when she's about to come again. "More of you."

I suck the taste of her from my fingers, making sure she sees. "What do you need, honey?"

As if I didn't know.

She's breathless, writhing on the bed, her cheeks flushed, her eyes soft and dreamy. "I need to come with your cock inside me."

"Then that's what you'll get."

I'm easing into her, trying to be careful until I know what she can handle, when she locks her legs around me with impatience.

"I won't break," she grits out. "So fuck me, goddammit."

I prop myself up on my elbows and peer into her eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

If my girl wants to get fucked hard then she'll get fucked *hard*.

I deserve an award for the way I'm able to hold out while she squeezes her legs like a vice as her pussy gets rocked to the core. She clutches my back and cries out my name and the next time I feel her come I'm ready to follow.

But it occurs to me that I should think twice about releasing inside of her. She's still clenching and whimpering, but then she puts her sweet lips to my ear.

"I want to suck you. Finish in my mouth."

Fuck yeah.

I'm positioned to let my greedy cock claim her mouth before she can blink.

She takes me anyway. Very eagerly.

With my hand gripping the headboard, I ride the daylights out of her pretty mouth until I erupt, which doesn't take long.

Then she swallows. Because she's fucking flawless.

Collapsing beside her, I'm dazed and lovesick but I still collect her in my arms.

"Merry Christmas, baby."

She kisses my chest and rests her cheek next to my heart, which belongs to her anyway. "I love you, Micah."

We enjoy holding each other until we're ready for the next round, which doesn't take long.

And I do get to use my tongue on her, which is as sinful as ever.

Dash is still sound asleep so we treat ourselves to the luxury of a joint shower, where she lets me fuck her from behind and then gets on her knees so I can come on her tits before it all gets washed away under the hot water.

I don't know how or why I got lucky enough to have this girl but I'm not going to question it.

She's mine forever.

Tess is sleepy by the time I carry her back to bed. I tuck her under the covers, mindful of the fact that she'll likely need to get up at some point.

The smile on her face is the last thing I see before I flip the light off. In no time she's breathing evenly and letting her

dreams take over.

For a little while I drift off to sleep as well.

Until the baby monitor crackles to life and a very familiar sound pierces into my subconscious.

My son is awake.

Sliding out of bed as carefully as possible, I turn the volume on the baby monitor down so Tess can get some rest. Then I throw on a pair of sweats and walk across to the hall where Dash fusses in his crib.

“Hey, little guy.” I pick him up and he quiets down immediately, recognizing my voice, secure in the fact that he’s safe and loved.

Dash moves his face toward my chest, no doubt hungry and searching for Tess’s breast.

“Sorry, kid. You’ll have to settle for a bottle right now.”

There are a handful of bottles filled with pumped breastmilk waiting in the fridge. It gets tricky, feeding an infant with only one hand since he’s too young to hold the bottle himself, but I’m becoming an expert.

Settling on the sofa in the dim living room, I place a pillow under his body and tuck a receiving blanket around him so he doesn’t get cold. Dash is a good eater and starts sucking at the bottle the instant he feels it on his mouth.

My son opens his eyes and we regard each other in silence as he finishes his bottle. I could swear this kid is forming opinions. I hope they’re good ones. I hope somewhere in his little head he understands that on this Christmas Eve when he’s small and helpless he’s in the arms of his dad, who loves him more than life itself.

My eyes shift to the table beside us, where a framed pencil drawing is propped up in the middle. Tess protected it with a frame and sometimes I catch her looking at it wistfully.

Once I drew a scene of a little girl handing a little boy a dandelion. On the long ago day when it really happened, the boy was still consumed with the pain and grief of seeing his own father die. He ripped up the flower and pushed her away.

That moment was the start of me and Tess.

But in my ending, the one I drew, he takes the flower from her hand with a shy smile.

And Dash will hear all about it someday, from the beginning.

When he's finished the last ounce of his bottle I gently move him to my shoulder. Almost immediately he releases a solid burp but I'm in no hurry to move.

With my son on my shoulder I stare out the sliding glass doors where Conner hung colored Christmas lights on the back patio.

“Look at my boys.”

I didn't even hear her coming.

Dash's head jerks at the sound of his mother's voice.

Tess is back to wearing my old sweatshirt, which falls nearly to her knees. She touches our son's back and then takes a seat beside us, sliding her arm through mine and raising her face in search of a kiss, which she gets.

Together, we sit in the dark and watch the wall clock strike midnight.

Dashiell Ethan Conner Gage Lyonne yawns.

“Merry Christmas,” whispers his mother.

I’m still in no hurry to move.

I’d rather stay inside this moment with them. *My family.*

In fact, I’m already committing it to memory.

“Merry Christmas, Tessie Belle.”

****KEEP READING** for the final story in the Wicked West Rejects trilogy. Conner and Haven set the world on fire.

This one will be the messiest of them all... **

WISE

(WICKED WEST REJECTS)

Conner Wiseman was once the boy of my dreams.

After an accident, he forgot me.

And I hated him for that.

So I decided to make him hate me back.

**Fast forward ten years and now Conner is the city's most
beloved football hero.**

**While I'm known as the cold-blooded heiress to my
father's criminal empire.**

**But the grim truth about Conner's legend hides behind his
golden boy smile.**

And I'm trapped in a violent high stakes world I despise.

Maybe the past was always going to catch up to us.

We have unfinished business. An old score to settle.

**Now Conner thinks he knows what he's getting into with
me.**

He doesn't.

I thought I knew how to keep from falling for him.

I didn't.

Because he has always been my weakness.

And I will be his downfall.

After all, a story like ours could never be simple.

No, this will be the messiest one of all...

Prologue

HAVEN

Back in high school...

I've now had half an hour to think about my crimes.

And I've decided what sucks the most is that I was minding my own motherfucking business, eating a severely overcooked cafeteria pizza square and reading Harry Potter fan fiction on my phone.

That's when Abby Pressman, who has been walking around with a bug up her ass ever since losing out on volleyball team captain, made a bad choice to saunter her skinny spray-tanned legs over to my table for the sole purpose of rubbing my nose in shit.

"Hey Marchenko, help settle a debate. When Conner Wiseman popped your cherry, was it a charity case or did you pay him off with your mobster father's pimp cash?"

Abby laughed.

Surrounding tables laughed.

The cafeteria workers laughed. (Not really. But the humiliation felt epic just the same.)

In her moment of triumph, Abby propped her hands on her bony hips and swung her shiny hair over one shoulder as if I couldn't choose to rip it all out at the root anytime I pleased.

As for the rest of the assholes who were snorting with glee in their plaid prep school finery, ninety-nine percent of them aren't even worth a glare.

I tried to leave.

Abby blocked me.

I shoved her.

She threw a punch.

Too bad no one ever taught her how to hit.

Extra too bad that I'm blessed with good aim and a solid arm.

Instant bedlam ensued.

High school fights are always like blood in the water but girl fights are a special brand of red meat. People leapt over tables like they were running toward a pile of money. They trampled each other for the best view of the action and bayed like wolves. Somewhere in the din my sister shouted my name.

And I guess Abby never saw her own blood before because she started shrieking as if she'd been shot when her nose gushed like a fire hydrant.

I'd made my point. I had no plans to hit her again.

But absurdly strong hands grabbed my shoulders anyway, yanking me backwards like I needed to be stopped from murdering poor, helpless Abby.

Twisting away, I discovered that my captor was none other than the boy who remains infuriatingly clueless about how much heartbreak he has caused.

“Haven,” he said.

“Fuck you,” I replied.

“You already did!” someone shouted.

“HAHAHAHA!” screamed the rest of them.

Ignoring the whole psychotic mob, I snatched my backpack and ran out of the cafeteria, bowling over spectators along the way, and forgetting that I wouldn’t get far because Lita has the car keys today.

My journey was cut even shorter when the football coach seized me by the elbow and dragged me to Director Dick Sucker’s office with orders to stay put.

I’m still here.

West Emerald Preparatory Academy might be best known as the gilded cage for wealthy teen spawn but its highbrow reputation is protected with a strict set of behavioral rules.

Today isn’t the first time I’ve broken those rules. I doubt it will matter much who started the fight. What matters is how I ended it.

As I stare blankly at the glass wall overlooking the main campus corridor, a trio of sophomore girls pause in the middle of their stroll and elbow each another with smirks. One of them raises a phone to snap a photo of me sulking in here with dark spots of blood decorating my school uniform.

The blood isn’t mine. But right now I’m not amused by anyone’s giggling interest. Slowly, I roll up my middle finger as a warning.

The three of them lower their heads and hustle down the hall. Smart girls.

Meanwhile, there's been no sign of life coming from the school director's office and the minutes just keep ticking by.

"Does anyone know I'm sitting out here?" I fire the question at the office assistant, who has been stapling papers at her desk while humming with terrible pitch.

She stops her humming and stapling but doesn't look at me. "I'm sure the wait won't be much longer."

The humming resumes. I think it's a song from Grease but I don't have a great ear and she can't carry a tune.

The chair I'm sitting in is the worst. High backed with no cushion and as uncomfortable as a Puritan church pew. I can't even slouch and my ass is numb.

My phone has been buzzing at irregular intervals, insistent as a begging dog. It stays in the backpack by my feet. Either my mother or my sister will be on the other end. I don't need to be reminded that I fucked up. I'm very aware.

The door to my right finally cracks open and Brett Hallaway steps out with his hand on his fly. I had no idea he was in there. He's a senior. They always are, the boys who emerge from that office with smug grins on their horny faces after a private counseling session with Director Dick Sucker, who has earned her nickname for a very obvious reason.

Brett looms over me and rubs his crotch with a smirk. "Still warm. You can have the next turn."

"Asshole." I kick him in the shin.

The humming from the reception desk gets louder. This time it's 'You Are My Sunshine'.

Strange choice.

I used to love that song when I was a kid. My grandmother would sing it to me and Lita. We even made up our own private lyrics. But my grandmother's been dead for ten years and my twin sister and I don't sing songs together anymore. We hardly speak.

Brett makes an obscene gesture, pokes his tongue into his cheek and then shuffles to the door.

I fucking hate this place.

The bell rings and within ten seconds the hallways fill up. I'm starting to wonder if I'll be stuck in this goddamn chair until Christmas.

But Oliva Davison (a.k.a. Director Dick Sucker) has finally decided to slither out of her cave. Her eyes drift right over me and her high heels click over to the counter, where 'You Are My Sunshine' has abruptly stopped.

I don't know how the hell anyone walks in heels like that. They are practically stilts. Personally, I think someday scientists will dig up stilettos and think they were torture devices. Lita owns a vast collection of heels but you'll never catch me wearing that shit unless forced.

My phone buzzes in my backpack again. I ignore it again.

Olivia recites a series of boring administrative orders. There's no mention of my name. Maybe no one would notice if I stood up and left.

From here I can see all the way to the courtyard, which has become a hive of activity as students travel at varying paces. My longstanding habit is to scan crowds for Conner and I'm not shocked to see him. His favorite hangout is out there

beside the courtyard fountain and he's rarely in a hurry to get to class.

As usual, Conner is flanked by his two cousins, Micah and Gage. It must be nice to have cousins you actually like. My own cousins are a vile basket of macho excrement. I avoid them.

Conner looks kind of glum right now. His arms are crossed over his broad chest and he says something to Micah, who wears his usual pissed off scowl, like he's one insult away from committing homicide. Gage stands on Conner's other side but for a change he's smiling, which probably has something to do with the pretty brunette clinging to his arm.

Things seem to come easy for that girl. I envy her for that.

Dani Gallagher has some kind of hard luck backstory and no parents. She lived with her author uncle in a shitty neighborhood until the guy struck it rich and then married Micah's ditzy mother.

Still, I've got to give Dani some credit. She's got everyone in the zip code believing she shits out rainbows. Even my social butterfly sister sings her praises. New kids with no pedigree don't rate much attention around here but within a few short months Dani went from being the unknown mousy new girl to playing the starring role in all the drama surrounding the three princes of West Emerald.

There are rumors that she fucks them all. Conner, Gage and Micah. At the same time too, although I don't know how that would work. Anyway, I have my doubts this is true. I've watched her carefully and from what I've seen, she's only got eyes for Gage.

But I've been very wrong about people before.

“Haven.” Olivia Davison snaps me out of my trance. She unwraps a pale green breath mint. “I couldn’t reach your mother.”

No surprise. My mother has little interest in bad news. Her ex-husband pays her enough alimony to keep her quiet and it’s a safe bet she’s either loaded down with armfuls of shopping bags or sprawled on a spa table somewhere with cucumber slices on her eyes and her phone on mute.

The mint disc is pushed between Olivia’s crimson lips. “So I had no choice but to call your father. He’s on his way. We’ll talk when he gets here.”

Fuck. Fuck. FUCKITTY FUCKING FUCK.

This news has caught me off guard. I haven’t even seen my father in four months. The idea of him showing up here to deal with my cafeteria fight is practically unthinkable.

I’m sure the horror shows on my face. The corner of Olivia Davison’s mouth turns up. There’s a crunching sound as her jaws demolish the candy. She leaves me to stew over this new development and shuts the door to her office.

Aric Marchenko’s anger is the kind that simmers rather than erupts. I’m not worried about getting hit. My mother is the one who lashes out with slaps but the last time she did that I slapped her back so hard that I don’t think she’ll be doing it anymore. But my father expects a certain standard of behavior from his daughters and his chilly disappointment is more brutal than any punch.

He has a son now. That’s one big reason he’s far less interested in me and Lita. He signs the hefty tuition checks and pays child support but rarely answers my calls. His time is

spent with his brothers on the shadowy east side of Emerald City in neighborhoods I am under strict orders not to visit.

Our last name is feared in some parts of the city. That much I know. The rest of the picture is incomplete, just a murky cloud of gossip and rumors that I don't have the nerve to ask him about.

Lita insists she doesn't give a shit if she sees our father again or not.

That's fine for her. But she doesn't understand why I *do* care, why the hurt curdles and festers deep inside my chest and crowds out everything else.

Lita shrugs over our father's abandonment because she is used to being favored by everyone else. She takes it for granted. If I were to tell her this she would get annoyed and remind me that a little personality adjustment would go a long way.

But she wouldn't deny being the *good* twin. The *fun* twin. The *beloved* twin.

Lita knows it's all true and she doesn't lie.

I can't explain why we can't stand being in the same room these days. Sometimes it feels like we've always been at odds. I have to look at old pictures to remind myself that's not the case.

But if your identical twin doesn't know how to handle you, then who the hell does?

At least Lita has been decent enough not to gloat about the Conner situation. She tiptoes around me with pitying glances and stays artificially cheerful. She knows I don't need to be reminded that she tried to warn me.

“Haven, I like Conner but even when he’s not drunk he’s not real particular about who gets to handle his dick. He sure as hell doesn’t understand how you feel about him. Don’t do this.”

My eyes return to the courtyard. I wish they wouldn’t. Conner’s cousins have moved on, probably because the bell is about to ring again.

Only a pair of cheerleaders remain in the area with Conner. They hitch up their skirts and strut around. He rubs his jaw and ignores them, his gaze fixed in the distance. If I didn’t know better I’d say he was upset.

But I do know better.

Life is a big fat fucking orgy of sex and candy to Conner Wiseman. He lives for the moment and nothing else. The smart, sensitive boy who taught me how to shoot baskets from the foul line and listened to my secrets on our long walks home disappeared six years ago. A fall from a tree ended with a severe concussion that extinguished large chunks of his memories.

Some important things were lost in those memories. Including me.

For years I’ve watched him from the sidelines, gritting my teeth and swallowing the painful lump in my throat as endless streams of pretty girls competed for scraps of his attention.

When it seemed like my turn had finally arrived, I could have passed out from sheer joy.

What an idiot I was. My own stupidity is the reason I’m sitting here.

Stupidity and hope, because I desperately wanted to know what it feels like to be of supreme importance to *someone*.

Not a mistake I'll make twice.

Or admit to.

Lita never stood a chance at dragging me out of that party.

All it took was a smile from Conner Wiseman and I was eager to fall to my knees and do anything he wanted. After pushing my sister out of the way, I left her scowling miserably in the kitchen as her girlfriend attempted to comfort her. Half the school had crashed Gage Silvestro's party so there was no shortage of witnesses who saw me cuddled on Conner's lap, whispering in his ear and then clinging happily to his neck as he carried me upstairs.

But behind the closed door of a guest room in Gage's castle-sized house, I finally got a taste of what I've always wanted, at least for a little while.

Conner. His smile. His mouth on mine. His hands all over my body.

I knew what I was doing. And I regretted nothing that night or even the next day. Then on Monday morning I saw him talking to girls in the courtyard, just like always. I don't know why I expected anything different. Still, I scrounged up the nerve to ask him to the Emerald Ball, only to see a cloud pass over his eyes. He'd already made plans to go with someone else.

Then I knew. It had never even occurred to him that we'd be more than a random Saturday night hookup.

I was a fool. Now I'm the fucking laughingstock of West Prep.

The glass door opens and Tess Ballerini breezes in with a stack of papers. She gives the receptionist a winning grin.

“Do you mind if I leave these in Mr. Ratzenberger’s mailbox? Signatures for my candidacy in the spring election.”

The woman smiles at Tess, the darling of West Emerald. The chronically overachieving daughter of the mayor, Tess is a petite torpedo of self-confidence. She practically runs the student government single handedly.

Normally that kind of goody-goody energy makes me want to throw sharp objects. Tess is an exception. She’s really Lita’s friend, not mine. Yet she always makes an effort to include me. The effort is usually wasted but she tries.

Tess keeps an eye on me while depositing the sheaf of clipped papers into one of the faculty mailbox slots. She glances at the director’s closed door and then slides into the chair beside mine.

“Lita’s worried,” she says in a soft voice. “She asked me to come down here on a phony errand and try to find out what’s happening.”

Tess focuses on the blood on my shirt. She rummages in her messenger bag, comes up with a pack of wet wipes, and hands them over.

I allow her to shove them into my hand even though I won’t use them. “No one needs to worry about me.”

Tess sighs. “Conner asked me why you hate him now. He says he’d apologize if he knew what he did.”

My fist closes around the pack of wet wipes.

I’m not telling that story.

Tess continues to scrutinize me. “Haven, are you okay?”

Not answering that question either.

But the glass door swings open again and Tess lets out a low whistle of shock.

Standing at the threshold in all his furious six-foot-five glory, is my father.

He must see me sitting here but his sharp words are for the terrified receptionist. “Tell Olivia Davison that Aric Marchenko is here.”

Tess is suddenly in a hurry to escape. She gives my arm a friendly squeeze and then flees. Can’t say I blame her.

My father reaches me in three long strides. Lita and I inherited our pale blonde hair and high cheekbones from him. Though he’s well into his forties he’s in peak physical shape and there’s no hint he’ll be going bald anytime soon. If his two brothers, Estes and Desmond, resent the fact that he’s the head of the family, they’re not dumb enough to complain openly.

He looks me over with cold eyes, noting the blood on my shirt, but says nothing.

I clear my throat. Though I know it’s possible I’ll be kicked out of school, I haven’t been nervous until right this second. “Dad, I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here but-”

“Aric.” Olivia Davison has silently prowled into the middle of the scene. She holds out a slim hand. “What a treat to see you again, though I wish the circumstances were different. You haven’t been at the club in ages.”

Despite my father’s brutal reputation, he knows how to be pleasant when necessary. His large hand warmly shakes her small one. “Olivia. Appreciate the phone call. Let’s see what we can do about getting this sorted out.”

“Of course.” Her eyes rake him over like she’s drooling over her next meal. “Come sit down and we’ll have a chat.”

My father snaps his fingers and addresses me directly for the first time. “Get up.”

Aric Marchenko is not the kind of guy who tolerates an argument. Shouldering my backpack, I follow his tall body into the large office and wait until he sinks into one of the leather chairs parked in front of Olivia’s desk before copying the move.

He wastes no time speaking first. “I find it difficult to believe that my daughter would be severely punished for a silly shoving match between girls.”

In the corner of Olivia’s desk sits a glass bowl full of those green mints she was eating earlier. If there’s a shred of truth to the gossip, I guess she needs them.

She folds her hands on the desk and takes her time appraising me before turning back to my father. “It was more than a shoving match. The Pressman girl suffered a broken nose.”

“Pressman.” My father spits out the name. “Rich Pressman’s daughter, right?”

“Yes.”

“I know him.” My father’s smile has a glacial quality. “I’m confident he’ll allow me to make this right.”

Abby’s father owns a string of car dealerships but my dad must have something worth holding over his head. The thought makes me oddly proud.

My father glances at me. “And what could this fight have possibly been about?”

Olivia enjoys telling this part. “Before things turned physical, Haven and Abby were arguing over a boy.”

“Impossible.” He waves a hand that’s heavily tattooed and adorned with silver rings. “My daughter doesn’t even like boys.”

Olivia raises her expertly shaped eyebrows and looks to me for confirmation.

“Dad, that’s Lita,” I mutter.

My father peers at me with a frown. “What?”

“Lita’s gay. I’m not.”

He’s annoyed to be openly contradicted. “I thought it was you.”

“No.”

“What’s this boy’s name?”

“It’s not important. He doesn’t matter.” I shoot a glare at Olivia and hope she’ll keep quiet. This day could get a lot more mortifying in a hurry if my father decides to storm the halls of West Prep and drag Conner Wiseman out by his testicles.

Perhaps the school director has no wish to see the star quarterback mutilated. She keeps her manicured hands folded and says nothing.

My father is already growing bored with the meeting. “It’s a silly disagreement between teen girls. Just give her detention for a few days.”

Olivia mulls this over. “Excusing the incident will be difficult. We have a no tolerance policy when it comes to physical altercations.”

My father's eyes bore a hole in her face. "And I bet receiving a fat check for the new library will help you overlook that policy."

She smiles. "Such a contribution would be very appreciated. We do value our West Prep families. Haven, I'm afraid I will have to suspend you for three days, however."

My father rises from his chair and answers for me. "You can be sure Haven appreciates the second chance and will put the time to good use." He shoots me a look as a sign that I need to agree.

I can't manage to raise my voice above a mumble. "Yeah, thanks for the suspension."

Olivia Davison is not paying attention anyway. She extends her hand to my father. "We'll have to arrange lunch at the club sometime."

My father hardly looks at her. The fact that he's married wouldn't be an obstacle, just like it wasn't an obstacle when he was married to my mother. She's just not his type, at least a decade above his preferred age bracket.

"Let's go," he growls and I don't even think about disobeying.

Besides, I'm more than ready to exit this scene. A three day vacation doesn't sound half bad right now.

But before we're out of the building my father makes a shocking statement. "We'll need to stop at your house so you can pack."

"Pack?" All the alarm bells start ringing in my head. "Where am I going?"

"You'll be spending the rest of the week with me."

I can almost feel my jaw dropping. Lita and I haven't spent a single night under the same roof as our father since he moved out three years ago. "What's Mom going to say?"

"This is *my* decision." He clicks the unlock button of his Ferrari. "Haven, you are intelligent and you seem to know how to handle yourself. It's possible you might have a role in the family's future so you ought to see what that future will look like. Now get in the car. Front passenger seat. I'm not a fucking chauffeur."

This is a shock. Glimpses of Aric Marchenko's professional world have always been forbidden but I'm aware that it's a boy's club. My baby brother will someday be welcomed with a seat at the table but Lita and I are excluded.

I don't know what to think. Yet the sudden rush of happiness is real. I've craved my father's attention for so long. I never thought I would actually have it.

This is almost enough to take the sting out of the Conner situation. Almost. As for my sister, she's got her friends and her social calendar and her girlfriend. She'll certainly be glad to get rid of me for a few days.

As I click the seatbelt in place my phone goes off again. This time I haul it out, look at the screen and see the flurry of texts from Lita. I switch the phone off and stuff it back into a zippered pocket.

Our mother is sure to have hysterics over this visit with her despised ex. Lita will certainly get an earful. My whereabouts will not be a mystery to her so I don't feel the need to answer her call.

The cold reality is that Lita and I won't miss each other, not even a little.

My father checks his own phone, hisses out a curse and throws it on the dashboard before backing up. He'll just get annoyed if I ask him the reason. I say nothing.

Instead, I take a look out the window at the pretentious school I hate and discover that I'm being watched.

Conner stands in the shadow of the science building, beneath a shedding willow tree. He is not supposed to be out here and he is alone. Today is a game day so he's allowed to dress in his team jersey instead of the starchy school uniform. The number twenty-nine blazes from the center of his chest like an insult.

"I'll remember that. In fact, someday when I make varsity it'll be my jersey number. For real. I swear it."

He did use the number. But the part that included me was erased. Even if I told him the story of why he wears that number, he probably wouldn't believe me.

Our eyes meet. I smother the usual rush of giddiness that has the power to steal my breath.

I'd rather feel nothing for him. It's not easy.

He lifts his hand and waves. I turn my head away without waving back.

The whole school believes that I fucked Conner Wiseman in a spare bedroom at Gage Silvestro's party.

Let them keep believing that.

I haven't told any lies.

I just don't give a shit when everyone draws their own stupid conclusions.

The truth is, I did *not* lose my virginity to Conner at Gage's party.

We kissed. We took off our clothes. We *almost* did it all.

But Conner refused to have sex with me, even when I asked him to. Knowing his reputation, I thought that part must be important, like he felt something special was happening.

Wrong. So very wrong.

And it doesn't fucking matter.

Conner forgot me once.

It won't take him long to forget again.

He never really wanted me anyway.

PART I

A story like ours could never be simple.

No, this will be the messiest one of all...

1. Conner

This is some serious pressure.

Way more intense than being followed by the eyes of the world as eighty thousand fans howl in the stands.

Yup, that's much easier than changing the diaper of a squirming baby.

"You're fucking this up." Gage has a way of growling out his words.

Now I feel the need to prove him wrong.

After all, if I can successfully fire a sixty yard Hail Mary pass into the end zone, then surely I'm talented enough to slap a diaper on my cousin's kid.

I swat Gage away when he muscled too close. "Knock it off."

"I'm just trying to save you from humiliating yourself in front of an infant."

I block him again. "Kind of cute the way you're getting all these delusions of grandeur and thinking you have a prayer of moving me."

He scowls as only Gage can scowl. “It’s backwards, you jackass.”

I peer down at my handiwork. “No it’s not.”

“The hell it’s not. You also failed to secure one of the adhesive tabs.”

“Who the fuck died and made you the diaper whisperer?”

He rolls his eyes. “I know how to do this. Dani and I babysit for him all the time.”

“Like I don’t babysit for him too. The kid lives in a bedroom down the hall.”

“Then you have no excuse for your inferior skills.”

I turn my attention back to the baby. “This guy’s just trash talking, Dash. He knows we have a special bond.”

His full name is Dashiell Ethan Conner Gage Lyonne. Quite a mouthful for such a little guy and someday he’ll want an explanation. We never call him anything but Dash. The thick thatch of dark hair on his head was inherited from his mother. He also has Tess’s big, serious brown eyes. But the deeply skeptical look on his little face as he stares up at me is something I’ve seen a thousand times from his daddy.

That look has got a *‘What the hell have you done now, jackass?’* shine to it. Classic.

Micah’s son hiccups. His diaper comes apart.

Gage snorts out a laugh.

“That one was defective,” I grumble. With care, I remove the diaper that wasn’t working out and grab another one.

“Why are you guys taking so long with the best man?” Dani has now entered the room, hands propped on her hips.

Gage rakes his eyes slowly over his wife, stunning in her maid of honor gown, before answering. “The quarterback apparently requires some lessons in child care.”

I object to that. “Dorothy Ann, give your husband a snack or something so he quits whining.” This time when I fasten the diaper it appears to hold. “Dash and I understand each other. He has faith in me. Right, buddy?”

Naturally, Dash can’t answer. He’s only seven months old. But he flashes a toothless grin and flails his arms around.

I’ll take that as a vote of confidence. I scoop him up into the crook of my arm and he gurgles happily.

I freaking love this kid.

How could I not? He’s the cutest damn thing on the planet and his parents are two of my favorite people.

“You forgot to dress him,” points out Gage, always so helpful.

“Shit.” I look around for Dash’s wedding outfit.

Dani crosses the room, her arms already out. “Here, I’ll get him all fixed up.”

She doesn’t wait for me to consent before stealing the baby away. Her face has already turned to maternal mush and her voice changes to that of a high pitched cartoon character as she squawks out something like, “Aw, our boy is the very best little baby, isn’t he, oh yes, double yes he is, the very best baby.”

Dash squeals with delight and seizes a handful of her long brown hair.

I switch my gaze to Gage to see if he’s smirking. He isn’t. He looks positively awed at the sight of his wife fussing over

the baby.

My grouchy cousin isn't one to overshare personal details but I know they are trying for a baby of their own. When the time comes, I have complete faith they will both be excellent parents.

It's quite a trip, seeing both my boys in love and settled down. These days I'm kind of feeling like a late bloomer when surrounded by all this family bliss.

As Dani sets the kid down on the changing table, making *goo goo* noises all the while, Gage swoops in to help snap up Dash's little wedding suit. I'm not really needed here at the moment and anyway I need to go find a sink to wash my hands.

This area of the huge Palace Hotel now looks like a ray of sunshine exploded indoors with sunflowers and ribbons practically dripping from the walls. Yellow is Tess's favorite color and she allowed Micah's wacky mother to take over most of the wedding plans. Matilda doesn't know how to get through the day without being extra.

I can see my aunt now, all the way at the other end of the corridor. She's gesturing wildly and I can't hear anything she says but her lips are spitting out rapid fire words to the poor club employee who looks like he's searching for an escape hatch.

She dismisses him and he bolts into the ballroom. Matilda huffs and checks the condition of her dress, which is sparkly and white. I remember hearing somewhere that it's a rotten idea for anyone other than the bride to wear white but good taste is not really a priority in our family and no one loves being the center of attention more than my aunt.

Speaking of aunts, Gage's mother Alta is already strutting around with a champagne glass in her hand and hostility stamped on her pinched face. She's allergic to good moods. Now she slinks right up to Matilda and says something that makes Matilda redden and snap back.

I swear, one of these days I expect to find those two locked in a hair pulling brawl and smacking the shit out of each other. Maybe it would be good for them. Like therapy.

Together, my aunts run Yellow Brick Properties, the billion dollar family business. I've got no idea how anything gets done over in that downtown eyesore of a glass building. The two of them agree on absolutely nothing and they each tend to think the other is the antichrist. Meetings must be loads of fun.

My grandmother was really the glue that held her daughters together. Cecile's been gone for over a year now. She was a spitfire who never shied away from brutal honesty. The last time we spoke I wrote down what she said so I wouldn't forget her words later. I do tend to forget things sometimes.

“Conner, you always see the best in people. In that way you're far smarter than the rest of us. And kinder. But while you're busy looking out for everyone else don't forget to seize your own happiness. I know you'll find it. Once you do, sweet boy, don't let it go.”

Damn, I miss that lady.

How she would have loved to be here for Micah's wedding day.

But if Cecile is here in spirit then I bet she's pissed that her two oldest daughters can't even pretend to play nice for two minutes.

“This is a vintage Valentino,” Matilda huffs.

Alta sniffs. “It’s an etiquette travesty. Has no one informed you that this isn’t *your* wedding day?”

Matilda throws back her head with a laugh. “Says the woman who shows up dressed in a funeral shroud.”

Watching the two of them spar like mean schoolgirls is a reminder that there’s a missing ingredient. My mother, for all her faults, used to be something of a buffer between her two abrasive older sisters.

But that was before she killed some people, shot me with a pink pistol and then took a swan dive from the balcony of a downtown high rise.

This unwanted thought comes with a flood of rotten feelings.

Thoughts about my mother usually do.

Before my insane aunts notice I’m in the area and call me over to mediate their catfight, I duck into a restroom.

After washing my hands, I check the time. There’s still an hour to kill before the ceremony starts. Maybe I ought to track down the groom and make sure there aren’t any last minute wedding chores that need to be dealt with. However, the instant I open the bathroom door I’m immediately tackled by my ten-year-old cousin.

“Thank god.” Charlotte doesn’t bother to explain before pushing me down the hall.

“Whoa, are we being chased?”

She ignores the question and successfully shoves me into a room full of stacked white chairs.

Charlotte looks around as if she's worried about being overheard by spies, perhaps lurking in the chair towers. "Conner."

"What?"

"I need you to do something for me."

"Is it illegal?"

She rolls her eyes. "No. We just have to switch places."

"Okay, but I'm not sure I'll make a very pretty bridesmaid."

"Not that. I need to walk down the aisle with Elijah instead of you."

Elijah is Micah's old boss from his MMA fighting days and he runs a gym on the east side. The guy is super likeable. He manages to be hilarious while keeping that stern old school, no nonsense energy. Elijah's been a friend and father figure to Micah since his teens so it makes sense that he would be included in the wedding party.

When I hesitate, Charlotte rushes to explain. "Elijah needs to walk slowly because of his cane."

"Yeah, but he's getting the job done. Besides, I thought we were partners in crime."

She grins. "We still are. Which is why you should help me keep Elijah safe from that Haven person."

The reminder that Tess chose Haven Marchenko as one of her bridesmaids is not a pleasant one. I haven't been required to interact with her yet, which is nice because Haven is about as approachable as a raccoon with rabies.

“Do you really think you need to protect Elijah from Haven?”

Charlotte lifts her chin, eyes narrowed. “Yes. She’s one hell of a scary bitch.”

“Charlotte.” I fail at sounding stern and start cracking up.

“Well, she is. Even Mother says so and Mother really dislikes using words like that because she says profanity is tacky so it must be true.”

“In that case, maybe I also need to be protected from Haven.”

She shakes her head with impatience. “You can make anyone like you, Conner.”

It’s cute the way she overestimates me.

And it’s clear no one has enlightened Charlotte on my ancient history with Haven.

There’s every sign that Haven still hates my guts for some high school crime that I wasn’t aware I committed. Sure, we hooked up at a party but that was her idea. We never talked at school and I barely knew her. She seemed cool but something went haywire in the days that followed. More than once I tried to talk to her but all she did was stomp around, shoot red hot lasers from her eyes and behave like I was a carrier of smallpox.

Maybe Haven would have come around eventually and allowed me to apologize for whatever I’d done to piss her off. It really doesn’t sit right with me when I’m hated. I thought I could win her over, maybe take her out on a real date if she’d let me.

But then came that awful tragedy with her twin sister and a whole lot of shit blew up at once. On the rare times we've crossed paths, Haven looks right through me. We're just two strangers who know some of the same people and got each other off at a party once. And now a freaking decade has gone by since high school.

Maybe a wedding is a good time to break the ice. Haven is unlikely to have a tantrum today, even if she is a Marchenko. The name attached to that family is notorious for some damn gory reasons. Haven has spent the years since high school neck deep in her family's east side criminal empire. Saying the wrong thing might earn me a hammer to the head and I'd rather not deal with that. My head's been through enough.

Charlotte waits for my answer.

I don't want to say no to her.

What could go wrong? It's just a brief walk down the aisle. Maybe a couple of words of tense conversation.

Anyway, there's always the possibility that some time with Haven could be interesting. I'm a big fan of making things interesting.

"Char, you'll need to check with Tess first. She's the bride."

Charlotte claps her hands and bounces. "Tessie doesn't care. I already asked. She laughed and said I need to ask for your permission but if it's all right with you then it's all right with her. By the way, why didn't you bring a date? I heard Mother and Auntie Alta talking about it."

I rub my jaw and pretend to give the matter intense thought. "I guess nobody wants to be seen with me. Really wish I hadn't been reminded of that. Now I'm sad."

“Bullshit,” says the ten-year-old.

“Sheesh, kid. Are you just trying out all the cuss words today?”

“It *is* bullshit, Conner. Everyone wants to be seen with the quarterback of the Emerald City Cyclones.”

This is true. Irritating at times, but true.

But I didn't bother to find a date today because I didn't want to. I don't bring dates to family events. My interest is easy to spark, impossible to keep. I like having a good time and I make sure to seek out people who also like having a good time. Anything deeper than that has always felt out of reach. Doubt that will ever change.

“Yeah, I'm all kinds of popular. By the way, did you happen to run into your big brother lately?”

She nods. “I saw Micah outside in the garden a little while ago. The one with all the palm trees and huge flowers. There are so many gardens here. I think he was hiding from Mother. Did he and Tessie really hate each other when they were kids?”

“They definitely weren't friends.” An understatement. They couldn't fucking stand each other when we were growing up. “Why do you ask?”

She scrunches up her nose. “Because I hate Benny Cortland. He's the rudest boy in my class and he gets the other kids to call me Saint Charlotte just because he's mad that I beat him in the spelling bee. He's totally gross and he never wipes his mouth and I definitely do *not* want to marry him.”

She's being completely serious right now so I stifle a smile.

“Don’t lose any sleep over Benny Cortland. He doesn’t stand a chance with you.”

“You’re right. He doesn’t.” Satisfied, she flings the door open.

Matilda’s voice comes wafting from down the hall. She’s complaining to someone that there is a glare in the ballroom and something must absolutely be done at once to control the sunlight.

Charlotte winces and drops her voice to a whisper. “I don’t want Mother to see me right now. She’ll be angry that I’m not wearing my flower crown but I kept sneezing so Tess and Dani said I don’t need to wear it if I don’t want to.”

“Tess and Dani know best. How about I’ll stand lookout so you can escape?”

She beams. “Thanks, Conner. I really hope Haven doesn’t hurt you today. Please be careful.”

“Luckily I’m pretty indestructible.” I poke my head out and check out the hallway. “Coast is clear. No Matilda. Make a run for it.”

Charlotte daintily lifts the hem of her yellow dress and scampers down the corridor. She barely misses smacking into Alta, who rounds the corner with her glass newly filled. Gage’s mother glances at me with supreme disinterest as she passes.

I wave at her. “Nice day for a wedding, Auntie Alta.”

She swigs her drink and keeps moving. I don’t take the snub personally.

Remembering Charlotte’s comment about spotting Micah in the garden, I follow signs that point in that direction. Once I

find it there's nothing to see except a jungle of tropical plants amid weird sculptures that look ugly to me but probably count as art to someone else. I've never been out here before, despite the fact that I lived up in the penthouse suite of this hotel for over a year.

Matilda pouted when her plan to hold the wedding at the West Emerald Golf Club was rejected. She tends to be oblivious to important details, like how a place where Gage and Dani were nearly killed might not be a great venue for a joyful occasion.

Nobody wants to be reminded of that.

Just like nobody wants to be reminded of the fact that it was my own mother, warped and seething with jealousy of Dani, who hired the hitman.

That's just one fucked up story woven into our family history. There are many more. To outsiders we probably sound as dysfunctional as the Marchenkos.

Can't be helped. Let everyone else gossip. We know who we are. Terrible stories don't define us.

Living at a luxury hotel was all right but I don't miss it. Last year I bought a house on the northern edge of Em City. I had to twist Micah's arm to get him to move in, bringing Tess with him. Now that they have Dash it feels like we're all exactly where we are supposed to be. Sooner or later I expect that Micah and Tess will want to move on and buy their own home but I'm hoping that day doesn't get here soon because I love being around them.

Dani said something to me once and I can't remember when or why. But her words stick in my head every day. She

said that it took her a long time to learn that home isn't a place. Home is people. Dani knows what she's talking about.

"Excuse me."

I turn around, expecting to find that while I'm standing around being all moody and philosophical I'm in someone's way.

The club employee that Matilda was shouting at earlier offers a timid smile.

"Hope I'm not bothering you, Conner. Just wanted to let you know that we're all huge fans. Me and my whole family."

I'm used to this. Yet there are times when it still catches me by surprise when people recognize me and go out of their way to say hello.

I don't mind, not even a little.

If a simple word from me makes someone's day then I'd be a real asshole not to give it to them.

I grin back at the guy and extend my hand. "Hey, thanks a lot. What's your name?"

His brown eyes widen and he pumps my hand with eagerness. He's probably in his late teens. "It's Berto. Berto Aguilar. We're all Cyclones fans in my family. We tailgate up at the stadium during the season. My dad always says you're the best QB in the game. I've been saving up to buy my kid brother your jersey for his birthday next month."

"Yeah? It just so happens that I've got some extra jerseys stockpiled. I'll arrange to have one sent over for you to give to your brother."

Berto's jaw drops. "Holy shit, seriously? I mean, thanks."

“No problem. Give me a few days and it will be delivered here to the hotel.”

“That’s...” He gets choked up and sniffs. “Really, you’re awesome.”

“Tell your brother happy birthday.”

“I will. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

I just hope it’s not a question about my mother. Reporters enjoy blindsiding me with that shit.

But Berto’s no reporter. “You’ve been wearing the number twenty-nine since high school. Does it mean something to you?”

The tension leaves my shoulders. This is a familiar question. “It’s just always felt like my lucky number, that’s all.”

Berto nods and then his face falls before he glances over his shoulder. “Thanks so much for everything but I should get going. I’m supposed to be fixing the centerpieces so that the flower stems are all exactly the same height.”

An order that could only have come from Matilda.

“Take care,” I tell him.

Berto flashes another smile. “Let’s go, Cyclones. Can’t wait for next season.”

He’s still smiling as he walks away. Turns out it’s really not that hard to make people happy.

Before moving on, I take a moment to pound out a text to my assistant, asking her to handle the task of sending the jersey over. If I don’t do this now then I might forget later.

Hiring an assistant was Tess's idea. She noticed that I was getting overwhelmed while trying to keep up with small tasks and scheduling issues. I tend to overcommit, make too many promises. Tess even helped me find Angela. Angela doesn't give a flying leap about football. She and her husband run a horse rescue ranch south of the city. And she's fanatically organized.

I'm not surprised when I receive an instant response from her with a promise she'll take care of the matter. That was easy. I should have hired an assistant years ago.

Now I need to get back to my mission of finding Micah. Since he's not hiding behind a palm frond out here in the garden it's time to look elsewhere.

After returning indoors and poking my head into a series of random doorways I'm about to give up and try to call him when I walk in on my cousin making out with his bride.

They look like a book cover, standing in the middle of a sunlit room with their arms around one another and oblivious to anything else.

I wait for a few seconds and finally clear my throat. Loudly.

Tess quits sucking face with her soon-to-be-husband but doesn't look at me. "What was that noise?" she asks Micah.

He keeps his arms locked around her and smirks. "Don't know. Sounds kind of like an overbearing quarterback."

"Overbearing, haha." I have a good laugh over that one.

Tess turns her head and gives me a pretty smile. "Conner. Hello. When did you get here?"

I wag my finger. “You guys aren’t supposed to see each other before the wedding. It’s tradition. You’ll wind up with seven years of bad luck or something.”

“We already have a baby,” Micah points out. “Fuck tradition.”

Tess smiles up at him. “God, I love it when you talk dirty.”

“Then you’ll have a hell of a good time on the honeymoon.”

“I plan to.” She stretches to plant another kiss on his mouth. “So will you, big boy.”

I don’t mean to stare. There’s nothing unusual about seeing them all over each other.

It’s just really hitting me hard today, the reminder of what it took to get them here.

Tess and Micah grew up on the same street. Since we were kids it’s been a running joke in our group that they could hardly stand to be in the same room. When that changed, no one saw it coming, not even me. And usually I have a knack for sensing when people want to fuck each other. Guess I’m losing my touch.

But Micah, the guy who’s been through many layers of hell, who rarely cracked a smile and wielded the chip on his shoulder like a trophy, was knocked flat on his ass by feisty little Tess Ballerini.

That doesn’t mean their journey was easy.

It was anything but easy.

“You have to save Tess. That’s what I need you to do. So you better fucking do it.”

That night.

That *fucking* night.

It never stops haunting me.

The night Micah lost his hand and nearly lost his life.

The night he ordered me to save the girl he loves at all costs.

Many times I've woken up in a cold sweat, my ears ringing with ugly echoes that refuse to disappear.

But when I see the two of them here together on a day like this, I can keep those shadows at bay.

And the rest of the shadows too.

The ones my mother lives inside of.

"LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!"

"Conner." Micah is giving me a funny look. He probably knows my moods better than anyone. He's wearing his prosthetic hand today, something he rarely does. The marvels of modern technology. At a glance it looks completely real.

It's not hard to force a smile on my face in order to set him at ease. "Bring it in here, both of you. The overbearing quarterback requires a hug."

Surging forward, I capture one of them in each arm and squeeze, like they're my kids or something.

Micah mutters something profane but he's not really annoyed. Tessie giggles and hugs me back.

I release my hold on them before I manage to wrinkle Tess's wedding dress. "Have I mentioned that you look absolutely stunning?"

“Thanks for noticing,” Micah says. “I even shaved today.”

For his insolence he gets smacked on the shoulder. That’s just how we deal with each other. Nothing but love there, though.

Micah grins at me and reclaims his bride, sliding a possessive arm around her small waist.

“Look at this. Seems like some pre-wedding festivities are carrying on without us.” Dani enters the room with Dash on her hip and Gage right behind her.

Dash gets excited to see his parents and Tess rushes over to take him from her best friend.

Tess cuddles her baby boy and nuzzles his cheek. “My little man. As handsome as his daddy.”

Micah cups a palm to the back of his son’s head. His voice is soft. “Kid, I’m marrying your mom today. Hope you approve.”

Dash gurgles. A line of drool falls from his chin.

That looks like approval to me.

Dani hooks her arm through Gage’s. “We’re approaching the critical hour. Guests are arriving. Micah, your friend Elijah is here. He’s already been captured by Charlotte.”

“But no sign of Marchenko yet.” Gage directs the comment at me with some amusement. “So we’re still missing one member of the wedding party.”

Tess bounces baby Dash. “Haven will be here. Don’t worry.”

Dani shares a look with her husband. “We’re not worried about Haven. What about you, Conner?”

“What about me?”

“Charlotte told us about the procession adjustment.”

“Hey, I’m cool with it.” I shrug to emphasize the point.

Tess hands the baby off to Micah. “You sure you don’t mind the switch? I told Charlotte she had to check with you.”

“Absolutely fine. Haven and I are like oil and water.”

“We know,” Gage says. “I think that’s the point.”

“What point?”

“Oil and water don’t mix. Like you and Haven.”

“Oh, then that’s not what I meant. We’re like peas in a pod. Or chicken and rice.”

“Chicken and rice? That’s not a thing.”

“Sure it is. It’s totally a thing. Haven and I are the most fantastic of friends.”

Micah decides to chime in. “Careful. Gonna hurt your back shoveling all that bullshit.”

“Funny, moments ago I heard that exact word from your little sister. Now I know where she learned it.”

“Sure. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Hey.” I snap my fingers at Tess. “Aren’t you worried about your bad-tempered bridesmaid going off the rails when she finds out she’s paired with me?”

She shrugs. “Nah. Haven has mellowed a lot. Besides, she never even mentions your name.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.” Tess smiles sweetly. “I’m positive she’s utterly indifferent to your existence.”

“Huh.”

“Don’t tell me that bruises your ego.”

“No. Well, maybe a little. I’ve been told on many occasions that I’m irresistible. Did everyone lie?”

“No. You just need a more receptive audience. And your ego will recover.”

“Already has.”

“Tessie!” Dani gasps. “Your lipstick is smeared.”

“Uh oh.” Tess touches a finger to her lips and bats her eyes. “I can’t imagine why.”

Micah smirks at her. “You ought to be more careful how you use your mouth.”

She flashes a wicked grin. “My mouth enjoys being used.”

Dani gets stern, slapping her hands together like a teacher trying to get the attention of her class. “Come on, we need to fix this and we don’t have much time.” She starts dragging Tess away.

Tess willingly surrenders but before leaving the room she puts on the brakes and blows a kiss to her groom. “I can’t *wait* to marry you, Micah Lyonne.”

He looks at her with raw devotion. His voice becomes a little husky. “I love you, Tessie Belle.”

She tilts her head and gazes at him. “Forever, Micah.”

These two.

I’m no hopeless romantic but they kill me.

I expect I’ll shed a tear when I’m watching their wedding. I’m in danger of letting one fall right now.

With just us boys left in the room, Dash yawns and gets comfortable on his father's shoulder. He looks like he'd be happy to stay there for a while but it'll kind of throw a wrench in the plans if he's napping during the ceremony. He's an important participant. Tess is going to carry him on the walk down the aisle. Then Micah will hold him while they say their VOWS.

Dash won't want to miss that, even if he'll never remember it.

When I glance to my left I notice that Gage is watching Micah while I watch them both.

These boys are my brothers. Best men I'll ever know.

Out on the football field I play for wins alongside a team.

But my *real* team is right here. My family.

Fucking ride or die until my last breath.

"Well boys, let's not let these awesome tuxes go to waste." I start ushering Micah to the door. "Time to marry you off. Good thing Tess is willing to take you off our hands."

He decides to take this opportunity to bust my balls. "Know what this means, big guy?"

"What?"

"You're the last bachelor. Your turn is up next."

"Don't I know it. Tomorrow I'm opening up Future Wife applications. Spread the word." A joke. The thought of leaping on the matrimony bandwagon is hilarious.

This is an excellent day. I plan to enjoy every minute. The only possible hitch is the volatile Haven Marchenko but Tess

knows her a lot better than I do and Tess is sure she won't make a scene.

Besides, I don't believe that Haven really is 'indifferent' to my existence. I have strong reasons to be confident in my ability to charm the socks off a nun.

This doesn't mean I'll be trying to charm the panties off a mob princess with personality issues but I can keep things cheerful. Even in the face of a challenge like Haven.

So bring it on.

This will be fun.

I'll have Little Miss Hostility dropping her attitude and blushing in no time.

She won't know what hit her.

2. Haven

When Tess asked me to be a bridesmaid at her wedding I laughed.

What a shock to find out that she wasn't joking.

And ultimately I couldn't refuse a request from one of the few living people who doesn't make me want to bash something with a steel bat.

This is the reason why I'm currently dressed like a satiny pineapple slice. My hair is newly dyed to a normal color and my makeup is being artfully applied to look tasteful instead of frightening.

My typical look is nothing like this for a reason. The same reason why my closet is full of tight, racy dresses with necklines that plunge to my bare tits.

I'm always daring any man to disrespect me. If he's stupid enough to take the bait, the penalty will be harsh. The penalties doled out by me always are.

At least he'll likely think twice before treating the next woman like a toy.

And I'll never feel an ounce of guilt for this.

Why should I?

Men are applauded and admired for being tyrants. Meanwhile, women get condemned for being impolite.

What a shitty deal.

“Now hold COMPLETELY still or I’ll smudge the liner.” Sophie is taking my bridesmaid makeover seriously. She just spent ten minutes inventorying her massive cosmetic case in search of the ideal shade of lip gloss.

Sophie works in silence and then pulls back. “Your lips are absolutely the perfect shape. I would give anything to look like you. Did anyone ever tell you that you could be a runway model? Seriously, you could. You’re tall, you’ve got the body for it and my god, people have actually *killed* for your cheekbones.”

It’s not hard to tune her out as she prattles on about my imaginary modeling career. In the two months since she arrived here in Em City, Sophie has gotten into the habit of hanging around here at the club. I never tell her to get lost even though she’s ditzy, always gets in the way and constantly carries on about nonsense. I feel sorry for her.

Anyone who is stuck being married to my cousin Jared deserves truckloads of pity. Jared is a soulless bastard who doesn’t deserve the attention of a dog and their story isn’t exactly a love match.

Sophie was born into a Las Vegas mafia family, one of the traditional names standing atop generations of hushed respect. A far cry from what we are; an upstart squad of gutter gangsters. Recently my father grew interested in dipping his inked fingers into some underground Vegas business. Meanwhile, the big boss out there craved a taste of the action here in Emerald City. The two of them struck a deal, cemented by the marriage of Sophie Castigliore to Jared Marchenko.

Now Sophie is stuck with an Armani-suited prick who sees the likeness of god when he looks in the mirror. The only choice that could have been worse than Jared is his younger brother, Talon.

Anyway, I can't fault Sophie for hiding out here at the club instead of going home to that jackass. Besides, it's not as if I have piles of friends to choose from so I ought to play nice when they show up in my life.

Three staccato raps come from the other side of my office door.

I call out, "It's open."

Fiona's auburn curls frame her lovely face as she takes in the scene of my temporary makeover in progress. "Looking good, boss." She brings the noise of the club; the final notes of a Beyonce song and the jeers of men salivating over a raunchy stage performance.

A tension headache begins to bloom at the base of my neck.

"Close the door behind you," I say while scouting the nearest desk drawer for a bottle of aspirin. I shake out the last two pills and tip my head back while chasing them with a gulp of mineral water.

Fiona perches on the edge of my desk, observing me with avid green eyes. Her origin story is a little cloudy. She was born in Ireland but never speaks of it. Her experience on the pole came from her years in Vegas but she's tight lipped about that era too. She mentors the younger staff and she's become my second in command, used to being in charge whenever I'm not around. Sometimes I don't know how I'd manage without her.

“Tonight will be busy,” she says in her Irish lilt. She taps her sparkly purple acrylic nails on my desktop. “I think the spring air is fuel for testosterone. And thanks to some big sporting goods convention downtown there are plenty of newcomers prowling the city in search of entertainment.”

Sophie accidentally stabs my skull with a bobby pin. “Sorry!”

I politely escape her by rising to my feet. “Luckily we’ve got a full cast tonight and the bar is overstocked. Is the new girl settling in all right?”

Fiona nods. “She’s still a little quiet but she’ll come around. On a related topic, Barnum has been complaining about you rather loudly.”

“Is that right?” I chuckle with no humor.

“Yup. He’s accusing you of stealing his best dancers.”

“Stealing. As if they’re his property. I know how he operates. I’ve seen the bruises on the girls who work for him. Fuck that sloppy train wreck. His days of operating in this district are numbered if he keeps pushing my buttons. And if I hear anything else about him roughing up women then one of these days he might find a hole in the center of that rock he calls a skull.”

Fiona toys with the fringe hanging from the neckline of her sequined red shirt. “No arguments here.” Her expression is relaxed. She’s worked for me long enough to understand I don’t blow hot air. I mean what I say. And she obviously approves.

Sophie, on the other hand, gawks at me with startled doe eyes and now I want to kick myself.

I need to hold my tongue more when I'm around her. Despite the ruthless reputation of her father, she's been slow to adapt to her new reality.

It's not as if she can count on Jared for an education. Sophie's new husband hardly acknowledges she's alive. Even Jared isn't stupid enough to abuse the daughter of a mafia king but he has no use for her unless he's in need of a warm destination for his dick. She told me so one night after getting shitfaced and then she swore me to absolute secrecy.

Seriously, who the hell would I tell?

And even if I decided to shout the news into a bullhorn, no one would be surprised.

Jared is a narcissistic garbage person. He fits into the family far better than I do.

For Sophie's sake, I force my mouth to smile to make her think I'm just joking about adding bullet holes to the heads of bad men. There's no need to remind her what she married into.

Sophie is comforted enough to break into a smile of her own before picking through her array of beauty products again.

She waves around a curling iron. "The wand is still hot. Can I add some more waves? I really want to. Your hair holds a curl so perfectly. Unless you've changed your mind and decided to wear all of it up. Do you want to wear it up? Oh, I think you should! Fiona, don't you think she ought to wear it up?"

I despise wearing my hair up. As it is, I'd like to tear out the bobby pins holding back two small sections. "Thanks but I'll leave it down."

Fiona appraises me. “I’m glad you’ve gone back to black. The look suits you.”

Tess never even hinted that I ought to change my hair color for the wedding. But I change my hair color often and a switch was overdue. Besides, I didn’t want to ruin the wedding photos by standing out with a head of deep purple not found in nature. My real hair color is the iciest shade of blonde but I’ve been covering it for ten years. I plan to keep covering it.

A quick time check tells me that I need to cut this makeover short. I have a stop to make before Tess’s wedding.

There’s no decent mirror in my office so I run my fingers through the glossy black tresses hanging halfway down my back and smooth the folds of the dandelion-colored strapless gown before presenting myself for inspection.

“What do you think? Do I succeed as a conventional bridesmaid?”

Sophie applauds. “You are *gorgeous*. So lucky.”

Fiona checks me out and wiggles her eyebrows. “Lady, I’d fuck you in a heartbeat.”

With a snort of laughter, I shove my phone into my purse. “Too bad you never got to meet my sister. You would have loved her.”

Fiona and Sophie exchange a quick glance. Long enough for me to notice.

I know why. Naturally, everyone knows about Lita. But I rarely speak of her.

And now I hate what I just said.

Hate how I spoke about her in the past tense, as if she were dead.

My sister isn't dead.

She's just out of reach. Here but not here.

Years of agony can condense into the space of a single breath.

The long ordeal unfurls in my head with no option to switch it off. The piercing pain of waiting beside my twin's bed after a sudden brain aneurysm left her in a coma. Doctors and tests and the prickly odor of antiseptic. Hospital rooms exchanged for other hospital rooms. Desperate tears shed in private. Fury with the world.

And later, the bitter acceptance of cruel reality.

When everything that can be done has been done already.

When there's nothing left to do but hope, even when the odds grow weaker with each passing year.

Over a decade gone. More than a decade of guilt and regret and infinite loss with no end in sight.

No one who isn't a twin can understand this. Because the rest of them are used to marching alone.

But those of us who arrived in the world together?

We've never been alone. And we suffer acutely when this changes with no warning.

These are not feelings I'm interested in sharing with anyone other than Lita. Even if I'll never know whether she hears a word I say.

Shaking off the gloom, I briskly give Fiona her orders.

"If there's any sign of trouble, don't be timid about summoning the sharks." I always keep a lineup of strong bouncers on staff to handle any rowdy behavior.

She hops off the edge of my desk. “No worries. I’ll imitate you.”

“In that case, be sure to flavor your language with a lot of ‘motherfuckers’.”

Fiona titters and holds the door for me. “Just enjoy the wedding. And if you happen to snag Conner Wiseman’s autograph on a cocktail napkin, I call dibs.”

Outwardly, I show no sign that the comment means a thing to me. My history with the quarterback for the Emerald City Cyclones is not common knowledge. But Conner has no shortage of admirers. It’s likely he’s never thought twice about that old drama.

In fact, I’d prefer if he didn’t.

“Do you mind if I, um, stick around here?” Sophie asks the question so meekly. She chews on a pink painted nail and sighs. “Jared is in Vegas until tomorrow and he said I could come along but then he left without me and it sucks being all alone.”

I don’t say what I’m thinking, which is that she ought to enjoy every minute that shithead is across state lines. “Hang out as long as you want. If the commotion in the club gets on your nerves, feel free to kick back here in the office. Fiona has the key.”

Sophie exhales and smiles, as if she genuinely feared that I’d tell her to take a hike. It’s hard to believe I’m only a year older than her. There are times when she seems about as sophisticated as a high school freshman.

Another twinge of sympathy strikes as I take one last look at Sophie happily packing up her cosmetic case. It really is unfair how she gets used as a pawn.

Then again, lots of shit is unfair.

It's just the cost of living.

I wait until we're halfway down the hall before nudging Fiona, keeping my voice low. "Try to stop her from drinking too much. You know how she gets. Make sure she gets home okay. That damn cousin of mine doesn't even bother to give her basic security. Her father would have a fit if he knew."

"Will do. Relax. There's more than enough backup to fend off trouble. Right, Andrei?"

The big man keeping silent watch in the shadows at the end of the bar hears his name above the pulse of music and swivels his head. He raises a beefy hand in acknowledgement and returns to staring at a sloppy quartet of aging frat bro types who are having trouble staying in their chairs.

With one finger I make a slicing motion across my neck as a signal. It's time to cut that crew off from the bar.

Andrei touches a hand to his brow, his way of saying he's already got a handle on the situation.

A former foot soldier in my father's entourage, Andrei was reassigned after being shot in the right knee, acquiring a pronounced limp. He's been here since I received the keys to this place as a gift for my twenty-first birthday. I'll never know the details about what he used to do for my father and I don't need them. All I need to know about the people on my payroll is that they are trustworthy and do what I ask.

"Have fun." Fiona pushes me to the door.

Pausing, I make a quick visual assessment. A large group pours through the entrance, men and women both. They are college aged, bubbling with carefree laughter. They eagerly flash their ID's at the door.

Up on the narrow stage, a new set is about to begin. Jerica, a crowd favorite, sashays to the pole and wiggles her ass before taking a spin. I always hate being reminded of how I participate in a system where women's bodies are cheap entertainment.

Too bad. I can be silently unhappy all I want. But I cannot leave. There are reasons.

"You'll see me back here before closing." A reasonable assumption. The wedding reception can't last until two a.m.

Fiona crosses her arms to show her disapproval. "I hope not. You deserve a night off."

I think my last mini vacation from the club was a bout with the stomach flu two years ago. My apartment is across the street in a renovated tenement building that's now a family owned property. It's a bed to crash in and nothing more.

When I hesitate, Fiona gives me one final push out the door. "Slay, ice queen."

Funny. I'm no kind of queen, ice or otherwise. My nicknames range from 'That Marchenko Bitch' to 'Wicked Witch of the East Side'. Won't hear me complaining. In this world, a bad reputation is far superior to a weak one.

"Call if you run into any trouble."

She props her hands on her hips. "You know I will."

Two disheveled men standing on the nearest street corner pause their conversation and gawk at the sight of me decked out in all my golden bridesmaid glory. With a wary eye on them, I reach into the folds of my purse and bend my fingers around the loaded handgun inside. My father has long since given up on the idea of saddling me with a bodyguard

everywhere I go. If my cousins are allowed to move freely without a fucking chaperone then so am I.

A shrill wolf whistle pierces the air and the men laugh. I show the middle finger of my free hand before ducking into my car. An onslaught of sudden nerves is leaving me restless. Uneasy. Agitated and overheated.

The outside temperature is mild, perhaps even a little cool for a spring evening in Em City, but I max out the car's air conditioning before navigating my way out of the narrow, twisting streets of the east side.

Normally I wear my antisocial attitude like badge of honor. Today I have to set it aside. Tess is my friend and this is her wedding day. It's a privilege to stand beside her. Anyway, a few hours of good behavior won't kill me.

City traffic is light, leaving a comfortable time slot for a detour to the west of downtown, where the concrete urban jungle gives way to greener landscapes. From here it's possible to glimpse the decadence of snobbish West Emerald, land of golf courses and high gates and insufferable self-importance. The affluent town of my childhood is a collage of distant memories, nothing more. This is as close as I'm willing to get.

My sister lives in a nursing home that offers every amenity for a patient in a persistent vegetative state. The standard of care is impeccable, one of the best in the country. I would never accept anything less for her.

Lita's friends still stop by on occasion, Tess and Dani in particular. But they are all immersed in their own lives while Lita remains in a state of limbo. And time just keeps passing.

As for my mother, she moved to Hawaii some years back and keeps herself inaccessible.

“Lita is long gone. Do as you please, Haven, but I’m not wasting years of my life grieving a vegetable.”

The woman is damn lucky that thousands of miles separated us when she spoke those words.

My father is more subtle. He won’t mention Lita’s name at all. He quietly pays all the bills for her care and otherwise pretends she doesn’t exist.

Every employee in the building knows me on sight but they all do a double take and start fussing when I stroll through the door.

“My god, I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“Haven, you look incredible.”

“Dazzling. I need a picture. Smile!”

Stifling my annoyance, I escape the wave of admiration as soon as possible. They mean no harm and they all take good care of my sister.

This facility specializes in patients who have suffered a traumatic brain injury. Every room contains a sad story, a life interrupted. Lita is one of the longest residents.

She sits in a leather reclining chair, dressed in a matching turquoise loungewear set that undoubtedly would cause her to shriek. The blunt, shoulder-length cut of her blonde hair would make her shriek even louder.

“Hey you.” I lean down to peck her soft cheek, as I always do.

She blinks, her unfocused eyes fixed somewhere above the mounted television, which is currently screening some Disney musical.

“Don’t laugh at my transformation,” I warn as I take a seat on a cushioned ottoman. “I’m on bridesmaid duty today. Tess and Micah, can you believe it? Jesus, they couldn’t stand each other. Now they’re crazy in love. Tessie has brought their baby here to see you a few times. He’s a complete angel. And you know I’m not one of those people who gets all starry eyed over babies. That little guy is the exception.”

Up on the screen, there’s a crescendo of dramatic music with a close up of Emma Watson’s face. Lita had the hugest crush on her when we were kids. It was the only reason she agreed to sit through all the Harry Potter movies with me.

From the beginning, we were different from each other. We were also a world unto ourselves. We had our own private jokes. Our own elaborate quirks. We danced to music only we could hear. We chose new lyrics for familiar songs.

And we didn’t drift apart all at once. It happened little by little.

The last time Lita and I spoke, I told her to fuck off with her shitty friends and leave me in peace forever.

That’s something I wish I could forget but never will.

With tenderness, I push my sister’s hair from her forehead. “Sorry, but I can’t stay. I’ll be sure to give Tessie your love. Hell, I’ll even be cool to Dani. It must shock you that we’re not enemies anymore. Yeah, I’ve talked a lot of dirt about her but I was wrong. I’ll come by tomorrow and share all the gossip about the wedding. I know you’ll want to hear all about it.”

Before leaving, I bend close to my twin's ear and whisper my usual words of farewell. A superstitious ritual, one that began in a hospital emergency room when the initial news was terribly bleak and for the first time in my life I felt the sharp terror of loneliness.

What would happen if I failed to say the words?

Nothing.

Just like nothing happens year after year. No matter what I have to say about it, Lita's condition remains unchanged.

But now's not the time for brooding and tears.

There's somewhere I need to be.

Ashley, the receptionist, smiles at me when I walk by. "Have fun at the wedding. I heard someone say that Conner Wiseman is the groom's cousin. Will he be there?"

She says 'Conner Wiseman' like other people say 'Jesus'.

"I have no idea," I tell her.

She's not put off by my sharp tone and runs out from behind the desk. "He's *single*, you know. Aren't you single too?"

"Nope." I've never been anything *but* single. Still, I don't have the slightest difficulty finding a man to use for a little while when I'm interested in getting some exercise.

Lately, I haven't been interested.

A cock just doesn't astonish me as much as it used to. Even the most impressive one takes second place to a long shower and a date with Maestro, my favorite vibrator. Perhaps that's just maturity talking.

Ashley is still babbling about Conner, her hero and masturbation fantasy, when I walk out on her.

I left my bad feelings about Conner Wiseman behind years ago, along with the rest of my feelings about him.

And I have no interest in a reunion.

As for tonight, I'll stay out of his way if he stays the fuck out of mine.

3. Haven

“**W**ait.” I sidestep the overeager teenage valet when he practically snatches the keys out of my hand.

He trots on my heels as I open the trunk and withdraw the large box wrapped in silver paper. Once I have the box in hand, I toss the kid my keys and accept the claim ticket he’s waving around.

While I’ve passed the swank Palace Hotel thousands of times, I’ve never had a reason to step inside. The hotel is a landmark of high maintenance chic and pretention. A celebrity destination. I think I remember hearing that a president or two has slept here. Stepping into the lobby is an assault on the senses.

An assault on *my* senses anyway.

Most people would appreciate the cathedral ceilings, the glittery chandeliers and the Renaissance-inspired wall art. Everything I see is a visual scream of ‘NOTICE ME, I’M CLASSY!’

Nothing wrong with that, nothing at all.

It’s just that I can’t squash the odd sense that I’m standing in a place where I don’t belong.

There's no shortage of people milling around but none of them look ready to participate in a wedding. Long corridors beckon from every direction like a wonderland maze. The front desk is swamped with guests and I don't have the patience to stand in a line.

Nearby, some dude dressed like an old fashioned bellhop, silly hat and all, hangs out beside a gigantic wheeled luggage rack and examines the gold buttons on his blazer.

I clear my throat. "Excuse me."

He focuses with some effort. His eyes are two shiny marbles and he sways on his heels, unable to remain still. I know the look of a man who's juiced to the gills. That shit, whether it's pills or powder, isn't something I'd ever touch myself. However, one feature of my line of work is that I get to spend time with plenty of people who do.

"You've got bags, huh? I'll get your bags." He's already starting to wheel the luggage cart.

"I don't have any bags. I'm not a hotel guest."

He stops. Scratches his head. His hat tumbles off and lands on the floor. He stares at it.

"Hey." I snap my fingers to get his attention. "I'm here for a wedding. Can you point to where I might find it?"

He presses his lips together in confusion. He still hasn't picked up his hat.

Just when I'm sure that talking to him is a complete waste of time, he points a gloved finger to the left. "That way. It's that way. I'm sure it's that way."

Good enough. It's only when I've exited the lobby that I realize I forgot to thank him.

A soothing smell permeates the air, a blend of citrus and flowers, too universal to be someone's perfume. Must be pumped through the vents. I ought to copy this idea at the club. The stench of liquor breath, cologne and sweat leaves a lot to be desired.

After what feels like an endless walk, the wide corridor ends in a large atrium. But I still see no evidence of a wedding. High above, an enormous wall clock ticks the passage of another minute.

This is about to be a problem. I'm picturing Tess wringing her hands somewhere in the depths of the Palace Hotel and cursing me out for shirking on bridesmaid duties.

"Cool, you finally showed up." A big hand touches my right arm above the elbow.

Instinctively, I wrench my arm away.

Then I turn my head and come face to face with Emerald City's beloved hometown sports legend. The man who fires a fifty yard pass with the ease of swinging a badminton racket, absorbs crushing hits from giant men with good cheer and is arguably the most idolized player in pro football.

"Conner Wiseman." I don't know why I felt the need to speak his full name.

Faces swivel our way. Audible gasps are heard.

I'm tall and I'm wearing heels but I still need to look up to meet Conner's blue eyes, which are gleaming with amusement.

"Haven Marchenko," he bellows.

Then he opens his arms for a hug. He's not getting one and I don't think he expects to. He's just being obnoxious.

But the sight of Conner in a tux leads me to the conclusion that there is absolutely no fucking justice in the world.

I mean, it should be illegal to look this good and flaunt it so casually. His shoulders are wide enough to block the sun. His jawline is a work of art. He wears his dark blond hair the same way he always has; short and combed neatly, parted on the right side.

I'm a little pissed at myself for having instant recall of this last detail.

But I'm a lot more pissed about the way my heartbeat speeds up while I can't figure out what words should come out of my mouth. I don't get nervous around men, not even the ones I'd enjoy seeing naked.

So what the hell is up with this sudden schoolgirl stupor?

My blood sugar must be dropping. I did skip lunch.

Seeing Conner here is certainly no surprise. And I'm very aware of what he looks like, how he's bulked up into a muscled demigod since high school. After all, I never miss watching his games. I'm just a big sports fan. That's the only reason.

Conner drops his arms and patiently waits for my appraisal to come to an end.

Somehow I'm positive he hears the thoughts storming through my head and finds them hysterical.

"You look different," he says, and from the way his eyes rake me over, it's clear he approves of the change.

My tongue gets temporarily stuck in my mouth. *Pathetic.*

"Well, you look the same, Conner. The wedding is about to start."

“Nah, we’ve got time.” He leans against a marble pillar, happy to remain right here and continue this unspeakably awkward conversation.

I don’t feel the same way. “Can you just tell me where to find Tess?”

“Yup.”

I wait.

He smiles.

Seconds pass by while he just stands there grinning.

“Conner.” I chew out each syllable. “Cut the shit. Where the fuck is the wedding?”

He lets out a low whistle. “So you *are* still like this. I was told you’d mellowed.”

“Like what?”

“Cranky. Come on, we’ll get you a candy bar on the way to the ceremony. Chocolate puts everyone in a good mood.”

“I don’t need a candy bar,” I insist, even though I’m legitimately starving. In any case, he’s walking away and if I plan to find the wedding then I have little choice but to follow him.

“Conner!” A small boy blocks our path and gazes up at Conner with awe. “Can I have your autograph?” He holds up a pen and a wrinkled newspaper page.

“Absolutely.” Conner doesn’t even hesitate. He asks the kid his name, scribbles out a personalized autograph, and hunkers down to offer words of encouragement when the kid says he dreams of playing football someday.

With his autograph in hand, the kid walks away happy. Two more kids materialize out of nowhere. They also want autographs.

Then along comes three forty-something soccer mom types.

Followed by two barrel-chested dudes who claim to play for Emerald State University.

Conner cheerfully welcomes them all as if he's been expecting them. He signs autographs and poses for cell phone photos like he's got all the time in the world.

It's a little bit fascinating, this life of a sports celebrity. But after five minutes of watching on the sidelines while Conner gets the royal treatment I've had enough. "Conner, we need to go."

He looks up. Checks the time on the wall clock. Turns to his fans. "Great to meet you guys but if you'll excuse me, I can't ignore my date anymore."

Once we're on the move again I feel the need to clear something up. "I'm not your date."

Conner ignores the comment. "This way. There's a shortcut."

He holds a side door open and gallantly waits for me to walk through it.

"I'm not your date," I tell him again as we travel a walking path bracketed with red and white geraniums.

Conner cuts abruptly to the right, leads the way along a narrow cobblestone path to another door and pushes that one open too. "What did you say?"

I squeeze past him with effort. "I *said* I'm not your date."

He stares. “Now why on earth do you think I was talking about you?”

My mind blanks.

I have no comeback for that.

Of course he wasn't talking about me. It goes without saying that Conner would have brought a date to his cousin's wedding. Nobody goes to a wedding alone.

Well, no one except me.

Somewhere in the bowels of the Palace Hotel there must be a leggy, impeccably waxed supermodel anxiously awaiting his return. She can have him.

Conner stands just outside the doorway and merrily observes the full cycle of my embarrassment. “Right around the corner,” he says and fleetingly brushes his hand across my lower back.

Hugging the silver box in my arms and suppressing a shiver at the feel of his hand, I follow his direction and turn the next corner.

The sight of overdressed people filing into a huge ballroom is something of a relief. Gigantic yellow and white floral arrangements are parked on decorative tables all over the place and the interior of the ballroom looks like the entire spring season vomited all over it. Tess told me that Micah's mother took charge of the wedding plans and she has a taste for extravagance.

I see her now, Micah's mother. Matilda is marching around in a white dress and flinging out orders like the grand duchess she thinks she is. The famous author she's married to is Dani's uncle and he's here too, looking constipated while trying to keep up with his demanding hurricane of a wife.

“I was looking for you.” A little girl appears and latches onto Conner’s arm. She frowns up at him. Her dress is the same color as mine but cut more appropriately for a child. She has to be Micah’s little sister, Charlotte. Tess talks about her often.

Standing a few feet away and observing the scene is an old man with a cane. The yellow rose boutonniere in his lapel matches the one Conner wears. A hard life is etched into the lines of his face and but his eyes are friendly while watching Conner and Charlotte.

Then his gaze switches to me and hardens, becomes wary.

I know who he is. Elijah, a former prizefighter, owns the scrappy gym where Micah used to train back in his MMA fighting days.

And judging by the cautious glint in his eye, he knows exactly who I am too. Makes sense. Anyone running a business on the east side is destined to interact with a member of my family at some point.

The man receives a polite nod of greeting from me. Whatever issues he might have with my last name, I have no ill will toward him. According to Tess, I’ll be walking down the aisle beside him so it wouldn’t hurt to start off on a courteous note.

Conner’s little cousin appears to be a precocious ball of energy, bouncing around constantly. “Where did you go, anyway?” she demands.

He smiles at her. “I was on a scavenger hunt.”

Charlotte crosses her arms, full of doubt. “And what were you hunting for?”

“A missing bridesmaid.” He points in my direction. “Check it out, my skills paid off. Charlotte, meet Haven.”

The girl’s mouth flattens into a line of disapproval, a clear indicator that she’s heard some unpleasant things about me.

“Hello, Charlotte. It’s nice to meet you.” I smile to show that I’m really not a monster, whatever the gossip might be.

She studies me for a long moment. “You’re really pretty. I wasn’t expecting you to be pretty at all.”

I like her honesty. “Well, sometimes even wicked witches know how to clean up nice.”

Charlotte likes that enough to giggle. She’s a cute kid, probably not much younger than my little brother, who I don’t get to see often enough. Robert’s mother is wary about letting him spend time on the east side. Smart thinking, but she won’t be able to shield him forever. My father has big plans for his only son.

Conner takes a peek inside the ballroom. “Where’s the rest of the wedding party hiding?”

“They’re taking pictures,” Elijah answers. He has a voice like coarse gravel, probably intimidating when raised in anger. “That Matilda lady said she wanted photos in the tulip courtyard, whatever the hell that is.”

Matilda is too far away to have heard her name but she turns her head. She eyes us from a distance, plainly thinking of running over here.

“Shit,” Charlotte mutters and hides behind Conner. In an instant she’s darting away, a flash of bright yellow. “Follow me!” She runs off before waiting to see if anyone obeys.

Elijah snorts with laughter and limps after her as best he can, leaving me once more with only Conner for company.

“Shouldn’t we go find the tulip courtyard too?”

He mulls that over. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Not *maybe*.” I’ve never been a bridesmaid before but I’m pretty sure we’re supposed to participate in the photography sessions.

“We’ll go to the tulip courtyard in a minute.” Conner creeps closer.

I stagger back and nearly drop Tess and Micah’s wedding gift.

His hands shoot out to rescue the box. “What’s in there?”

I snatch it away and hug it to my chest. “What do you think it is? It’s a wedding gift.”

“Nice. What did you get them?”

“Why do you care?”

He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Why is it a secret?”

“It’s not a secret.”

“Then tell me.”

I huff with exasperation. “It’s a set of fucking wine glasses! Happy now?”

I didn’t mean to raise my voice. At least ten people turn and stare.

Matilda is among them. Her expression turns suspicious, her eyes narrowed. She knows my father. He doesn’t like her. I glare back at Matilda until she breaks eye contact.

Conner, who finds everything funny, finds this funny too. He chuckles and then gestures to turn my attention elsewhere.

“Gifts can go on the big table along the wall. Unless you plan to keep clutching it all day long, which might look kind of weird on our march down the aisle.”

He’s still talking as I move to the table and set down the box with a collection of other gaily wrapped presents and colorful envelopes. Then his last statement finally sinks in.

“What do you mean *our* march down the aisle?”

He’s ready for this question and immediately hooks his arm through mine before I can object. “We had to make a change.”

“What change?”

“Charlotte ditched me to walk with her new friend Elijah. Which means we’re stuck with each other.”

Conner keeps my arm trapped as he hauls me away, presumably in the direction of the tulip courtyard. He’s very strong.

And I’ve suddenly grown very weak.

The wink he flashes my way is full of triumph.

A man who has successfully gotten under my skin and knows it.

“It’s you and me today, angry girl. So let’s practice being friends.”

4. Haven

Whatever frustration I feel about being hijacked by Conner dissolves when I spot Tess smiling radiantly in her wedding dress

The so-called ‘tulip courtyard’ looks like a page from a storybook. Rainbows of bright buds surround a massive, tiered fountain that rises at least ten feet high. Tess is fixing Micah’s collar while Micah holds baby Dash in his arms.

Micah, always a head turner with his powerful muscles and his chaotic patterns of ink, is no less striking in a tux. His face splits into a rare smile when Tess fixes his bowtie. I’m a harsh judge of men and I doubt there’s another woman on the planet who could have tamed the hot-tempered Micah Lyonne. He stares down at his bride with adoration while shifting the baby to his shoulder. Someone who didn’t know him wouldn’t be able to guess that his glove-covered right hand isn’t real.

I guess it’s now been over a year since that night. The night he was attacked by a squad of brutes after a high profile MMA fight on the east side.

It was a hit and it was personal, financed by men who are no longer breathing.

But because the location was smack in the middle of our territory and because my uncle had a stake in the venue, the incident immediately became a family matter.

And we sure as hell took care of it. No one else has been foolish enough to spill blood without permission since then.

I'm genuinely sorry for what happened to Micah. And not just because I care about Tess. Micah's a good guy. Sometimes he used to work security for me at the club. With all his rough, unapologetic edges, he knew how to knock down the fuckers that really needed to be knocked down and yet he always treated women like human beings. Experience has taught me there's no shortage of shitty people in the world. Makes you really appreciate the decent ones.

Tess notices my entrance and waves happily. Dani, who stands under the canopy of Gage's strong arm, is more reluctant to offer a greeting. We just stare at one another for a few seconds until the photographer rises from his crouch and gestures with impatience.

"Do we finally have the wedding party all in one place? I have already explained to Matilda that I will NOT Photoshop any missing links."

Micah exhales loudly. "Nobody needs more pictures of us posing like idiots in front of a shitty fountain."

"But Matilda said-"

"Yeah, I don't fucking care what my mother said."

Tess lays a calming hand on Micah's chest and tries to soothe the pouting photographer. "We're all here now, Kurt. Let's just take a couple of quick shots before we move to the ballroom."

Finally, I manage to extricate my arm from Conner's grip. "I can walk to the fountain without your help."

The look he gives me is pure innocence. "That's too bad. I enjoy servicing you, Haven."

He thinks he's being cute with his innuendo, leaving me with no answer unless I want to attract attention.

Already too late.

Dani has noticed and nudges Gage, who openly stares. Micah smirks. Tess smiles. Baby Dash blows spit bubbles.

Even Elijah, biding his time on a stone bench, looks interested in what might happen next.

Only Charlotte seems oblivious as she sticks her arm in the cascading fountain and splashes with a shriek of laughter.

I won't win a verbal battle with Conner. For whatever reason, he's turning this into a game. I don't play games.

Tess's bridesmaids line up on her side while the guys all fan out beside Micah. It's slightly awkward when I wind up standing beside Dani. I have a long history of being a raging asshole to her for no good reason. Sometimes I just really suck at being a person.

Dani, however, is far better when it comes to social graces. She hands me a small bouquet of yellow and white daisies. "I've been holding these for you."

"Thanks," I mutter.

She examines me more carefully. "You look beautiful, Haven."

"So do you, Dani." I try to smile.

Sometimes I wonder what goes through the minds of Lita's friends when they see me. Anyone with an interest in human psychology would probably have a field day sorting through all the complex reasons why I take pains to alter my appearance, bearing only a passing resemblance to the girl I used to be.

The girl who looked exactly like her identical twin sister.

Kurt shouts at us to say the words 'Wedding Day'. He's barely begun snapping photos before Matilda shows up in a state of high energy. She waves her arms around like a symphony director.

"Charlotte, I will be *so* disappointed if you've misplaced your crown again. And is that water splashed on the front of your dress? Really, you are not a toddler. Micah, the baby still has that cowlick in the back. It'll be obvious in the pictures. Absolutely needs to be fixed before the ceremony."

She keeps spewing out words without the slightest awareness that no one appears to be listening to anything she says. Micah mutters something to Tess that sends her into a fit of laughter. Tess catches her breath and hisses at him to behave.

My face is starting to hurt from holding a smile. I'm glad when the photo session ends and we need to move along to the ballroom for the actual wedding part of the wedding. I'm less enthusiastic when Conner takes custody of my arm once more but I can't shove him off without making a big deal.

"Don't worry," he says as we follow the others to the ballroom, "I'll set the rhythm."

"You mean the pace?"

He nods. "Yeah, both."

I roll my eyes so hard my head hurts. Kurt records the moment for posterity with his camera lens.

The ceremony itself is short and lovely. Tess said Matilda invited over two hundred guests, mostly business contacts and minions from her socialite circle. Tess doesn't really have any family left and most of Micah's family is in the wedding party. The two of them wrote their own vows. I never would have thought of Micah as the romantic type but there's a catch in his deep voice when he gazes down at the woman he loves while their son yawns in his arms.

He doesn't wait for permission to kiss the bride. After handing Dash off to Gage, Micah's big hand cups the back of Tess's neck and he claims her mouth. Their kiss is hot and prolonged. Tess's petite body melts against his powerful chest and they lose themselves in each other with such fiery abandon that the moment almost feels like something the rest of us aren't supposed to be looking at.

Dani playfully hides Charlotte's eyes from the scene. Matilda clears her throat over in the front row. Dash drools on Gage's tuxedo.

During the ceremony, I avoided looking at Conner but now I slide my eyes in his direction. He appears to be swiping a tear from his cheek. He does this quickly, like he doesn't want anyone to see. His gaze veers before I have time to react. He's caught me watching him.

Conner winks. Then, slowly and intensely, his blue eyes coast the length of my body before returning to my face. I can't squash the sudden tug of desire between my thighs. However, I can damn well ignore it. I look away first.

Conner becomes more difficult to ignore when he glues himself to my side again as we follow the newlyweds down

the hall to the reception.

“Just stick with me,” he says as he waves his free hand to people who don’t bother to be discreet about snapping photos of him. “I know exactly where our table is.”

Existing next to Conner even for a few minutes is similar to being onstage. His name bounces off the walls in a hundred different voices. This level of attention would destroy my sanity in less than a day.

“*Our* table? We’re sitting at the same table?”

Dumb question. It would make sense to seat the wedding party together. But he’s sure to get distracted once we’ve moved to a different setting.

“Sure. Dates always sit together.”

“So where is she? Your *date*?”

I’m mortified that a hint of jealousy has crept into my tone. I’m not actually jealous. Honestly, I’m counting the seconds until Conner becomes someone else’s high maintenance problem. Yet as I scan the surrounding faces in search of a likely candidate that would fit the title of Conner’s Date, there’s a sour taste in my mouth.

Conner turns his head. He throws down a charming smile that shouldn’t make my breath stutter and my insides turn to jelly. “You know you’re my date, Haven.”

I can’t come up with a single reply. Conner confidently shepherds me to an empty table. When Dani and Gage join us, I’m surprised when Dani chooses the seat beside mine after only a tiny hesitation.

Now that the ceremony is over, unease twists in my gut. I drown it by chugging my full champagne glass. I’m not

anxious about being surrounded by people. I'm surrounded by people every goddamn day. But in my own environment I have no filter. Right now I need to have a filter.

“Do you like prime rib?” Dani asks, leaning closer and making a clear effort to invent small talk. “There’s a stuffed chicken option too.”

“Both sound great.” I unfold my napkin and force my tone to sound pleasant. Friendly. Kudos to me for not dropping a single curse word. I ought to be grateful that Dani is going out of her way to speak to me. God knows I’ve done nothing to earn her goodwill over the years.

Suddenly she laughs, pointing out that Conner has successfully kidnapped the best man from his parents. With the baby on his shoulder, Conner drops down into the seat on my other side. Dash’s wide eyes study me from inches away. He gives me a gummy smile. I smile back and the knots in my belly loosen a little.

“Want to hold him?” The question is hardly out of Conner’s mouth before he’s transferring Dash to my arms.

I don’t have much experience holding babies. The last baby I held was my little brother. He’s twelve now.

Dash babbles as my arms circle his warm little body. One small fist curls around a section of my long hair and he snuggles against my shoulder. Without thinking, I press my cheek to his and shut my eyes, inhaling his clean baby scent. When I open them, I find Conner leaning back in his chair, arms crossed, a wide grin on his face.

Tess is so delighted at the sight that she rushes right over. “Aw, did you make a new friend, little one?”

Dash's head jerks up at the sound of her voice. His chubby hand releases my hair and he lunges for his mother. Tess scoops him up with a laugh.

"Congratulations," I tell the bride. "I'm so happy for you, Tessie."

She props Dash on her hip, leaning down to give me a hug with her free arm. "And I'm so glad you're here."

We do share a long history, all of us.

When I think of that, I think of West Emerald Prep.

Then I watch as Micah swings an arm around his bride's waist and I think about how funny it is that stories can have such unexpected endings.

Finally, I think of my sister and my heart contracts. Lita would have loved to see this.

Dani might be able to read my mind. She stands and raises a champagne glass. "Let's all have a drink together in honor of Lita."

I've already drained my champagne glass but a hardworking waiter stops by with a tray of flutes. I pluck one with a murmured word of thanks.

"To Lita." Conner lifts his glass.

"To Lita." I swallow my drink and sigh.

Then I notice that Conner is staring at me with a thoughtful expression. I wish he'd stop.

As soon as plates of food are delivered, I remember that I haven't eaten all day. I'm the first at the table to finish devouring my meal but once my plate is clear I have no excuse for not joining the conversation.

Beside me, Conner never stops talking. I don't know how the hell he was able to finish his prime rib in between the constant chatter. It's kind of fascinating.

Elsewhere, people are beginning to abandon their tables and move to the dance floor. Conner disappears for a few minutes. When he returns, he extends a confident hand my way.

"It's our time," he says.

"For what?"

He grins. "To make everyone here jealous."

I fidget in my seat. Nothing appropriate comes to mind.

Conner drops to one knee. "Haven Marchenko, *please* do me the honor of accepting this dance."

There are now quite a few people ogling the scene.

Dani nudges Gage. "Come on, let's all take to the dance floor. Tess just dragged Micah out there."

At first Gage looks less than thrilled about being ordered to dance, but ultimately he gives his wife a smile and gathers her in his arms.

Conner watches them. "See? Everyone's doing it."

It's no big deal. Just a wedding dance. And it won't kill me to give him the benefit of the doubt for a few minutes.

I stand up without accepting his hand. "Let's go."

Conner grabs my hand anyway and pulls me to the center of the dance floor. He wastes no time transitioning to some ballroom dance pose and marching me around.

"What are you doing?" I'm already getting whiplash.

“We’re waltzing. This is a waltz.”

“This is NOT a waltz. I don’t know what this is.”

He is unconcerned. He’s also a cheerfully terrible dancer.
“Maybe it’s a tango.”

“Well, take it down a notch or you’ll be waltzing by yourself.”

He laughs and slows down, sliding an arm around my waist. “Better? I love this song. I asked the DJ to play it. Are you a fan of Napoleon Dynamite?”

Maybe he’s already drunk. “What?”

Conner spins me in a circle. We narrowly miss colliding with Dani and Gage. “Napoleon Dynamite. Great movie.”

“Never heard of it.”

His arm tightens around my waist. “That’s too bad. This song is played at a very pivotal moment when Napoleon’s date ditches him at the school dance while he’s in the bathroom eating a snack.”

I’m distracted by the pressure of his arm around my waist. I haven’t quite figured out what to do with my hands so they’re kind of awkwardly propped on his broad shoulders. “Who the hell goes to the bathroom to have a snack?”

“Can’t answer that. I don’t want to ruin the plot for you.”
He abruptly dips me and I’m so startled that I let out an odd squeak.

Conner’s steady hands return me to an upright position. We’re closer now, much closer. My breasts are pressed against the concrete wall of his chest.

Fuck, he’s hot. Outrageous. Unfair.

A flash of fire curls in my belly and settles lower. I blame the fact that I haven't been fucked in half a year, a significant dry spell. And this is a bad time for a fragment of an old conversation to replay in my head.

"I want to keep going. Conner, I want to do it."

Someone should have invented some kind of brain scraper to get rid of humiliating memories. I would clean out my savings to rid myself of the one where I'm begging Conner Wiseman to screw me at a high school party.

We're swaying slowly now in time to the music. I'm having trouble fighting the basic rush of desire. There are some instincts that just can't be helped.

"What are you thinking about, Haven?" His eyes sweep my face, then stray lower.

"Nothing as obscene as what you're thinking about." What a lie.

He blinks. "No idea what you mean. I'm a complete gentleman."

"If you were really a gentleman you'd quit peering down my dress so freely."

"I'm just checking out your ink. Got any more?"

"No." My teeth grit at the mention of my hated tattoo. "It's not an artistic statement. It's a family brand."

"Interesting. I'd like to take a closer look."

"Can you quit being a clown for two minutes?"

"No."

"No?"

He bends to whisper in my ear. “No. I think you’re enjoying yourself.”

I can’t argue. For a few seconds I stop breathing. I feel like I’m sixteen again, finally being acknowledged by the boy I’ve always been crazy about.

The song ends. Another one begins.

He frowns when I pull away. “Don’t leave.”

“Bathroom break. You’re not invited.”

“All right.” He kisses my knuckles. “Don’t stay away too long, beautiful.”

A silly line. I’m silently annoyed at the fizz of giddy bubbles in my chest as I walk away.

In the bathroom, Matilda is there fixing her face in the mirror. Her initial phony smile fades when she sees it’s just me. I don’t bother to say hello. She leaves while I’m still locked in a stall while cursing myself for swooning over Conner Wiseman.

After all this time, why does he still get to me?

And why am I hiding out in a gilded hotel bathroom, breathless and flushed, after only a few minutes in his arms?

I know why.

I’m aware that he doesn’t.

On the way out of the ladies’ room, I check my phone because I haven’t looked at it in a while. Twenty minutes ago Sophie sent a text.

Hi! Are you having fun? Guess what? Talon is here.

Not good. My asshole of a cousin pops his head into the club now and then, always pushing the limit and requiring a

reminder that the whole east side doesn't belong to him. He needs to back the fuck off and stick to his own three block radius that's filled with smoke shops, pay-by-the-hour motels and grimy bars that serve as a front for a vast illegal gambling operation.

It's possible that Talon caught wind of the news that I'm out of the office tonight and smells a chance to throw his weight around. Next week my father reports downstate to spend six months in prison. On paper the sentence is for tax fraud but it was really an orchestrated deal in order to keep the heat off the rest of the family's activities. The authorities will get to appear competent enough to keep their jobs and their government funding. And they will turn a blind eye to everything else we do.

If Talon is getting big ideas about expanding his influence while my father is in lockup then it's best to smack him down now. Fiona would insist that she can handle him with no problem but if she stands in his way he's capable of retaliating. When I'm around, he doesn't dare. My father's family code of honor, flimsy and frayed though it may be, wouldn't allow it.

In reality, I know I'm making excuses, searching for a reason to leave so that I don't end up back there on the dance floor, salivating over Conner and ready to do something foolish.

While these thoughts rage through my mind, I'm not paying attention to where I'm going and nearly run over Tess and baby Dash.

"This little guy is hungry." She kisses her son's cheek and bounces him. "I didn't bring enough pumped milk today so I need to nurse. What's wrong?"

I hope she can forgive me for what I'm about to say. "I'm so sorry, but I have a family situation I need to deal with at the club."

She nods. She doesn't seem particularly surprised. "I understand. But thank you for being here today. Haven, it really meant a lot to me."

"It was an honor, Tessie." And it was.

She gives me a quick hug before disappearing to search for a private room to nurse the baby. If I was any kind of friend I'd stay until the end of the reception. But now that I've cleared my departure with Tess, there's nothing preventing me from escaping.

First, I stop to look in on the party. Conner stands out instantly, impossible to ignore.

He was always at ease in any crowd and today is no different. While I'm watching, he roars out a laugh at one of Gage's deadpan comments and then moves on to socialize at a table filled with people who hail him like a war hero.

Abruptly, Conner straightens his back and scans the room, searching for something. His expression dims when he doesn't find it. He might even be looking for me. Someone with good manners would walk over there and say goodbye.

But I don't have good manners. Never did.

This is why I shrink back into the shadows and leave Conner Wiseman to wonder where I've run off to. He'll have no trouble finding a new dance partner, another girl to flirt with. He's not the type to stay lonely.

I'm sure Fiona will huff with exasperation when I return to the club at such an early hour. But the bawdy chaos of the club

is preferable to this awkward struggle to fit in while masking the fact that I'm an imposter, taking Lita's place.

My sister is the one who deserved to be here today, standing up with one of her oldest childhood friends, partying the night away in a bridesmaid gown.

With all my heart, I wish she was.

5. Conner

Most people find that sleep comes easier in silence.
Not me.

Silence is nails on a fucking chalkboard, grating on every nerve and buzzing in my ears.

Arriving home to an empty house is a weird feeling. Tess and Micah are enjoying their wedding night at the Palace before driving to the lakeside cabin up north where they'll spend their honeymoon. As for my favorite baby boy, he's staying with Dani and Gage while his parents are away.

I'm not so pitiful that I can't deal with being on my own. But sometimes solitude gives energy to the shadows that eat at the edges of my mind. Those shadows whisper rotten memories.

"LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!"

Nope. Screw that. My mother doesn't need to be in my head tonight.

After spending ninety minutes in my weight room, beating off in the shower and sucking back three beers, I switch on a sound app and stare at the dark ceiling in my bedroom.

My thoughts return to Haven. She's been on my mind a lot today. Now here she is again, shooting fiery lasers from her

eyes one minute and then melting in my arms on the dance floor in the next. There were moments when I didn't know if she wanted to punch me or kiss me. I don't think she was too sure either.

She's welcome to do either one. I won't complain.

Haven is a puzzle. A sexy one. She's tall and her body is a fucking fun house. When she's not saturated with layers of garish goth makeup she could easily challenge any of the world's beauties and win. In the looks department, she's got all the right assets.

But the girl's attitude can be exhausting. Usually, open hostility doesn't do it for me. Her angle seems to be, *"I want to hate you and I don't know why I want to hate you but I'm gonna keep hating you until I damn well find a reason."*

Why is that making me horny as I lie here alone in the dark?

And what would it take to crack a shell as thick as hers?

I think I might like to find out.

There's no way to guess what to expect from Haven Marchenko. Still, she's anything but boring. Tonight I couldn't wait to hear what would come out of her mouth next. Maybe she'd curse me out. Maybe she'd tell a joke. She can do both at the same time if she wants. I'd love to have her here right now, pinned underneath me as I fuck all that fire and fury into submission.

What a nice thought.

Nice enough to make my cock swell and my balls ache. With a groan and a curse, I shove down my boxers and fist the stiff length.

“Can you quit being a clown for two minutes?”

I’m smiling as I think of her choking on those words as my cock rams the back of her throat.

When it comes to women, I tend to be pretty predictable. Normally, I choose easy fun over contempt and high drama. I mean, there are plenty of gorgeous women with spectacular personalities who just want to have a good time. There’s no reason to waste energy on someone who doesn’t.

At the end of the day, I make no promises and I sure as shit don’t chase anyone, begging for attention. But in the past couple of years I’ve watched both my boys fall head over heels and settle down for life. Micah and Gage are just built different. To me, fucking isn’t part of a long game, never has been. I make sure that everyone in the equation walks away happy and it’s good enough.

It’s possible that a serious concussion at age eleven that left permanent damage cost me a lot more than academic skills. Maybe I also lost the piece of humanity that falls in love, that stubbornly sticks to one person and refuses to stray. I don’t expect I’ll ever be as happy as Micah and Gage.

Sometimes that bothers me.

However, right now I’d gladly settle for having Haven Marchenko suck my dick. Which she’s currently doing with gusto inside my head. Ordinarily I draw the line at using friends as jerkoff material but Haven doesn’t really count as a friend. She’d be the first to agree.

My thumb grazes the sensitive tip of my cock, idly smearing a drop of pre-cum. I bet she swallows. She seems like the type who insists on finishing any job she starts.

But this is my game and she’s not in control.

With my eyes shut and my hand pumping the length of my swollen cock, I picture flipping Haven on her back and destroying her pussy with my tongue.

She moans. She writhes. She shakes.

Yeah, she knows when she's fucking conquered.

Good girl.

So she gets rewarded with my dick.

This time.

Next time I'll make her beg for it.

Listen to me, making future plans on how I'm going to wreck a piece of fantasy pussy.

By the time I'm finished fake fucking Haven, I'm legitimately tired. After mopping up my cum with my discarded boxers, I roll over on my belly naked.

Nothing but class. That's me.

As my eyes squeeze closed, I'm still kicking myself for letting Haven out of my sight tonight. The minute I wasn't looking she took off like Cinderella fleeing the ball before the clock strikes.

Tess said that Haven had some family emergency to deal with on her side of town. I'd have to live in a cave to avoid hearing rumors of the Marchenkos and Haven is the empress of their east side crime world.

So what? I don't fucking care.

Even if the Marchenkos are Em City's answer to the freaking Cosa Nostra, that doesn't scare me off. I want another chance to make my case even if there's effort involved. Judging by the way Haven's cheeks flushed and her breathing

sped up when I wheeled her around the dance floor, she's not immune to feelings.

Wait until she finds out that I can give her access to *a lot* of feelings. Fuck, she'll be lucky if she's able to walk straight by the time I'm finished showing off.

That pleasant thought is the last one I have before dropping off into a dreamless stupor.

It feels like mere minutes have passed when I'm jolted awake by the scream of a seagull. I left my sound app running all night on my iPad, somehow snoring through hours of bird cries and crashing waves. The sunlight is invading through half open shutters and it's late, almost ten a.m.

That's enough to drop kick me into action. I always keep a grueling workout schedule in the offseason so that I don't have to kill myself getting back into game day condition. Seems like a shame to spend a late spring morning in the sweaty weight room so I throw on some clothes, add a pair of sunglasses for a semi-disguise that will fool no one, and wrestle my favorite mountain bike out of the garage.

This neighborhood hardly even feels like part of the city. The houses, built sometime in the middle of the last century, are widely spaced apart and there's no shortage of winding nature trails. Tess, always eager to share her realtor knowledge, once told me that there were plans in the works to raze some of these old neighborhoods and throw up rows of high rise condos but the plan was scrapped when some historical society won the fight to turn a handful of streets into landmarks. The condo project was supposed to go to Yellow Brick Properties. I bet Aunt Matilda was pissed. I'm never bothered when Matilda is pissed.

Funny to think how the original plan was to turn me into a corporate suit. I was meant to be stuffed into an office somewhere in the honeycomb of a downtown high rise owned by my mother's family. Along with Micah and Gage, I would have been sitting through daily executive meetings and staring at dumb shit like balance sheets.

Wasn't meant to be. The three of us went in very different directions.

Micah was forced to quit being an MMA fighter after the loss of his hand but now he's happy with his family man life and putting his artistic talents to use.

Gage, meanwhile, took apart every brick of his vicious father's criminal kingdom. These days he and Dani are always busy managing a web of humanitarian projects and trying to make the world a better place.

As for me, there's no point in guessing what route my life might have taken if I hadn't fallen out of a tree and lost a chunk of useful IQ points. Before the fall, school came so easily to me. There was even talk that I ought to skip a grade or two. Maybe I would have gone to an Ivy League school and become a physicist or something. In the early days after the accident, when I was still coming to grips with the new normal, the chief neurologist overseeing my case offered some gentle advice. He said I shouldn't think in terms of loss. Inside of each person's head there are millions of tiny connections. Some of my connections were damaged, that's all. Doesn't stop me from being a beast on the field. And the fact that my brain can store every football formation ever invented proves that I've kept what counts.

I'm living the dream. I know that. No one outside of my inner circle has a clue that I walk beside the grim devils of my

own history.

Then again, don't we all?

There's a sudden twinge of odd pressure just below my right hip. It's not pain, not exactly. And sometimes I'm not even sure if the sensation is real or in my head. The bullet was removed cleanly. The bullet my mother shot at me. Months of physical therapy followed, but now it doesn't look like I've missed a single step. On the contrary, I'm faster on the field than ever.

Riding on the dirt along the canals is the easiest way to rack up miles. On a mild morning like this, I can go twenty miles round trip without even breathing hard.

The mundane exercise gives my mind a lot of opportunities to wander. It's wandered back to Haven.

And Lita.

Lita Marchenko and I ran in the same circles and got along just fine. I knew her better than I knew her sister, but that wasn't a high bar because I didn't really know Haven at all. She was just a cute girl who ignored me whenever I smiled at her.

But Lita was different. Quirky and fast talking, forever ready to laugh. It's always been tough to picture her silenced and immobile. I've never visited her at the nursing home. Not because I don't care but because I always figured Haven wouldn't be too appreciative if I showed up.

Today isn't the first time I've wondered just how close I came to sharing Lita's fate. Her injury was different from mine; a brain aneurysm as opposed to a severe concussion.

Still...I was fortunate.

And Lita wasn't.

I remember nothing of the hours I was unconscious. It was like a switch had been flipped off and it felt like no time at all passed when it was flipped back on.

No one can know if it's the same for Lita, if she's simply suspended in a dark room, waiting for the lights to come back on.

I've been riding around on autopilot and it's a surprise to realize I'm back within a half mile of my own street. Slowing down, I coast to my driveway. Just as I wheel into the garage, my phone buzzes.

The caller's name flashes as 'Vee'. Her nickname. Elvira Gonsalvo. Pro soccer player. Cool as shit. Screams out her own jersey number every time she comes.

"Hello there, sexy," her throaty voice purrs into the phone. "It's been too long."

With two fingers I heave the bike into its rack beside Tess's silver minivan. "Yeah, haven't seen you since we met up while I was playing in Seattle last fall."

She groans. "I remember it well. A productive six hours."

"You here in town?"

"Only until tomorrow. And I'm bored. This place doesn't have much in the way of excitement. You want some company tonight?"

When I hesitate for longer than a couple of seconds, she gasps. "Holy shit, you've got a girlfriend."

"Hell no."

She laughs and starts taunting in a singsong. “Woohoo, will wonders never cease. Spit out her name, Wiseman.”

“Haven.” I’ve said it without even thinking. And now that it’s out there I don’t want to take it back. “But she’s not my girlfriend. She’s just, ah...”

Vee snorts her amusement. “Right. I’ve had a few of those. But you? This is uncharted territory.” Muffled words come from the phone, like she’s talking to someone else in the room. “Listen, I’ve got some photo shoot crap to get to. But I hope things work out with Miss Haven. I mean that. And I expect to hear details next time I’m in the city.”

“Sure. Take care, Vee.”

“Bring her flowers,” she says before cutting off the call. “Even if she swears she’s not the kind of girl who likes flowers. Bring them anyway.”

Flowers. Huh.

Can’t really picture Haven getting all starry eyed over some plants. But it’s something to think about.

While I’m taking my time hosing off in the shower, I’m still thinking.

I know exactly where to find Haven today. Tess has mentioned that Haven always spends Sundays with Lita. It’s true that she might toss me out if I show up there. Yet I doubt it. And my instincts about women are usually on point.

That’s not arrogance. Just fact.

Yesterday I caught short glimpses of Haven shedding a little bit of her invisible armor. It was enough to get me interested in picking away more layers to find out what’s underneath.

Nothing about her is easy but I'm starting to believe that I'm sick of easy. Maybe I'm willing to work for something more stimulating.

A fucking challenge.

I can't think of a bigger challenge than Haven. She's sure to be a wildcat, both in bed and out. When I picture having those long legs locked around my waist while she whimpers as I ruin her pussy, my cock stiffens into a spike of iron.

With a brand new goal in mind, this day just got a whole lot more exciting.

6. Conner

The lone employee in the shop looks like she just crawled out of one of the flower pots. There are pink petals sprinkled in the feathery waves of her silver hair and a long string of floppy green leaves hangs from her neck like a fringed scarf.

But she's excited to give me advice. "Choose carefully. Flowers are used to convey a message, a sentiment." She hovers by my side as I slowly move down a long row of floral arrangements. Some are sitting in glass vases. Others are tied together with ribbons while hanging out in black pails of water. "The pink chrysanthemums in front of you represent joy and fidelity. Any flower in the shade of red is a love symbol. But I'm sure you knew that."

"These are daisies, right?" I reach for a bunch of large white flowers with centers the color of egg yolks.

"Yes." She claps her hands together. Two petals flutter from her hair and land on the floor. "White daisies represent purity."

I pull my hand back. A purity statement is the last thing on my mind. White seems kind of bland anyway.

The woman pushes pink framed spectacles up her nose and examines me. "You didn't mention the occasion."

“It’s not really a special occasion.”

She produces a small pair of scissors from a pocket and clips a wilting bud from a rose bouquet. “Are you shopping for a friend? A relative?”

“None of the above.” As I scan the selection, I realize I might sound a little cold. I don’t want to sound cold. I just don’t have a neat way to categorize Haven. “We went to high school together.”

“Ah.” She nods. “And old flame.”

I don’t see much point in correcting her. Anyhow, I suppose there’s a crumb of truth to that.

It’s out of character for me to stand around brooding about the meaning of flowers. Micah and Gage would laugh their stupid asses off if they could see this. I should just shrug away all the symbolism and grab some pink roses or whatever. Isn’t it the thought that counts?

Still, some restless part of my brain forces me to bypass one choice after another. None of them seem right. None of them scream HAVEN.

A weird idea because I can’t imagine what *would* scream HAVEN. Dead weeds maybe. Or one of those houseplants that eats flies.

The shop is arranged by color. I’ve now reached the purple section. The nearest bundle is a simple collection of small, dainty flowers tied with a matching ribbon. They strike me as a good compromise.

My new friend scurries over to see what has captured my interest. “Ah, forget-me-nots.” She nods with approval. “Self-explanatory. We have a better selection in blue, the more popular color.”

“I think I like the purple. I’ll take that big bunch in the middle.”

She wraps the bouquet in thick lilac-colored paper and gives me detailed care instructions, which I don’t really listen to because now it’s crossed my mind that I’m really going to see two girls. The polite thing to do is to arrive with two sets of flowers.

“Hey, can I also get a dozen of those?”

She squints to see where I’m pointing. “Sunflowers. Excellent. The stems on these are so long. I’ll cut them down.” Her fingers are already flying. The newly cut sunflowers are swaddled in light green paper.

She places the two flower bundles in my arms with maternal tenderness. She seems reluctant to part with them.

“Remember,” she says, “anything of beauty requires care. And the effort is always worthwhile.”

Sounds like a fortune cookie line to me but she’s a nice lady so I smile and thank her before escaping with an armful of flowers.

No detective work is needed to discover the name of the medical facility where Lita lives. I’ve always known it. On the first of every year since I’ve been raking in the NFL bucks, a sizeable check is sent by my accountant to Queen Valley Care. I’ve never found it necessary to advertise this fact. Even Micah and Gage aren’t aware.

By the time I’m cutting my truck engine in front of the place where Lita spends her days, the dashboard clock reads half past two in the afternoon. I scan the parked vehicles in an effort to locate Haven’s car and give up when I can’t guess

what the hell she drives. Tucking both flower bundles under my arm, I whistle on the short walk to the glass doors.

The interior is bathed in pastel colors and smells like peppermint. An airy lobby is dominated by a long counter and behind that counter sits a girl with a knot of brassy blonde hair coiled atop her head. The door whispers shut at my back and she tears her eyes from her phone screen with a flicker of annoyance. An employee badge hangs from her neck and I catch the name Ashley.

“Hello.” I lean one hand on the counter and give her a friendly smile. “Hoping you can help me. I’m here to visit a resident.”

Recognition lights up her face, followed by shock. “Wait, you’re...” Her words trail off and her mouth flops.

“Name’s Conner Wiseman,” I finish because sometimes I don’t have patience for all the fuss. “I’m here to see Lita Marchenko.”

Ashley topples right out of her chair. It goes rolling away without her. Then she bangs her head on the desk when she tries to stand up and now she looks like she might cry so I offer to pose with her for a selfie. This instantly cures her of the blues.

“My friend Rena is crazy in love with you and she’s gonna die when I post this to Insta. Wait, I can post it to Insta, right? That’s okay, right?” She seems like she might have a breakdown if it isn’t okay.

“Absolutely. Post anywhere you like.” What do I care if there’s one more goofy social media photo of me out there in the world?

Meanwhile, all the action has drawn some attention. A guy wearing plain grey coveralls pauses in the middle of wheeling a hand truck out the door and runs over to ask me to autograph the back of his hand with a Sharpie. I've received far stranger requests so that's no problem. Then an older couple walks into the building and they're both excited as they take turns pumping my hand. They are season ticket holders and they're here visiting the man's brother, who has been in a persistent vegetative state ever since a horrible car accident. They don't ask for autographs but the woman hugs me and says I've made her day, which is always nice to hear.

Now a man in a white coat emerges from a set of double doors and frowns at the mini circus in the lobby. I'm guessing he's the boss because Ashley snaps to action and asks for my ID. I'm given a laminated visitor badge after penciling my name in a large book. Three spaces above my signature is Haven's. Her handwriting, full of dramatic peaks and loops, is far neater than mine. I should have learned how to sign my name more artistically since I'm required to autograph shit like hands and phones but no one has ever complained about my chicken scrawl so I guess it's all right.

"Room sixteen," Ashley says. "Through the doors, then take the first left. Her sister is also here."

"Thanks." I wink at her.

She faints. Almost. Touches her hand to her heart and kind of wobbles.

While following Ashley's directions, I pass a lot of doors. Some are closed, most are open. I try not to stare at the sight of frozen people propped up in hospital beds or seated idly in chairs. Sounds echo in the hallway. The chatter of medical

staff. The drone of television sets. The soft but unmistakable noise of another human being weeping with despair.

The last sound tugs at my heart. This is a sad place.

Lita's door is halfway ajar. I see the twins before I get a chance to tap my knuckles on the wood.

My last memory of Lita is from the night of the Emerald Ball. She was laughing on the dance floor moments before a fire swept through the building. The brain aneurysm that led to her collapse moments later had nothing to do with the fire but the two events are forever linked in my mind.

Today Lita is seated in an overstuffed leather recliner. Her head is tilted slightly to the right and her eyes are open. She blinks but nothing registers. No movement, no expression. If she were truly awake there's no doubt she could see me gawking in the doorway eight feet away.

Her sister, however, sits with her back to the door. Haven is huddled atop an ottoman that matches Lita's chair. She hugs her knees and her head is bent forward. She's speaking but the murmured sounds are too low for me to hear. The tight dress she wears is the shade of ripe plums. Her hair, long and black with no hint of her natural blonde, spills over her shoulders, shielding her profile.

The scene is deeply personal. I'm suddenly doubting my choice to come barging in here but it's too late to back up and leave.

Besides, backing up isn't my style.

"Knock knock."

Haven freezes. A second later she flips her curtain of hair aside and aims her searing gaze at me. She's not quick enough to mask her own emotions. There's a spark of surprise,

followed by a visible flush that could be excitement or it could be rage. Tough to tell with her.

While I'm watching, she rearranges her features into indifference. Looks like it takes some effort.

“You must be lost, Conner. There's not a party in sight around here. Try the golf club.”

“Nah, that's at least ten miles away.”

She studies her nails. “I suggest you make the drive. It's more your speed. And undoubtedly filled with frivolous women hunting for high profile dick like you.”

Listen to her. Doesn't give an inch without a fight.

“Great option to keep in mind next time I'm lonely. But today I've found exactly what I'm looking for.”

Haven cocks her head and considers the situation for a few seconds before straightening her back and climbing to her feet, which are covered in black heeled boots laced up to her knees, setting my imagination on fire. And because I'm a horny scumbag who likes to let my cock lead me around, I take careful note of every luscious inch of her body.

She notices. A grim smile tilts her lips. “Why the hell are you here?”

I decide to take that as an invitation to enter the room. “You didn't say goodbye before you fled the wedding. Missed my toast and everything.”

“Oh. Goodbye.” She crosses her arms. She's not wearing a bra. I appreciate that.

Lita, meanwhile, hasn't moved a muscle. The mounted television is showing some colorful musical. People are dancing and singing in the middle of a freeway.

Haven stands her ground when I get closer, not budging even when my arm brushes hers. She notices the flowers in my hand and confusion ripples across her forehead. But she doesn't prevent me from getting next to her sister.

Tess visits Lita often. She's the one who told me that no one knows whether or not Lita can hear what's going on around her. Haven must believe that her sister can hear her. She was deep in a one sided conversation with Lita when I walked in.

I can do that too. I'm good at talking, whether or not anyone is actually listening.

"Hey Lita, it's your old pal Conner. Yeah, I know I should have come sooner. You'd be right to give me shit for that."

I don't know what I'm watching for when I stare at her face. Nothing changes. Lita shows no sign that she understands anything.

Haven's boots click on the tile as she moves to the window. Gently, I place the bouquet of sunflowers on the ottoman. Though Haven faces in the opposite direction, I know she's listening to every word I say to her sister.

"Look, I brought you sunflowers. I guess this proves I've managed to absorb a few decent manners over the last decade. Hey, was it sophomore year when we sat next to each other in the back row of Henderson's class? Yeah, I'm sure it was sophomore year. Can't say I recall any trigonometry but I remember that guy wore a bad hairpiece that looked like a dead muskrat and he popped antacid tablets like peanuts. I was always falling asleep on my desk. Every so often you'd smack me in the arm with a spiral notebook and say 'Rise and fucking shine' whenever I started to snore too loud. Which happened a lot."

Haven's loud sniff sounds like laughter. The sound generates warmth somewhere inside me. She ought to laugh more.

This seems like a good time to make a peace offering. I extend the arm holding the purple bouquet. "By the way, this is for you, angry girl."

She turns her head and makes no effort to accept the flowers. She remains rooted in place, full of silent suspicion. Beautiful and difficult.

Well, I knew that getting on Haven's good side wouldn't be easy. Especially because I'm not positive she has a good side.

But I can't really stand here for eternity, posing with a bunch of flowers while waiting for her to react. Eventually my arm will get tired. If I have to go to her then so be it.

Her posture is stiff and wary as I approach. She reminds me of a coiled snake, unsure if there's a threat worth striking at. Maybe that's how she thinks of herself. As a snake. She called the serpent tattoo on her chest a family brand. The idea is unsettling.

My gaze drops to her pert bow of a mouth. Dirty thoughts swirl behind my eyes. I'll keep them to myself for now.

In a playful gesture, I tap her folded arms with the bundled flowers. The paper hisses and crinkles. Haven exhales and finally snatches them out of my hands.

Just when I'm wondering if she's going to toss the flowers on the floor and stomp them into confetti with her shiny boot heels, there's a shift in her attitude. A ghost of a smile plays on her lips as she peers into the purple paper.

It's hard to say exactly why something deep and unidentified crunches inside my chest but I'm pretty sure it's related to Haven Marchenko's possibility of a smile.

"I was told that all flowers have some kind of deep purpose but I just chose these because I thought you might like them. They are called forget-me-nots."

Her head snaps up and a sudden cloud passes through her eyes. Then, just as quickly, it's gone, replaced with flat indifference.

I feel like I've missed something important.

"Thank you." She says the words in a tone that makes it clear gratitude doesn't come easily to her. "It was nice of you, Conner. And it was nice of you to stop by."

"You're welcome." This is a good start.

Haven leaves the window and collects Lita's flower bouquet. She peels back the paper and sniffs at the sunflowers within. While I watch from the across the room, she locates two tall plastic tumblers inside a cabinet by the door. Every move she makes is sexy and graceful. I could hang out and admire the lines of her body for hours. At the moment I'm fixated on the toned shape of her thighs. My face would fit very comfortably between them.

Focus.

I'm supposed to be shelving sex daydreams for today. Haven wouldn't be impressed to know the contents of my mind right now.

Anyway, I shouldn't be thinking about rubbing my cheeks all over Haven's inner thighs while her sister is in the room. It's just crappy manners all around.

In order to cool down my libido, I turn away from the sight of temptation and face the window instead. The sky is clear and flawless. And the view gives me inspiration. A longshot, for sure. But I like longshots.

Right now Haven is setting the sunflowers on a small white table beside the bed. The only other object on the table is a framed photo of two identical little girls hugging each other and smiling. Both girls are missing their front teeth and their dresses are similar to the color of the paper wrapped around the forget-me-nots.

There goes that deep crunch in my chest again.

Haven steps away from the table and inspects her sister. She presses a button on the chair's arm and with a soft whirring noise, the chair inches to a slightly more upright position. Satisfied, Haven leaves Lita's side and stands with her back to the opposite wall. She crosses her arms again and openly eyeballs me, a message that she doesn't submit with ease. No surprise. I knew that already.

I smile at her. "I was just thinking."

Her right eyebrow peaks. "Does that happen to you often?"

"Ha. Seriously, I have an idea."

"That sounds ominous."

"It's about you."

"Even more ominous."

I ignore the dig. "You're a goddess, Haven. But you could use some time in the sun."

There's a slight shift in her posture. "Thanks for the input. Thoughts of that caliber don't come along every day."

“Hear me out. You’ve got that whole pale mistress of the undead look down and it’s hot. Seriously, I’m into it. But you’re missing out on the vitamins.”

“What vitamins?” She could win a scowling contest. “What the hell are you babbling about?”

“The vitamins you can only get when you run around outdoors.”

She stares at me like I’m rambling in pig Latin.

I guess I’m not doing a good job of clarifying. I’ll try again. “The team nutritionist explained it all. The human body benefits from all the vitamins absorbed during reasonable exposure to sunshine. And fresh air is called fresh air for a reason. I’ll going out on a limb and guessing that you don’t get enough of either. The weather outside is perfect. Light breeze and warm without being hot. Ideal for hiking. How about it?”

“Hiking.” From the way she repeats the word, you’d think I’d just suggested snacking on tarantulas. “You are inviting me to go *hiking* with you.”

“Sure. Look outside. We can see Glinda’s Peak from the window. It’s a twenty minute drive and there’s a lot of daylight left. The climb isn’t tough. I’ve seen little kids tearing up the trail like it’s nothing.”

She twists a piece of black hair around one finger, her face shrouded in doubt.

I decide to push my luck. “Don’t worry about keeping up. I’ll make sure to go extra slow so you don’t get left behind.”

Her eyes flash. “There’s no chance I’d have any trouble keeping up with you.”

“Cool, we have a date. The way I figure, a nature workout is right up your alley. You were really into sports in high school. Volleyball, right? Softball too?”

She quits toying with her hair and a glimmer of surprise flashes in her eyes. “Volleyball, yes. Not softball. I was on the girls’ varsity basketball team.”

“Right, basketball. Forgot that you played. That was never one of my sports.”

She visibly flinches. I don’t know what that’s about. Maybe she hates basketball in addition to fresh air.

Then she glances down with a sigh. “Sorry, I’ll have to pass. I’m not exactly dressed for outdoor recreation.”

“Don’t you keep a change of clothes in your car?”

“On the off chance I’ll receive a sudden hiking invitation? Afraid not.”

“We’ll stop at your place so you can change.”

“My place is way the hell over on the east side.”

“No worries. I’ll just carry you.”

A withering look. “What?”

“Yeah, I can easily carry you up the trail and back down again. I’ll be your personal chariot.” I flex my arms to make my point. “Look at me, I’m practically Superman.”

“You’re a far cry from Superman. And you’re not serious.”

“Never been more serious.”

“Christ, you’re persistent.”

I’ve definitely made a dent in her resistance. But it’s time to inject a touch of sincerity.

“Haven.” I wait until I’ve got her full attention before continuing. “I would really like to spend the day with you. It’s my sincere hope to prove that I’m *not* a ruthless monster.”

Her shoulders wilt and her jaw ticks. Her gaze strays to the purple forget-me-nots in their tumbler of water. “I’m very aware that you aren’t a monster, Conner.”

“Now you’re just piling on the compliments. I’m touched. Can I have a hug?”

She’s back to rolling her eyes. “Try to hug me and I’ll spike my heel on your shin. And you shouldn’t be *touched*. I wasn’t giving you a compliment. It’s just that I know enough men who truly are monsters to understand the distinction.”

I’ve decided to keep the compliment anyway. Feeling bolder, I cross the room and stop when I’m less than two feet away from where she’s backed against the wall. “Know what? I think that despite your best efforts, you really do like me.”

“And I think you’ve been strapping your football helmet on too goddamn tight.”

That’s what she *says*.

But her body language is another story. She fidgets, shifting her weight, pressing her back to the wall like she needs it to hold her up.

Those signs are a big fat motherfucking advertisement. I’m definitely getting to her.

I flatten my palm against the wall above her head and lean closer, confident that she has no intention of kicking me.

And if she did? Hell, I’d enjoy it.

“Haven, don’t be ridiculous. I have no reason to wear a helmet this time of year.”

She remains still. It's not as if I'm keeping her handcuffed. I'm not even touching her. She could escape with ease. Instead, her breathing picks up and a thick sheet of that chilly attitude vanishes before my eyes.

My cock relishes this game and throbs inside my jeans. My gaze dips to her mouth. I can easily imagine teasing a moan out of her with my tongue. The pressure inside my pants reaches a crescendo.

Haven tilts her head to look past me, to where Lita sits in a chair and stares at a television screen she doesn't really see.

This makes me realize I'm kind of an asshole for standing here with a boner the size of Jupiter while Haven's comatose twin sister hangs out a few feet away. I remove my hand from the wall and take a slow step back.

Haven doesn't seem to notice. She's still watching Lita. For no apparent reason she gives a tiny nod of her head before returning her attention to me.

"Hiking," she says slowly. "That's all you want?"

I don't like to lie and I'm no good at it. "No. That's definitely *not* all I want."

She breathes out a short laugh. I get the impression she values the honesty.

Great. There's plenty more where that came from.

"Like I said, a hike is not all I want from you. But I won't beg for anything else right now. You know what? Sex is off the table for today. I'm calling it."

She gives one of her famous eye rolls to the ceiling. "*You* are calling it."

"That's right. Don't even try to change my mind."

“No worries there.” She slides away from the wall and circles her sister. “What do you think, Lita? Should we humor him? I could borrow something of yours. I’m sure you’d approve. In fact I know this entire situation would send you into screams of wild laughter.”

I feel like this is my cue to contribute. “Glad to be of some entertainment value. I’ll wait outside the room while you change.”

Haven is already rummaging through a wooden bureau, sorting through folded mounds of clothing. “Fine.”

Before exiting, I hunker down in front of the third person in the room. “Goodbye, Lita. I swear I won’t wait so long to stop by and see you again.”

Of course Lita doesn’t respond. In a friendly gesture, I touch one of the motionless hands curled in her lap while Haven pulls a pile of clothes from the dresser. She doesn’t look my way as I exit and close the door softly behind me.

Out in the hallway, I twirl my keys while basking in today’s small victory. The prospect of spending uninterrupted hours with Haven jumpstarts my interest more than anything else has in a long time.

An elderly patient with the same vacant stare as Lita is wheeled past. The attending nurse looks me up and down, clearly suspicious that I’m up to no good as I hang out in the hallway with a broad grin on my face. I guess she’s not a football fan.

“Just waiting for a friend,” I tell her.

She turns her head and keeps wheeling her patient down the hall without responding.

As I watch them disappear I think about the word I just used.

Friend.

If I start thinking of Haven as a real friend then it wouldn't be cool to picture her naked while fucking my fist.

What a bummer that would be.

I was already looking forward to jerking off to the vision of that girl down on her hands and knees with her dress shoved up around her waist and that tight ass ready to be-

The door is flung open and there she stands, transformed in the space of ninety seconds. Her long, jet black hair is pulled into a loose ponytail and she's dressed in a pair of light pink yoga pants with a grey tank top. On her feet are blinding white running shoes that look like they've never been worn outside. She removed much of her makeup too, proving that her natural beauty should never be hidden under layers of paint.

Haven tightens her ponytail and notes the scrutiny. "Yeah, it's not my most glamorous look. You'll have to cope."

"Actually, I was thinking that you've never looked more beautiful."

No lie there. No lie at all.

She drops her hands from her ponytail and examines my face without blinking. Given the reputation of her family, there might be times when being on the other side of a penetrating stare like that becomes intimidating.

Let the girl look all she wants. She doesn't have a prayer of getting me to flinch.

Haven breaks the stalemate first, shifting her eyes down. If this was a test then I think I passed.

I twirl my keys one last time. “Ready? I’ve got some water bottles in my truck.”

She doesn’t yet know that I’ll be doing the driving. This is *my* field trip and I want to see her tucked into the passenger seat and relaxing for the ride.

“Hold on.” She dashes back into the room.

The door remains open. I watch as she crouches beside her twin and murmurs something in Lita’s ear. Whatever she says is longer than a simple goodbye. She kisses her sister’s cheek before rising and joining me in the hallway.

“Can I ask what you said to Lita?”

She slides her purse strap over her shoulder and tries to walk faster than me. She fails and pauses with a sigh.

“That’s just between me and my sister.” A crease of distress appears between her brows. “No offense. I’m not trying to be rude.”

“No offense taken.” The urge to haul her to my chest and comfort her is sudden, unexpected. Almost overpowering. “Thank you for saying yes to our date.”

I’m wrong to assume she’ll roll her eyes again. Or sneer that this is not a ‘date’ at all.

She does nothing of the kind.

Instead, a blush colors her cheeks as she fights a smile. “Thank you for inviting me, Conner.”

And with those reluctant words, I know that Haven Marchenko has just staked an unintentional claim on my heart.

7. Haven

Once upon a time, I was a superior athlete.

In those high school days of yesteryear I enjoyed being one of the top jock girls, respected in every sport I touched, most likely to win an athletic scholarship. There was nothing at all to waking up at the crack of dawn and running five miles without feeling a twinge of pain.

It seems that things have changed.

Today I can't scale a shallow hill without panting and stumbling and making a general ass out of myself in front of one of the world's finest athletes.

How fucking mortifying.

The stitch in my lower side after a mere twenty minutes on the trail leaves me feeling like an eighty-year-old woman with a lifelong smoking habit.

When was the last time I got any real exercise at all?

I don't remember. But as I cling to a convenient boulder and attempt to breathe normally while waiting for the cramp in my side to disappear, I'm miserably embarrassed for myself.

Conner, who trots along without breaking a sweat because he has the stamina of Thor, turns around when he notices I've fallen behind again.

“Good idea. Let’s take a break. I was just thinking that I need a minute to rest.”

He’s trying to salvage my pride. This only makes me cringe harder.

Glinda’s Peak isn’t exactly Mount Everest. The rocky knob just north of the Em City skyline is a favorite local recreation spot. Today there’s no shortage of families taking advantage of the excellent weather.

Conner plunks down beside me as two boys who can’t be more than ten years old scamper into view and run up the trail. They are followed at a more leisurely pace by a woman holding the hand of a tiny girl and offering bright words of encouragement.

“Look at you go, Jessie. We’ve almost caught up to your brothers.”

There’s something deeply humbling about being passed by a kindergartner.

Plucking my limp ponytail from my sticky neck, I wonder if I look as pathetic as I feel.

Conner pulls a bottle of water from a black nylon sling bag and twists the cap off before handing it over. When I fail to reach for it, he nudges the bottle into my hand.

“Drink.”

I shake my head. “I’m fine.”

“You’re getting dehydrated.”

I know he’s right. But my stubbornness, as always, is instinctive. “Thank you, Dr. Conner. Worry about your own hydration.”

“I did. I’ve consumed sixteen ounces since we got here. But you’re on the verge of heatstroke”

“Heatstroke? It can’t be more than seventy degrees out.”

“I know what I’m talking about. Drink the water.”

“Or else what?” A juvenile response. Can’t help myself.

Conner startles me by moving with lightning speed. Before I can even turn my head, he positions himself at my back, swings one leg around and traps me between his muscled thighs. “Or else I’ll *make* you do it for your own good.”

His breath strokes the back of my neck. One large hand lands on my right hip, cementing me in place like it has every right to be there. There’s no escape from the rush of feral hunger that careens through my blood.

Despite his threat, Conner isn’t the vicious type. He’ll let me go if I complain or elbow him away. Funny how I have zero desire to do either one.

He holds the water bottle to my lips. I draw the line at letting him feed me so I snatch it out of his hand and guzzle the contents. My parched throat welcomes the relief.

While I’m greedily drinking, Conner’s hand remains on my hip. His fingers exert slight but possessive pressure. The rise and fall of his chest connects with my back.

“That’s my good girl.” His whisper is thick with buttery seduction, completely unanticipated.

And I fucking lose it.

Water sprays out of my mouth and decorates the rocks. More water gets sucked down my windpipe. I gasp for air. Poetic justice if I choke to death on a surge of my own lust.

“Careful, honey.” He gently pats my back, playing innocent. “You really ought to practice swallowing.”

When I’m finally finished coughing, I swipe a hand across the back of my mouth and swivel around to glare at him. “You never quit, do you?”

“Nope.” He sits back on the palms of his hands and gives me a lazy grin. “I’m not good at giving up when I want something.”

This guy.

Half the words out of his mouth are laced with supersonic sex fuel.

Usually I have no trouble firing verbal bullets at any man who thinks he has the secret ingredient to get the best of me. Yet somehow I’m having trouble snapping back today.

Fine time for my personal fortress to crumble like sand.

Conner’s knowing smile stays intact as I climb to my feet and take stock of our progress. From here, the cars dotting the parking lot look like toys. We must be more than halfway to the top.

Aware that Conner’s eyes are on me, I raise my arms and stretch, very slowly, twisting my torso from side to side. The clothes borrowed from Lita are designed for comfort not a fashion show. However, my boobs are big enough to fill out the cotton sports bra and strain against the fabric of the tank top.

Conner doesn’t bother to hide the fact that he’s enjoying the show.

I don’t mind.

In fact, his directness is the quality I appreciate the most. Sneaky people suck. To Conner's credit, he's not remotely sneaky or underhanded. His motives couldn't be clearer if they were skywritten above his head. It's kind of refreshing.

But if I sit here for too long, ticking off his finer points, I'll end up talking myself into something way riskier than an afternoon hike.

"Race you to the top," I say even though there's not a chance I'd be able to beat him in any race at any time.

He knows it. But he laughs and plays along, shadowing my heels as I use this fresh burst of energy to sprint to the summit.

Reaching the top of Glinda's Peak isn't a significant accomplishment. Still, it's the first wholesome physical mission I've completed in years so I feel a sense of satisfaction when I thud my ass down on a flat rocky ledge and take in the view of Emerald City and beyond.

Conner helps himself to the empty spot at my side and when he wordlessly hands over more water I don't argue. At least this time I don't choke while drinking.

In between sips I sneak a few glances at my hiking companion. For the moment he's run out of cheeky dialogue. He removes his sunglasses and sits casually with his arms propped on his knees while enjoying the sights.

Everything about him, from the square line of his jaw to the thick fingers tapping on his knee, screams masculine vitality. And even though I can secretly admit that Conner was magnificent in a tux, I prefer the way he looks right now. He wears an old pair of jeans. Dusty running shoes. A green Emerald City tee that's seen far more vibrant days. He did a careless job shaving this morning, or else he didn't shave at

all. The stubble on his jaw is darker than the windswept hair on his head.

When he shifts his weight, I breathe in soapy hints of sea salt and tropics. Much more to my liking than overpowering cologne.

His stare is pointed west, skating over the flashy stadium where he amazes the world with his astounding skills on the field. Beyond the stadium, even farther west, lies the green scenery of wealthy West Emerald. Sometimes the serene childhood I spent there with my sister seems as remote as a fairy tale.

Conner turns his head and I'm hit with the full force of his curious blue eyes. "Why did you run out on me yesterday?"

I lift my chin, my defenses prickling. "I didn't *run* out."

"All right. Why did you walk out quickly when I wasn't looking and forget to say goodbye?"

"I had business to handle." A polite way to sum up an unpleasant encounter with my asshole cousin. Just like I thought, Talon is on the hunt, a predator testing the fence for weak spots. No doubt he and his brother are planning to become a problem while my father's away. This will need to be nipped in the bud.

However, right now I have no wish to dwell on the ugly, complicated pressures attached to that piece of my life.

"Business." Conner nods over the word. I feel like there's a question hanging at the end of it.

Some questions don't need to be asked. Or answered.

Apparently my silence isn't enough of a hint.

Conner rubs his chin. "You work for your family."

“Yes.”

“Running a bar, right?”

“You could call it a bar.”

“What would *you* call it?”

“A bar with tits.”

Conner laughs and plucks the half empty water bottle out of my hand. He tilts his head back and drains the remaining water in a couple of swallows. The sight of a man drinking water shouldn't make my pulse speed up. Then again, the average specimen is a bin of garbage next to Conner Wiseman.

He tosses the empty bottle in his sling bag and gets comfortable, openly studying me.

I stare right back at him. *Look as long as you want.* I'm the opposite of an open book. I'm a goddamn vault with a steel padlock. He won't learn anything that I don't want him to learn.

“You live alone?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Over on the east side, right?”

“Are we now getting to the interrogation part of this outing?”

“Sure. That would be fun.”

“That would be boring. You'd discover pretty damn quick I don't crack under pressure.”

“No?” He reaches behind his neck and pulls his shirt over his head. He rolls the fabric and stretches the length between his hulking fists. “Not even if I tie you up and use some creative tactics to bend you to my will?”

Un-fucking-FAIR.

His body is insane. Every inch of his chest is cut and defined. Stupidly flawless.

Never mind the fact that his ‘tie you up’ tease is doing wicked things to my senses. Normally, I’m not into any kind of bondage unless I’m the one tying the knots and even then it doesn’t get me too riled up.

However, the idea of getting restrained by Conner has me over here on the verge of drooling like a porn-sick fool.

I clear my throat, hoping it will also clear my head. No dice.

“We’ll never find out, Conner.” Even as I say it I know I’m lying.

He smirks and rolls his shirt into a ball, setting it down on the rock. His hand idly drifts over his chest, rubbing at a hard space between his pecs. I’m pretty sure the gesture is intentional, designed to reinforce the fact that he’s hotter than planet Mercury.

Turns out I’m wrong.

Conner spends a long moment staring at the concrete jungle of the east side and when he speaks again his tone is a lot more thoughtful.

“I understand more than you might think.”

I’m struggling to rip my eyes away from the perfect suntanned canvas of his skin. “What is it you understand?”

“Families. They can be complicated. Can’t blame you for not wanting to talk about yours. There’s plenty about my family that I’d rather not examine either.”

“Right.” I snort loudly. “As if your upper crust pedigree can relate.”

Shit. Shit. SHIT.

I’ve never wanted to eat my own words more than I do right now.

“Conner, I’m a major asshole for saying that. I swear I just forgot.”

Forgot that his mother went on a murder spree.

Forgot that she shot him in the leg before diving headfirst out of a high rise.

Maybe I really am teetering on the edge of sunstroke. That would explain why I’ve become stupid.

“I’m extremely sorry.” Certainly not words that come out of my mouth every day. But I never say them unless I mean them.

“Hey, don’t worry.” He scrubs a hand through his short hair and flashes a wry grin. “I’d forget too if I could.”

The fact that he’s being sincerely cool about my mistake is enough to make me want to crawl beneath the rock I’m sitting on. There’s also a shade of vulnerability that has crept into this conversation. My resolve to keep my thoughts locked up tight has taken a hit.

Suddenly, I want to meet him halfway.

There must be a kernel of truth to Conner’s fresh air claims. Inhaling deeply and filling my lungs dissolves a lot of tension. The elastic band is sliding out of my hair so I yank it free and thread my fingers through the artificially dark strands.

I push the elastic band over my wrist. Confession time. “You want to hear what scares me the most?”

He sits up straighter, giving me every bit of his attention. “Sure.”

“What scares me the most is giving up hope that Lita will come back.” My fists ball up and I shake my head. “That’s something I’ll *never* fucking do. I’ll never give up on her. Not until the day I die.”

Conner slowly runs a thumb over his scruffy jaw and nods. “You’re good to Lita. She’s lucky to have you.”

I appreciate how he speaks of my sister in the present tense, acknowledging that she’s still alive. And I appreciate that he wasn’t dropping empty words that mean nothing. We’re unlike in most ways but both of us understand the hollow feeling of loss.

My fists relax and I rub my palms on the soft fabric of the yoga pants I took from my sister’s closet. “You asked me what I said to Lita before leaving her room. When we were kids we used to play this game where we’d make up new lyrics to old songs. One of them was ‘You Are My Sunshine’. I can’t remember it all but I do remember the last line and I remember that Lita was the one who came up with it. Now I repeat it to her every time I leave her room. I’m not usually superstitious but I never miss saying it.”

He doesn’t move a muscle. “I’d like to hear it if you want to tell me.”

I suck my lower lip between my teeth. I’ve never uttered the words out loud to anyone else, as if doing so would rob them of their power. Stupid thought. If they had any power they would have worked by now.

“Please don’t take my sister away.” A soft breeze tickles the nape of my neck. The laughter of children carries from the trail below.

Conner reaches for my hand. His fingers squeeze mine gently and let go after mere seconds, a signal the act was made in friendship, or something like it.

He heaves a deep sigh and it’s not a sound I’ve heard from him before. “I don’t talk about my mother.”

“Would you like to talk about her now?”

“Not really. Whenever there’s a microphone shoved under my chin it’s a question that comes up and I always deflect or pretend I don’t hear. Edie was a terrible human being. No doubts about that.”

I remember her a little bit, Conner’s mother, from back in old West Emerald times. She seemed like a cheerful idiot, always bowing and scraping to big sister Matilda, ready to burst into tears if anyone looked at her cross eyed.

She fooled everyone.

I pull my knees up to my chest and fold my arms around them. “Not always easy to sort people into good and evil boxes. Most of us are a little of both.”

He gives me a long, careful appraisal. “I bet you’re speaking from experience.”

I hold his eye. “More experience than I’d like.” More than I’m willing to discuss on the summit of Glinda’s Peak.

He doesn’t press. He looks again to West Emerald, the landscape of his past. Mine too.

“You know what’s extra fucked up, Haven?” His pitch has grown lower, darker.

“What?”

“In spite of being a shitty human, Edie was a good mother. At least, she was a good mother when I was a kid. After she and my dad were divorced, it was just the two of us. Sometimes when I’m stuck in a groove of hating her for all the pain she caused, I get ambushed by memories. Like the time I fell out of a tree. I was being reckless, climbing higher than I should have been climbing. One the way down I got knocked out cold. Turned out to be a hell of a fork in the road of my life. But you grew up in West Emerald. I’m sure you’ve heard that damn story.”

I sink my teeth into my lower lip hard enough to feel some pain. I’m amazed my voice stays neutral. “Yes, I remember your accident.”

He nods. “Anyway, my mother’s face was the first thing I saw when I woke up in the hospital. She’d been crying. When I opened my eyes she started crying even harder. My mother was never religious but she kept sobbing out thanks to Jesus. She said she wouldn’t have been able to survive if she’d lost me. Later, she snuck a pint of cherry vanilla ice cream into the room because she knew it was my favorite. She didn’t leave my side until I was discharged from the hospital.”

His pause is so long that I wonder what I should do to fill the silence. Or if I should fill it at all.

A shadow falls as a lone cloud scuds across the sinking sun. A short distance away, a hawk flattens its wings and flies in slow circles. It’s the first moment of true serenity that’s come my way in ages and I’m reluctant to let it go.

Conner jerks his chin at the horizon. “The sun is on its way down.”

“I see that.”

“Looks like you got some color there today.” He touches a finger to the slope of my nose.

The gesture is not erotic. Yet I battle a shiver of desire.

“Mistress of the undead, remember? I burn easily.”

He drops his hand. “So you’re not working tonight?”

“No. The club is closed on Sundays.” A steadfast rule. No matter how my father grumbles over lost revenue, my employees deserve a day off.

“That’s good news.”

“Why?”

Conner leans closer until his shoulder brushes mine. “Because now I get to keep you for the evening.”

I can’t avoid staring at his lips, wondering how they might taste after time in the sun. “Who says?”

He pushes my hair aside, an unnecessary move since it wasn’t really in my face. It’s an excuse for his fingertips to linger on the pulse point of my neck, as if he has studied the art of seduction. “You need to eat. I’ll take you to my favorite restaurant.”

Part of me wants to poke a bubble in his superior confidence.

But that part is too small to win.

I check him out and cluck my tongue. “Since we’re going to a restaurant you’ll have to put your shirt back on.”

“Nope, can’t do it.” He’s so close. His hot breath skims over my face. I can see flecks of green swimming in his deep blue eyes.

“Because you’re a shameless exhibitionist?”

“Because you like me so much better when my shirt is off.”

Sort of true. And because it’s true, I don’t have a rational argument. Might as well be straightforward.

“I won’t be fucking you tonight, Conner.”

He huffs like the notion is preposterous. “Did you forget how I already said sex is off the table for today? I sure as hell didn’t forget. I bet you’re getting dehydrated again. You ought to sit in my lap and drink some more water.”

I snatch his shirt off the rock and push it at his chest. “Quit running your damn mouth and let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

8. Haven

Conner's favorite restaurant turns out to be a pirate-themed, kid-friendly seafood place, the kind that draws the whole family out to celebrate birthdays and straight A report cards.

The manager, obviously adapted to the sight of Em City's famous quarterback, greets him without much fanfare. We're ushered in through the back door and seated in a private dining room that's likely reserved for high school graduations and sweet sixteen parties.

I'm pleasantly surprised by Conner's low key taste. I've never had much use for five star dining and three hundred dollar bottles of wine. A basket of fried chicken strips and a cold beer suits me just fine.

Members of the staff must have instructions not to trouble Conner with autograph requests. Different faces keep lingering at the doorway but only our waiter, a youngish fellow with a Spanish accent and an oversized eyepatch that keeps sliding over his cheek, interacts with us directly, chirping 'Ahoy there!' whenever he stops by to top off our water glasses, which happens more than it really needs to.

Our food arrives in record time but the waiter is so busy yelling 'Ahoy there!' that he nearly dumps the meal in my lap.

Instantly, I feel sorry for him. Serving food to the irritable public is a tough way to earn a living. With effort, I scrape together a smile to set the guy's mind at ease so he doesn't break pirate character and start crying.

Conner is already digging into his food with the zeal of a horse at the trough. As I dump an excessive amount of ketchup on my plate, my stomach unleashes an audible rumble.

Conner hears and lifts an eyebrow. "My fault for keeping you out too long. You need some extra nourishment." He ordered a double meal of lobster and steak. Now he's trying to shovel a loaded fork into my mouth from across the table. "Here. Eat."

I fend off his fork and pick up a sweet potato fry. "Feed your muscles. I'll stick with what I've got."

He drops his fork on his plate and instead pushes over a plate stacked with buttery dinner rolls. "At least take some of these off my hands."

I've never been a girl to turn down carbs. "I can do that."

Being around Conner is oddly comfortable. Yeah, he's oversexed and screwball jokes fly out of his mouth nonstop. In addition, his reputation for bed hopping is constant tabloid fodder.

Yet the guy's streak of decency isn't faked. He has his wounds. Deep ones. And still he's probably the most radically honest person I've ever known.

Voices buzz near the door. Glancing over, I spot three young female employees huddled in a tight pack and studying our table. When they spot me staring they withdraw in haste, as if I've screamed curse words at them.

Conner is oblivious. Being the center of attention is nothing new to him.

“You have quite the fan club around here,” I observe after pounding back half my beer.

He swallows the food in his mouth and chases it with a gulp of water. “Yeah, I live nearby. Come here at least once a week, usually with Tessie, Micah and the baby. They’ve named a drink after me.”

“I don’t remember seeing any Wiseman shakes listed on the menu.”

“Sure, it’s on the back page. Fireball whiskey and lemonade.” He winks. “Called the Twenty-Nine.”

A long buried memory crackles like a lightning bolt.

“I’ll remember that. In fact, someday when I make varsity it’ll be my jersey number. For real. I swear it...”

I could tell him. This is probably what I *should* do.

Yet I’ve already picked up on the fact that Conner is still troubled over what he lost after his childhood concussion. He won’t feel better after hearing the whole story of us.

My long silence catches his attention.

“It’s my jersey number,” he says, assuming I’m confused. “Twenty-nine.”

“Yeah, I know.”

A ripple of interest cuts his forehead and he leans back in the chair. “Do you watch my games?”

I could play this off with a lie but the only people I enjoy lying to are the ones who share my last name. “When I get the chance.”

And I always get the chance. If miss the live broadcasts I watch the replays.

He's pleased enough by the answer to break into a grin. For years I was obsessed with that cocky smile. There might be a piece of me that still is.

I rip my eyes away to avoid getting too lost in Conner Wiseman's smile. My defenses are already low. Must be all the time out in the sun.

I'm aware it's not cool to stick your face in your phone in the middle of a meal but I need a distraction. Anyway, I haven't checked my phone in a while. Never know when something fucked up is happening in the family fold.

No texts, no messages, no fires to put out. I push the phone back into my small barrel-shaped handbag and set it carefully on the table beside my plate.

Conner hears the clink of heavy cargo within. "You keep bricks in your purse?"

"No."

"Something made that noise."

"Yup, something did."

He raises an eyebrow.

Might as well shock him.

"I carry a gun. Sometimes it's necessary, all things considered."

'All things considered' being that my family has an ongoing deal with the devil.

Conner isn't shocked at all.

He shrugs off the revelation and passes more food my way. “Eat another roll. Can’t let these beauties go to waste.”

I should have guessed he wouldn’t be fazed. Conner’s no stranger to the world’s sordid underbelly. He’s played a central role in some really horrifying shit. Something we have in common.

Guns and organized crime don’t make for excellent dinner conversation so I steer the topic to football. This is a subject where Conner really shines. He uses his hands a lot when he’s talking and his sincere love for his sport, for his teammates and for his fans is real.

It’s admirable, his affection for the game. And enviable. Must be a trip to enjoy what you do for a living. I never even made it to college, instead jumping from the uptight palace of West Emerald Prep to the sleazy depths of east side corruption.

Conner hasn’t touched a drop of alcohol but I’ve polished off another beer while listening to him talk.

“Do you think you’ll finish your career in Em City?”

He leans back in his chair, laces his hands together over his broad chest and gives my question some thought. “Not my call in the end, depends on which direction the franchise takes. But yeah, that would be the dream.”

“The franchise is run by businessmen. You’re a huge crowd draw and the best QB in the game. They’d have to be fucking morons to let you go.”

He shifts and moves his elbows to the table, hunching forward with a glimmer in his eye. “Keep talking, Marchenko. I like where you’re going with this.”

“As if you don’t already receive heaping praise from all directions.”

“Every day. But it means more coming from you.”

I don't need a mirror to know that my cheeks are reddening. No one else can get me blushing and tongue tied the way this guy can. “You have the whole world at your feet. Why would you care what I think?”

“Because you don't hand out much praise. And because I like you.”

I'll have to pretend I didn't hear his last statement. “The Cyclones need to invest in better defense to give you some breathing room. It's a heartbreaker to watch you brilliantly rack up points only to see the advantage unravel when the opposition gets the ball. And Digby's retirement last year leaves a major blind spot when it comes to offensive tackles, which were already on the weak side. Next season you'll be running for your life every Sunday if you don't get more protection.”

He's already nodding in agreement. “Nice. That analysis beats the best sportscasters in the business. And you're right. I'll have to sharpen my running game so I don't get clobbered and clock my brain out for good.” He taps his head. “There's more than enough scars in there already.”

I never thought about whether his old head injury might impact his playing. “Is that risky for you?”

He winks. Then smirks. “Getting knocked down by a mammoth tub of testosterone is always risky.”

“But is it riskier for you than for others?”

His smirk disappears and the fingers of his right hand tap the flickering glass lantern in the center of the table. “When I was in high school my parents were told not to let me play. It's not a hazard that disappears with time. A hard blow to the

head would be a bigger deal to me than it might be to someone else. But the game is what I do. I doubt I'd know who I am without football.”

An invisible knot tightens in my chest. A fleeting thought of Conner meeting Lita's fate and staring at nothing in an empty hospital room rattles me to the marrow.

“Ahoy there!” Our favorite fake pirate arrives to break the mood. He tops off our water glasses and asks if we can be talked into ordering dessert.

The beers haven't supplied even a slight buzz. “No dessert for me, but I'm going to cave and get a real drink. Give me one of those Twenty-Nines.”

“Aarrrrgh, excellent.” Ahoy There adjusts a crooked black tricorn hat and swings to face Conner. “I'll bring two, yes?”

Conner shakes his head. “Pass, my friend. I'll be getting behind the wheel and I'm trying to make a good impression.”

When I bust up into wild laughter, Ahoy There looks frightened and retreats.

Conner blinks. “Feels like I missed a joke.”

Cutting off a final chuckle, I clear my throat. “It's just surreal, the concept of Conner Wiseman *trying* to be impressive.”

“That far fetched, huh?” He rubs at his jaw. “Guess I ought to reevaluate my credentials.”

“Like you don't know you're impressive as fuck. Always have been. You never even needed to try.”

The words shot out of my mouth before I could think twice. It's becoming a trend today.

His amused expression gives way to something more scorching. Sex is stamped in his eyes when they drop to my mouth.

Under the table I squeeze my knees together, a useless attempt to erase a flutter of excitement.

“Ahoy there!” A stubby glass filled with ice cubes bobbing in pink liquid lands in front of me.

I pluck the lemon slice from the rim, flick it on the table, and drain every last drop in four swift gulps. There’s not as much of a burn in my throat as there should be but it’ll do.

Conner whistles. “Wouldn’t want to face you in a drinking contest.”

I shake the glass, now empty except for the ice cubes. “Their shit is watered down. But you’re right. You wouldn’t want to compete with me. There’s nothing I can’t swallow, Conner.”

That slip was no accident. I know full well what I’m implying.

So does he. He stirs in his chair and turns his head to the side. I’d say his cock just turned to steel and he needs a few seconds to deal with it.

Triumph washes over me. For once Conner Wiseman is at a loss for words.

When he recovers, his eyes slide back to my face and he inspects me for a moment before withdrawing a thick money clip from his pocket. He drops a stack of high bills in the center of the table and stands. “Come on.”

“You’re leaving?”

“*We* are leaving.”

I cross my legs and haul my purse into my lap. “I’m pretty comfortable right here. I just might have another drink.”

With one hand he gruffly shoves the table two feet to the right and looms over me. “Plenty to drink at my house. You’ll be a lot more comfortable there.”

Our eyes clash. His leg brushes my knee. Deliberately, I’m sure.

I can hold anyone’s gaze without flinching, even when I have to tilt my head back to see him. “Thought I remembered you declaring that sex is off the table.”

“You just saw me move the fucking table.” He extends his hand, a chivalrous move that’s at odds with the fire burning in his eyes.

“Doesn’t matter where you put the table, Wiseman. You’re not getting any tonight.”

Even as I say this, I slide my palm into his and allow him to pull me to my feet.

He smiles and leads me to the door.

9. Haven

Amazingly, Conner's house is not some tricked out castle of a bachelor den. I would expect the cave of an NFL king to sit alone on a high hill and include exotic trappings such as gold plated pool tables and cavernous theater rooms.

But no, Conner lives in an ordinary one story sprawling ranch in the cozy depths of a serene neighborhood. It's the kind of place where daylight summons high energy moms wheeling jogging strollers while kids on training wheels pedal beside them. But right now the orderly streets are tranquil and homey with recycling bins neatly crouched at the curb. The street lamps emit a soft white ambient light that's unknown to east side streets where the lighting is either garishly fluorescent or dangerously non existent.

"Tess is my decorator," Conner says as he tosses his keys on the coffee table. "Used her realtor superpowers to find this place and then helped me pick out furniture."

Tess has a taste for white wood and deep cushioned seating. Spot of bright color pop from couch pillows and wall art. The effect is pleasant and inviting. A yellow playpen waits in the corner, evidence that a baby lives here.

A frame in the center of a nearby end table catches my eye and I bend low for a closer look. “Did Micah draw this?”

The pencil sketch is simple. Two kids, a boy and a girl, exchange a small flower. A sweet scene that manages to be humble and poignant.

Conner flicks on a kitchen light and glances over. “Yup. Talented, isn’t he?”

I find it difficult to look away from the framed sketch. The longer I stare, the more I’m drawn into the scene. I suppose that’s the mark of an effective artist. “I knew he designed his own ink but I’ve never seen any of his other work.”

“It’s Micah and Tess in the picture,” Conner says. “Well, them as they were a long time ago.”

From what I remember of Tess and Micah from high school, they weren’t remotely friendly. Beside the sketch is a newborn photo of Dash, the child they made together. He’s scrunched up on his belly and slumbering peacefully. My hidden sentimental reflexes contract. Good people deserve to be happy.

The weight of the gun in my purse is usually a comfort but at the moment it feels like a burden. I’d rather not set it down in some random spot so I keep the purse hugged to my chest and drift to the middle of the living room. “The two of them traveled a hell of a long road to get where they are. But you know that. You watched it happen.”

“Sure did.” Conner slides open a panel that exposes a wall of glass overlooking a huge backyard. With the flip of a switch, the landscape lighting sparks to life. A sizeable pool glitters beyond the patio. “The three of us knew Tessie since we were little kids. I’m aware we always gave her a lot of shit

because she was the mayor's daughter but I can't remember the details. Some of those childhood blocks of time are kind of like Swiss cheese, full of holes. Still, I can't deny there's plenty of evidence me and Gage and Micah were the tyrants of West Emerald."

No, not you.

I catch the words before they can tumble out. Explaining them would be difficult.

Conner turns from the open patio door. He crosses his arms over his chest and hitches an amused eyebrow. "Count yourself lucky we didn't cross paths in those days."

His meaning isn't callous. The words shouldn't sting the way they do. The fault is mine, for stewing over ancient history that no one remembers except for me.

I'm not sure what I'm doing here in his house. I meant what I said. Despite being plagued by random surges of desire I won't be spending the night.

The best excuse I can come up with is that Conner has gone out of his way to make this a good day. I'd hate to set fire to it at the end. That's why I'm standing in his living room and searching for something harmless to talk about.

When I take a step, the muscles stitch in my right calf, echoing old sports-related aches and pains. I glance down at my leg and make a face. "You know what? I think I'll be paying for that hike tomorrow. I've been slacking on workouts for roughly a decade."

Conner's eyes travel over my body and that wicked playboy smile makes a comeback. "Lucky thing you're here. I'm skilled at giving full body massages. Watched an entire

three hour video series. Always looking for more subjects so I can practice my technique.”

“Cool story, bro. We’re not crossing that boundary.”

“Your loss.” He shrugs, his good mood intact. “Did you see my hot tub?”

I crane my neck and spot a massive covered box squatting on a slab of concrete to the right of the pool. “I do now.”

“Got it last season, recommended by the team trainer. The jets do a lot of good when it comes to sore muscles. Water will be nice and hot. Let’s go.”

While I’m still processing this sudden turn, Conner hurries outside and peels back the hot tub cover. He dips a hand in and nods with satisfaction before pressing a button. The jets bubble to life. Then, without a pause, he pulls his shirt off for the second time today. The shirt is tossed to a patio table and he’s on the verge of opening his pants before noticing that I’m stuck in the doorway.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says with his hand on the fly of his jeans.

What I’m thinking is that I’d enjoy sliding my tongue over his absurdly defined ab ridges. I hope there’s no drool sliding from the corner of my mouth.

Conner sighs, like he’s disappointed in my dirty thoughts. “This has nothing to do with sex.”

“Getting naked with you in a hot tub isn’t related to sex?”

“Naked.” He huffs out the word like it’s a puzzle in another language. “Nobody will be *naked*. I’m not an animal, Haven. I’ve got boxers on under this. Oh shit, you were

talking about yourself. You're not wearing underwear. Don't be embarrassed. I swear I won't look."

I'm wearing a black lace thong and one of Lita's cotton sports bras. Not exactly proper swimwear. Yet I have to battle a smile of amusement. Conner has a knack for coaxing the humor out of any situation.

And, regrettably, this flair only enhances his sex appeal.

"I'm not *embarrassed* for god's sake but-

"Great." With two jerks of his wrist his jeans are open, ready to drop.

My thighs clench and my nipples tingle. I'm too hard up and his body is too damn sinful, impossible to resist.

"Wait," I blurt.

He pauses and looks up to see me gaping and clutching my purse. He smacks a hand to his head. "So stupid. You're right. We need towels."

My mind blanks and my jaw snaps shut. I haven't discovered a follow up to the 'Wait' command. I also haven't figured out how to move past the patio threshold. Or how to lighten the grip on my purse, which remains clasped to my chest. A black suede shield that can't save me from the onslaught of lust.

Conner finds no fault with these issues and dashes right past me. His towel errand takes him down a long hallway. A door squeals open and shut.

Exhaling heavily, I finally step out on the patio. The moon is a sliver tonight and the air smells of burning mesquite wood. This might be the last cool snap before the long, brutal hot

season sinks its teeth in. With my head tipped back, I look to the clear sky as I consider my next move.

On one hand, I'm tempted to run out of here before I wind up doing the walk of shame at the crack of dawn.

On the other hand, I'm having fun. A shock. But absolutely true.

A compromise takes shape as I pull my phone from my purse.

Setting a time limit on this social exercise would nudge me back to reason, whether I want it or not. My father's driver, Vito, has been a stalwart family soldier for decades. He stays on call even when my father is out of town, as he is right now, taking a weekend vacation in Newport Beach. But Vito, forever protective and loyal, will always come whenever I call.

And if I do call there's no cancelling. Vito isn't a fucking Uber. Once roused, he's like a demon unleashed from hell. He'd merrily bulldoze right through Conner's backyard gate to retrieve me.

My thumb hovers over the digital keypad. Every sex-starved sense in my body joins forces and begs me not to hit send.

I press the send key anyway.

As expected, Vito responds immediately. He'll be here to pick me up within the hour.

A vague twinge of regret is set aside. For now there's a short time gap to fill. And the steaming hot tub a few feet away doesn't look like a bad way to spend that time.

Conner's tuneless whistling echoes from the house. It only takes seconds to kick off my shoes and strip down to my bra

and panties. The elastic band I pulled from my hair earlier is still around my wrist and it comes in handy now. After tying my long hair up, I waste no time climbing into the hot tub.

The steaming water clashes with my skin and my jaw locks with a wince. Within seconds my body adjusts and by the time Conner reappears in the backyard I'm comfortably occupying a corner in water up to my shoulders.

As for Conner, he couldn't be more delighted. "You beat me to it. How's the water?"

"Freezing."

"Liar." He tosses a pair of fluffy grey towels on top of my discarded clothes. "But I like it. Lie to me about something else."

"I have a boyfriend." A foreign word to me. There have been plenty of men I've enjoyed fucking for a little while. Not one was worth more effort than that.

Conner smirks at the phony answer. He hooks his thumbs into his scruffy jeans and slides them over his hips, exposing more skin and a pair of flimsy boxers that leave little to the imagination. His face is pointed down as he steps out of his jeans and it almost feels like an intrusion to ogle so brazenly. If I had any manners I'd turn my head and stare at the hot tub bubbles instead.

But my manners are few and far between so fuck it. Call me a pervert. I feel like watching. And if I wasn't drooling before, I'm sure as shit ready to start now.

Conner Wiseman could inspire poetry and art. To look at him, he's sculpted perfection.

It occurs to me he's putting on a deliberate show with his short striptease, flexing this way and that beneath the glow of

the patio lights. No objection from me.

Barefoot and showcasing just how effectively his pro athlete assets fill out a pair of boxers, Conner saunters over to the edge of the hot tub and grins at me before vaulting cleanly over the side and landing with a small tidal wave.

He ducks under the water for a second and surfaces with the brawn of Poseidon. Slicking his hair to his skull with one hand, he backs into the opposite corner and studies me in the blue tinted lighting.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“For splashing me in the face just now? I’ll recover.”

“Good. But that’s not what I meant. I’m talking about what happened in high school.”

I sit a few inches higher to escape the heavy steam. “You don’t owe me any apologies, Conner.”

“Giving you one anyway.” His frown manages to be adorable. “You know that night of the party when we were all hanging out in the kitchen? Dani pulled me aside and warned that I needed to be a good guy where you were concerned. I wish I’d listened.”

Remorse isn’t something I taste often but it is bitter. Unlike Conner, I don’t struggle with memory gaps. I wish I could forget that I was a raging bitch to Dani from the moment she stepped into West Emerald Prep. In spite of that she still looked out for me. Dani is a much better person than I am. At least I’m aware.

While I struggle with a crisis of conscience, Conner plows ahead with his sincere apology tour. “Haven, I *really* never wanted to hurt your feelings back then. Always felt shitty about it.”

I shake my head. “Conner, stop. I know how I behaved and I know it was unjustified. Look, I was cringing over making an ass out of myself. And the whole school knew we’d hooked up so I got tortured with a lot of trash talk.”

He exhales loudly. “Yeah, high school is hell. But I didn’t go around bragging, just so you know.”

“You didn’t need to. Half the student body was there. Everyone saw us go upstairs together and drew their own conclusions. But the choice was mine. I own it.”

He stretches his muscled arms out and lets them rest atop the hot tub rim. “Know what? I was happy when you asked me to the dance. Sure hated to turn you down.”

Yes, I’d asked him to the Emerald Ball. He’d already made plans to go with someone else. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

He’s quiet for a few seconds. “Then what? I did something to hurt you. What was it?”

He truly doesn’t know, doesn’t remember a thing.

I should have understood that back then. But I was a silly, infatuated teenager who’d just suffered an ego bruise and I was getting taunted everywhere I turned.

So I lashed out. Wouldn’t be the last time.

Burdening him with the whole story now feels wrong. Petty.

Conner is quick to paper over the silence with more apologies. “I’m sorry for being careless, for making you feel disrespected. And I liked you, Haven. I really did. I can’t think of another girl who was so intensely athletic, gorgeous to look at and could stand up to anyone’s bullshit. I hoped that once you cooled off we could figure things out but then after

Lita...” He trails off, unsure of how to sum up what happened next.

Nothing about that bleak time requires words anyway. No matter what, the pain never fades. There is forever a sense that a fundamental piece of my soul has been cleaved away and it hovers, always, just out of reach.

Where Lita is.

There’s still a question I’d like to ask him, something I’ve been wondering about all this time. “Why didn’t you fuck me the night of the party?”

He’s startled for a second before roaring out a laugh. “Man, you’re direct.”

“I thought it was clear that I don’t have the patience for tact.”

“Damn clear.” He hesitates, stalling, trying to come up with an appropriate answer.

I shrug over things that really make no difference now. “I’m just curious, that’s all. We went upstairs, found an empty bedroom. We messed around. I gave you the green light. Plus you were...”

“Not all that particular about who rides my dick. Isn’t that what everyone used to say?”

“Isn’t that what they still say?”

He snorts. Tips his head back and considers the constellations. “I figured out pretty quickly you didn’t have a lot of experience. And despite being drunk and horny and seventeen, I wasn’t enough of an asshole to steal your virginity on our first hook up.”

“Would you have stolen it on our second hookup?”

“Probably.” He shifts his gaze and finds my eyes. “But we haven’t gotten there yet.”

My turn to snort. “You and your smug optimism. I hate to dash your hopes but I’m not exactly a virgin anymore. In fact, if virginity has a polar opposite then I’m claiming dibs on that label.”

He lets out a low whistle. “I can relate.”

“I’m sure. But even your vulgar standards might be shocked.”

He sits up, no doubt interested. “Go ahead. Try to shock me.”

I suck my lower lip and debate just how juvenile I want to be. “Let’s just say I can creatively handle more than one cock at a time.”

His nod is polite, like I’ve just shared the trivial news that I enjoy eating cake. “It’s good to have different talents.”

I chuckle over the word choice. “I bet you have some *talents* of your own.”

“Absolutely. But they are all retired now.”

“Why is that?”

He lets the seconds stretch in dramatic silence before letting his answer drop. “Because, Haven, I am not ever fucking sharing you with *ANYONE*.”

I did not successfully shock him. But he has managed to shock me.

Where did all my handy, harsh sarcasm go? The best I can do is squirm beneath the water and make a noise that sounds like, “Huh.”

He laughs. “Come here.”

“What for?”

“Better view from this side. When I look straight up I see the spoons.”

“The what?”

He jabs his finger at the sky. “Right there.”

“I see The Big Dipper, Conner.”

“Not yet you don’t. But I’ll show you if you ask nicely.”

“Are we talking about the sky or your dick?”

“Whichever you think is more exciting.”

This conversation is ludicrous. I laugh anyway. “You’re a pig.”

“Sometimes. But haven’t I been a gentleman today? Fed you lobster and didn’t even try to grab your tits yet.”

“I didn’t have lobster. *You* had lobster. And for the record, I would have belted you in the nuts if you’d gotten fresh.”

“Nice. Now you’re just trying to tempt me.”

“Never underestimate the power of my kick. With one blow I could have put an end to the Wiseman line forever.”

“Shit, that’s harsh. Imagine trying to deprive the world of Conner Junior.”

The laughter bubbles out of my throat again. Can’t help it.

But this magnetic connection is also catching me off guard. I’m remembering too much about why I used to be crazy about him. With each passing minute, wider cracks are breaking in my invisible armor. If those cracks grow any bigger I’ll get reckless.

Anyway, our time's almost up. I've already made sure of that.

Without a word of explanation I jump out of the hot tub. The chilly night air strokes my skin on the short walk to the pile of towels and dry clothes. A quick glance over my shoulder confirms that Conner hasn't followed. He's just moved over to the closest side of the hot tub, watching me in silence.

My phone lights up with Vito's incoming text. **Ten minutes out.**

It would be better if I was waiting for him out front. Alone.

Moving swiftly, aware that nothing is hidden thanks to the patio lights, I rub a fluffy beach towel on my skin. Despite the fact that Conner is watching, or more to the point *because* Conner is watching, I peel off my sodden sports bra and drape it on the back of a nearby chair. His abandoned t-shirt, balled up beside his jeans, is seized on impulse and pulled over my head. The smell of him, the lingering warmth of his body and the intimate rush of stealing something of his all collides with powerful force. The t-shirt falls mid thigh and covers the important parts. The choice to forget my pants is intentional.

Freeing my hair, I let it fall in soft, damp curtains around my face. "I need to go."

Conner hangs his elbows over the side. "Why?"

Because I want to stay.

"The family driver is picking me up. He'll be here any minute."

"I'll pay him a king's ransom to get good and lost until daylight."

“Not an option.” I collect my purse and pick up my shoes. Which are actually Lita’s shoes. They’ve had an adventure and no longer look squeaky clean. “I had a good day, Conner. Thanks for that.”

Of course, there is plenty more worth saying.

But the most important words don’t come easily to me. They never have. The sharp turns in life are not to blame. It’s a personality flaw.

“This isn’t over, Haven.” Conner isn’t issuing a warning. He’s just sure of himself.

And he isn’t wrong.

“For tonight it is.”

I’m not wrong either.

Whatever happens, we haven’t seen the last of each other. But right now I’m teetering on the edge of long lost foolishness. The heady clash of emotion and desire is leaving me slightly dizzy. I need to get my bearings before I lose my head and start pitifully mooning over him.

Like I used to.

Conner stays where he is, amid the steam and bubbles, watching me withdraw. Turning my back on him is a hollow kind of relief.

Inside the cozy shell of Conner’s house, the tick of a wall clock is the only sound. I can’t explain why my steps drag on the way to the front door. Maybe it’s because nights without the club to fall back on always feel too long. My sleep patterns have been shot for a decade. It’s almost a chore to chill out in my own bed and drift off after trying to watch whatever show gets people all excited nowadays.

While I'm feeling sorry for myself on the way to the exit, Conner overtakes me. Moving in stealth silence, he blocks my access to the door, one meaty hand shooting out to brace it closed.

Instinctively on defense, I whirl around, flattening my back against the wall. His other hand hammers down beside me and I'm officially caged by his hulking arms.

Water streams from his body. He didn't take the trouble to towel off. It's downright indecent how close we stand, how undressed we are. The hunger I've been struggling to keep at bay screams to the surface. A tremor unspools from my core.

Conner keeps his chin raised on purpose, casting his eyes down in a power move, just in case there's any doubt as to which one of us is more intimidating. Almost like he's staring down some enemy on the football field. "You didn't say goodbye. Again."

His voice is gruffer, laced with a dangerous edge.

I steel my spine, willing my body not to shiver. If he so much as breathes on my neck I'll crumble. "Goodbye, Conner. Again."

His mouth tilts but his smile is incomplete. "I need to tell you something before you leave."

I can't move in any direction without touching him. "You have a dramatic way of trying to sneak in the last word. What is it?"

His hint of a smile disappears. His eyes narrow as he annihilates a few more inches between us. "I need to tell you what will happen when we really do fuck."

"*When?*" I laugh at his nerve, even as my belly tightens and my nipples ache.

He seizes my chin and his eyes bore into mine. “*When we fuck*, there’s no turning back. This won’t be some worthless one night screw. Once we get a taste there’s no way out. Count on it.”

The thunderbolt of lust slices through my belly and fizzes between my legs, sharp enough to ache. He awaits my reaction with deadly calm.

Conner isn’t just shooting his mouth off. All traces of humor are gone and he’s completely serious.

Yet a seed of inner defiance grows rapidly.

He can’t have the last word. I want it. And I’m taking it.

A bead of water trails past his collarbone and inches down his chest.

I don’t think twice before acting.

My tongue flicks out to catch the stray water drop. The taste of his skin is instantly addictive. His head rolls back as I slide my tongue to the hollow of his throat. I hear his thick groan and feel its vibration with my mouth. His muscles coil and his jaw grinds. He’s about a millisecond away from shedding the last traces of his playful good guy intentions and fucking the air out of my lungs right here against the wall.

He wouldn’t hear a single complaint from me.

The horn of a car abruptly bleats outside. Between my legs, every muscle quivers. I’ve never wanted to come so badly.

But I remove my tongue from his skin and stretch on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. “Next time you find me, I’ll expect you to make good on that warning, Wiseman.”

With a hiss, he seizes a big fistful of my hair. He pulls, hard enough to draw a yelp of surprise from my mouth.

The sound curls his lips into a smile. There's an arrogant quality to that smile. A man who thinks he's won and can take what he wants whenever he wants.

He can. There's plenty I want to take from him too.

"It's on, Haven. Start looking forward to getting your pussy wrecked like nothing else."

His guttural vow is not unlike a threat. If it came from any other man I'd bristle and breathe fire. Instead, his promise crawls into my bones and nearly sends me to my knees.

My heart hammers. I struggle to recall how to inhale and exhale properly.

Conner releases his hold on me so suddenly that I nearly stumble into the wall. He flings open the door. The headlight glare from Vito's hulking Escalade bathes the broad driveway.

Conner casually waits in the doorway as the swollen shape of his cock threatens to split his drenched boxers apart. He'll need to take care of that before he can get any sleep tonight. The mental image of Conner fisting his own rigid cock and jerking off threatens to drain what little self-control I have left.

With my purse and my clothes clutched to my chest like a feeble screen, it takes a supreme effort to peel myself away from the wall.

Vito leans on the horn again. Fair enough. I'm the one who summoned him. Now I can't seem to find my way out the door.

Conner idly waits, one hand holding onto the door, unbothered by the fact that water continues to fall from his

skin and splash on the tile floor beside his bare feet.

My brain has emptied of useful tools like words, ironic or heartfelt. All I can do is concentrate on holding my head up and ignoring the storm between my legs.

A pang of regret hits the same instant as a return to the night air. I have a chaotic impulse to turn around, run back to Conner, collide with his hard body and lock my legs around his waist.

We could use the hell out of each other all night, both of us raw and spent by daybreak. I can almost taste it happening.

Instead, my pride demands that I scrounge up every shred of my willpower, walk upright and not stagger to the waiting car in a sex-drunk daze.

The creamy leather interior smells strongly of my father's cigarettes. Vito waits in the driver's seat, strumming his ringed fingers on the steering wheel with impatience. He spares a suspicious glance at Conner's house before his doughy face glances at me in the rearview mirror.

"Everything cool, kid?"

"Yup." I feel no need to elaborate. He's worked for my family long enough to understand that there is never an invitation to ask questions.

Vito's known me since I was a teenager and he's a father himself. He makes no comment on the fact that I'm shivering in the backseat while wearing only a damp t-shirt but he's thoughtful enough to spin a dial on the dashboard and blast some heat this way.

"Thanks, Vito. My car is at Lita's. You can drop me off there."

No additional explanation is required. With a nod of his thick neck, Vito pulls slowly away from the curb.

I snap my seatbelt into place and try to dismiss the clash of passion and feelings. But, like an itch that demands to be scratched, I can't stop myself from glancing out the window before Conner's house disappears from sight.

He stands silhouetted in the doorway, backlit by the gentle light drifting from the living room. He's already waving farewell, like he just knew I wouldn't be able to help turning around for one last look.

Conner Wiseman already has me figured out.

Flustered, I flop back into the leather seats. I've always prided myself on being tough and impenetrable. Either Conner has a unique gift or else I've become too obvious.

Whatever the answer, he's in my head and he has won the day. I've sentenced myself to a night of brooding in my lonely apartment and thinking about him until I'm too tired to think at all.

Oddly enough, I don't even mind.

10. Conner

It turns out the internet has limits.

Every time I've tried to type in Haven's name combined with 'strip club', the results have come up empty. In fact, Haven hardly has an online presence at all. The snippets that I do find are ancient, all sports stats and game summaries from high school.

The only one of them that gave me pause was a thumbnail headshot of an unsmiling Haven wearing the West Emerald Prep girls' basketball uniform. Despite her wholesome schoolgirl appearance, the brutal defiance in her eyes burned through the screen. I kept wondering what was going through her head at the time.

The internet did spit back other Marchenkos in Em City but hell if I can sort out who is who. According to Gage there's a whole gaggle of them on that side of the city doing gangster shit. And since there is no map to their east side playground, last night I decided to drive out there and have a look for myself.

A charity event at Emerald City Children's Hospital ran late and it was damn near midnight when I steered to the dense labyrinth where something notorious is always popping off every day of the week. I didn't bother to come up with a plan,

other than filling my need to see the girl who has cornered all my waking thoughts and even my dreams.

Funny, but I've probably done more sick and dirty shit than ten average guys. I shouldn't be borderline obsessed with having a girl who doesn't always know whether she feels like smacking me or fucking me.

But the other night Haven just about murdered my self-discipline. To look at her, she's sleek lines of perfection, tailored precisely to my tastes. Legs for days. Tits that need to be in my mouth. She's unafraid to be sexy, which is so fucking hot. Give me a woman who knows what makes her come and demands to get it. I needed every thread of restraint to stop me from snapping off those dental floss panties and taking her against the wall like an animal.

And she knew it. She enjoyed it.

"Next time you find me, I'll expect you to make good on that warning, Wiseman."

No matter how she tried to play it cool, she was just as close to the edge of sanity. I could read her thirst in the tilt of her hips as she hobbled out the door. She was all but choking on the ache to get stuffed with big dick.

Poor girl. She didn't have to suffer like that. I would have happily given her as much dick as she could take. She's just torturing herself by putting off the inevitable.

It's clear that Haven can be bratty and difficult. It's also clear that scraping away the sheets of attitude is worth the effort. She's got a spine of freaking steel, she has zero patience for fools and she's tough to impress. She doesn't talk much so I find myself hanging on every word she says.

But most of all, I want to fuck her until she can't remember what planet she's on.

A hunger on this level is new to me. Unexpected. I doubt it's going to be solved by getting sweaty for a night or two.

I want her time and her attention. I want to erase all the bad experiences responsible for those shadows in her eyes. I want to hold her close. I want to have stupid debates and hear her laugh. Haven's smile, tough to earn, tougher to keep, somehow rattles the untouched regions of my heart.

The whole east side has always been a dense rabbit hole of twisty lanes and dead end alleys, real easy to get lost in if you don't know your way around. In order to get my bearings I swung by Micah's old apartment building and then coasted the short distance to Elijah's gym. The lights were out and the men clustered on the corner didn't look especially friendly. I didn't hang out there for long.

Once I was away from familiar ground I started feeling a great deal of sympathy for rats that get stuck trying to navigate an impossible maze. There are bars and strip clubs galore on that side of town so I picked a random place to start. After poking my head into a few places and asking around, I found no sign of Haven but received quite a few hostile glares.

It finally dawned on me that my two BFF cousins would hit the roof to see me wandering around like that, unarmed and alone in some really sketchy places.

Micah in particular always complains that I have no sense of self preservation. That thought crossed my mind when a dark sedan with no headlights rolled out of an alley and started riding my rear bumper, keeping pace no matter which way I turned. As I scowled into the rearview mirror at the shadow behind the wheel, I could almost hear my cousin's outrage.

“Just get the HELL out of there you jackass!”

Even when he’s just yelling in my imagination, Micah gives good advice. This time I listened. Pressed the accelerator and zoomed back to the freeway, losing the other car before rocketing to the on ramp.

I didn’t like giving up. But then again, nobody wins if I end up in a dumpster.

There are any number of people I could call for a quick answer to the Haven question. Gage. Micah. Tess. Hell, even Dani probably knows more about where to find Haven than I do.

Although I would rather hunt her down myself, it might be time to call in a lifeline. Because after coming home empty handed and spending a restless night alone, it’s a new morning and a two hour punishing workout in my weight room didn’t give me any bright ideas. I have to admit it might be impractical to roam around the greater Em City area on a perpetual Haven hunt.

Besides, I’m already getting impatient. Playing with my own dick is no substitute for sinking into pussy.

After a quick shower, I shoot a text to Gage, giving him a heads up that I’ll be paying him a visit in West Emerald this afternoon. I don’t bother to ask for permission. There’s no need.

West Emerald is like the Beverly Hills appendage of Emerald City, except there are no actual hills and instead of movie stars it’s populated with corporate scions like Aunt Matilda, richer than Midas and as ethical as Lucifer.

My old hometown is not exactly my favorite place on earth. I don’t even know who now lives in the house where I

grew up. I won't drive down that street. While I'm not superstitious, I'd rather not find out I'm on the wrong track by running into the ghost of my mother.

Gage throws the door open before I get a chance to knock. He's always dressed like he just got finished shouting at underlings in a board meeting.

He gives me a cool nod. "Dani made lunch so I don't want to hear that you're not hungry."

That's worth a sarcastic snort. "As if we just met today. When am I *ever* not hungry?"

Gage isn't in the habit of busting my balls as often as Micah but he still blocks my entrance with a smirk, forcing me to shoulder check him aside. He just wants to serve up a reminder that he's no pushover. The guy is as tough to move as any NFL rival.

Charlotte, dressed in her plaid skirt uniform, runs into me next. Circling her feet and belting out three sharp yaps of greeting is her dog, Total. "Conner you need to take a selfie with me." She's already got her phone held at arm's length and when I'm too slow to cooperate, she jerks on my arm. "You have to kneel down. I'm short."

I do what I'm told, dropping down to one knee and smiling for the camera. Total barks at me again.

"That's perfect." Charlotte snaps the picture.

"Perfect for what?" I scratch Total behind the ears. He wags a furry little nub of a tail.

Charlotte scrunches up her face. "I need to prove something."

"To who?"

“This asshole at school who says you’re not my cousin.”

I shoot a glance at Gage, who coughs to cover his laugh. “Speaking of school, shouldn’t you be there?”

She drops her phone into a cardigan sweater pocket. “It was a half day. The teachers are all having a meeting or some crap. Daddy is working on his next book and Mother is at the office so Gage picked me up and we stopped by my house to rescue Total from his kennel. Now I’m helping take care of Dash. I even helped Dani give him a bath.” She heaves a very loud sigh. “Conner, have I told you what a shitshow my school is? Most people at that place absolutely suck. I want to go to public school instead but you know what Matilda is like. She says I’ll pick up bad habits there. Can you believe that? What a crock of bullshit.”

The instant Charlotte finishes her speech she’s off and running down the hall, Total galloping after her, leaving me and Gage to sort things out for ourselves.

I wait until she’s out of earshot. “Damn. She’s on a profanity mission these days.”

He lets out a chuckle and touches the doorknob. “Were we any different?”

Probably not. I don’t remember a whole lot about being ten years old.

While I’m mulling this over he touches the doorknob again. It’s an OCD thing, no big deal. He fights the urges around everyone who’s not family. To outsiders, Gage’s lack of friendliness and his indifference to their gossip comes off as callous. They don’t know him like we do. Gage would carve a hole in his own chest to protect the people he loves.

I wait while he gives the doorknob one last swipe, then he motions that I ought to follow Charlotte's lead to the living room.

Gage's wife, lovely as ever, sits in the center of a fluffy white area rug. Meanwhile, the world's most awesome baby stretches out on his belly in the middle of a colorful mat that's decorated with cartoon animals. He's currently too busy inspecting his reflection in a small mirror to notice my arrival but Dani smiles and waves me over.

"Hello, gorgeous." Bending down, I peck her cheek. She smells like baby soap.

"There's food." She points to an impressive layout on the buffet table. "When I heard you were coming over I added some of your favorites to the menu."

"You're a peach. Are those Italian meatballs?"

"Yup. Fresh subway rolls are in the basket. Help yourself."

"Will do after I pay proper respects to my main man." Hunkering on my knees, I snatch up a plush rattle with a smiling lion face and shake it to get Dash's attention. "Hey, buddy. Remember me?"

He rolls to his back with a gurgle. His arms wave in the air. The scene is too freaking cute and I can't resist scooping him up and setting him on my shoulder.

Total takes a seat at the edge of the area rug and rests his head on his tiny paws.

Charlotte snaps a picture of all of us. "I'm sending this to Tess."

I bring Dash with me to raid the food. He doesn't object. "Speaking of the newlyweds, have they been in contact?"

Gage helps his wife to her feet. She stretches on her toes to plant a kiss on his lips and then straightens the hem of her blue dress. “Talked to them an hour ago on a video call. They’re happy but they sure do miss their little boy. I bet they’ll come back before Friday.”

“I bet they will too.” I shift position and address the baby. “What should I put on our meatball sub, little man?”

Micah’s son burps. A line of drool falls from his chin.

Charlotte inches over and inspects my sandwich. “Ew. You seriously just put chili peppers on top of meatballs.”

“Yup. Lots of them. Try it.”

She makes a very loud gagging sound and snatches a chocolate chip cookie. The kid doesn’t know what she’s missing.

Dani suggests eating outside. With a heaping plate of food in one hand and a baby in the other, I claim a prime spot at the patio table. Charlotte stakes out the chair beside me and regales us with a series of fifth grade tales. She has many. I didn’t realize fifth grade came with so much drama. It’s not the first time I’ve felt amazed over how much Charlotte reminds me of Dani, using her hands a lot and smiling like an angel after delivering a line of biting wit.

Across the table, Dani perches on the edge of Gage’s knee and nibbles on a square of pita bread. Gage keeps an arm around her waist while making careful selections from the three plates in front of him. Another OCD thing, separating food. He likely views my plate, a mismatched colorful jumble, as a crime against nature.

Dani swings her soft brown hair over one shoulder. Her eyes shut in a brief moment of bliss when Gage curls his arm

around her more tightly. There are plenty of things I can't recall from my early years but I can flash back to the day they met like it happened last week. It was the first day of junior year at West Emerald Prep. Matilda ordered us to give her brand new stepdaughter a ride to school. Gage, rude as ever, bluntly refused. He said he didn't pick up stray animals. He wasn't kidding. Then he offered to tie Dani to the roof rack as a compromise.

I laughed. Micah laughed. Dani thought we were dicks.

We were.

While my mind wanders, Dash takes an interest in the food. He's getting a lot more grabby these days and manages to seize a chili pepper in his fist. The thing is well on its way to his mouth before I gently pry it out of his palm.

"Trust me, buddy, you don't want that."

He pokes out his lower lip and makes a growling sound. I'm pretty sure he's pissed. Just like his daddy. Cracks me up.

"Baby boy is hungry," Dani says and starts to move from Gage's lap.

Charlotte, however, is already running for the door. "I'll get his bottle."

"Top shelf of the fridge," Dani calls.

"I know!" Charlotte shouts back. She returns in seconds and waves around a full bottle. "I want to feed him, Dani. Can I *please* feed him?"

"Of course. Just be careful with the bottle. Tess goes through a lot to pump that milk."

Charlotte settles down in a cushy chair and holds her arms out when I carry Dash over. He's not at all unhappy to be

transferred to the lap of his adoring aunt, who carefully aims the bottle at his mouth.

“My little nephew,” Charlotte coos. “I love you so very much.”

Total wags his tail and whines, maybe feeling left out for the moment. His furry head gets a pat from my palm before I return to the table to finish my sandwich.

“How’s business?” I ask Gage, even though I find the business world about as interesting as the view of grass growing.

He knows this. Which is why he only bothers with a simple answer. “Lucrative.”

Before Gage’s shitbag of a father choked on his last breath, he had big dreams for his international empire. Gage enjoyed dismantling those plans. When he’s not helping Dani manage the various charitable organizations launched with the proceeds, Gage is putting his shrewd money making skills to use by investing in projects all over Em City. I don’t exactly keep track but I understand he dabbles in everything from the restaurant business to commercial real estate.

“What about you?” Gage pops a wedge of cheese in his mouth. “You staying busy?”

I swallow a large bite of food and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “The team doesn’t start training again until July. Until then, I’m on my own with keeping this superior form in peak condition.”

Dani’s attention had been on Charlotte and Dash but now she shifts her focus to me. “I heard you were at the fundraising gala for the children’s hospital last night.”

“Yup. My hand got numb from signing so many autographs.” This reminds me that I need to send over the big check I pledged for the hospital’s sports therapy facility. Knowing Dani and Gage won’t mind if I pull my phone out for a minute, I fire off a quick text to my awesome assistant, Angela. Three dots appear instantly. Seconds later, there’s a ding from her response.

Already done.

I respond with a corny thumbs up emoji and can see she’s typing again so I wait.

Short notice but Allie Riddle’s team reached out to ask if you’re free to fly to L.A. tonight for her film premiere.

My mind clicks to an image of shiny red hair and a megawatt smile on the big screen. Never even met her in person. I tend to steer clear of actresses. I’d rather not be left guessing if someone is for real or playing a part. And those Hollywood red carpet events are boring and phony as hell.

Besides, I’ve got another mission in mind and it doesn’t involve flying to L.A. to function as some starlet’s arm candy.

I’ll pass.

She replies with the same thumbs up emoji I just used. I make a mental note to give her a nice raise. Angela will appreciate that. She and her husband can rescue all the horses now.

As I stuff my phone back in my pocket, Charlotte sings softly to Dash on the other side of the patio. Across the table, Gage whispers something to Dani that makes her giggle. Dani buries her face in Gage’s neck before pulling back to give him the kind of Fuck Me Now look that makes me feel like an

intruder so I turn my gaze to Total yawning on the patio floor and concentrate on polishing off my meatball sandwich.

I've barely swallowed the last bite when Dani notices that milk-drunk Dash is dozing off in Charlotte's arms. She leaves Gage's lap and collects the baby with tenderness. "Naptime," she murmurs with a kiss to his plump little cheek.

"Can I read him a story?" Charlotte asks.

Dani smiles at the little girl and they all disappear into the house together. Charlotte's loyal canine sidekick perks up and obediently trots after her.

While I was watching this scene unfold, Gage has been watching me. He doesn't flinch when I return his hard stare. I'm the one to blink first. Point goes to Gage.

He leans back in his chair. "Something's on your mind."

"Didn't know you'd acquired extrasensory perception."

"I haven't. You're just transparent as fuck. Spill it."

Beating around the bush isn't a skill I'm familiar with so I don't bother to try. "I went on a little east side mission last night. Didn't find what I was searching for."

His brows rise an inch. He doesn't ask a question. He just waits for me to come clean.

I push my empty plate aside with a shrug. "I was in the mood to surprise a friend."

"A friend." His nod includes no surprise but plenty of amusement. "Curious choice of words."

He knows exactly who I'm talking about. Of course he does. Gage is like a moody oracle.

I flick a balled up napkin at him. “Are you really gonna give me shit about this?”

“Of course. Micah’s on vacation so someone’s got to do the job.” He glances at the open patio door and breaks into a satisfied grin. “And my wife just lost a really big fucking bet.”

“I don’t know what the hell that means.”

“It means the sight of you twirling Haven Marchenko around on the dance floor sparked plenty of interest. Dani insisted there was nothing to it, just you being your annoyingly charming self. I disagreed. Your dirty plans were written all over your face so I felt inspired to make a wager.”

Sometimes it’s irritating to realize he knows me so well. “Congrats on the win but it’s kind of a crappy move to take money from your own wife.”

“Money?” He chuckles and shakes his head. “Fuck no. My prize will be a whole lot more fun to collect and she’ll *really* enjoy giving it up.”

“Good for you. Now will you give me the name of Haven’s club or do I need to sit through more of your gloating?”

“The Back Door on Front Street.” He parks his elbows on his knees and taps out an involuntary rhythm on his ironed black trousers. A crease appears between his brows. “You have to understand that you are walking right into a snake pit.”

“I know what her last name is. Doesn’t mean shit.”

“But it’s a damn good reason to stay on your toes.”

I meet his gaze so he knows I’m serious. “I won’t be changing my mind about her.”

“I’m not saying you should. Just keep your wits about you.”

“Sounds like you’ve got some information you’d like to share.”

He shrugs. “I’m not exactly an expert on Haven Marchenko.”

“Bullshit. You’re an expert on everything.”

He flashes a thin smile. “Haven’s bark is worse than her bite but I’m guessing you already figured that out. As best I can tell, she stays out of the fray. Instead, she sticks to her club and looks after her people.”

Gage’s forefinger taps out another pattern on his thigh and his jaw tightens. “But the rest of them? That’s a whole other fucked up matter.”

11. Haven

Esex Street, all of it, belongs to Uncle Desmond and his garbage sons. My cousins lack taste the way they lack decency. Every square foot of real estate on this ugly strip has been swallowed up Marchenko-style with tactics that have even raised my father's eyebrows.

Still, he's done nothing to rein them in. I don't expect this will change. And I never set foot on this particular block of the east side unless I have to.

Today I have to.

The meetings called by my father are not optional.

A pair of black-suited men bracket the entrance. They eyeball me behind their dark glasses, no doubt recognizing me and wondering why I might be lingering behind the wheel with a dirty look on my face. They belong to my father, pieces of the entourage he keeps for the sake of appearances. Like he's a freaking mafia don or a celebrity instead of an east side mobster who fattens his pockets with gun running, gambling rings and shakedowns. He used to try and stick me with some of his bodyguards. Even while I balked, I never dared to speak the truth, that the most dangerous men in the borders of Em City exist within the family fold.

My empty stomach sours, a merger of hunger and anxiety. Keeping an eye on the black suits, I reach into my purse for a roll of antacid tablets and pop two into my mouth, chasing with a sip of lukewarm bottled water.

No one on the outside would ever guess how many of these rolls I go through in a month. Chewing down on antacid tablets would put a dent in the badass bitch image and that's an image I can't afford to part with.

Any fracture in my armor would be detected by the deranged motherfuckers I share common blood with. My cousins would be breaking the door down with demands for my meager territory and I'm not sure my father can be trusted not to give it to them.

I check my makeup in the mirror and shove a hated pair of black patent stilettos on my bare feet. Wearing them gives me a tiny height advantage over my cousins and I'm petty enough to enjoy that half inch.

The neckline of my dress is low, as usual. There's a special reason for that on days like this. Their tattoos are all stored beneath their crisp, costly suits and I'm sure none of them think twice about this. But they need to see my mark to be reminded that I'm one of them.

Just in case they try to forget.

I feel my mouth pull into a grimace as I glance down to see the top of the inked snake that slithers between my breasts and flicks a forked tongue three inches above my right nipple. I was twenty when my father decided I'd proven to be impressive enough to join his inner circle. He ignored the scowls from his brothers and beckoned to the tattoo artist to step forward and get to work. He looked away when I dropped my shirt, as did my uncles. Even Jared averted his eyes in the

end. But Talon kept a cold smile on his despicable face and watched every jab of the needles as I glared with my chin up, refusing to acknowledge the humiliation of being studied with my breasts bared.

The black Lamborghini crookedly parked two spaces away isn't a car I've seen before. My cousins have short attention spans and a taste for flashy engines, rarely keeping cars for longer than six months before trading up. They act like they're royalty, zipping up and down east side lanes in their chariots with no respect for traffic laws and daring anyone not to make way.

Egotistical shitheads. Murderous ones at that.

And if gossip among girls has a kernel of truth, a small dick complex might also be a factor.

I'm discreet when I scrape the sharp end of my key along the driver's side door of the Lamborghini. The sound of metal mutilating paint makes me smile.

The two guard dogs at the door don't receive a greeting as I breeze right past them without pausing. This building used to be something more wholesome. A tire store, I think. A vague odor of new rubber still clings to the interior. Now it's a bare bones dingy bar, which is really just a cover for the backroom illegal betting racket that pays for the Lamborghini I just disfigured.

The place is closed right now. A man polishes shot glasses behind the counter and minds his business. Dense retractable screens cover the windows to blot out the daylight but it's not too dim for me to notice the lone girl seated on a cheap metal chair in the corner.

She's young. If she's finished with high school then she hasn't been finished for long. She's pretty, possibly Hispanic, with hair the same color as mine but on her it looks natural. An ugly bruise colors her left cheek. Her tearful brown eyes lift and I can read her thoughts as if they are painted above her pleading expression.

A sideways glance confirms that the bartender has paused and watches with interest. Maybe he's not really just a bystander. My cousins tend to appreciate tattletales.

The girl's lips part and mouth a silent word. *Please.*

Acid curdles in my belly.

Emotion will get me nowhere. If I don't look away I'll do something reckless.

I'm confident there is no outward sign of sympathy on my face as I march past the girl, despising the calm, flat click of my own heels on the tiled floor.

My uncle and his sons have refurbished the former garage bay, turning it into a soundproofed office where it's not unheard of to spot a blood stain or two. They keep a collection of live rattlesnakes, venom intact, often used as brutal tools of persuasion. Now and then a bloated body shows up, punctured with fang marks, and everyone knows that the unfortunate fucker must have crossed the Essex Street Marchenko boys somehow.

If I never step into this corner of the city again that would sit just fine with me but I'm not the one calling the shots.

A door swings violently open but before I can put a hand on the gun in my purse, the tension is gone. My little brother spills out of the bathroom.

Robert spots me and breaks into a crooked grin. "Hey."

He's changed since I saw him last. How long has that been? Months, it seems. A year ago he would have run to me with a hug. In another year he'll likely top my height.

I settle for a fist bump. "What are you doing here?"

He pushes shaggy honey-colored hair from his eyes. "Dad decided I was ready to be part of things."

I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't growl my fury out loud. Robert is a child. Nothing that goes on in our world should reach his ears.

A loud snuffle rises above the bar sounds of clinking glassware. I can feel the heat of the girl's desperate gaze on my back. Or maybe that prickle at the base of my spine is just guilt.

Meanwhile, my little brother's chest is puffed out and he stands tall, clearly proud that he's being treated like a man even though he isn't one. He's the son of a woman who once worked onstage in the club long before it was mine. Even if she never existed my parents would not have stayed married. She's long since been discarded but she has earned special status for giving Aric Marchenko the son he craved.

It's a mark of how little progress we've made that powerful men still have this Henry VIII-type obsession with a male heir. I used to be resentful. Now all I feel is dread because my brother doesn't fully understand that his future has already been written for him.

His choices will never exist. This is the start of an inevitable journey and from now on he'll be coached to be a monster.

Like them.

Like me.

Robert frowns because I've let too much time go by in silence. For his sake, I force a smile even as my heart withers.

"First lesson is to never be late for a meeting. Come on."

He nods and falls in beside me. "Hey, can I go with you to see Lita sometime? Mom keeps saying she'll take me but she never does and Dad gets mad whenever I ask about her."

A memory swims before my eyes. When Robert was born, Lita and I went to see him in the hospital. I was still smarting over the fact that our father was so clearly over the moon to have a son even though he could barely bother to remember that he still had daughters. When the squawking bundle was placed in my arms I held him for less than a minute before eagerly handing him off.

But not Lita.

Her face softened into wonder and she rocked him in her arms. He quit crying when she began singing softly. She tried to get me to join but I was too busy protesting by standing in a corner with my arms crossed, annoyed that she was making such a fuss.

Robert was still a diapered toddler when Lita slipped away. He has no memories of her.

"I'll take you to visit Lita anytime you want."

We've reached the end of the hallway. I breathe out slowly, buying a few seconds to calm my irritation before twisting the handle of the door. Robert waits until I give him the nod to walk right in. I square my shoulders and follow.

The acrid stench of cigar smoke does nothing to calm the inferno in my stomach. Though the sun blazes in the outside world, no natural light reaches in here. Fitting in a way. Kind of like strolling into a vampire lair. Even the snakes have been

invited today. They're lounging within a portable plastic container atop a dark wood end table. A petty show of power.

There is no illusion of equality at the cherrywood rectangle in the center of the room. My father sits at the head in a wingback red velvet chair. He leans to the right, in the middle of a private conversation with his favored brother, Estes. He pauses and his eyes skate over me with a stiff nod.

I return his nod. That's about as affectionate as we ever get. We're not the sort of family that plans cruise trips or sits down to Thanksgiving dinner together. We're a family that plots gangland takeovers and deploys hitmen to erase anyone in our way.

Desmond is responsible for the cigar stink. He puffs away, looking bored. The chair creaks as he shifts his weight. Desmond's original plan was to become an attorney and slink into politics but while he was jerking off in an east coast law school his younger brother was making his bones on the streets. My father began with a laundromat won in a poker game and swiftly acquired a taste for gobbling up real estate, then veered into the cash cows of seedy bars and strip joints. But for the last decade his biggest windfall comes from illegal casino operations. Keeping those in business comes with a different set of challenges. There are politicians to buy off and competitors to squash. Literally, not figuratively.

Growing up, I knew little about what my father did when he was gone from the house, which was most of the time. He was busy turning swaths of the Emerald City's most neglected neighborhoods into his blood soaked domain. At his side was the older brother who used his knowledge of laws to gleefully break them and the younger brother who is best known for

throwing one of his own henchmen off a freeway overpass after the guy told a bad joke.

I was very young the day I asked about my father's tattoo as he climbed out of the swimming pool. The menacing diamond-shaped head of the snake contrasted with the pale skin of his chest and I was fascinated enough to risk a timid question. He didn't even look at me as he shot out a curt answer. The mark his chest was a family honor, an emblem of blood and loyalty. When I asked if I'd have one too someday he peered down at me with scorn and said two words.

“No. Never.”

Only much later did I learn why. In my father's mind, that 'blood and loyalty' bond was reserved for men alone.

It's source of pride that I was able to make him eat those words. Not many people score a victory over my father and live to talk about it but even he can grudgingly admit that I've earned my seat at this wretched table.

Speaking of the table, I choose a chair beside Estes and pull out the one next to me for Robert. The shy, uncertain expression on my brother's face is enough to make my jaw clench because he's just a freaking kid and he doesn't belong here. He ought to be out in the sunshine throwing around a baseball or jumping ramps on his skateboard. Robert glances at the snakes as they curl their bodies and search for an escape route.

My handbag gets shoved under the chair and my phone is intentionally left in the front pocket. I can't afford to be distracted in this room. With my chair pushed right up to the rim of the table and my hands folded on the shiny surface in front of me, I keep my back straight and my head up.

Across from me, Desmond slouches, thumbs through his phone and yawns. Forcing my face into neutral mode, I hazard a glance at the men sitting on either side of my uncle.

As a child, I spent little time with my two cousins. Talon and Jared were finished with high school before I even got there. To look at them, they are imposing men. Tall, broad shouldered and handsome, they match the physical mold of my father and uncles. It's a tossup whether they are feared more than they are hated or vice versa. My father has been known to grumble when tales of his nephews' heavy handed brutality reach his ears but the fact that his punishments are never harsher than a reprimand is a sign of his approval.

Right now Jared and Talon flank their own asshole father like two waiting demons. My chief problem with Desmond is that he produced the two of them.

Jared pays zero attention to my arrival. He keeps his face pointed at his phone with a smirk. Knowing him, he's looking at porn. Last night his wife wandered into the Back Door yet again with red, unhappy eyes. Sophie downed so many tequila shots she vomited all over the bar and since Jared was nowhere to be found I had to pull Andrei off duty to escort her home.

Though Jared doesn't even look up, Talon keeps his eyes on me. The gleam within would be worth a shudder, except I refuse to give him the satisfaction. Instead, I harden my muscles and offer a blank stare in return.

Talon taps the pointer finger of his right hand on the table. An oversized titanium insignia ring that was given to him by my father clicks in a sharp, slow rhythm against the wood. Aside from Robert, I'm the only one in the room who doesn't

have one. This used to bother me. The ring is shaped into a gothic style letter M.

Marchenko.

Click.

From where I sit it's upside down, looks like a W.

Click.

The W winks at me.

The snakes hiss.

For no special reason, the word *WICKED* runs through my mind.

Click.

Wicked.

An accusation.

In the end I'm complicit, no better than the rest of them. The face of the desperate girl in the bar haunts my vision and threatens to light a match to my outrage.

No, I can't lead with a question about her. Doing so would prompt suspicion and seal her fate.

Robert fidgets in his chair, rocking it on the back legs for entertainment. He has no idea that I'm making a silent promise. Somehow I will extract him from the nightmare of our legacy before it swallows him too.

The murmured conversation between my father and Estes continues without interruption. From the words I can catch, it's obvious they are discussing details of my father's impending holiday at the state penitentiary. Interrupting them would be unthinkable. When Robert sighs loudly, no doubt already

bored, I catch his eye and put a finger to my lips. He nods and goofily pretends he's zipping his lips closed.

A vintage atomic wall clock ticks the seconds away on a paneled wall above a black leather couch. It's two minutes past four p.m. There's nothing special happening tonight at the club so the crowd will be light.

Last night when I wasn't holding Sophie's hair out of her vomit, I was keeping an eye on the door. I shouldn't have been expecting Conner to show up at any moment but somehow the preposterous flutter of hope in my chest didn't get the message. This little Catch Me If You Can game isn't to my liking, even though I'm the one who started it.

Anyway, Conner probably had other plans. There's no shortage of people clamoring for his time for all different reasons. He owes me nothing. No doubt he'd be deeply amused to know that I've been obsessing over the hours we spent together.

At this point I wish I hadn't walked out on him the other night. Maybe then I wouldn't be tortured by a steady stream of fantasies about how he fucks.

Conner is unlike the men I'm used to bedding. That unmemorable bunch tends to fall into two categories. Either they are one of the depraved barbarians who populate the worst corners of the underworld or else they are gutless foot soldiers, boring and easily pussy whipped.

For the first category, it's smart to sever ties the minute the dick riding is done.

And the second group needs to be shaken off just as quickly before they start becoming a nuisance.

Conner is different. He is no ferocious brute, nor is he an obedient fuck boy. His nice guy image is for real and yet there's also a sting of aggression in the way he demands the right to call the shots.

He's got something else going for him too. No other man has *ever* had me looking at a doorway and hoping he'll walk through it.

Part of me despises him for that. The rest of me will be watching the door again tonight.

“Conner Wiseman.”

I nearly tumble out of my chair. For a horrifying second I think I've uttered his name out loud while daydreaming. “What?”

Talon's slimy grin is pointed at me. “Got a heads up from the Carino brothers that this football fucker was slumming in our territory last night, wandering around like a sad puppy.” Talon scrapes his ring on his jaw and lets the suspense build. “It seems he was looking for you, cuz.”

FUCK!

It never crossed my mind that Conner might decide to go traipsing blindly through a bunch of seedy dumps and asking for me by name, an act that would generate exactly the worst kind of notice. Why the hell didn't he do something sensible, like ask his freaking cousin where to find the club? Micah would have told him.

Yet this is at least partly my fault. And the thread of guilt mingles with a buzz of excitement. The combination feels unhealthy.

I assumed that Conner understood what my family was about. Maybe he does understand and just doesn't care.

But now my father is listening in. “What does the Cyclones quarterback want with you?”

I shrug. “No idea.”

Talon is enjoying the can of worms he’s opened. “You went to high school with him, right?”

“Yeah. So what? Maybe he’s on the reunion committee.”

I have to break my glare with Talon in order to sneak a glance at the head of the table. My father rubs his jaw, his expression already flattening into disinterest.

Good. I’m not about to explain my relationship to Conner.

Relationship.

Not the right word. At least no one else heard me say it.

“Haven, you know Conner Wiseman?” Robert gapes at me with a new level of respect. I should have seen that coming. Robert loves sports. He can probably recite Conner’s stats off the top of his head.

Before I can open my mouth to answer him, my father slaps his hand on the table. “Time is short and I have some key points so listen up because you know I don’t fucking repeat myself. I’ll be taking one for the team and reporting to my temporary cage on Friday.”

He stops and lets his sharp eyes rest on each of us in turn. “Don’t think of me as gone because I’ll be in the loop every day. Nothing will get past me and I know you won’t even fucking try. At the moment we’ve got more eyeballs than usual on us so your orders are as follows; DO NOT give a reason for the spotlight to shine. Caution is the name of the game for right now. No escalations, you get it?”

My father isn't really waiting for our nods of obedience. His gaze lands squarely on Talon. Last week my shitbag cousin took a mallet to the back of some stockbroker's skull after losing a boat to him in a poker game. The body is lying in a brick of cement on the floor of Lake Poppy and while my father cares nothing about dead stockbrokers, he doesn't relish going to so much trouble for no reason.

Talon is smart enough to know when to keep his mouth shut. He even manages to slouch in his chair and lower his eyes. My father still has a soft spot for his nephews but I know better. Talon is as honorable and remorseful as a hyena.

Satisfied that this prickly topic is out of the way, my dad nods to his younger brother. "Estes will be on a plane to Palermo tomorrow. He has some new friends and they're hungry for stateside opportunities. Because he'll be spending a lot of time there in the coming months, Dez will take the reins while I'm in lockup."

Right now I wish I still had long nails. A prick of pain would be welcome when I dig my fingers into the meat of my palm. Erupting is out of the question. The only thing to do is keep my face impassive as a scream roars through my head. I don't need to look across the table to know that my cousins are gloating.

Neither of my uncles are trustworthy but at least Estes is capable and he stays out of my way. Desmond, on the other hand, is lazy and weak. His sons easily overrule him at every turn.

While my father is temporarily out of the picture, Desmond won't be running the show. They will.

My father moves on briskly, pointing to Jared next and asking for a Vegas update. I'm not listening too hard while my

cousin's nasally, self-important voice drones on about casinos.

On my right, Robert sneaks his phone out and starts playing a video game in his lap until I nudge him with my elbow and shake my head. He gives me a sheepish smile and shoves the phone in his back pocket.

My father waits until Jared has finished his monologue. "Castigliore being cooperative?"

"Naturally." Jared's thin lips stretch into a chilly smile. He raises his left hand and wags the finger decorated with a thick wedding band. "I keep this trinket on just so he doesn't forget our connection."

My father mulls that over with a rub of his chin. "Wouldn't hurt to give him a grandson to cement his loyalty."

Jared's grin falters. I'm guessing that fatherhood isn't part of his plan. In one of her drunker moments, Sophie spilled some TMI beans that her husband always fucks with a condom at the speed of operating a power drill and then bolts to the shower.

While Jared pouts, my turn finally arrives.

My father jerks his chin in my general direction. "I glanced at the club's books. Not a bad return for such a small operation."

This is my invitation to respond. "Thanks, Dad. Just like you always told me, some niches are recession proof. Men will always be degenerate enough to empty their pockets at the sight of naked women."

He chuckles with no clue that I'm being sarcastic. Back when I first took over the Back Door I had lofty ideas about getting out of the skin business, even created a whole dorky power point presentation to make the argument that the club

ought to be turned into a sports bar. After being laughed out of the room, I came to terms with reality.

Our empire was built by using people. We use their addictions, their desperation and their vices. While my father still refuses to dabble in the drug trade due to the risk factor, all else is fair game and no one here is interested in a moral lecture.

Talon loudly clears his throat to get all eyes on him. After processing the look on his face, I brace for the sound of something I won't like. "We've got some merchandise coming into the country next week and need a distribution base." Talon clicks his stupid ring on the table again and leers at me directly. "You've got a family building that could be useful."

Instantly, I'm bristling. I don't allow illegal shit into my territory. This conviction has nothing to do with protecting family assets. I'm protecting the people inside, the ones who would be a whole lot fucking worse off if they're left to the nonexistent mercy of these clowns. I take care of my employees, paying generously and never allowing them to get mistreated. I've put six dancers through college and didn't hesitate to dip into my own savings to keep the expenses off the books. If my people run into any trouble, they know they can come to me and I'll handle the situation, whether it's extra cash for their kid's braces or crushing a few bones of an abusive ex so he gets the message not to come stalking anymore.

"Back Door is off limits," I fire back. "The last time I checked, you had custody of a few buildings yourself. You can play at being king in one of your filthy pay-by-the-hour human trafficking hubs."

Talon quits dicking around with his ring and narrows his eyes. “Why don’t you go pop a Midol and chill the fuck out?”

“Why don’t you invest in a poker tutor and quit your sociopathic tantrums? They have a body count now.”

His veneer of civility gone, Talon rockets to his feet, leaning across the table on his knuckles. “This isn’t your fucking call, bitch.”

I laugh at him even though I know there’s a vague possibility I’ll get shot in the head for playing with fire. “Says the perennial sore loser.”

He shows his teeth in a way that could never be mistaken for a smile. “You know what? Choking on those words just might be the last thing you do, little cousin.”

“STOP!” Aric Marchenko’s fist slams down on the table. He’s on his feet too, jaw locked, eyes scathing. His most ferocious glare, however, is aimed at Talon. “I won’t have that. Do you hear me? I will NOT FUCKING HAVE THAT.”

Silence falls and not a muscle moves. Only the faint pulse of the wall clock bleeds through the tension.

Talon, who has just enough sense to know when he can’t win, finally nods. “I hear you, uncle. Haven, I shouldn’t have lost my temper. My apologies.”

Half a dozen searing comebacks fight their way to my tongue. This will only make matters worse. Besides, I’m acutely aware that my little brother listens to every word. “Forget about it.”

My father sighs and runs a hand through his thinning hair. This is the first time he’s ever looked old and tired to me. “You work this out among yourselves. And no matter the outcome

you remember that you're family. You've got each other's backs. This is not a suggestion and it's not negotiable."

"Understood." Talon keeps his eyes on me. Not everyone would be able to see the smoldering fury behind his mild expression but I know better.

"Understood," I echo, seething with my own fury.

My father sinks back into his chair. "Good. Keep the rules in mind. Any words spoken in here are for our ears alone. We are a fortress. We can't be breached."

Consequences are always implied, not spoken aloud. There's never been a significant betrayal within the family. I'm not sure what the fallout might look like but I expect it would end with a trip to the floor of Lake Poppy to keep the stockbroker company.

Following this dire hint, my father's tone relaxes and he opens up the conversation to questions. Desmond finds his voice and pipes up to ask a question about paying off the liquor license board. Estes says he'll be back in town in two weeks to oversee the opening of his new club on the grounds of the Catacombs, an abandoned factory compound on the outskirts of city limits. He's sunk some cash into renovations to give the grounds some artificial glitz but the place is still creepy as fuck. I can't look in that direction without thinking about how Micah and Tess were nearly killed there last year.

In the hours after the attack that cost Micah his right hand, I visited them at the hospital, sent on a mission to discover who might have had the nerve to launch a brutal assault on our property without permission. It was there that I watched Conner sink to the floor in grief after spending the night on an unsuccessful search for Micah's lost hand. And for a brief,

confusing moment, my heart cratered. In that fleeting moment, I wanted to go to him.

“Anything else?” my father says, already pushing back from the table.

There won't be a better time to help the girl in the bar. I'll only get one chance.

I pull my purse out and withdraw a mirrored compact, feigning detachment. “By the way, who dumped a stray kitten outside?”

“One of ours,” Jared says with a smug grin.

I flip the compact closed. “How so?”

“Her dad borrowed some funds from Estes to try and save his failing bakery. When he couldn't keep up with payments he made a date with the barrel of a shotgun rather than face the consequences.”

“What's the girl got to do with that?”

Jared shrugs. “The piece of shit property isn't worth as much as the debt. We'll make sure it gets paid, one way or another.”

I let a handful of seconds go by and pretend I'm thinking. “Give her to me. I'll put her to work.”

Talon invites himself to the conversation. “Stripping at the Back Door? Would take her half a decade to earn that kind of cash. Better to get it all sorted out with one windfall. Had her examined this morning. Virgin. Cherry intact.”

Thoughts of gouging my cousin's eyeballs out with a cheese knife dance through my mind. “Oh, I hadn't heard you've graduated to full blown pimp.”

He cackles like a comic book villain. “No need for name calling. I have a client with deep pockets and some specialty interests.”

Exhaling, I smother the flame of temper. “It’s our uncle’s decision, isn’t it? The original debt belonged to Estes.”

Beside me, Estes flips a poker chip between his fingers while he watches us battle. Judging by the amusement on this face, I believe I’m about to be handed a win. He dislikes Talon. It seems one hothead doesn’t appreciate another.

“All right, you take her, Haven.”

I smile sweetly at my uncle. “I’ll prepay. In fact, I’ll deliver the cash before you get on your plane tomorrow.”

The promise will require another raid on my savings but that’s nothing. Estes nods and pockets his poker chip.

Across the table, my cousins sulk in silence. I’m careful not to smirk over the victory. No need to pour gasoline on the blaze.

My father gives the signal that the meeting is over. Talon practically bangs out the door in a huff. Desmond sighs and scampers after his son.

I stand and approach the man who I used to desperately crave approval from. I no longer wish for my father’s approval or even his love but a show of respect is still required.

What’s the proper sendoff when your dad is going to prison? Nothing sentimental will do.

I settle for the offer of a handshake and say, “See you soon, Dad.”

His inked paw practically swallows my hand and squeezes a little too tightly. “I’m counting on you to keep the peace,

Haven.”

As if I have the slightest bit of control over my dipshit cousins. “I will. Hey, how about if I take Robert home? It’s no trouble and will save you some time.”

I don’t give a hot damn about doing him a fucking favor. I just want to get my little brother the hell out of his orbit.

But Aric Marchenko shakes his head, his gaze landing on his twelve-year-old son. I can practically see the dynasty plans swirling in his eyes. “Nah, my boy and I need some quality time together.”

Keeping my lips zipped, I console myself with the thought that he won’t be around for a while. Maybe I ought to risk a heart to heart chat with Robert’s mother, Aileen. She’s not the brightest bulb but she lives for her son.

For now, I touch my brother’s shoulder on my way to the door. “Take care, buddy. I promise we’ll make plans to visit Lita soon.”

He grins. “Later.”

A sense of failure grips me once I’m on the other side of the door. Then I spot the girl, positioned exactly as I left her, hunched and terrified on that awful chair.

The bartender is still shining the same set of glasses, thinking he’s real sly about the way he keeps watch from the corner of his eye.

I snap my fingers and kick the leg of the chair. “Get up. You’re coming with me and don’t even think about running. You won’t enjoy being caught.”

She flinches and her chin trembles but I can’t sound friendly just yet. Someone might still interfere. Her pink

hoodie is zipped up to her chin and her pretty eyes swim with tears as she snatches a backpack and stands. She's petite, barely reaching my shoulder.

My father's goons hold the door open and I wait for the girl to follow me out into the sunshine. She tucks her hair behind her ears and opens her mouth to ask a question but I cut her off with a stern shake of my head. Her feet drag on the asphalt as she follows me to my car. I've just successfully installed her in the passenger seat when there are footsteps at my back.

"Haven, wait."

I curse myself for throwing my purse into the car already, cutting off easy access to my gun. Then I swivel to face Jared, who has decided to wander out here for reasons unknown.

Standing in front of the passenger window, it's a subtle message that I'll be in the way if he tries to get to the girl. "What do you want?"

He takes his time strolling over in his impeccable suit and gives me an insincere half smile. "I know things got a little heated in there."

"No big deal. Like I said."

He checks the time on his two thousand dollar watch. "Let's remember we're all on the same team."

I let him squirm under my unblinking gaze for a moment before answering. "Believe me, Jared, I don't forget who's on my side and who isn't."

His smile drops and his back stiffens. "I've been meaning to ask, how's Lita doing these days?"

If I were a dog, every hair on my back would be raised. It's a miracle I can speak without growling. "Lita is very well taken care of. Thanks for your concern after a decade of disinterest."

He takes a step closer, a classic bully move. "I'm sure it's very hard, watching someone you love wither away as a helpless shell." He slides one thick finger on the hood of my car and makes face of disgust, as if he's discovered filth. Then he removes a red handkerchief from the breast pocket of his blazer and makes a show of wiping his fingers clean. "I wonder what *you* would want if you were trapped like that, with strangers feeding you through a tube and wiping your fucking ass while you stared at a wall year after year."

For that alone I'd cheerfully cave his skull in. But common sense keeps my hands glued to my sides and my rage in check.

There are too many people depending on me. I can't take the bait.

Rather than explode, I sigh as if he's unspeakably boring. "Get lost, Jared. If you're desperate for attention, go home and remember you've got a wife. Are we done now? I've got things to do besides stand in a parking lot and listen to you whine."

He stares at me. I stand my ground and stare back.

Finally, with a sniff of laughter he starts walking backwards. "Maybe I'll take your advice and go home to my *wife*."

"You do that." My racing pulse begins to calm down. "Have fun."

"I will." He takes three steps and spins around again. "But take some free advice. Do a better job watching your back,

cousin. I was walking right behind you and you didn't even notice. Never know who might be trailing you next."

I flip him off. He laughs and whistles on his way back to the building.

Only when the door swings shut behind him do I exhale and stalk over to the driver's side. The girl clutches her shabby backpack in her lap as I click my seatbelt. The sour waves of fear rolling off her are intense and my heart softens.

I place a gentle hand on her arm. She flinches so I remove my hand. "Don't be afraid."

Her chest heaves and fat tears start rolling down her cheeks. I reach into the glove compartment for a pack of tissues and hand them over.

"What's your name?"

She blows her nose. "Veronica."

"How old are you, Veronica?"

"Nineteen."

"Any family left?"

She chews her lip and her face crumples again. "No, it was just me and my dad." Tears stick to her lashes as she raises her eyes to me. "Who are you?"

I work on piloting the car out of the parking lot, glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure there's no one following. "My name is Haven Marchenko. I know you've been through hell. I also know you have no reason to trust anyone with my last name. But you are safe with me. I swear on my own life that no one will touch you. Now let's go get you some dinner and we'll make a plan."

Veronica gradually loosens her grip on her backpack and begins to relax. By the time we get several blocks away and pull up to a diner that serves halfway decent burgers, I learn that she dreams of becoming a makeup artist and had been saving up to go to cosmetology school while working in her father's bakery.

Even as I listen and smile and murmur appropriate words to set her at ease, my anger continues to simmer at a low boil. There are times when I feel like my blood must be acid, eating me alive from the inside. This is one of those times.

As for the men in the room I've just left behind, let them be fooled into believing that the ink on my chest means something to me. Let them assume that my loyalty isn't a mask.

The truth roars through my veins with an intensity that threatens to rupture my skin.

We're parked now and Veronica's voice chirps in the background as my hands curl tightly around the steering wheel. She hasn't noticed how I glare at the derelict motel across the street where homeless addicts nap in the stairwells and desperate half clothed women parade on the sidewalk out front. It's one of ours, that motel. An ugly emblem of sin and corruption that defines the family I was born to.

And I'd happily turn every brick of their fucking kingdom to ashes.

12. Conner

The shadows are long and the sun is about to dip below the horizon when I pull into the parking lot of the Back Door strip club. Music pumps out, one of those hyper popular country rock songs that gets people line dancing atop counters.

Two bikers in leather cuts loiter against the colorless brick wall and smoke something other than cigarettes. They freeze with narrowed eyes when they see me coming. Then the biker on the right slaps his thigh.

“Holy shit, it’s Conner Wiseman.”

The other guy focuses. “Who?”

“Cyclones quarterback.”

The second guy perks up and now they’re both staring. I probably look like a weirdo when I wave at them but I don’t want to be a dick.

“Give ‘em hell next season, son,” says the biker who slapped his thigh. He coughs and spits on the asphalt.

“That’s the plan,” I assure him as I give Haven’s club a good look from the outside.

The neon sign above the entrance looks like it’s been around longer than I have. The words Back Door are

underscored by a thick purple line with the head of a snake. Stripper joints aren't my thing at all. I'm just not a fan of women feeling obligated to take their clothes off for money. I can't really picture Haven in charge of a place like this.

The interior is nothing fancy. Most of the wooden tables and chairs are clustered close to the stage at the back. A rustic, no frills bar dominates on the right. A dancer dressed as Superwoman blows kisses to the front row as she collects her tips.

“Well, well. Looks like trouble just walked in.”

My head turns at the cheerful female voice. A woman observes me from the wood paneled hostess podium to the left and clucks her tongue. Her curly red hair frames an attractive face dotted with freckles. She wastes no time sliding around the podium to stand in front of me, conducting a frank appraisal.

“You're taller than you look on television.” Her accent has a musical quality.

“Because on the field I'm always surrounded by huge men.”

She tilts her head back and laughs. “Our girl is not in the office right now.”

“Haven isn't here?”

“Isn't that what I just said? I'm expecting her back any minute. Take a seat wherever you like. She'll enjoy the surprise. My name is Fiona.” She winks and keeps an eye on me as I find an empty bar stool.

The guy minding the drinks resembles a furious bull and registers no flicker of recognition when I ask for a beer. Within

seconds he slides a tall glass across the table and grunts when I toss over a fifty with instructions to keep the change.

The stage is temporarily empty, the music volume low key. I count two dozen customers sprinkled in the seats. Some are well dressed corporate types with barracuda sneers and flashy watches. Others look like kin to the bikers I spotted on the way in. One scruffy loner naps on a table, snoring loudly. A thick-necked bouncer rattles the table and the guy jerks awake.

The beer is lukewarm but I'm thirsty and I need something to do while I wait for Haven to show up. Since her friend Fiona didn't seem at all shocked to see me I'm going to assume that Haven has mentioned my name. I like that idea.

Even if she's storming around in her epic heels and howling that I'm a pompous ass, it means I'm on her mind. I have every intention of staying on her mind. Why should I be the only one with a new obsession?

While I was gulping my beer and brooding, a girl deposited herself on the barstool beside mine. She sweeps some strands of brassy blonde hair from her forehead. She's attractive in the way that can be bought with money. Lots of jewelry, an obvious nose job. She's also weirdly dressed in a silver sequined evening gown. The right strap keeps falling from her shoulder. A diamond boulder dominates her petite left hand.

"Hi, I'm Sophie. I already know who you are." She gives me a bleary, somewhat crooked smile before wobbling on the stool.

My hand shoots out to seize her elbow, releasing when she manages to stay upright. "Careful, there."

“Wow, thanks. You’re the best.” This Sophie person tosses back the rest of her drink. Then she wipes her mouth with a brown napkin, unaware that she has smeared pink lip gloss all over her chin. Either she’s drunk or two more tequila sips away from crossing the threshold.

“Are you all right?” I ask her. A drunk woman all alone at a seedy bar needs at least one guardian angel.

She beams at me and nudges her glass in the direction of the bartender. He slings a dishtowel over his shoulder and looks around. When his gaze connects with Fiona’s, she shakes her head.

“Sorry, kid,” the bartender says to Sophie. “You’re cut off again.”

“No fair,” Sophie complains and crosses her arms.

He shrugs. “You made a real fucking mess of the counter yesterday.”

“I said I was sorry. This isn’t cool.” She sulks for a minute, then remembers I’m still sitting next to her. She leans closer as if she’s sharing a secret.

“Hey, did you know that I’m Haven’s cousin? Well, I’m *married* to her cousin. I didn’t want to marry Jared. My father said I had to and then he gave me a Porsche. I didn’t want a Porsche either. I wanted a Bentley.”

I have no clue how to greet this news. She’s a member of Haven’s family though, so maybe if I talk to her I’ll find out something interesting. “Better luck next time.”

Over the rim of my beer glass I spot Fiona having a quiet word with the biggest of the bouncers. The guy eyeballs me with a puckered frown.

Sophie starts to slide off her stool again, catches herself by bracing both palms on the bar, and hiccups sharply. “Haven’t tell me you were coming over today. I saw her before she went to her meeting.”

I set my beer glass down. “What kind of meeting?”

Sophie is eager to tell me but she starts speaking in a whispery shriek that can probably be heard across the room. “A *family* meeting. I’m not ever invited even though I’m Jared’s wife. I don’t care. My father never invited me to his meetings either. The only time he ever talked to me was to complain that I wasn’t pretty.”

The bartender didn’t cut her off soon enough. She slurs her words, getting dizzier by the second.

In the meantime, my presence has been detected. It starts with a girlish squeal and then someone else shouts my name. One of these days I ought to take Gage’s advice and don a real disguise so I don’t get swamped every time I leave the house. But I didn’t do that today so I might as well make the best of the swarm heading my way.

First, I get surrounded by scantily clad dancers who insist on a photo shoot. One girl deposits her ass in my lap while another wraps her arms around my neck. A third girl plants a lipstick kiss on my left cheek while preserving the moment with a cell phone camera.

I’m starting to feel like I’m being mauled at the zoo. Luckily, Fiona marches over and shoos them away. Ordinarily I don’t mind getting slobbered on by beautiful women. Today, however, I’m not so thrilled. There’s only one girl I’m interested in dealing with. And my effort to make a good impression on her won’t be enhanced by the sight of strippers climbing me like a tree.

At Fiona's command, the dancers wave and scurry back to the stage. But a few of those self-important executive fellows in the audience have already sauntered over with their confidence and slick charm, acting like we're old friends as they bark out drink orders. The bartender glowers, perhaps considering breaking a few whiskey bottles over their receding hairlines.

Sophie remains glued to her barstool, gazing at the circus of admirers through groggy half-closed eyes. When one of the pretentious suits abandons a nearly full vodka on the rocks she grabs at it, only to be thwarted by Fiona, who sneaks to her side just in time to snatch the glass away.

"That's enough, honey," Fiona says, firmly but not without kindness.

Sophie parks her elbows on the counter and mopes. "I deserve drinks." Her lip quivers. "My husband is such a mean jerk. Did you know he didn't talk to me this morning? Not even when I made him an Eggo. He never talks to me."

"How about a soda?" I throw another big bill at the bartender. "I'll have one too."

Sophie perks up. "Bruce, I want a cherry in mine. Can you add a cherry?"

Bruce dumps a handful of cherries into both glasses but he's still a little cranky. He gruffly shoves the glasses over and some of the soda slops on the counter.

The volume of a Lada Gaga tune gets jacked up a few notches. Up on the stage, the girl who wiggled her ass in my lap performs a circus trick on the center pole.

Sophie chews on a maraschino cherry, then gets distracted by the boxy hot pink purse dangling from her arm. She yanks

it open, peers inside with a frown and then shoves the thing at my chest.

“Conner, find it for me.”

I’m stuck with her handbag. The only other option is to let the thing fall to the floor “Find what?”

“My phone.” She rubs her eyes and one of her false eyelashes comes loose. “I could feel it vibrating but then...”

She grows bored with the sentence and lets it die.

Looking into the chaos of her purse, I see a tampon, various cosmetics and an open bag of M&M’s that has spilled its contents everywhere. It doesn’t take long to locate an iPhone in a zipped pocket.

Sophie slurps another cherry as I hand the phone over. “You’re a doll.” She squints at the screen. “Crap, I think I’m in trouble.”

The girl on the pole spins to the floor. She struts to the front of the stage and blows me a kiss. Instead of reacting, my eyes flicker to the door. With each passing second my impatience to see Haven mounts.

“What kind of trouble?” I ask Sophie because now she’s practically wringing her hands.

She lurches from her seat. “Jared says I need to go now. Like *right now*. He’s got a car outside waiting to pick me up.”

So far this Jared character sounds like a real prick. Ignores his wife and orders her to come running the instant he snaps his fingers. I’m not surprised. And I’m sure there are far worse bullets points on his bio than crappy husband.

Gage warned that some of Haven’s relatives are into some seriously sordid shit. I don’t doubt Gage’s word. He grew to

manhood as his mob boss father's apprentice. He steers clear of that life these days but he keeps tabs on Em City's worst characters and there's not much that gets past him.

"Bye, Conner." Sophie throws her arms around my neck for an inexplicable hug before staggering to the door. Some M&M's fall out of her open purse like a trail of breadcrumbs.

Fiona watches her leave from the hostess station. From the way she props her hands on her hips and shakes her head it's a safe bet that she's used to Sophie's behavior.

Something especially raunchy must have happened up on the stage because suddenly there's an outbreak of hooting and some crass shouts. The beefy bouncer prowls the outskirts of the scene, practically cracking his knuckles and waiting for some fucker to step out of line.

My eyes shift back to the club's entrance at the exact second Haven breezes inside. Every muscle in my body freezes as I hungrily drink her in. Her dress clings to the curves of her body and her hair hangs loose. A new energy crackles into the room with her, as intense as a sudden hot wind.

Haven hasn't seen me yet, leaving me free to study her at close range. She's impossible to look away from. Regal as a fucking queen, sexy as a forbidden sin. The impulse to seize her and haul her gorgeous ass caveman-style away from prying eyes is so powerful I can taste it.

There's a girl at Haven's side, small and easily overlooked as she cringes into the shadows. She notices the onstage strippers and her eyes flare. She takes a step backwards.

Haven, who has been speaking quietly with Fiona, notices the girl's alarm and places a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Haven shakes her head and the girl, who looks like she might be a teenager, relaxes a notch. She seems too young to be working here. The whole exchange is a little weird.

I don't flatter myself that I've got Haven all mapped out but I've seen enough to understand when something is off. Her shoulders droop and when she tucks her hair behind her ears the brief glimpse of weariness on her lovely face drives a hole through my heart.

I've never had Micah's fiery temper. Or Gage's cool appetite for vengeance. But it's now my business to find whatever or whoever has distressed this proud, beautiful girl and crush it into fucking oblivion.

She makes one final comment to Fiona and steps aside. Fiona, with new maternal determination, slings an arm around the young girl's shoulders. The girl hesitates and glances at Haven, who nods her approval. This is enough for a relieved smile to flash across the girl's face and for a second she gazes at Haven with the kind of awed hero worship I'm used to seeing from the kids who beg me for autographs.

Fiona is on the verge of steering the girl through the door when she halts and looks over her shoulder. With a spark of mischief written on her freckled face, she jerks her chin and says something that makes Haven's head whip around.

Our eyes meet. Haven battles her surprise and a hint of a smile manages to touch her lips before she clamps down and erases it. Instead, she raises her chin and stalks over here on shiny black heels that will be playing a central role the next time I jerk off.

I'm not shy about checking her out, lingering on the shape of her legs before drifting up to her hips and then higher.

She doesn't stop until she's close enough to touch. I realize this is because she'd rather look down on me as I sit on this stupid barstool.

“Did you enjoy the show, Conner?”

“There's a show?” I rip my eyes from her long enough to skim the gyrating dancers onstage. “I didn't even notice.”

She huffs out a snort. “Right. Did you decorate your own face with lipstick?”

Fuck.

I swipe at the general area where one of the exotic dancers pressed her lips. So much for being impressive. “I was an unwilling participant.”

Haven's smirk is full of amusement. She leans in and with the pad of her thumb she carefully scrubs the mark away. “There. Your suffering is over.”

My cock was already turning to iron. Now it threatens to bust through my zipper and wave at everyone in the room.

I've always been one hell of a horny bastard but a two second touch from this girl electrifies me like nothing else. Without thinking, I clap my hand over hers, simply because I want to keep her hand on my face.

Haven responds by curling her hand into a tight fist. Brat.

But she doesn't jerk away completely. I watch her face as my hand slides up to her wrist. I stroke the pulse point with my finger and approve of her answering shudder. She feels this magnetic pull every bit as much I do. She can't hide the truth. Her breathing speeds up. The snake head inked on her chest pulses with every rapid beat of her heart.

I don't put up a fight when she finally yanks her hand out of my grip. She clears her throat and crosses her arms. Shifts her weight from one foot to the other, like she's trying in vain to tame the sudden ache in her pussy.

I'll count this as a moment of triumph.

Haven looks past me and spots my unfinished cherries and soda concoction. She makes a face of disgust. "What the hell are you drinking?"

"A special brew. Sophie's idea."

"Sophie." Her eyebrows shoot up. "She's still here?"

"She just left. Said her husband sent a car for her."

Haven's jaw tightens at the mention of her cousin. There's sudden fire in her eyes but it doesn't burn for long. She shakes off whatever emotions are raging and addresses the eavesdropping bartender. "Bruce, I'll be in my office. Send Andrei to see me when he's back from break."

"Will do." Bruce clears away the soda. I had no intention of drinking it anyway.

Haven curls a finger in my direction. "As for you, Mr. Golden Boy Quarterback, follow my lead if you think you can keep up."

No chance I'll turn that offer down, whatever it is.

Haven walks slowly. I suspect she knows my eyes are glued to her ass. The dress she wears molds to her body like a second skin. Those heels are pure porn fuel.

She takes a sharp right past the restrooms. A phone booth is still welded in place on the wall, like a relic of ancient history. A red emergency exit sign flickers straight ahead.

Haven twists the knob on the last door before the exit. The hinges scream when she flings it open.

The office is tidy and simple. There's a desk and a sofa and a filing cabinet. The walls are covered with the sort of wood paneling typically seen only in fading vintage photos.

Haven drops her keys and handbag on the desk before falling into her leather swivel chair. After ripping off her heels she throws them somewhat savagely into the middle of the room. Then she watches from her throne behind the desk while I close the door and take a seat on the sofa.

The chair squeaks as she leans back and folds her hands over her stomach. A long moment of silence passes while she evaluates me. Then she sighs. "Conner, you need to think twice before you do stupid shit."

"Any stupid shit in particular?" I tap my skull. "Remember, I'm not the brightest star in the sky."

She twists her mouth into a grimace. "That's not what I meant. I heard you were looking for me last night."

"Guilty. And now I'm curious. Do you have spies in every corner of the east side?"

"People tend to take notice when you're shouting my last name into every open doorway."

"Not *every* open doorway. I skipped a few. But here I am so clearly my detective skills are top notch."

"Detective skills." She throws her head back and laughs. "What did you do, ask Tess?"

"No. But I can't reveal my sources."

The light rap of knuckles on the door prompts Haven to sit up straight. "It's open."

A pretty brunette pokes her head in the room. She smiles at Haven, then notices that I'm in the room and shrinks back. "Is this a bad time?"

Haven shakes her head. "Come in, Layla."

Layla edges into the room, just barely. She wears a robe patterned with big flowers and judging by her elaborate hairstyle and thick makeup, she must be getting ready to join the dancers onstage.

"I just wanted to thank you for giving me last week off with pay and for your help with the doctor bills."

Haven's attitude is now almost warm and fuzzy. The transition is amazing to see. "How's the little one feeling?"

"Better. She keeps asking why I didn't make the doctors save her tonsils in a jar. She'll go back to kindergarten on Monday."

"Glad to hear it. And I dropped some gift cards for Benny's Pizza in your locker."

"Oh wow. Thank you." Layla flicks a curious glance in my direction. "Well, my set's about to start so I'll go finish getting ready."

"See you later." Haven watches the door whisper shut. Then she exhales loudly and swipes a bottle of whiskey from a drawer. "I only have one shot glass in here but I'll share."

"No need. I had my fill of beer and cherries." My attention stays zeroed in on her lips as she pours a finger of whiskey into a shot glass with the club name scripted in chipped purple paint. "Do you do that often? Help out your employees?"

Haven tosses back the whiskey and grimaces at the burn. She sets the glass down and rolls one finger along the rim.

“Layla was a competitive gymnast. Then she got pregnant while in college and her parents kicked her out. Her boyfriend tried to strangle her when he found out about the baby. At least he’s still serving time for that. She lives with her sister and when her daughter gets a little older she wants to go to nursing school. I offered to pay for it.” Her face scrunches up into a frown. “Most of the women who wind up here don’t have a lot of options to make ends meet. The only thing I can do is try to give them options. Like Layla...she hates stripping. But she’s forced to paste a phony smile on her face to score tips. Because those fuckers out there don’t just want to see skin. They’re fooling themselves that these women want to be here. They’re paying for the lie.”

A muted roar from the club punctuates her last sentence.

Her short speech touches a nerve because I doubt there are many people around who are allowed to see this side of her. Yet she’s chosen to be honest with me and I don’t want to waste the honor. “If only everyone knew your real identity as the east side fairy godmother.”

“Hardly.” She screws the cap back on the whiskey bottle. “Make no mistake, I’m part of a violent gang that calls itself a family.” Her voice lowers to a near whisper. “I fucking hate it.”

“Then why do you stay? Did you sign a blood oath?” Even as I ask the question it occurs to me that the answer might be yes.

She gives this some thought as she rubs her temples. I get the idea she’s using the time to decide just how much information she wants to part with. “Conner, my father owns this place. He just allows me to run it. If I leave then he’ll *still* own this place. Only he’ll likely let my sadistic cousins run it

instead.” She quits rubbing her temples and gives me a sad smile. “And what would happen to Layla then? To all of them?”

It’s rare that I’m at a loss for words but right now they fail me. Everywhere I go people call me a hero just because I make magic happen on the football field. Haven deserves the word a hell of a lot more than I do, although I suspect she’d roll her eyes and scoff if I told her so.

She’s studying my reaction. “Did you see the girl I walked in with?”

“Sure. Is she family?”

“No, she is not.” Another knock at the door interrupts the conversation and Haven yells, “It’s open!”

This time the bald head of the stern bouncer sneaks in. “You needed me, boss?”

“Yeah, hold on, Andrei.” Havin turns her chair around and bends close to the floor. I have to crane my neck to see she’s spinning the dial on a wall safe. She enters the combination from memory and withdraws two fat manila envelopes. “I need you to bring this over to my Uncle Estes right away. He’ll be at the Domino Club and he’s expecting you.”

“Sure.” The guy doesn’t hesitate. He marches right up to Haven’s desk and a thick hand takes custody of the envelopes. He tucks them under his arm. “Any other orders?”

“No, that’s all.”

Andrei bows his head with a curt nod and retreats without giving me a second look.

The thud of music is constant. Haven leaves her chair and prowls silently in her bare feet to the closed door. The grim

shadows have returned to her face. She stops two feet in front of the door and stares at it like she's reading a caption.

“The girl's father owed a debt to my uncle. When he couldn't pay he took the suicide route, probably never guessing that his daughter would be taken as compensation. My cousins planned to auction off her virginity to the highest bidder.”

The scenario is so repulsive I want to puke. “What happens to her now?”

She slowly turns to face me, her chin lifted in permanent rebellion. “Those envelopes I gave to Andrei will buy her freedom. Fiona is taking care of her until I can get her set up with another name in another city. Can't take the chance my cousins will stew over being thwarted and try to track her down.”

“Say the word and I'll write you a check for however much you need. No questions asked.”

She snorts and moves away from the door. “I don't want your money, Conner. I want you to hear me when I tell you what my family is. Like it or not, I'm a part of it. Don't get too close. It's all ugly.”

She says this like it's a certainty. Inescapable.

Fuck that.

There's nothing ugly about this girl. She's fearless. She's challenging. She's so fucking beautiful that my chest craters and my cock throbs every time I look at her.

And it's finally crossed my mind that she's also lonely.

“You don't scare me, baby.”

She shakes her head. “Conner.”

“Quiet now. Come over here.”

But she never takes orders without putting up a fight. “What for? To finish the conversation with a fuck?”

“No, not right now.” And not like this, with a hundred people on the other side of the door and the catcalls of other men as a sick soundtrack. The first time I get her underneath me I’m taking my motherfucking time.

She finally obeys, strutting past my knees to sink into the far side of the sofa. It’s difficult to crush the need to haul her into my lap, pry her thighs apart and tear that dress like a tissue.

Haven, with no clue about my inner turmoil, slouches into the suede cushion and stifles a yawn.

“Bored?” I ask.

She tsks her tongue. “You know that nothing about you is boring. I just don’t get much sleep at night. I have a habit of dozing off in here for a little while.”

“That’s a good idea. Let’s have a nap.”

“A nap isn’t sex.”

“Jeez, you’re obsessed with sex. It’s borderline abnormal.” I snatch one of the couch pillows and balance it on my thigh. “There.”

She stares at the pillow. “Amazing. What trick will you perform next?”

“It’s a buffer.”

“A buffer against what?”

“The prospect of my dick accidentally landing in your mouth. Lie down.”

There she goes, her jaw steeled, her eyes flashing stubbornness. She doesn't move when I slide my hand across the back of the sofa, close enough for my fingers to capture a section of her long hair. I let the strands filter through my fingers and this is enough to make her squirm.

My eyes drop to her soft mouth. I can't wait to use the hell out of those lips in the filthiest sense. But first, I'm going to prove that I'm not here for something quick and dirty. I can get quick and dirty anywhere. I want more from her.

Winding one finger in a circle, I trap her hair and draw her closer, inch by inch.

She must really be tired. It only takes seconds for her resistance to crumble. She curls her legs up on the couch before pressing her cheek to the pillow.

I'm forced to bite my own tongue to destroy a lusty groan. But I'll behave myself. For the moment. Can't make any promises about what will happen later.

Haven settles in and I try to think about something besides the reality of her head being inches from my cock. She sweeps her hair aside, letting it fan out in a dark curtain. Right above the shell of her ear I catch a glimpse of gold trying to break through at the root.

My thumb finds the nape of her neck and rolls in slow circles, massaging gently. Her eyelids flutter closed and the tension drains from her muscles. Using my free hand, I try to wrestle my phone out of my back pocket without disturbing her. Once it's in my palm, I ask, "Beach or rainy day?"

She yawns again. "What?"

"It's a sound app I use every night. My favorite is the beach but I'm willing to compromise."

“I don’t like the rain,” she says and fights another yawn.
“When it rains the whole east side smells like a landfill.”

“We’ll stick with the beach.” I press a button and waves crash. Seagulls scream through the wind in the background. Stretching, I reach for the light switch on the wall with the tips of my fingers.

Haven doesn’t stir when I flip the light off. The faint sigh escaping through her lips is something sweet and fragile. I can feel the rise and fall of her breath turning steady as she descends into her dreams, completely trusting and vulnerable.

In response, a new kind of passion ignites and burns somewhere deep.

A place inside of me that no one has ever reached before.

A place that’s now reserved solely for her.

13. Haven

I'm building sandcastles with Lita and I don't want to leave. Our purple bathing suits are identical and I dislike the attached ruffled skirt but this was the deal I made. I got to pick the color. She got to choose the style.

Our small fingers work together, patting mounds of damp sand into shape as a storm sky swirls above us and threatens to ruin the day's fun. A seagull wails overhead and sorrow fills my chest because somehow I understand this to be a signal.

It's time to leave.

Before my sister's face dissolves into mist she pushes her pale hair from her face and gives me a sad smile. Her lips move but I can't hear any sound. It's only when the beach fades to black that the dream words spoken by my twin echo in my ears.

"Please don't take my sister away."

My eyes flip open and I can still hear the beach. But beyond that is the hard thump of a bass, the music of the club. The sensation of wind sifting through my hair was real but its fingers are not invisible.

They belong to Conner Wiseman.

His hand moves in slow, soothing strokes. I shiver when his thumb grazes the back of my neck. He hasn't moved an inch since I laid my head down on the pillow in his lap. Everything about our current position is sweet and yet still sensual. I'm having trouble forcing myself to move.

"You're awake." He tickles my neck.

I roll to my back and see only the shape of his head in the darkness. "What time is it?"

"Eleven."

"Shit." I vault to my feet and stumble to the light switch. My eyeballs wince at the bright intrusion. "I didn't mean to be unconscious for half the night."

Conner tosses the pillow aside and shoots me a lazy grin. He's unreasonably sexy in a white tee shirt with dark jeans. "I got to be unconscious with you for a while."

"You can sleep sitting up?"

"Yup. Just like a bat."

"Bats don't sleep sitting up. They hang upside down."

"Interesting." He turns off the sound app that made me dream of a childhood vacation on Coronado Island. "I wonder what else you can teach me."

My gaze flicks to his big hands, now resting casually on his muscled thighs. He takes up a lot of space. His broad-chested hard body is carved of muscle and power.

And I'm weak enough to feel a little dazed and dizzy at the idea of being conquered by all that raw dominance.

Conner Wiseman's effect on me is magnetic. Unavoidable. Intensely physical. I can't escape the overwhelming temptation

and I don't want to escape.

I just want him.

From the way his eyes brighten as he studies me, it's clear he's skilled at translating the hunger on my face.

But instead of belting out a raunchy remark, all he does is scrub a hand through his hair. "Let's order some food."

"You want to order food right now?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry enough to eat a cat. What have you got around here?"

I shove my feet back into the hated heels because I can't return to the club barefoot. "There's a pizzeria down the street. It's open until midnight. Knock yourself out."

He stands. "On my way. What's your favorite topping?"

Standing at the door with my hand on the knob, I pause to take stock of the man who isn't at all easy to sort into a box.

I can't say that I was shocked to find Conner hanging out at the bar earlier.

I also can't deny that the sight of him was an electric thrill too similar to the pleasure of sitting in his lap at a high school party a million years ago.

The surprising part is that I'd much rather stay in this room with him than return to the corrupt chaos of the club.

"Just cheese. I'm easy." My cheeks flame with the double meaning of the last sentence.

He picks up on it, holding my eye. "I'll keep that in mind, Haven."

The way he says my name hits with the force of a thunderclap. My thighs clench and my heart races.

But I leave without a word and walk quickly down the corridor before I'm tempted to lock the door and hurl my body against his.

The crowd is moderate for a weeknight but judging by the empty glasses being cleared away, the drinks are flowing. Andrei has returned from his mission and keeps watch alongside Kyle, a stern former Marine who barely speaks. When Andrei sees me he nods his head once, a signal his task was carried out without a hitch. I expected no less.

Fiona is behind the bar speaking to Bruce when we lock eyes and she immediately comes sashaying over to drape a teasing arm around my waist. "That was some kind of long *meeting*, sweetie. You should thank me for keeping the vultures away from your door."

Before I can open my mouth to spit back a sarcastic answer, Conner comes ambling into view. He doesn't even glance at the skin show up on the stage and searches for me instead. As our eyes meet he flashes a delighted grin that takes a blowtorch to another layer of ice surrounding my heart.

I still haven't regained my composure when he casually strolls across the room, tips my chin up with a thick forefinger and drops a kiss on my forehead. "Be right back, beautiful."

Fiona chuckles in my ear. I swivel my head to stare at Conner's hot ass because I'm only human. He high fives Andrei on the way out the door and the only shock is that Andrei indulges him with a grin. I didn't know Andrei had smile muscles.

Fiona continues to bump my shoulder and cackle, having so much fun she's ready to fall over. With a grunt of annoyance, I steer her in the direction of my office so we can chat in private.

When I close the door and ask about Veronica, her mood changes. She's quick to offer reassurance that the girl is safe, staying with a couple of women who used to be MMA fighters. Fiona swears she'd trust them with her own life, which is as good of an endorsement as they come.

Veronica had mentioned she grew up in Santa Fe and still has friends there. The city is far away enough to get her out of my cousins' range.

Tomorrow I can make a few calls, procure some new documents and find her a place to live. I'll even pay her tuition so she can finish cosmetology school. For tonight she's safely tucked away with people who will protect her.

Now that serious business is out of the way, Fiona goes back to smirking. "Dish the dirt."

"There's no dirt." But I mumble and look away.

"HA!" She almost screams in triumph. "Take a bow, darling. Em City's biggest catch is virtually on his knees. The boy is besotted with you."

I drift to my desk and shuffle invoices that don't need to be shuffled. "No way."

Usually I'm far better at slinging comebacks.

Maybe I'm still sleepy.

Or maybe I'm distracted by the lingering sensation of Conner's lips on my forehead. Such a simple gesture and yet such an open claim of possession.

Fiona's green eyes dance. "Not in the mood to gossip, are we? Fine, I'll take a hint." She swaggers to the door in platform heels that she probably picked up at one of the vintage thrift stores she stalks. "I'll wait to read about it."

“What are you talking about?”

From the look she throws over her shoulder you'd think I just asked her how to spell the word 'dog'.

“Babe, he's Conner Wiseman. Half the nation faints when he flexes his right arm. How long do you think it'll be before the news breaks that he's taken?”

I haven't given any thought to what it would mean to be seen with Conner in public. And I don't plan to think about it at all for the time being. “Let's not get nuts here. No one is clipping any leashes in place.”

“Whatever you say.” She laughs in her maddening way and her heels clop down the hall.

Fiona doesn't get to see my scowl but it falls off anyway when my eyes land on the sofa where I napped in Conner's lap while he stroked my hair. A delicious clash of feelings is partly made of sex and partly made of something more intricate. That part can grudgingly admit that when I'm with him the heavy burdens weighing down my soul feel a little lighter.

Back in the club, I've missed nothing. Cardi B belts out her finest, the girls on stage are performing their hearts out and Fiona delivers a tray of drinks to a full table.

Bruce nods to me when I take an empty seat at the bar. He starts to pour my usual whiskey sour but I shake my head. “Just give me a soda. No cherries for fuck's sake.”

He snorts and makes it happen in ten seconds. Anyone looking too closely might notice how I keep shifting my eyes to the door but I don't have to wait long for Conner's return. And because he's Conner and he likes making an entrance, he

doesn't just have one pizza. No, he balances no less than ten cardboard boxes in his hands.

He gives a pizza to Andrei. He gives one to Bruce. He hands one to Fiona. Then he drops the remaining boxes on the bar. "Are the dancers allowed to eat?"

"They're allowed to do anything they want." I jump to my feet and collect three boxes. "I'll bring some to the dressing room."

The big smile on my face feels foreign. I haven't smiled as much in the last decade as I have in the past few days. Conner does shit like buy pizzas for a roomful of people he doesn't know. His only motive is because he's a good guy. I don't run into many of those.

The girls are happy with their pizzas. When I return to the bar Conner has stolen my seat and happily chews on three slices mashed together on top of each other. He pats his knee, clearly expecting me to deposit my ass on it. Instead, I drag an unoccupied stool over.

He sets the remains of his pizza tower down on a napkin and selects a new slice. "Open up."

I try to snatch the pizza away. "I learned how to feed myself awhile back."

But he holds the slice just out of reach. His eyes flare with fresh intensity, the same kind I glimpsed at his front door when I warned him to make good on his threat the next time he found me.

And now he's found me.

With two fingers, Conner reaches underneath the metal lip of the barstool and yanks it close enough for our knees to touch.

“Let me tame you just a little bit, angry girl.”

A pleasant sensation fizzes in my belly. Good old fashioned butterflies.

“You can try, quarterback.”

Then I open my mouth and give in.

14. Haven

Conner must be trying to win a medal for good behavior. He fed me pizza, hung around without a word of complaint until closing, then good-naturedly waited for me to lock up. I did not protest when he kept his hand on the small of my back for the short walk to my apartment building.

Now he leans against the wall beside my door and watches as I turn the key in the lock. “How long have you lived here?”

“Six years.” I shove the door open. “My father owns the building but I get a portion of the rent proceeds because most of the tenants were referred here and vetted by me. Mostly employees from the club. It’s not a castle but I do my best to make sure it’s not a slum either.”

Technically my apartment is a one bedroom unit but a wall was knocked out ages ago to open up the space. I can’t stand clutter and I don’t bother with decorating so there’s not much to see as Conner stands in the middle of the room and surveys the scene. He pauses at the sight of my bed, neatly made as always. Then he sees how I’m watching him and cracks a devilish grin. He shuts the door at his back and pointedly flips the lock, a clear sign of his plans.

I have no objection. I didn't let him in here for coffee and conversation.

My heels get kicked into the closet. "I've got to jump in the shower. I hate having the smell of the club in my hair." Standing in the bathroom doorway, I slide up the dimmer switch until the lighting is the perfect shade of near twilight. Bright lights annoy the shit out of me. Seizing the pliable fabric of my dress at the hem, I pull it over my head with one swift motion and toss a meaningful glance over my shoulder. "Are you coming?"

I don't wait for his answer. I know he'll follow.

My luxury bathroom was a customized install, an extravagance that doesn't match the rest of the crappy apartment. The marble tiled walk-in enclosure rivals the size of the living room and the overhead shower panel boasts sixteen different settings. I can choose to stand beneath a drizzling sprinkle or a geyser that stings like a thousand needles, depending on my mood.

Right now I'm feeling more in tune with soothing rain as opposed to searing knives and I flip to the correct setting. The water temperature is ideal within seconds. At my back, Conner says nothing when he enters the room. I don't turn around to look at him but the sound of his fly unzipping brings a smile to my lips.

Pinching the clasp at my back, I allow my bra to fall to my feet before rolling my black lace panties down to my ankles.

It's been ages since I've felt any shyness about getting naked. If a man doesn't like what he sees then he can fuck right off and get his dick serviced elsewhere.

And I'm not feeling shy right now, not exactly.

I'm just intensely aware that Conner is studying every inch of my body at very close range. I'm also aware that he's used to stripping down with the world's most gorgeous women. I'd have to be made of ice for that not to give me a touch of anxiety and I'm definitely not made of ice.

"You are so fucking beautiful." Conner has crept closer, so close that my skin prickles at the prospect of his touch. The husky rumble of his voice is heavy with sex and promises.

Hot need blooms deep in my belly and multiplies rapidly. Yet I don't turn around before stepping into the steamy shower. I'm enjoying the anticipation of what will come next.

The water glides over my skin and I turn my face toward the spray. The urge to scour away my makeup is sudden and intense. Puzzling. I'm very alert to the fact that he's here, inches away, as I rub a washcloth on my skin until I'm sure my face is clean.

Maybe my reasons are not so mysterious after all. I never had much use for makeup as a girl. Lita was the one who kept the bathroom counter cluttered with lip gloss and mascara bottles. Now for once I want a man to see *me*, not the layers of paint applied to avoid the sight of my own face in the mirror.

The shampoo squirted into my palm is my favorite, a beachy mix of coconut and vanilla that from now on will make me think of Conner, and of dozing off in his lap to the music of crashing waves.

I still haven't faced him when he gruffly pushes my hands away and uses his own, working the shampoo into a lather. I allow him to do what he wants. His touch is hypnotic. Demanding and sensual. If his hands drift between my legs right now I could come in seconds.

But he just finishes soaping my hair and watches while I wash the suds away.

Nothing about Conner is shy or cautious. He sure isn't the type to beg for permission to make a filthy move. Right now he's biding his time in silence, savoring the mounting sexual tension until he finds the moment of his choosing.

We're torturing each other in here and reveling in the agony.

This time I squirt some shower gel on a loofah and finally turn around. My eyes are traitors and instantly drop low. It's no surprise to see his massive, thick cock at full attention. The throb in my clit intensifies, my muscles quiver and my teeth rake my lower lip. I'm nearly dizzy with the fever to have him, all of him.

And I will. Soon.

For now I press the sponge to his broad chest, salivating over the ridges of hard muscle. He's perfect, every inch. A class apart from any other man.

Then I see it, a quarter-sized scar carved into his skin beneath his right hip. The sight of the spot where a bullet entered his body twists a knife in my own chest.

He inhales sharply when I touch the scar with my fingertips. I want to kiss that piece of his painful past away. I want to avenge him.

I want to tell him the truth about the things he forgot.

When I raise my eyes I find blue fire staring back. The way he looks at me, with such savage hunger, erases all words. The game is coming to an end and he plans to claim his prize.

"When we fuck, there's no turning back."

I knew that before tonight. I knew it before he did.

He doesn't move a muscle when I turn the water off and leave the steamy haze while reaching for the pair of towels hanging from a wall hook. Conner catches the towel I toss his way. I don't look back as I move to the vanity mirror and start blotting water from my skin.

Conner emerges with the towel around his waist just as I tie the belt of my purple silk robe. He says nothing as he prowls directly behind where I stand at the cloudy mirror, toweling off my hair and then combing the damp tangles.

The towel around his waist is in imminent danger of falling. I watch in the mirror as it slips and reveals another inch of the muscled V cut below his belly. Fuck, I'm on the verge of rubbing one out right this minute so that I can think clearly.

He reads my heated expression and smirks, clearly enjoying the effect he has on me.

Whatever.

Yes, I want him. I see no reason to hide it.

Let's see how much more he can take before he reaches the breaking point and pushes me to my knees. Or bends me over the sink. Or tears this fucking robe in half and flings me on the bed.

I'm ready for the scene to get nasty. X-rated. Downright indecent.

Those big hands of his land on my shoulders. My breath becomes a soft sigh and the comb gets thrown down on the counter. Conner's million dollar hands can pull off awe inspiring athletic feats and now they knead my shoulders with mild, pleasant pressure. Within seconds the remnants of

today's tension drains away and my spine melts into the hard wall of his chest. My head drops back, fitting neatly beneath his chin.

Yet I never shut my eyes. I watch his every move in the mirror, just as he watches mine.

Conner sweeps my hair aside and his strong fingers massage just a little harder. An erotic heat buzzes through every nerve, tingling the most sensitive corners.

I exhale with a shudder, barely capable of remaining still. My pulse hammers and the ache between my legs is sharp enough to steal my sanity. I need him so fucking badly I'm almost panting.

Conner drops his hands to my waist, briefly squeezing my hips before those capable fingers find the knot in the belt. He swiftly pulls it apart at the same instant he allows his towel to fall.

The robe drops with a shiver, a cool puddle at my feet.

But Conner has managed to claim a souvenir. The long satin belt hangs from one hand. With his other hand he seizes both my wrists and locks them together.

I narrow my eyes at his reflection. "What are you up to?"

Silly question. I can *feel* what he's up to. The full length of his cock presses into my lower back.

His muscled arms cage me more tightly. A smile dances at the corners of his lips.

"Hush, honey. Good manners are over. It's playtime."

A battle rages in my head as he swiftly binds my wrists together. It's not in my nature to be submissive. Yet I'd willingly crawl over broken glass to have him any way I can.

The grin he flashes in the mirror is unlike his usual smile. There's victory and also a devious quality, the glint in his eye a memo that this isn't going to be quick.

Good. I don't want it to be quick.

He spots an object on the counter and snatches it up. I can't stop him with my hands tied.

Conner examines the thing and shakes it next to his ear. He grins. "Birth control pills, right?"

"Nosy." My attempt to snatch them out of his grip is in vain.

He laughs, tosses the pill case back on the counter and slings me over his shoulder as if I were a pillow. I barely have time to notice the way the room spins and the light changes before I'm flying through the air, then landing on my back in the middle of my king sized bed.

Conner doesn't give me time to adjust. He sweeps the pillows to the floor like they've offended him, seizes my bound wrists and ties the robe cord to a metal bar in the center of my headboard.

"Don't pull," he warns when I follow my instincts and try to break free. "You'll get bruised." His knees become an iron vice on either side of my hips. Looming over me like a stallion, he drags a thumb over my lips. "And I can't let that happen." His thumb keeps moving, past my chin, a tickle at the hollow of my throat, between my breasts and lower, playing at the edge of my pussy.

He's so close to where I need him to be that a groan rolls from my throat and my belly tightens. He grazes my clit and my eyes roll back in my head.

His low chuckle is an insult. "Do you need a safe word?"

My eyes flip open and I glare up at him. “No. I’ll just bite you.”

His eyes brighten. Then he removes his hand from my pussy, a punishment. I try to buck my hips and get nowhere.

Conner, meanwhile, takes an interest in our surroundings. “Do you have any toys? Never mind, I’ll just explore on my own.”

He has no difficulty keeping me pinned between his knees. My attempts to squirm free of the belt securing my wrists are useless. He knows how to tie a solid knot.

I stop squirming because it’s not doing any good anyway. “Will I be tied up the whole time we’re fucking?”

“Maybe.” With one hand he makes a racket rummaging through my nightstand. “I haven’t decided yet.”

I’d sort of like to see the look on his face if I kneed him in the balls. Too bad I can’t move my legs right now because he’s sitting on them.

Anyway, who am I kidding?

I have no intention of obstructing his plans. My number one priority involves feeling his cock buried inside me.

“Damn, check out this guy.” Conner has found Maestro. The extra large purple wand doesn’t nearly look as impressive when clutched in his ham hand. “This one’s your favorite, isn’t it? Yeah, it is.”

I try to yank my arms free and fail so I grit my teeth. “How the hell did you know that?” A fair question. There were eight other competitors in the drawer and Conner bypassed them all.

He presses a button and the vibrator buzzes to life. Conner raises an eyebrow. “Too bad you don’t need this anymore.”

“And why is that?”

He was waiting for the question and grins, completely smug. “Because you’ve got *me* now.” He rocks back, pushes my legs apart, and wedges his knee between them. “But we’ll give the poor fellow one last hurrah before he gets kicked to the curb.”

“Conner.” My objection fails with a squeak as the buzzing edge of the vibrator invades.

“See?” Conner does a masterful job of teasing my clit, guiding the tool in a slow rolling motion that leaves me gasping. “It’s not so hard to be a good girl.”

“Shut up,” I grit out, annoyed by his gloating. I can’t curse him out more effectively because I’m *really* trying not to whimper and beg.

Maybe Conner can read minds. He turns the vibrator speed up and slips the tip inside while his thumb presses on my clit. The sensation should be illegal. My breath catches and the demand for relief is unbearable. Within seconds I’m ready to shatter and moan like a porn star.

Only stubbornness stands in the way. It’s not fair that Conner’s thumb plus an inch of fake dick is enough to dominate me.

No, it shouldn’t be this fucking easy for him.

He’s amused by my resistance, meeting my glare with one of his charming smirks. “Would you rather ride my cock?” He pushes the vibrator in another inch. “Just ask nicely. Say pretty please.”

“No fucking way.” The way I gasp the words out is pathetic. I’m so close to coming I want to weep but pigs will be flying before I beg any man for his dick.

He clucks his tongue. “That’s not what I wanted to hear.”

“Then work harder to convince me.”

His nod is thoughtful. “All right.”

He turns up the vibrator full blast and fucks me with it until I see stars and galaxies and every goddamn color of the rainbow.

And I can’t keep the dam from cracking.

Despite my best effort to hold out, the orgasm destroys me with a torrent of curses and convulsions.

I’m still shaking as Conner casually pitches the vibrator aside and surveys my body. His grin is so arrogant I’d be tempted to do something to smack it off his face if I had the use of my hands.

“What the hell are you laughing at?”

“Not laughing at all. But you should see yourself, Haven. Your cheeks are red, your pussy aches and you can’t catch your breath. I’m taking a minute to enjoy this view before I let you come again.”

While he’s busy congratulating himself, his attention is diverted. I’m free to move my leg enough to kick him. And this is exactly what I do.

He roars with laughter and hooks my knee. “Knew you were a wildcat. Maybe I ought to untie that knot so you can punch me like you really want.”

“If that’s what you’re into I’m glad to indulge you.”

He bends my knee and traps it against the mattress, then does the same with my other leg, leaving me wide open and exposed. The scrutiny shouldn’t make me cringe. I fight the

bubble of ancient self doubt that threatens to rise as his eyes drink in every inch.

Conner, however, lets out a low whistle. “Perfection. Fuck, you’re my goddamn dream girl.”

Amazing how he knows exactly how to extinguish my defensive firewall. At the sight of his smile the rubber band of time snaps me back to the era of being a lovesick teen.

Conner gives no hint of his plans before lowering his head and taking me with his tongue. The effect is similar to an electric shock. There are still muscles sizzling from the impact of the last orgasm and within twenty seconds of being sucked by Conner’s mouth I’m on the verge of another one.

Even if I wanted to stop the tide I couldn’t. His tongue teases with skill and my toes curl. He nibbles my clit and fireworks explode.

Back to back orgasms leave me shaky and fog-brained. “Conner,” I gasp. “Fuck, that was good.”

“Just the beginning,” he whispers and kisses the tender interior of one thigh and then the other.

While I’m coming down from the blissful high, he kisses a trail up my belly, pauses to worship my breasts, and licks at the edges of the ink on my chest.

To get his attention, I wrap my legs tightly around his waist. “Untie me.”

He rests his chin on my chest and considers the idea. “I might need some incentive.”

I lick my lips and look him in the eye. “Untie me and I’ll ride you so fucking hard your massive cock might snap off.”

He mulls this over. “Sold.”

With one hand he loosens the knot and frees my hands. Before I can adjust to this turn of events, Conner seizes my hips in his big hands and rolls to his back so that I'm straddling his waist with his rigid cock ready to drill a hole in my belly.

Conner grips my hips harder. "You really are a goddess, Haven. Don't ever doubt it."

Men are often quick to pile on compliments when sex is involved. And I have sense enough to understand that most of these words are insincere. But I would never place Conner in that category. He doesn't tell lies.

The cold hearted bitch façade I've been cultivating for far too long is in danger of becoming a memory. I have some mixed feelings about that. But not enough to keep me from being a little reckless.

Conner's eyebrows shoot up when I grab the silk belt and dangle it over him, tickling his chest.

"My turn," I warn and remove his hands from my waist.

Tying a good knot isn't one of my skills. Besides, Conner's muscles guarantee that no flimsy fabric is going to hold him if he doesn't want to be held. But he humors me anyway, allowing the clumsy binding of his wrists and watching my face as he awaits my next move.

A few minutes ago, Conner didn't give me a warning so I don't give him one. With the speed of a hawk descending on prey, I dive down and assault his cock with my mouth, sliding over the length until the broad tip meets the back of my throat. He's so big that I don't get close to fitting all of him before tears sting my eyes.

But Conner's loud groan says I'm doing everything right. Despite his tied hands, he snatches a fistful of my hair and growls, "I'll ruin that pretty little mouth of yours if you make me come right now."

I would enjoy that. But I'm not ready for him to finish. The tingling surge between my legs demands to be dealt with again.

Slowly, inch by inch, I pull back, pausing to lick and suck at the sweet spot beneath the tip before sitting up and straddling him again, grateful for the reach of my long legs. "No, you're not allowed to come yet."

He stretches his tied hands over his head and arches an eyebrow. "Better not make me wait for long or I'll snap this string, flip you over and savage that sexy ass before you can say Emerald City."

I greet this news with a smile, take his massive length in my palm and rise up on my knees, ready to guide him inside. "Emerald City."

Before the last syllable fades I bear down hard, gritting my teeth over the flash of pain because Conner is *a lot* to take in, even by my high standards. A gasp chokes my breath and my eyes clamp shut for a few seconds while my muscles stretch and expand. But with each roll of my hips the sting gives way to something far better.

Breathing easier, my eyes open and find his, which are fixed on my face. There's a stir deep in my chest as we stare each other down in silence with our bodies connected. A silly thought, but for a fleeting second I would swear he has the ability to gaze straight into my soul.

But now's not the time for mushy romance.

I promised him a hell of a ride and that's what he's getting. Each thrust of my hips is a new spiral of pleasure. Never before have I experienced sex without a condom and the feeling is outrageous. Addictive. Every other fuck I've ever had feels like a freaking waste of time and energy.

A storm starts brewing deep, in a place that's damn near untouchable. I don't care that I'm making all kinds of noise as I jerk my hips hard and fast.

This time when I come it's going to be on the heels of a blitz that will definitely leave me feeling sore tomorrow. I dig my fingers into his skin and he ought to be glad I don't wear nails anymore or I'd be clawing the blood out of his veins.

I'm so intent on getting to the peak that I'm startled when Conner sits up and flips his bound hands around my body, forming a cage and forcing me flush against his chest.

We're face to face now, eyes boring into each other, his strong arms helping me keep the punishing rhythm. My own arms wrap around his neck, hanging on like my life depends on it. I'm reaching the edge of the cliff, rocked to my core.

A sharp scream rips the air. Mine. I'm falling into oblivion and now Conner claims my lips. His kiss is rough and powerful. His tongue makes demands I can't refuse.

He's in control now; holding me as I shatter, using my mouth as I fall. The tremors are still pulsing when Conner releases with a deep rumble of a groan, our tongues still carrying on their war. He empties himself in hot waves as I greedily cling to him; sweaty and spent and still shaking.

I want to complain when he leaves my body and our kiss ends but I'm still dazed. My head drops to his shoulder. There's a rip when Conner jerks his hands apart and I dimly

wonder where I'll find another belt robe. Then he cradles me closer and I lose the ability to wonder about anything else for a minute.

One hand pushes my hair aside and slides up to the nape of my neck. I have no idea how long we stay like that, holding each other in silence. Probably not more than a few minutes. It only feels infinite because it feels right.

The spell is broken when Conner lifts me with one hand, pulls back the down comforter with the other, and deposits me in a nest of cool sheets. He tucks the blanket around me with care and I'm embarrassed to be worried that he's about to leave.

I *really* don't want him to leave.

Curling the comforter under my chin and stubbornly refusing to say a word, I watch as he hunts down his pants and pulls his phone from the back pocket. Seems like a weird time to check his damn texts, but it turns out that's not what he's doing at all.

The sound of the beach fills the silence, the same sound that lulled me to sleep in his lap hours earlier. Conner raises the volume and sets the phone down on my nightstand. Then he switches off the light and climbs into bed beside me.

There's a rough, possessive quality to the way he curls his arms around my body, locking me in a cocoon of his creation, as effective as if he's yelled the word 'MINE!'

He nuzzles my neck. "You need to get some rest."

I'm not even tired. "What for?"

"Because I'll be demanding a lot more of that from you real soon."

“Demanding. Just try.” I try to elbow his chest but he tightens his grip.

Conner chuckles over my struggle and kisses my shoulder. “When is your birthday, angry girl?”

The question is a jolt, a slice of echoes from the past. A conversation between two children and I’m the only one on earth who knows it happened. The only one who knows the reason why he wears a certain number.

Words get stuck on my tongue.

I’m suddenly protective of him, keenly aware of all he’s lost and unwilling to let him know he’s lost even more. If I tell him of those vanished days in the green paradise of a West Emerald summer it would be more for my sake than his.

He allows me to wiggle out of his grasp and change positions to face him in the darkness. The only sounds in the room are waves colliding with an unseen shoreline and I lay my head on his chest. He kisses the top of my head and cradles me close.

“Next month,” I tell him. “June twenty-ninth.”

“The twenty-ninth.” He’s starting to sound somewhat sleepy himself. “I definitely won’t forget that.”

He has no clue that the words are a spike of regret through my heart.

It isn’t Conner’s fault that a piece of me remains back in West Emerald.

Where my sister is a hopeful child. Where Conner Wiseman became my friend.

He tightens his arms around me, on his way to slipping into his dreams. The seagulls wail in their endless sound loop.

And I listen to the steady thud of his beating heart.

He'd be shocked to hear the truth whispering through my mind, an inner voice that insists all of this was inevitable.

Because I'm already his.

I always have been.

15. Haven, Age 10

Last Saturday he promised he'd be there waiting at our spot this afternoon and he doesn't lie. If Conner says he'll be there then he will be, especially because tomorrow is my birthday. He said after we practice shooting hoops we'll go get ice cream to celebrate.

I wasn't going to mention my birthday but last week as he walked me home he asked about it. And when I told him the date was coming up on June twenty-ninth he said, "I'll definitely remember that. In fact, someday when I make varsity it'll be my jersey number. For real. I swear it."

Then he grinned and tugged lightly on my long ponytail in a way that gave me butterflies and I've been thinking about it every day this week.

The funny thing is, I was supposed to be somewhere else the day we met. If I hadn't started skipping Saturday morning dance class then I probably still wouldn't know him.

Lita always rolled her eyes when I cut ballet but she would never tell on me either. It was the teacher who complained to my mother when I quit showing up. Even though my mother yelled and screamed for hours, she can't make me stand in a studio with a bunch of other silly girls, wearing tutus and glitter and learning how to pirouette.

Lately my mother keeps carrying on that she can't do anything with me at all and my father won't help so she's finished. She's giving up on me.

I don't think that's a bad thing.

She still won't sign me up for any local sports leagues but at least she's stopped chasing after me with dance leotards and satin ballet slippers, trying to get me to be more like Lita. Graceful. Polite. Funny. Everyone's absolute favorite.

Everyone except for Conner.

Conner hasn't even met Lita and he doesn't need to meet her. He's the one thing I get to keep to myself.

The first time I escaped from ballet class at the West Emerald Athletic Club I went straight to the outdoor fields. They were empty and I was excited to find an abandoned basketball in the grass. I was having a good time sinking baskets on the concrete court but I wasn't shocked when a pack of boys arrived and decided to take over. Boys tend to do that.

West Emerald isn't a big place, nothing like the endless maze of ugly streets in Emerald City. Most of those boys who crowded the court were ones I recognized but I knew that didn't mean they'd be friendly.

Conner Wiseman caught my eye because he was a head taller than the other boys. Even though he's a year ahead of me in school I already knew exactly who he was because everyone in school knows his name. He's always the number one pick for any team because he's so good at every sport he plays.

When the other boys crowded around and tried to grab the ball out of my hands I decided to go down fighting, maybe kick

one or two of them in the process. But Conner pushed them away, telling them to back off and leave me alone. He even stood in front of me like he was daring any of them to charge.

Those boys shrank back like turtles and if that wasn't a big enough shock, an even bigger shock came when Conner Wiseman smiled at me and asked if I wanted to hang out and play ball. His friends huffed and grumbled but he just ignored them.

Up until I met Conner, the only boys I'd ever dealt with had two moods when it came to girls. They were shy or they were mean.

Conner was neither. He was just...nice.

That day he talked to me like I was one of his buddies and shared tips on shooting from the free-throw line. He showed me how to protect the ball and keep my feet moving.

We started meeting at the basketball court every single Saturday afternoon. He always walks me home afterwards even though my house is nowhere near his.

Conner is also smart. Really smart. A walking encyclopedia of sports trivia, reciting batting averages and weird football rules off the top of his head. But his favorite sport is basketball. It's my favorite sport too. And I'm good, but not nearly as good as him. I bet someday he'll play for the Emerald City Wizards. Then I can play for the Lady Rubies. And we'll both win national championship titles and laugh about how we used to practice at the stupid West Emerald Athletic Club.

Maybe a long time from now we'll even fall in love and get married. I've never thought about marrying anyone. My

parents are married and they suck. But if I were going to marry someone then I'd definitely choose to marry Conner.

The way I figure it, you ought to marry the person you can say things to that you can't say to anyone else. I can say those things to Conner.

I've told him about how I wear my noise cancelling headphones to bed every night to drown out the noise of my parents screaming at each other because my dad is always cheating and my mom is always mad.

I can even tell him my biggest secret, that I'm jealous of Lita because she's the better twin, the twin everyone likes. All of her friends are coming over for a birthday sleepover tonight and I'll probably just go up to my room and pretend they aren't there.

Lita was teasing me this morning because she saw me walking with Conner last Saturday. She says I have a crush on him and that I want to kiss him on the mouth. I got mad and slammed my bedroom door in her face but she used a butter knife to force it open. When I threatened to throw a lamp at her head she said she was sorry. She didn't mean to make fun of me and she knows what it's like to have a crush. She had a big crush on Emily Gruber last year and even gave her a Valentine's Day card. But Emily tossed the card in the trash and said that liking girls is disgusting. Lita cried that night. She didn't tell me she cried. I just know she did, like how she knew when I broke my wrist in a fall from a skateboard even though she wasn't there. Anyway, the next day Emily Gruber tripped over my hockey stick in gym class and she belly flopped on the floor. Emily screamed with bloody snot coming out of her nose and said that I tripped her on purpose, which I

did. So I had detention for a week but I wasn't sorry. She can't make my sister cry and then just skip away.

When Lita decided I was no longer mad about being teased about Conner she asked if I wanted to help decorate for the sleepover party. No, I definitely did NOT want to hang glittery streamers and blow up balloons. The girls coming to the house tonight are all her friends, not mine. Anyway, I had plans to meet Conner. The minute she wasn't looking I snuck out with my basketball tucked under my arm and didn't tell her where I was going.

Sometimes I wonder why I can't get along with my sister the way I used to. Whatever the reason, I'm sure it's my fault. It always is.

Conner is nowhere in sight when I reach the basketball courts. A handful of boys are already playing on one of the courts but they all look like they are in high school and they don't even glance at me when I take a seat in the nearby grass with my ball in my lap.

We've been meeting here every Saturday for two months and Conner is never late. Most of the time he's already here when I show up.

Maybe he's late because he's planning something special for my birthday. That would make sense. Conner likes to do nice things for people. He said he saved his allowance for a month to buy his mother a bracelet made of rose quartz for Mother's Day.

He doesn't really need to do anything for my birthday. I'm happy just to shoot hoops and then go for ice cream, like he said.

The high school boys curse constantly. That doesn't bother me. My father slapped me across the face once when he heard me say 'shit'. Then he yelled at my mother, saying she didn't teach me how to behave like a lady.

I still say 'shit' and a lot of other words but I'm not dumb enough to say them where he can hear anymore. Then again, he's not at home very often so it's not hard to keep him from hearing what I say.

Conner doesn't curse much. His cousins are a different story. Micah and Gage are not just his cousins. They are his best friends, although they never come here to play basketball. I'm glad they don't come here. They are in my class and it beats me why so many girls decide to like them. Gage is rude and Micah is always fighting. They're jerks.

But I do know why a lot of girls like Conner.

He's cute and when he smiles at me I get a strange feeling in my belly and have weird thoughts, like the one about how I might be willing to marry him someday.

I can't tell him that. I can tell him anything else, but not that.

The high school boys shove each other as they leave the court. One of them trips and the others laugh loudly. I watch them growing smaller as they walk away and the whole place feels suddenly empty and lonely.

I look in every direction for any sign of Conner but now there's no one else here but me.

A growl of thunder comes from the sky. There are dark clouds collecting in the distance. I can't see any of the big, ugly city buildings from here but I know that's where Emerald City is.

I'm tired of sitting in the grass. I bet if I get up and start shooting hoops Conner will show up. I won't even tease him about being late.

My game must be off today. After fifty tries I've only sunk ten baskets. Worse, Conner still isn't here.

After fifty more tries I only make six baskets. Annoyed, I hurl the ball into the grass.

But Conner still isn't here.

And he's still not here after an entire hour passes. And then another hour.

The dark clouds are much closer now. The rumbles of thunder are louder.

Conner would never just leave me here waiting. I know he wouldn't. Even if he couldn't come himself he would have found a way to let me know, maybe sent one of his jerkoff cousins to break the news.

But I'm thirsty and lightning flashes just on the other side of the tree line. I can't stay out here. Conner will make it up to me. I'm sure he will.

Still, I feel like crap as I drag my feet on the six block walk to my house. I don't even really care about my birthday. My father is on a business trip in Las Vegas. My mother will stay locked in her bedroom suite, drinking gallons of wine and watching one of those gross Real Housewives shows.

People have said I'm lucky that I was born with a best friend. I used to agree. Lita and I have never spent a single day apart. I don't want to imagine a world without my sister. But sometimes I'm tired of being stuck right next to someone who's a better version of me.

Lita's friends have started to arrive for the sleepover. I can hear them squealing with laughter from the front yard so I use the kitchen door instead. If they are all in the living room I should be able to tiptoe to the stairs and get to my room with no one noticing.

The kitchen already looks wrecked with potato chip crumbs on the floor, a puddle of Gatorade on the counter and a melting tub of ice cream in the sink. I'm so thirsty I could scream but I clean up the mess before doing anything else. Even though Lita always leaves a mess behind and it drives me nuts, I don't want her to get into trouble. If our mother stumbles down here all drunk and weepy she might get mad and decide to embarrass Lita in front of her friends.

So I'll clean up the spills, put the ice cream away and sweep up the potato chips even though no one will say ever say thank you or even know that I did it.

Now I will literally fall over if I don't drink water so I fill a glass from the filtration pitcher in the fridge and gulp every drop.

Then a voice separates from the giggles in the living room. "She's not gonna hang out with us tonight, is she?"

I'm pretty sure that voice belongs to Abby, who once told the art teacher she was fat and didn't even get punished for it.

And people say I'm mean. I would never say something like that.

"Yeah, Haven gives me the creeps," says another voice and even though I don't know who it belongs to, the words make my throat feel tight.

"Shut up," says Lita and she actually sounds angry. "Nobody better say another word about my sister or I swear to

god I will paint your entire face with green glitter nail polish while you sleep.”

Somehow hearing her stick up for me makes things even worse.

“Hi, Haven.” Tess Ballerini stands just outside the open kitchen door. She holds a yellow sleeping bag with butterflies all over it. She can always tell me and Lita apart and she smiles at me. Since she’s pretty much the only one of Lita’s friends who doesn’t act like I’m evil I force myself to smile back at her.

“Hi, Tess.”

Her smile falls and she walks into the room. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everyone’s in the living room.”

She keeps looking at me. Then she puts down her sleeping bag and reaches into the yellow canvas backpack slung over her shoulder. “Here. Happy birthday.”

The wrapping paper covering a small box is dotted with tiny rainbows. Tess wrote ‘Happy Birthday, Haven’ in pretty script across the top.

“You didn’t have to get me a gift. It’s not really my party.”

She tilts her head. “But it’s your birthday too.”

“Yeah.” I don’t know why I feel like crying. “Thanks.”

She bends down and hugs her sleeping bag in her skinny arms. “Did you hear about Conner Wiseman?”

I nearly drop the box. “What about him? What did Lita tell you?”

Tess frowns with confusion. “Nothing. I don’t think Lita knows yet. But I live down the street from Conner’s cousin Micah and our parents are friends so my dad told me what happened to Conner yesterday.”

“What do you mean?” My stomach suddenly cramps with a bad feeling.

Tess chews the corner of her lip and sighs. “The boys were climbing that old willow tree in the park, racing each other to the top. But one of the branches broke and Conner fell. He hit his head pretty bad and wouldn’t wake up. It was really scary. My dad says Conner woke up a few hours ago but he’s all confused and I don’t know what happens to him now but he’s still in the hospital.”

I no longer feel like crying. Now I feel like I’m going to puke.

Because I’ve said nothing, Tess keeps talking. “My dad knows all this because he talked to Micah’s mother, Matilda. I guess Conner doesn’t remember a lot of things right now and the doctors aren’t sure how long it will take for him to get better or if he’ll get better at all. I forget what that’s called. Oh wait, it’s called amnesia. Yeah, that’s what he has.”

Lita bounces into the room. “Tessie!” She hugs her friend. “We’ve been waiting for you.” Lita notices that I’m standing here with Tess’s birthday present in my hand. “I didn’t know you were home.”

“Well, I live here.” I’m amazed I can talk as my heart cracks into pieces at the idea of Conner in the hospital.

Lita stops hugging Tess and gives me her full attention.

She knows something is wrong.

Of course she does. The curse of having a twin.

“Come to the party,” Lita says. “It’ll be all kinds of fun. Mom left us all her makeup samples.”

I’m already shaking my head. “I hate makeup.”

“But I’ll do your face for you. Please?”

Lita reaches for my hand. But if I let anyone touch me right now, especially her, I’ll start sobbing and I might not stop. Then everyone will start laughing and I don’t think I can take that. Not today. Not right after hearing how Conner fell out of a tree and now lies in a hospital with amnesia.

Maybe he doesn’t remember that his favorite color is green and he loves basketball and promised to wear my birthday on his varsity jersey someday.

Maybe he doesn’t remember anything at all.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” I say to my sister and shove her aside on my way to sprint up the stairs.

The tears make everything blurry and I drop Tess’s gift as I run up to my room. But I manage to flip the door lock before collapsing on my bed, crying until I can’t breathe as the thunderstorm arrives outside my window.

16. Conner

“It’s still crooked.” Tess bounces Dash on her hip and critiques the banner. “Conner, raise your side a little bit.”

I do what I’m told and make a funny face at Dash. In return, he gives me a drool-soaked grin. On the other side of the ten foot long ‘Happy Birthday’ banner, Micah stands on a stepladder and waits for instructions.

“It’s too high on your end,” I tell him. “Fix it.”

I don’t even know if this is true. I just enjoy fucking with him.

Micah throws me the kind of look that suggests he’s thinking about ripping the banner off the wall and strangling me with it.

Tess stands back and considers the scene. “It is a little bit too high, Micah. Lower it just an inch.”

The wrath vanishes from his face. He gazes down at his wife and turns into cheerful mush. “Okay, honey.”

I keep my snort of laughter to myself. When we were in high school Micah used to call Tess ‘the tiny dictator’. Now he’d eagerly crawl at her feet on command.

And why shouldn’t he? Tess is awesome. They both are.

It's just a trip to think about how time is such an agent of change. Two people who epically despised each other became a storybook happy ending.

Not like I'm one to talk. Within the last five weeks I've been knocked flat on my ass by a girl who thought I was the devil in blue jeans for the past decade. Now here I am stressing over hanging a paper birthday banner in my living room in the hopes it might make her smile.

Micah finishes adjusting the sign and jumps off the short ladder. Immediately he almost trips over a mammoth flower arrangement. His scowl returns. "Looks like the fucking botanical gardens exploded in here."

"Language," singsongs Tess and acts like she's trying to cover Dash's ears.

"It's festive." I pick up the offending flower pot but there's nowhere to put it because the counters and end tables are already covered with flowers. I bought out the entire purple section of the flower shop. Haven likes purple.

"It's overkill," Micah grumbles and reaches into the fridge for a beer, wedging it in the crook of his arm and flipping the tab. He's become damn good at getting shit done with one hand. Beer fizzes over the top and he gulps the whole thing in about five seconds before absently crushing the can in his palm.

"Someone needs to take the prince." Tess holds Dash out. "Nature calls."

Micah starts reaching for his son but before he gets there I cut him off and make the steal. Today Dash wears an outfit that says, 'I Get This Attitude From My Dad'. I bought that for him. Tess laughed like crazy when I gave it to her.

Dash blows spit bubbles and punches the air.

“Let’s start learning how to play football,” I say to him.

Tess laughs. Micah stares at her ass the whole time she’s walking down the hall. What a jerk.

I carry Dash to the sofa so he doesn’t have to see his dad drooling over his mom. Plus, the sofa is one of the few places that isn’t currently crowded with flowers and boxes.

The whole house is in a state of flux right now. In addition to the birthday mania there’s a collection of half packed boxes. Next week I’ll be losing all three of my housemates. The whole situation was kind of sudden but when the house across the street went on the market Tess jumped at the chance to buy it.

I’m happy for them. After all, I couldn’t expect the whole family to stay here and keep me company for eternity. They deserve their own home. And their front door will only be thirty steps away from mine. I know that because I made a joke out of counting it off and warning they won’t be able to keep me out.

Micah assured me they know better than to try.

With Dash propped up on my knee, I reach for an orange foam football lying on the coffee table. I’ve bought him at least half a dozen of these. That way one will always be around.

His eyes get bright when I stick the ball in front of his face. “First thing you’ve got to remember,” I tell him, “is to hold onto the ball. That’s the number one job.”

Dash slaps at the ball. Micah grumpily kicks a box aside with his foot so he can fall into an armchair. But there’s a smile on his face when he focuses on the baby.

“Maybe he’ll be more of a team player than I was.”

I look at my cousin, covered in ink and still wild at heart even if he’s been domesticated. “You weren’t lacking in athletic talent. You just had an allergy to rules.”

His grin widens. “Still do.”

Dash makes a noise that sounds like ‘Aaaaaagh’. He decides the most appropriate thing to do with the ball is eat it and tries to take a bite.

I pull the thing away before his gums start chomping down. “Good hustle, but not the best way to pick up yards.” I move his little hands to either side of the ball and he likes this game enough to shake out a belly laugh.

“Look at that.” I feel proud. “The boy’s a natural. Practically born with a football in his hands. Like me.”

Micah looks like he’s getting a kick out of Dash’s football enthusiasm. “Nah, football wasn’t your first choice. You never went anywhere without your basketball.”

Hearing this hits kind of funny. On one hand, I don’t remember playing basketball as a kid. On the other hand, I’m positive that what he says is true.

Micah notes the long pause and realizes his mistake. His mouth pulls into a grimace. Long ago he and Gage assigned themselves as my shields, trying to protect me from the reality of my own flawed brain.

I should be used to the hollow feeling that comes from hearing the news about something I’ve forgotten. In the months after my accident those revelations happened everyday. And it got to be fucking overwhelming, like being told about a movie of your life that you don’t remember starring in. The only times I remember having a basketball in

my hands was the handful of occasions when I played pickup games in high school and college.

“That must have slipped my mind.”

A casual comment in just about any other conversation. Micah understands the deeper meaning. He looks through the glass sliding doors with a shadowed expression that he’s trying to hide. His left hand rests casually on one side of the chair. His right arm sits on the other. When he refuses to add the prosthetic, which is most of the time, he usually wears an elastic sleeve, like he’s wearing right now.

And there is no fucking way I am going to sit around and feel sorry for myself after what he’s been through.

Dash gives the moment some comedy by burping and laughing at the sound he just made. Tess returns and Micah seizes her around the waist, hauling her into his lap. They slobber all over each other for a minute before Tess reclaims the baby so she can nurse him.

Since I have no need to witness that, I wander out to the backyard. While checking the pool chemicals my thoughts turn to Haven. This is getting to be a familiar theme. Anytime she’s not in my sight I’m impatient to change that.

The sex is white hot and it’s fucking constant. Daring and reckless. Before her, I thought I’d done it all and had nothing else to learn. In reality, I’d only ever played it safe. All that history went out the window the first time we fucked. The hunger to have her was consuming and for the first time I didn’t play it safe. Every time I touch her, my appetite only grows stronger.

Yet that’s not the reason why I’m buying up flower shops and knocking myself out hanging birthday banners.

No doubt the girl can be challenging. She's practically married to that club of hers and some pieces of her life are sealed behind a cinderblock wall. Every inch of ground I gain has been hard won. Not that I have any complaints. The reward is always worth the effort.

She's just in a category by herself. On sex appeal alone she wins against any stacked combo of the world's most tempting women. But there's something far deeper going on when I'm always counting down the minutes until I see her again.

Haven gets my blood pumping and my mind running in places it never goes. I start thinking about how it would feel to win her for good, to wake up with her every single morning and turn her happiness into my permanent job.

Something just clicks into place when we're together. No one else has even turned my head since the day of the wedding and I have zero interest in changing this.

I've shared these thoughts with no one, although the people who know me best can guess something unusual is happening. Tess thinks the whole situation is adorable. Micah gives me shit. Dani is skeptical. Gage remains neutral about Haven and when he says to keep my head up and my elbows out I know it's not her he's worried about. I spend most nights on the east side these days, a daily quest to earn smiles from a girl who doesn't smile easily and conquer her body while also hoping to conquer her heart.

Haven's motley crew of an extended family are mostly still a mystery. Her dad is locked up in prison for something to do with taxes. One of her uncles is out of the country and I don't know what the other one does but he never shows his face at the club. Neither do the two cousins she doesn't like to talk about. The only family member I've had more than one

conversation with is ditzy Sophie and Haven seems to regard her as something of a charity case.

Last night I stuck to my familiar pattern and hung out at Back Door, waiting for the opportunity to grab some of Haven's attention. We fucked in her office twice and got a little too carried away when we abused her desk chair. The damn thing broke into four pieces. Someone really ought to make chairs strong enough to withstand an energetic fuck without cracking. The next one better be sturdier. This morning I told Angela to find the best luxury chair on the market and send it over. If my assistant had some questions about why I was shipping high end office furniture to a strip club then she didn't ask them.

Usually Haven and I spend the night in her bed after the club closes but last night was different. Her mood changed as the night deepened I don't need to be a genius to figure out she was thinking about Lita.

Haven's endless purgatory isn't something I can relate to. As close as I am to Micah and Gage, I understand that's not the same kind of bond as an identical twin. Haven and Lita met the world together and now Haven walks alone. When the clock ticked past midnight she became distracted. Quiet. Sad. My heart cracked and I would've have fallen on my knees, done anything she asked. Slay a dragon. Walk over lava. But it's not within my power to grant her the one wish she wants more than anything.

She wants her sister back.

I couldn't intrude on her private tradition. I walked her to her car and watched her drive off alone to go sit at Lita's side, as she always does on their shared birthday. There are visiting

hours at the care home but the staff knows Haven very well by now. For her, they let the rules slide.

I thought she might say no when I invited her to hang out here at the house this afternoon. It's Sunday and the club is closed. But she seemed pleased, maybe even relieved, to have something to do besides remember happier birthdays she spent with her twin.

Still, I didn't warn her that I threw together a surprise birthday celebration and maybe I should have. Too late now. She'll be here any minute.

As if to answer my thoughts, the doorbell chimes and immediately chimes again. And again. That's definitely *not* Haven's style.

The sliding glass patio door is wide open. I can hear the buzz of multiple voices, along with a joyous bark. I'm unsurprised when Charlotte prissily marches outside with Total tethered to a red rhinestone-studded leash.

"Hi, Conner." She leads her scrappy little furball of a dog around the far side of the pool.

Total keeps an eye on me while he lifts his leg in the rocks.

Charlotte taps her foot as she waits for the dog to finish his business. "Is Haven really your girlfriend now? I asked Dani and she said she didn't know. But she didn't say that I shouldn't ask you so I'm asking."

Total squats down and takes a dump. He looks like he's grinning at me the whole time.

"Yes, she is," I tell Charlotte. *Girlfriend*. Yup, that is a first.

My little cousin gives this some thought. “I guess she’s all right then. You wouldn’t have a terrible girlfriend. I helped Dani bake a birthday cake and the painted rock I made for Haven came out awesome.”

“That’s nice of you. I’m sure she’ll love it.”

Dani drifts into the backyard next. She’s the apple-cheeked picture of summer in a fluttery white dress. “There you are. My favorite quarterback.”

“And here you are, radiant as always, my friend.” I wrap my arms around her with care.

Dani waits until she pulls away to flatten a hand on her belly. “If I’m glowing there might be reasons.”

It takes a few seconds for the meaning of her words to penetrate my thick skull.

“No shit?” I peer over the top of her head and find Gage standing in the doorway.

The dopey grin on my cousin’s face is a rarity. He nods.

And now he gets no choice about being tackled with a bear hug. At least he knows it’s pointless to resist.

Micah makes the mistake of drifting into the backyard so he gets enveloped too. I’m a hugger. I make no apologies for that.

When I’m finished inflicting affection on my boys, I look up to find Haven standing in the middle of the living room.

“The front door was open,” she says.

She’s makeup free and breathtaking. A loose ponytail hangs down her back. She wears denim cutoffs with a long purple tee that casually slides off her right shoulder.

I'd marry her on the spot.

There's a kid standing beside her with his hands awkwardly stuffed in his pockets. His mop of light hair, along with his height and his high cheekbones, mark him as a member of the Marchenko family. I remember seeing Haven's father around a few times over the years and the kid is a clone.

Haven puts a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Conner, this is my little brother."

"Hey, Robert." I stick my hand out. "I've been hoping to meet you."

His smile is shy but he firmly pumps my hand. "Hi, Conner. It's an honor." He swallows and looks at his sister, like he's unsure what to say next.

She gives him a nod of encouragement. "Robert is a huge football fan."

"Right, you've told me that." I want her to know that I listen to every word she says. "Robert, if you feel like braving the heat in a little while, we could go toss a ball around in the grass."

His eyes practically light up with stars. "Yeah, totally. That would be great."

Haven is now taking note of the decorations. She scans the flowers spilling all over the place and her eyes linger on the huge banner above the doorway. I'm dying to put my hands on her and taste her mouth but it's not exactly appropriate with her kid brother standing nearby.

"Happy birthday." For now I settle for planting a kiss on her lips and giving her waist a quick squeeze.

“This is all for me?” She asks the question as if she’s truly stunned.

“Of course it’s for you.”

“Haven! Happy birthday.” Tess shifts Dash to her hip and stretches to embrace her friend.

Haven seems like she’s still trying to process all this attention. Her eyes keep flicking up to the banner hanging over the door.

Gage and Micah join us and offer more subdued greetings. The doorbell makes another loud demand and Micah trots off to answer it, returning with the stack of pizzas and hot wings I ordered an hour ago.

In the kitchen Dani is showing off the sheet cake she made from scratch. The edges are piped with colorful whipped cream flowers. The words ‘Happy Birthday, Haven and Lita’ are written on the surface in loopy script.

Dani really is no joke. She fucking *gets* people, understanding that acknowledging Lita would mean everything.

Haven stands beside Dani and stares at the cake. She nibbles her bottom lip. “Thank you, Dani.” Her voice catches on the last syllable.

These two have definitely had their issues over the years. But Haven has expressed sorrow for giving Dani a tough time. And Dani is far too good of a person to hold a petty grudge.

As if to drive home the point, Dani smiles and playfully bumps Haven’s arm. I think I’m the only one in the room who notices when Haven blinks rapidly, fighting an outbreak of emotion.

Meanwhile, it seems Charlotte has found Robert and decided to adopt him. In the space of a minute she introduces herself, tells him all the boys in her class are ‘shitty’ so she sure hopes he’s not ‘shitty’ too and hands him a dog biscuit from her pocket to give to Total.

“He can sit,” Charlotte says.

Robert crouches down and holds out the biscuit. “Sit.”

Total’s head cocks to the side. His tongue rolls out.

“Please sit, Total,” Charlotte begs.

The dog flops on the floor and curls his paws up, playing dead.

Robert laughs and gives him the biscuit anyway. Charlotte decides Haven’s brother has passed a crucial test and invites him to raid the pizza with her. They carry two boxes out to the patio.

Dani and Tess, best friends forever, giggle with each other as they follow the kids outside.

My man Dash is now in the arms of his dad and looking mighty interested in Micah’s plate of wings and pizza slices. Gage stands back, resembling an old school noir detective with his dapper threads and his holstered gun. All that’s missing is a wide brimmed dark hat. I’m already getting a kick out of thinking of him as a doting father.

Since everyone is looking elsewhere, I snatch this opportunity to grab Haven’s hand. I need to pull her away for a proper greeting. Detouring to the laundry room, I shut the door and back her into it.

“Funny place for a quickie.” She arches a brow and hooks her arms around my neck.

I push my knee between her long legs. “Just wanted to wish you a happy birthday.”

She raises her chin and peers into my eyes. “Then do it.”

Three little words that throttle my cock. I cup her face in my palm. Run my thumb over her lips. She can't stop herself from trembling at my touch. And I can never get enough of her.

For the first time in my career I'm unexcited to report to the pre-season training camp up north. Only thirteen days until I leave. No distractions allowed. There's a team depending on me to set the tone and be the leader. I'm used to craving the start of the season, when I live and breathe the game.

In an unthinkable pivot, I'm now almost resentful. The game will take me away from her.

Haven tilts her hips and arches her back. A teasing move because she knows I'm harder than steel.

But if she wants to feel the evidence for herself I'll give it to her. My other knee shoves her legs wider apart for the sole purpose of grinding my cock into her pussy. There are layers of fabric in the way right now but this is just a preview of what she can expect later when we're alone.

Her eyes flutter closed and the sound that leaks out of her mouth is a softer version of the noise she makes when she comes. Keeping her face locked in the vice of my hand, I take charge of her mouth, using her tongue the way I want to use her whole body.

She's just as hungry when she kisses me back. Her knees ride up to my hips and her arms tighten around my shoulders.

I'd bet my whole NFL contract that if I were to shred her flimsy shorts I'd discover soaked panties and a needy pussy.

I'm an expert on her body by now. Give her thirty seconds of my cock or my tongue or my hand and she'll come so hard she shakes.

Temping. *Real* fucking tempting.

But I'm making a sincere effort at romance. I pull back and unravel her legs from my waist. Haven's eyes flash with momentary frustration. Then she shifts to a smirk.

"Are we playing hard to get today?" Her palm drifts to the waistband of my jeans, then lower, toying with the zipper.

My willpower sure is taking a beating right now.

Locking my fingers around each of her wrists, I pin her hands to the wall with a growl. "Behave yourself or I'll have to bend you over my knee later and give you a birthday spanking."

Oh, she likes that. *A lot*. Her teeth claw at her lower lip and a heated blush colors her cheeks.

"Sounds more like an incentive than a threat."

"Whatever gets you off, cupcake."

She laughs and then the laughter fades to a sigh. "You didn't have to do all this. You'll be picking up fallen flower petals for weeks."

"Anything for you." I kiss the tip of her nose and release her wrists.

She lays her head on my shoulder. I wrap my arms around her.

"But thank you anyway," she says, somewhat sleepily. "Thank you for today."

I rub her back and press into the warmth of her body. “Stay here with me tonight.”

“Okay.” She yawns. “But I have to take Robert home later. I hope you don’t mind that I brought him. He’s a huge fan.”

“Stop, I’m glad you brought him. I’ll go with you to take him home later.”

She nods and yawns again. “The sofa in Lita’s room isn’t the most comfortable place to sleep.”

My hand moves up to massage the back of her neck. “You’ll get some rest tonight. After I’m done wrecking you. Then you can sleep in tomorrow morning and I’ll serve you breakfast in bed.”

She sniffs and raises her head. “Why are you so nice to me, Conner Wiseman?”

There are a lot of ways I could answer that question. Some dirty, some sappy.

“Because I need a date.”

“A date for what?”

“The team banquet next Friday. They make a big deal out of it every year, kind of an unofficial kickoff to the pre-season. Take the night off from the club and come with me.”

“Friday.” She twists her mouth and I can tell she’s still not sold on the thought of being scrutinized by the public, which will be inevitable if she shows up at the team banquet on my arm.

But I’m selfish. I want to show her off.

I also want her to understand that I’m not just screwing around. I’m in this for more than a good time. And I’m not so

enlightened that I won't slap a label on her ass and dropkick any fucker who tries to get in the way. A red carpet event feels like a perfect time to settle the question for anyone who wants to know.

Grazing my knuckles over her delicate cheek, I switch to a serious tone. "Please come with me, honey. Let the world know you're my girl."

Haven's head drops. I could swear she stops breathing for a few seconds. With a soft exhale, she raises her eyes and gazes soulfully up at me. There's something stripped and bare about her expression right now, like I've just been given the gift of seeing her at her most vulnerable.

My mind answers with a muted echo, a deep, troubling impression that an important link to this moment is buried somewhere inside. This feeling isn't unusual and often I can't find the reason. It's just a side effect of losing chunks of your memory.

Her eyes grow soft. "Of course I'll be your date."

I take her hand and press it to my lips. I can play the part of a gallant knight when it counts.

She threads our fingers together and smiles.

Someone has flipped on the sound system. Vintage heavy metal. Must be Micah.

"Let's get back in there before they get the wrong idea." I wink and turn the handle of the door.

But Haven hangs back, tugging on my hand, suddenly uncertain. "Conner?"

I wait.

She's frowning, her brow furrowed.

Then she relaxes and wrinkles her nose with a mischievous grin. “I’m starving. Feed me and I’ll follow you anywhere.”

I rest my hand on her lower back as I lead her through the door. “I plan to hold you to that.”

17. Haven

““**Y**ou are SO FAMOUS!” Sophie crows for about the tenth time today. “Here’s another article. I’ll send you the link.”

With a groan, I drop my head to the desk, still cupping the pair of dice I like to roll around in my palm when I’m anxious. My father carried them around for years, a souvenir from his earliest east side days. The dice make a comforting sound as they clack together. This brand new onslaught of internet infamy has been impossible to ignore and it’s only been eighteen hours since I walked into the West Emerald Country Club on Conner’s arm.

He warned me this level of scrutiny should be expected once we went public. He’s Conner freaking Wiseman. If he sneezes, a national media frenzy erupts. There’s constant speculation over who he’s romantically linked to. And last night Conner beckoned to the first paparazzi punk who stepped in our path and said, “Make sure you get some good shots of my girlfriend.”

Then, before I could say a word, Conner slid a hand up my back, dipped my body in a mock ballroom dance move and landed a passionate kiss on my lips.

Pandemonium ensued.

A swarm of giddy celebrity stalkers screamed questions and snapped endless photos. Conner, who is used to such hysteria, took the attention in stride, hamming it up for the crowd by kissing me repeatedly, nuzzling my neck and keeping one protective arm around my waist.

His arm stayed stubbornly around me all evening. I was introduced to everyone. His coaches, his teammates, their wives. Dozens of curious eyes stayed on us wherever we went. Those hours had a very Cinderella At The Ball feeling and I was glad I'd taken Tess and Dani up on their offer to help me shop for an evening gown. The color of the dress was a luscious deep purple with a halter style top. Below the fitted waist the fabric fell in smooth folds to the ground. Conner started salivating the minute he saw me wearing the dress. Once we were finally alone in his bedroom he fucked me roughly from behind while I still wore it.

Conner treats me like a princess. A filthy princess who enjoys getting destroyed by big cock and tongue fucked until she screams. But a princess just the same.

I slept soundly in his arms until the early dawn of a summer morning pierced the window shutters. Maybe I should have known I'd be waking up to a social media storm.

Now, as I press my forehead to the desk and curse the inventor of the internet, there's a ping on the phone inches away from my ear. I lift my head to see it's just Sophie's latest link. The sixth one she's sent since flouncing in here an hour ago to park herself on the sofa. So far I've been christened 'Conner's Mystery Girl', 'Diva in Purple' and the notably gag worthy 'Tempress of the Football King'.

But now they've discovered my name.

“Conner Wiseman stunned his fans when he attended the annual Emerald City Cyclones banquet with a raven-haired beauty. The popular quarterback is known for playing the romantic field so it was shocking for observers to spot him cozied up with an unknown woman.

But Conner Wiseman’s new girlfriend is a mystery no more!

According to our sources, Haven Marchenko is the daughter of notorious east side mobster Aric Marchenko, who is currently serving time in the Central State Correctional Facility. The entire Marchenko crime family has come under scrutiny in recent years in connection with a rash of illegal gambling rings and rumored acts of extreme violence...”

I stop reading and flip the phone face down.

“Shit.”

On top of cringing over the notoriety, there’s a pang of disquiet.

We live in an era of guilt by association. Conner’s image as everyone’s favorite football hero is bound to get bruised as a result of being linked to my dumpster fire of a family.

When my phone pings again I’m unsurprised to see a message from Conner. Despite today’s angst, the smile on my face is automatic. The hours I’ve been away from him already feels like eternity.

He has sent a photo, the one where he’s dipping me in his arms on the red carpet. Our mouths are joined and our eyes are closed.

My fingertips touch my lips, both reliving and missing the taste of his kiss.

A text message follows.

Miss you, angry girl.

He's busy today, filming a commercial for a foundation that raises money for children's cancer research. I swear, the guy is practically a saint.

He's also the sexiest man in the city. I might be legitimately obsessed with him.

Can't help that. Don't want to.

Miss you too.

Conner's next message promises that he'll be here later tonight after filming wraps up.

I can't wait.

That boy has no real clue how he makes my heart flutter. Only him. No one else, not ever.

I still can't get over the fuss he made over my birthday. They all did. Dani baked me a freaking cake for crying out loud. After I treated her like nuclear waste for years the girl goes and bakes me a cake. The hand of friendship she's extended to me is one I've neither earned or deserve and I'm grateful.

Birthdays have never been my favorite but they've felt especially grim ever since Lita's coma. Conner filled his house with flowers and family anyway, insistent on celebrating. Every moment I'm with him I can feel myself softening.

And I don't hate the change.

I don't hate it at all.

"That was Conner texting, wasn't it?" Sophie uses her phone camera as a mirror and applies glossy color to her lips.

“I can tell.” She smacks her lips together. “You’re so lucky. But I guess you don’t really need luck. You’re drop dead supermodel gorgeous. You’d have to be to catch a guy like Conner Wiseman.”

There’s a sharp edge of jealousy in her comment. I don’t take it personally. She’s stuck going home to Jared every night. That is, when Jared bothers to return to the heavily guarded Essex Street compound where they live.

I hear the gossip about my cousins from Vito. My father’s longtime bodyguard has been prowling around often, just keeping watch. He’s refused to say if this is my father’s request or his own initiative but I don’t mind having an extra pair of eyes and a reliable gun in the area, especially with my cousins running amok.

According to Vito, Uncle Desmond snorts so much powder up his nose these days he hardly knows which end is up. His demented sons are in control, as I knew they would be. Talon hasn’t been real stealth about muscling in on my father’s interests and it’s going to be entertaining to see him smacked down for it, as he will be. Jared, meanwhile, divides his time between expanding his illegal casinos and getting his dick sucked by porn stars, leaving Sophie to fend for herself.

Whatever. I’m content to stay out of their shit as long as they stay out of mine. Let my father deal with them when the time comes.

Sophie is now curling her eyelashes. “Jared came home early last night and had a fit. He always expects me to just sit at home in that ugly apartment that isn’t even a penthouse. I explained that I was helping you manage the club but he never listens. When I said I could leave him and go back to Vegas anytime I want, he laughed and said my father would just ship

me right back whether I liked it or not. It's probably true. No one wants me around."

There's a lot to unpack in that speech.

She sniffs and withdraws a crumpled tissue from her purse to blow her nose.

Sophie couldn't help 'manage the club' on her best day. It's enough of a chore to keep her from chasing customers away or choking on her own vomit after she gets blackout drunk. As for last night, Fiona said Sophie was tipsy when she showed up and then she kept stealing drink trays.

Still, as I watch Sophie breathing snot into a tissue and fretting over her shitty marriage, I'd have to be heartless not to feel some sympathy. "It's not true that no one wants you around, Soph. We're family now. You know you can always come here."

She slumps on the sofa cushion. "I think you're just saying that."

Not entirely false. But even when she irritates the hell out of me I won't tell her to get lost. "Can I ask you something?"

She bobs her head.

"Has Jared ever hurt you?"

Sophie chews her acrylic thumbnail and thinks. "He says I ought to get another nose job because the first one looks like shit. That hurt my feelings. And last night he broke my favorite string of pearls. Snapped it right off my neck. But I guess it didn't really hurt."

I don't especially like the sound of that. "You need to tell me right away if he ever hurts you."

She smiles. "You hate him, don't you?"

My cousins are not my favorite people. I wouldn't trust either of them to feed a cat. But for now I have to bide my time and live by the family code of honor. "We have our differences. That's all."

Her smile drops. "He hates *you*, Haven. He and Talon both. I think they might hate you even more than they hate your father."

Unsurprising. When my father gets out of prison he'll have a chore reigning those two in.

I have little doubt Sophie is telling the truth. But she also has a loose tongue. The last thing I need to do right now is provoke a war with my cousins.

My face stays neutral. My mouth stays closed.

Sophie thinks nothing of my silence and pouts over a different topic. "You're so lucky that your father loves you. He gave you this club, he tells you his business. To my father, I'm just a cow that was sold at auction."

There's a knock at the door and Fiona breezes in. She's not quick enough to mask the spark of annoyance at the sight of Sophie lounging on the sofa.

Fiona eases into the chair in front of my desk. "Time for our meeting."

There is no meeting scheduled.

Fiona crosses her legs and gazes at me expectantly.

I get the message.

"Hey, Sophie?" I say. "Can you do me a huge favor and go help Bruno at the bar while I'm in my meeting?"

She hops up instantly, all smiles. “Sure, I can help run the bar.”

Fiona has the good manners to wait until Sophie has flounced out the door before rolling her eyes. “Bruno won’t forgive you.”

“I just gave him a raise. He’ll forgive me.”

She smirks and bounces her leg. “Did you hear that Sophie took her dress off and got on stage last night? She smacked face first right into a pole. And that was *after* she sobered up. That hot mess is turning into a considerable babysitting job.”

I roll the cool dice between my palms. “I’ll give you a raise too.”

“I’ll take it.” She tilts her head. “A postcard arrived from Veronica.”

There’s a twinge of angst in my chest as I recall the sad-eyed young girl who nearly met a terrible fate at the hands of my cousins. “Everything cool now?”

Fiona nods. “She’s all set up in Santa Fe. New name, going to school. She says she feels like she can breathe again. She knows it’s all because of you and wanted to say thanks.”

The sudden buzz on my phone interrupts the conversation. I flip it over and curse when Talon’s name flashes on the screen. My first instinct is to ignore the call but I’d rather just find out what he wants and get it out of the way.

I put a finger to my lips as a message to Fiona to stay quiet and steel myself for a close encounter with an asshole.

“What is it?” I say as a greeting. “I’m busy.”

His answering chuckle is not a good sign. Nothing good follows a laugh from Talon. The sound is a trigger. My mind

snaps back to the sight of his cold smile as he watched my bare chest get branded with ink.

“I know you’ve got time for your favorite cousin. First, I wanted to congratulate you on your new celebrity status.”

Seriously? He has no reason to take the slightest interest in who I’m dating.

“Noted. Anything else?”

“Yeah.” There’s an audible cracking of knuckles. “Get your slutty ass down here for an emergency family meeting. My usual headquarters.”

“Since when am I required to jump every time you snap your fingers?”

“Since your Daddy got himself locked in a cage and didn’t give *you* the keys to the kingdom.”

“Fuck you, Talon.”

He sighs. “Why do you have to be so difficult? Didn’t want to do this but if you don’t show up here on Essex Street in the next fifteen minutes we’ll be at your doorstep to drag you out by your hair. And you can count on the scene getting *real* fucking messy.”

Talon is an arrogant bastard but violence is his hobby. His game needs to be played carefully. If I give him an excuse to charge in here then he’ll have a damn good time ripping up the place and steamrolling anyone who gets in the way.

“Fine, have your little power trip but this better not take long.” Sounding intentionally bored, I end the call before he can say another word.

Fiona has listened to my end of the exchange with raised eyebrows. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. I just have to go bend the knee to my cousin’s ego.”

Her brow pleats. “Take Vito with you. Andrei too. They’re both here.”

“No need.” I grab my purse out of the lowest desk drawer. “I’ll go out the back. Don’t tell anyone where I went.”

“Haven.” She stands, worry shadowing her face. “Be careful and watch your back.”

I wink and tuck my purse under my arm. “I always do.”

But I sound far braver than I feel.

18. Haven

Esex Street is uglier than usual in the late afternoon sun. I'm stopped at the door by a member of Talon's steroid-enhanced goon squad. His hands roam too freely and I smack the side of his head.

“Watch it, pal. My tits aren't a lethal threat.”

The guy squares up to his full height and sneers but drops his hands. “You're clear.”

“And you took my purse. Return it.”

My reflection stares back from the dark lenses of his sunglasses. “You can collect your shit on the way out.”

There aren't words enough to describe how intensely I dislike stepping into my cousins' hangout empty handed. Even if there's little chance I'd need to grab a gun because Jared and Talon aren't quite *that* fucking stupid, it's always better to have the option.

There's been a shift in the mood since the last time I was in here. It's not usual for family members to receive full body pat downs. My cousins must be getting delusions of mafia grandeur.

The trio of men seated at a corner table in the otherwise empty bar are unfamiliar. Their muttered conversation pauses

as they watch me walk by. The one in the middle nods to the other two and without a word they rise from their chairs and exit through the main door.

A distinct click, the sound of a lock being flipped, follows a second later.

The small hairs on my arms prickle as if blasted by sudden cold. I'm reminded of a story my dad is fond of telling about the first time he escaped a hit.

He was just a young punk barely out of high school and trying to hustle his way into the Em City gambling scene. A bookie named Marino took offense over losing a few clients to some arrogant upstart. He sent out an invitation to an exclusive high stakes poker game that was supposed to happen in an abandoned bread factory not far from here. My father figured out something was up when he got there and noticed there were no lights on. But more than that, he said there was just a *wrong* feeling about the place, every instinct shrieking at him to run. Before he could sprint back to his car, a bullet whistled right by his head. He dove behind a dumpster for cover.

At that point he had a choice. He could make a run for it or he could stick around and eliminate the threat. He pretended to escape. Then he doubled back to the scene and delivered a bullet right between Marino's eyes.

To this day when he comes across a sketchy situation he jokes that the ghost of Marino is breathing on him.

The ghost of Marino is breathing on me right now.

“There you are. We were just about to go looking for you.”

The man speaking from the shadows is no ghost. He emerges from the gloomy space to the right of the empty bar.

The soles of his shoes slap on the tile with each deliberate step.

My cousin Talon always turns the heads of women who aren't alert enough to see past his sharp looks. They don't notice the cruel glint in grey eyes that seem to rarely blink. My cousin and I look similar enough to be siblings yet that's where any connection ends.

I don't bother to hide my scowl. "Talon, what the fuck is so critically important that I needed to drop everything and run over here?"

An air conditioner belches to life and wheezes cold air from an overhead vent. I suppress the urge to shiver.

Talon watches me for an uncomfortable moment that goes on for too long. "You know the way to the office. I'll be right behind you."

The threat is technically unspoken. Yet it's thickly laced through every word. I wish I'd been wise enough to follow Fiona's suggestion to bring some muscled backup. I've rarely felt this vulnerable.

The thought is shaken off. Whatever Talon and Jared have in mind, if they wanted me dead then I would have already exhaled my last breath.

Anyway, they aren't bold enough to face the consequences of killing Aric Marchenko's daughter. My father still has the connections to rain the fires of hell on their heads from prison. I'm also confident that my Uncle Estes would never cooperate. Desmond and his sons can't afford to get on my uncle's bad side.

However, I do wish my homicidal cousin wasn't following at my heels on the brisk walk down a corridor. At the end of

the hallway a slant of light comes from the door, cracked open an inch. I don't bother knocking before kicking it wide open. My good mood evaporated when I was ordered to report my 'slutty ass' to this shithole.

Jared lounges at the head of the table, my father's seat, with his feet up on the desk. He's put on some weight lately and the red-eyed puffiness in his face shows he's also been hitting the bottle. He was clearly waiting for my entrance. "Haven, so good to see you."

"Bullshit." I scan the room, which is notably empty. "Your father isn't here yet?"

"Dad couldn't make it. He delegated this task. Have a seat."

"Thanks, I'll stand."

The words have hardly left my mouth when Talon shoves a chair underneath me, painfully clamps down on my shoulder and forces me to sit. He pushes the chair until my ribs collide with the edge of the table. I don't even get a chance to react before he's gone, briefly skulking behind his brother's chair, finally landing in the seat directly across from mine.

A couple of deep breaths are vital to my sanity as I try to stop my blood from boiling.

Jared sends a slimy grin my way. "Now that we're all here, we can deal with business."

I'd like to bury the pointy heel of my shoe in his right eye. "We could have dealt with business over the phone."

Talon clicks his eyesore of a ring on the table. The metal M, upside down from my vantage point, winks off the overhead light.

Wicked. Wicked. Wicked.

No, that's them. Not me.

"This is a family matter." Jared rubs his jaw. "Not appropriate phone conversation."

"What family matter?"

"Your new fuck toy." Talon slides his phone across the table. On the screen is the photo of Conner kissing me on the red carpet.

I roll my eyes, not caring if the gesture pisses them off. "Jealous? Sorry boys, he's mine."

Talon has produced an engraved switchblade and toys with it between his fingers. "You should have consulted the family before turning us into public property."

A fresh wave of wariness takes over. My cousins aren't smart men. But they are dangerous men.

It's a miracle I'm able to shrug and remain calm on the surface. "Don't be so dramatic. If I leave here in a good mood I'll see about getting you an autograph. Maybe I can even manage some game tickets."

"Don't mistake us for fools, little girl," Jared warns.

"I was just making an offer. I assumed you liked football."

Talon drops his knife into the pocket of his blazer. He lazily reaches for a crystal paperweight sitting on a nearby file cabinet and fires it against the wall, smashing it into shards. I'm sure I flinch at the crash.

Talon kicks his chair away and leans across the table. "Listen up, cuz. Nobody gives a shit how often you spread your legs or what kind of bottom feeder is willing to crawl

between them. But what you've done so carelessly is shine a spotlight on the family. We're not fans of the spotlight."

"Sorry you're not getting enough attention. Try a dating app. Leave me out of it."

He chuckles. "Sure didn't take long for you to get all full of yourself. The clean cut quarterback and the degenerate gangster princess. Adorable story, right?" Talon shakes his head, hisses with disgust. "You stupid bitch. Within hours our territory will be crawling with softheaded social media influencers scoping out every corner connected to our name and trying to coax the neighborhood into talking. We can't have that. Just can't have it."

I refuse to lower my head no matter how much my heart pounds. "Too bad we don't work in a corporate office. You could go whine about it to HR. But as it stands, you have no fucking recourse."

Talon smiles. Always a warning of danger on the horizon. "I doubt the boss will feel the same way."

"Let's call him right now. Get patched through to the warden's office and demand to speak to my father. Say it's a family emergency. You are aware he has special communication privileges. So go ahead. Put the call on speaker. I'll be sure to mention how your hired brute felt me up at the door and then you started tossing around threats as if you own the east side. I promise my father won't be amused."

Jared jumps in and makes a teeth-sucking sound. "Seems you've been so busy stuffing your mouth full of some football player's cock that you stopped paying attention to anything important."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

He shifts in his chair, taking his time. “Three days ago your dad was caught with contraband in his cell. Pain pills and some forbidden electronic devices. The new assistant warden is some kind of moral crusader and was about to go public with a story about the prison’s lax security for high profile inmates like Aric Marchenko. So your dad got sent to solitary confinement for thirty days. No phone calls. No visitors.” He shrugs his bulky shoulders. “Tough luck for you.”

The news isn’t great. And I’m a little rattled to hear that this development slipped past my radar.

“Then let’s give Uncle Estes a call. He’s been out of the loop overseas. I’m sure he has an opinion.”

Jared sighs. “Well, it looks like his opinion has fallen off a luxury yacht near the Sicilian coast.”

“What the hell kind of a riddle is that?”

“No riddle. When was the last time you heard from dear Uncle Estes?”

When I think back on recent weeks, all that comes to mind is Conner. I haven’t been paying attention to much else. “If you have something to say then say it.”

The sudden chill in my blood has nothing to do with the air conditioning and everything to do with the pompous unconcealed smirk on my cousin’s face.

“Seems Estes decided to stick his dick in the wife of a *capo* for the Donatelli family. Now there’s been an accident. His body won’t be coming back, likely because it’s been accessorized with cement boots and thrown into the Mediterranean, but his host was kind enough to send this.” Jared reaches into his pocket and tosses a silver object on the table. It’s the same type of insignia ring worn by my uncles

and my cousins. I know this one belongs to Estes because his was the only one modified with a fat emerald in the middle.

The truth of the situation starts to sink in.

My father is in prison. My uncle is likely dead. And my remaining uncle won't stand in the way of his sons' sick plans, whatever they are.

For now I'm on my own.

Talon picks up the ring and examines it. "Estes was careless." His eyes lift and bore into mine. "It's becoming a family epidemic."

I scowl, although my blood pressure continues to rise. "Conner isn't exactly the wife of a mafia boss."

Talon doesn't blink. "He's a liability. End it. Or we will."

The threat is obvious.

Blood roars in my ears and I literally see red.

Then a whisper of common sense intrudes.

My cousins are evil. But they aren't insane.

I look at each of them in turn, intentionally dragging out the moment before I respond.

"You wouldn't dare touch him."

Talon blinks, exchanges a look with his brother. Clearly, they expected me to fold immediately. "Is that a fact?"

"It is." My voice grows stronger with certainty. "You're not a fan of publicity. There would be few crimes more public than harming the city's beloved quarterback. No matter how far you run you couldn't escape the fallout. And if you try, I'll make sure the consequences find you."

“Brave words. And pathetic, your eagerness to be his human shield.”

“Hardly. Conner doesn’t need my protection.”

“Interesting. Does Robert?”

The words are fired like bullets. There’s a sickening thud deep in my gut.

I can’t stop the gasp of horror. Talon’s grin is the picture of spite.

If his last words were bullets, the next ones are a bomb.

“And what about Lita? Does *she* need you to protect her?”

“MOTHERFUCKER!” Now he has to die. With no weapon at my disposal, I dive across the table to claw the life out of his throat.

My fingers barely graze his skin before my arms are wrenched back. The scream I unleash is pure rage but it’s useless. Jared drags me off the table with my right arm twisted so far up my back it’s about to snap. The pain is sickening.

Jared easily keeps me immobile while his brother comes so close I can see the pores on his nose. Talon wraps his hand around my throat and squeezes lightly, just enough to cut off my air supply. “If you were a man I’d take one of your eyes for that little stunt. And probably a few of your fingers too.”

I spit in his face.

Jared twists my arm tighter and I bite my tongue, refusing to cry out. Humiliation is a unique kind of agony. Furious tears threaten to fall. The salt makes the eyes sting.

Jared’s mouth is next to my ear. “You need to behave now, little cousin,” he purrs. “Or I’ll hand you over to the wicked

beast.”

Talon smirks and takes his hand from my throat. Jared releases my arms and I fall into the table, gasping in pain. My shoulder throbs from the strain of nearly having my arm ripped out of the socket.

Jared casually reclaims his chair while Talon leans against the wall with his arms crossed. They both watch me with obvious amusement as I gulp back my fury and stagger to the other side of the table.

Still, if they think I’m going to retreat on that note they’ve got another thing coming. “Don’t you ever fucking threaten my brother or my sister again.”

“Relax.” Jared waves his hand. “Robert is safe. He’s just a kid. Sometimes my brother shoots his mouth off.”

“Was he shooting his mouth off about Lita too?”

He shrugs. “Lita’s a human vegetable. We were just talking about how it doesn’t make much sense to pay out a small gold mine every month to keep her in the lap of luxury.”

My teeth grind and I struggle to speak. “You don’t have the authority to move her anywhere. My father is her legal guardian.”

Talon snorts. “And where is he?”

Son of a bitch.

I already know where this is going when he drops his next question.

Talon pushes away from the wall like he wants to come closer to enjoy my reaction. “While Uncle Aric is in the cage, who has power of attorney over all his affairs? Including Lita?”

“My father would kill you for the suggestion alone. He’d have your shriveled little balls torn out and shoved down your throat.”

Talon rubs his chin and pretends to think. “Nah. In fact I think he’d prefer if Lita would stop breathing altogether.”

I never knew it was possible to actually feel blood drain from your face.

And worst of all, what he says might be true.

My father never visits Lita. He won’t even speak her name. It’s possible he would choose to never think of her again.

Talon stops rubbing his chin and gives me a pity smile. “Come on. Nobody will be stuffing a pillow over her face. We’re not monsters.”

“Fuck you.”

He throws back his head and howls with laughter. The sound is hideous. It cuts off abruptly and his expression becomes ominously flat. “Don’t tell me you’ve never wished she’d just die so you can have some peace.”

No. Never.

NEVER EVER FUCKING NEVER!

But I’ll be damned if I dignify his comment with a response.

No matter. Talon isn’t really waiting for one. He’s ready with some more cruelty. “I happen to know there are some real cheap options for patients like Lita. The ones who don’t even know they’re alive anymore and so they don’t care where you put them. But I’m sure she’d get excellent care. A pretty girl like her. Yeah, *someone* is bound to pay her some extra attention.”

The insinuation is hideous.

In desperation, I wish for the power to make his head explode like a water balloon.

Since that doesn't happen, I settle for sweeping his phone to the floor and crushing the screen with my heel.

Because I can. Because FUCK HIS SADISTIC ASS.

Somehow Talon didn't see that coming. Fury contorts his face and he lunges. "You goddamn bitch."

But Jared gets in his way. "Enough for now." He grabs hold of his brother's shirt. "This is still a family and she's one of us."

Talon jerks free of his brother's grip and seethes from across the table.

"Meeting adjourned," Jared announces as if he's being generous. "It's the weekend so we can keep things short and sweet. I think we're all on the same page now."

I can't even speak. I'm reeling. I'm raging.

I want to watch them both writhe on the floor, beg for help and choke on their own blood.

But I'm all alone.

With no chance to challenge them and succeed.

If I don't exit this room right now I'm bound to do something that will only jeopardize the people I love.

Straightening my back and standing tall, I deliver a penetrating glare that doesn't do nearly enough to convey my infinite hatred.

"I will *never* be one of you."

I hold my breath as I turn around, half expecting to feel a bullet in my back.

But no attack comes when I exit the room, nor on the short route to the front door, where the asshole who patted me down is waiting with my purse in his hand. I snatch it and shove him aside, sprinting to my car and peeling out of the parking lot.

Once I'm off Essex Street and sure that no one is following, the full miserable impact of this new betrayal hits me.

Somehow I have to get to my father. Until I can manage that, I'm stuck playing along. This is my cousins' game. Their rules apply.

I want Conner. Right now there's nothing I crave more than the comfort of his arms. I want to cry out my anger and my fear and know that I'm not fighting alone.

Conner would be absolutely outraged, fiercely protective. He'd insist on getting involved. It's not hard to imagine him confronting my cousins directly, putting himself in harm's way to defend me.

A flashback of Talon's evil grin is all it takes to fuel blind wrath that nearly melts the steering wheel in my grip. Another driver honks when I spin a sharp right into a liquor store parking lot. The tires screech as I brake hard only a few feet from some guy smoking a crack pipe. He spares me a disinterested glance and returns to his hobby while my mind races and my forehead rests on the curve of the steering wheel.

Those bastards who share my last name may or may not be bluffing as they try to crown themselves as the kings of the east side.

But any war I fight with Jared and Talon would mean endangering Lita. And Robert.

And Conner.

Then there's the rest of them to think about.

Wherever Conner goes, no matter how hellish, I have no doubt his two cousins will follow. Micah and Gage can't be stopped from standing by his side, come what may.

This would also make Dani and Tess vulnerable.

God, how my very soul crumbles to bits at the thought of Tess's little family being at risk because of me.

No. That cannot fucking happen.

The sound of my own shallow breathing is the only noise inside the car as I wrestle the demons offering nothing but terrible choices.

On the other side of the windshield, the man smoking his crack pipe slides down the decrepit wall until he's sprawled on the cracked concrete.

A tear leaks out of my eye. No matter how I grasp for another option I come up empty.

I have to buy some time. Conner would never voluntarily walk away. He wouldn't allow me to fight the wolves on my own.

There is no other option.

To save my sister, to protect them *all*, right now I need to break his heart.

I'll need to break mine too.

19. Conner

There's the usual Saturday night swarm at the Back Door and I don't bother trying to find a blank space in the parking lot. My truck gets left down the street at Benny's Pizza, which I know won't be a problem because I have a standing order to send a stack of pies over to the club once a week and every time I sign for a huge tip.

To look at the traffic and the people and the noisy mayhem of Saturday night street cruising, nothing appears to be out of order. The scene looks like many other nights I'm out here at this end of the city, keeping Haven company and steeling some office quickies until I get to bring her home and wear her out in the bedroom.

But she hasn't answered me in hours.

After getting no response to my last four texts I tried calling. Straight to voicemail. I dialed the club and Fiona answered. There was a fluttery, oddly nervous quaver in her voice as she said that Haven was locked in her office and couldn't be disturbed.

Not to be conceited, but Haven is *always* eager to be disturbed by me.

Maybe this brief brush off shouldn't be throwing up all kinds of red flags. After all, the girl is weighed down by

responsibilities. It's not off the wall to think she might actually be busy.

But I haven't been able to squash the sense that something is wrong. As I stand in front of the Back Door, watching the neon lights crackle above the open doors while the music of the club competes with the music of the street, I can't put a name to my uneasiness.

But I do remember the last time I felt this way.

It was the night of Micah's final MMA fight. In the tense moments before I walked into a dark building and was met with a squad of maniacs who intended to murder my cousin, this same prickle of dread brushed the back of my neck.

Whirling around on instinct, there's nothing to see but a line of souped-up low riders blasting music behind dark tinted windows. Across the street, two women get into a shoving match until a third woman comes between them and breaks up the fray.

A horn bleats nearby as a rusty pickup squeezes past a pair of leather clad tough guys idling beside their parked bikes and smoking weed. One of the bikers barks out a hoarse 'Fuck off!' and brandishes both middle fingers.

Chaotic, but nothing out of the ordinary.

In a quick scan of the rest of the frenzied scene, someone does catch my eye.

The first time I saw him was when he showed up in my driveway to pick up Haven. At a later date she explained he has worked for her father for many years. His name is Vito and he never says much. He's got the grouchy, no bullshit vibe nailed down. I wasn't told much about what kind of work he's

done for the family boss but I would expect some of it involved blood and a gun.

Vito stands just to the left of the club entrance and our eyes meet. His terse nod is about as friendly as he gets. There's not a doubt in my mind he's packing iron as he keeps a wary eye on who is coming and going. I tip my own head in acknowledgement on the way into the club.

The place is pulsing. The music blasting tonight is some migraine-inducing techno mix. Three dancers gyrate up on the stage and there's not an inch of space at the bar.

Andrei is the first familiar face I see on the inside. He stands at attention midway between the stage and the open hallway that leads to the rest rooms, the dancers' lounge and Haven's office. Down that hall is also a storage closet where I've had my dick sucked more than once.

A hand touches my back and I turn, expecting to find my girl, but it's Fiona staring up at me. The usual playful sparkle in her green eyes is missing right now, her expression more intense than usual.

The music is so goddamn loud I have to yell into her ear. "She's in her office?"

Fiona hesitates, looks in Andrei's direction, and finally nods. I'm about to make my way down the hall but she stops me, latching onto my forearm. There's urgency in the move and it's weird. Fiona is typically brimming with banter and humor. Even the outfit she wears, a subdued dark blue dress, is unlike her usual flair for showgirl glitter and sequins.

I lean closer so she can yell into my ear if she needs to but she lowers her head and lets go. She gestures loosely in the

direction of Haven's office and I don't hear her sigh but I do see the slump of her shoulders.

Nothing about the mood here feels right.

Andrei takes his job as head of security very seriously but tonight the tension in his posture reminds me of a tiger about to spring. Another guy wearing the black polo of the security staff trots up and says something to him. By now I've met all the staff but this other guy must be new. His head swivels when I walk by. Recognition flares in his beady eyes. He scowls.

Not a fan I guess.

As I make my way warily down the hall there's a break in the music amid an outburst of vulgar cheers. I crack my knuckle on Haven's door and turn the handle before I get an answer.

She sits at her desk. Her face is an unsmiling pale oval, framed by curtains of dark hair that I sometimes forget isn't her natural color.

Haven doesn't stir when I walk in the door. It's eerie, the way she looks at me like she's never seen me before and wishes she didn't have to see me now.

"Hey, baby." I shut the door. "What's going on?"

She watches me cross the room and approach her desk. When I bend down for a kiss she turns her head to the side.

"I'm extremely busy," she says, still facing away.

There's nothing on her desk except a pair of dice. No papers, no evidence that she's been doing anything except sitting here alone in an empty room.

Before I walked in here I thought something might be wrong. Now I'm sure of it.

Refusing to budge, I grip her chin in my hand and turn her face to me. Haven bats my hand away with a hiss and springs out of her chair, stalking away on her stiletto heels.

“Haven, what the hell is going on?”

She crosses her arms, throws me a steely eyed glare. “I told you. I'm busy. We don't all have half the year off to be nothing but frivolous celebrities.”

“True. How can I atone for my sin of being frivolous?”

Her mouth twitches, fighting a smile, then a grim look passes over her face and stays. “I don't want you to atone. I want you to leave.”

I'm at a loss. No idea where this came from. When she left my house this morning she could hardly tear herself away. “What the fuck happened?”

She clucks her tongue. “Conner, I know you're slow but I'm really getting tired of explaining.”

Ouch.

This isn't her.

Something's got her freaked out and I need to talk her down.

“This is our last weekend together before I report to the training camp. From there, it's going to be kind of hectic for a while once the season gets underway.”

She shrugs. “Sounds like you need some time to focus. You can have it.”

“What I need is to spend every available moment with you.”

“What the fuck for?”

No more of this. I grab her and pull her close. “Because I’m crazy about you. That’s why.”

She melts. Just for a split second. I see the spark in her eyes and feel her body soften.

Then it’s gone and she’s pushing me away again.

The loud knock at the door comes at the worst time.

“Go away!” I shout.

“Come in!” she shouts louder.

The guy who pokes his head inside is the same one who was talking to Andrei in the club. His eyes flit to me and harden. Then he looks at Haven and gets practically goofy.

“Haven, I just wanted to check in and tell you it’s good to be back.”

She nods. “Thanks, Alex. I appreciate you picking up some shifts on such short notice.”

He beams. I believe if she says one more nice word to him he’ll crawl over and kiss her shoes.

I’ve decided that I hate him.

“Anything for you,” says Alex in a sickeningly sweet voice. “Andrei says you want to keep some eyes on the outside as well.”

“Yes.” Haven frowns. “But don’t go alone.”

Alex puffs his chest up and flexes his inked arms. “Trust me, I can handle anything with these guns.”

I laugh. Loudly.

Alex reddens. He starts to sputter but Haven says, “Thank you,” and dismisses him with a wave of her hand.

Alex glowers at me one more time and stomps away like an infant. At least he shuts the door again.

When I look back in Haven’s direction I find her watching me with a strangely intent expression.

“Yes, I’ve fucked him,” she says. “More than once. He’s about as fascinating as a spoon but he sure knows how to use his dick.”

If she’s on a mission to piss me off she’s succeeding. “Am I supposed to go beat the shit out of him now? I can do that.”

Her smile is thin and insincere. “I don’t care what you do.”

Two can play at this game, whatever it is. “All right. If you want to trade sex tales I could give you a run for your money. But at the end of the day I don’t give a flying fuck if you’ve hosted half the goddamn city in your pussy. It’s us now, baby. You know that.”

A moment of silence passes. The head of the snake inked onto her chest is animated by the rise and fall of her chest.

An outbreak of coarse male cheering rises above the thudding music of the club.

Haven shows no emotion as she gazes at me. The only crack in her armor is the rapid pace of her breathing. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that I’m just not into this nearly as much as you are?”

The words were designed to sting and for a second they are a sword through the center of my heart.

Then I remember how she quivers when I touch her, how she lays her cheek on my chest after I've worn her out, how she whispers my name in the darkness when she thinks I'm asleep.

"You shouldn't lie, Haven. You suck at it."

"No, I'm an excellent liar, Conner. And you're easily fooled."

She doesn't blink, doesn't flinch. A sliver of doubt crawls up my spine.

It's crushed before getting far.

Everything from her posture to the downturned tug of her mouth screams unhappiness.

She's not as good of a liar as she thinks she is.

"Something happened."

She coughs out a harsh laugh and settles back in her chair. "Nothing happened. Like I said, you're just slow to catch on."

"Bullshit. Tell me the truth."

"The truth." She sits up straight and folds her hands in front of her. The look she throws my way is just this side of pity. "What was it they used to call you? Oh yeah, BRAINS. That's what people called you. Because after your accident you forgot how to do everything, even spell your own fucking name, which is why you were held back a year. Maybe you didn't know because Micah would go beat the living shit out of anyone caught saying it out loud. It's not your fault. Just like it's not my fault that you can't seem to understand what I'm saying."

She's doing her best to provoke me, to make sure I storm out of here without looking back.

I do understand that.

What I don't is *why*.

There's a reason. And the reason occurred somewhere within the last twelve hours.

"It's your family. That's it, right? Now that our relationship has gone public they've decided to use it as a way to threaten you somehow."

The flare of alarm in her eyes tells me everything. She wants to be made of stone but I can read her just fine. I might be the only one on earth who can.

I reach for her. She escapes her chair and tries to leave the room but I corner her against the wall.

"Listen to me," I tell her. "I'm here for you." My knuckles graze her soft cheek. "Whatever's gone wrong, baby, we'll figure it out together. Just don't shut me out of your life."

She closes her eyes, heaves out a long, defeated breath. "I have to," she whispers.

"Haven." I hold her in my arms. She doesn't know she's the sole owner of my heart. I need to tell her this. And I will, as soon as I destroy whoever is trying to take her from me.

"I'll fix it," I promise in a whisper and press my lips to her hair. "I promise."

A shiver rolls through her. Her chest heaves. She's crying.

The crunch in my chest is nearly painful. My furiously brave girl. She could face down an army and win. Nothing makes her cry.

Damn, I love her.

That's why I will eviscerate whoever has done this to her.

Haven squirms free. She takes a step back and swings her hair out of her face to show me where things really stand.

She's not crying at all. She's *laughing*.

And it's terrible, the way she gasps out those phony sounds. I know this performance is a sham because I know what her laugh really sounds like.

Haven giggles and staggers back. "Conner, how could you get this so wrong? You've mistaken me for some damsel in distress. I don't need to be rescued. I certainly don't need you."

"That's still what you're telling yourself? I know better, sweetheart. I know how to make you laugh. How to make you blush. How to send you to your knees. *I fucking know you, Haven Marchenko*. And right now you're lying."

She lifts her chin. Gazes at me with supreme loathing. And opens the door.

"Get the hell out of here."

"No."

She shrugs. "Okay. If you're angling for one last fuck I guess I can oblige." She pulls her dress up to her waist and bends over the arm of the sofa. "Make it fast."

I don't want my dick to get hard but I can't halt a reflex. Maybe I shouldn't try. Maybe the best course of action is to drop my pants and crudely fuck some sense into her with the door open.

After Haven's ass stays in the air for a full minute she finally yanks her dress back down and faces me. "Your loss."

"Haven, for god's sake level with me."

She holds the door and waits. “I won’t confuse you by failing to say goodbye this time. Goodbye, Conner Wiseman. It was fun while it lasted.”

Sure, I could plant myself in a chair and refuse to leave. Make this ugly. But Haven doesn’t crack under pressure. She’s stubborn and she’s intense. There’s no moving her if she doesn’t want to move. I do love those qualities. I just wish she wasn’t using them to make herself unreachable right now.

That doesn’t mean I’m surrendering.

It just means I’ll have to find another way to get through to her.

I don’t know where to find the answers. But luckily I’ve got someone in my corner who will have some ideas.

“This isn’t over,” I tell her.

“Not your call, quarterback.” Haven pushes me out and slams the door to her office.

Too bad. I’m making it my fucking call.

As I storm out of the club I get a brief glimpse of Fiona’s startled face, and another of Alex’s smug grin. A male voice breaks through the din, squawking my last name. Fuck it, I’m not in the mood to entertain anyone. I acknowledge no one and refuse to say a word until I’m back in my truck. Then I place a call.

Gage answers right away. “What’s up?”

He’s already alert, knowing I’m not one to call out of the blue on Saturday night for no reason.

“Need your help.” I tell him what I know, which isn’t much. But my cousin spent years in a world defined by crime and brutality. If my suspicions are correct and the Marchenkos

are forcing Haven to play defense for reasons unknown, he'll root out the truth. Gage has all the connections in the world and nothing stays hidden from him for long.

Haven should know better than to assume I'll retreat with no questions.

What we have isn't something that comes around all that often.

And come hell or high water, she and I aren't even close to finished.

20. Haven

The wake of club hours is typically peaceful. After the last customer exits and the music dies it's a favorite habit of mine to sit at the bar and drink a whiskey sour in solitude.

That tradition has changed a little since Conner happened. In the calm hush of the frenzied aftermath we would have a drink together. We would banter and laugh over things that are unimportant. Then we'd go find a bed and screw until we passed out in a tangle of sheets.

Tonight, however, I'm once again drinking alone.

I'm drinking alone because I drove Conner away.

The first swallow of the whiskey goes down harsh, mingling with the sour heaviness of sadness.

I hurt him. I know I did. Even though that was my intention, I still hate myself for the pained confusion stamped on his face.

Conner Wiseman is a man unlike any other. He's sexy and sincere and humorous and loyal. When I'm with him I could swear my feet hardly touch the ground. I've seen how women throw themselves at him. He could have anyone he wants. Somehow he's chosen me.

And this is what I do to him. Taunt him with one of my former fuck boys and then throw him out of my life.

Sometimes I lie to other people but I don't lie to myself. That would be an unspeakably pathetic thing to do. I'm keenly aware that I don't deserve Conner. I never did.

I'm also aware that I am in deeply love with him. What's more, the odds that I will ever feel this way about anyone else are zero.

My hand closes around the whiskey glass and squeezes. Maybe I'd like to crack the glass, to feel the shards pierce my skin and mingle my blood with the burning alcohol. Create a new source of pain to compete with the self-inflicted bruise in my heart.

"Hey, darlin'." Fiona slides onto a neighboring stool, her voice gentle, more like the tone she uses when one of the girls needs a shoulder to cry on.

Slowly, I relax the cramped hand clutched around the glass. My fingers probably aren't strong enough to break it anyway.

Fiona nudges my shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it now?"

"Hell no." I push the glass away. "Bruce, you can get rid of this."

He pauses in his task of wiping down the counter and nods. The glass is swept away in silence.

Fiona sighs. "I guess you noticed that Sophie left right before you returned from your meeting."

"Did she?" I haven't given Sophie a second thought.

Fiona knits her eyebrows together. “Conner ran out of here in a hurry.”

“I know. I told him to go.” When I jump off the stool I could swear I’ve aged ten years since I woke up in Conner’s arms this morning. If wishes were real then I would wish to return to that moment and force time to stand still.

“Haven, you need me for anything else?” Bruce folds the bar towel and exchanges a glance with Fiona. No doubt the entire staff is aware of the drama with Conner. After all, I didn’t bother to keep my voice down.

“No, you go home to your wife and kid. Enjoy the next two days off. I’ll see you Tuesday.”

He nods and doesn’t linger.

Fiona pokes her tongue in her cheek, clearly debating whether it would be smart to just keep her mouth shut right now.

Squeaky hinges pierce the silence. I’m on intimate terms with every sound in this building. That was the door to the men’s restroom swinging open and shut.

Alex wanders into the room. I wasn’t keeping track of him so it’s a surprise to see he’s still here. He could have left half an hour ago.

“My favorite boss lady.” He beams and swaggers over.

Fiona clears her throat pointedly and abandons her barstool. “I’m out of here.”

“Good night,” I say even though there’s nothing at all ‘good’ about tonight.

She cocks her head and pauses with her hand on her hip. “Call me if you want to talk.”

My nod is polite but we both know I won't be calling to discuss why I melted down on Conner. The less she knows about my cousins the better.

"Bye, Fiona," Alex says and claims her barstool.

He drums his hands on the polished wood counter and waits until Fiona is gone before slithering closer. "Hi there, gorgeous."

My head hurts. After the disastrous meeting with my cousins I thought it would be a good idea to beef up security around the club, just in case. It's a fact that good help is tough to come by and Alex can be trusted to oust troublemakers and not do anything fucked up. There was nothing special about what we had and I haven't even talked to him in a year but judging by the hope written on his face, it seems he's got some incorrect ideas about why I called him back.

I edge away from his muscled arm. "Think I'll lock up on a minute."

This only makes him smile wider. "Great. I'll walk you home. I even remember the way."

"It's across the street. Not tough to find. But I'd rather be on my own."

"Don't say that." He slides a hand up my arm and starts massaging my shoulder, which is still sore after Jared nearly broke it. "I'll make you forget all your troubles. I'll make you feel real good."

Sounds like some fucking corny song lyrics. His touch makes me want to scream. I throw his hand off, rougher than I meant to.

"Alex, you should go now."

The light in his eyes dims. He swallows. I wonder if he's about to cry.

“Okay, I get it.” The hound dog expression on his face is cartoonish. “You need me to come back next week?”

“Yeah. Thanks again for filling in on short notice.”

“Sure.” He gives me one last lingering look before trudging to the door. He's a harmless idiot but he's still an idiot. From what I remember, screwing him was little different than diddling a vibrator. He can't hold a candle to Conner.

Then again no man can. Or ever will.

Once Alex's shadow fades from the door the only noise is the intermittent whoosh of a car passing. If I shut my eyes I might convince my brain that the sound is the crash of a wave. I could climb back in time and be a child playing on a beach with my sister, a place I can only visit in my dreams.

The emptiness doesn't really fool me. I know I'm not alone.

“You can come out now,” I say out loud. “We're the only ones here.”

A male grunt precedes the whisper of shoes sliding on the floor. Vito's arthritis afflicts his knees enough to produce a slight limp.

My father's most trusted bodyguard and reliable enforcer emerges from the dark corner of the room where he'd been waiting with patience until there were no other ears to listen to our conversation.

He yanks a chair from a nearby table and a joint audibly creaks as he heavily drops down. He rubs a hand across his

sweaty head and I try to guess his age. My father is fifty-five and Vito was already established when they met years ago.

He gets comfortable and folds his beefy hands over his gut. “I didn’t like Desmond’s two fuckers even when they were little kids. They came out of the womb as scheming little shits.”

I gnaw at the corner of my lip. “Who told you?”

He scowls. “Nobody had to tell me. I knew what Jared and Talon would do even before your dad went away. As trustworthy as a pair of pythons.”

“Then you know they’re looking for any excuse to escalate.” Reflexively, my eyes roam over the dim interior of the club. This place is more of a home than my apartment. I both love it and hate it.

Vito scratches at his grizzled square jaw. “They like to bark loud but I doubt they can face the consequences of biting.”

“I won’t insult you by asking where your loyalties lie.”

He cocks his head, gazing at me with more fondness than my own father does. “You’re Aric’s daughter, kid. My loyalty lies with you.”

“Then I need to ask you for a favor.”

He’s unsurprised. “Name it.”

“Protect my little brother. His name came up today. I know my father has a couple of men looking out for him already but I want someone I trust to be there.”

In response to this news, Vito’s jaw flexes. His dark eyes glitter. I expect he was mighty fearsome in his heyday.

“Anyone who touches a hair on that boy’s head can look forward to getting skinned alive.”

He means it.

“Thanks, Vito.”

He rises from the chair and grimaces when his knees pop. “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“I can’t get through to Dad. I tried calling the prison and the family lawyer in case those assholes were bluffing. They weren’t.”

Vito waves a hand. “Eh, not your father.”

He’s talking about Conner. “No, I didn’t tell him. And I’m not going to. Healthier for him. And for everyone else.”

Vito mulls that over and sighs. “Whatever you say, kid.”

He refuses to leave until I’ve locked up and then he stays at my side for the brief journey across the street to my apartment building.

“I’ll check in tomorrow,” he says as his wary eyes shift back and forth, scanning for possible threats.

He stands guard at the entrance until I’m safely inside and up the stairs. I watch from the small oval of a second floor window as he slowly ambles down the street.

The sound of a laugh track blasts from a television somewhere in the building. My forehead hits the smudged glass and loneliness engulfs me. Conner’s wounded face keeps flashing before my eyes. I expect he will haunt my dreams.

A sudden impulse to be beside my twin is overpowering. Over the years the night staff at the care home has become accustomed to the sight of me randomly showing up in the

pre-dawn hours. No one objects when I go to my sister's room and curl up for a few hours of fitful sleep on the sofa.

The sudden vibrating trill of my phone yanks me back to the present moment. As I tug the thing out of my purse I can admit I'm hoping it's Conner.

But when I see the words 'Queen Valley' on the screen my mouth goes dry. Panic and terror join forces. Talon's hideous threats race through my mind.

"And what about Lita? Does she need you to protect her?"

I can't even breathe as I answer the call. The blood roaring between my ears is almost louder than the sobbing coming through the other end of the phone.

It's Hannah, one of the night nurses. She's wailing, "Oh my god, you need to come! You need to come here right now!"

I don't hear any other words because I've already cut the call off and I'm scrambling to get downstairs. The world becomes a blur as I race to the adjacent parking garage. There's not a complete thought in my head as my tires squeal through the east side, clipping curbs and running red lights.

I can't remember if I repeated the usual mantra on my last visit to Lita. This feels important now.

I hear the words echo in the car and realize they are coming from my mouth.

"Please don't take my sister away. Please don't take my sister away. Please don't take my sister away."

If my cousins have harmed Lita I'll go scorched earth on everything those fuckers care about. No matter how far they run they will never be able to escape the raging inferno.

By some miracle, after careening through the streets of Em City I arrive at Queen Valley Care Home in one piece. I leave my car right at the front door and kick my heels off so I can run faster into the building.

Rather than the usual subdued hush of the late night hours, there's a buzz of voices and staff members are milling around. A few are crying. One of Lita's doctors sees me blasting through the lobby like a wild animal and says my name. He reaches for my arm. I shove him into a wall and run down the hall to my sister's room.

The door is open.

The lights are on.

There is a collection of wide-eyed people scattered throughout the room. A nurse clutches the cross hanging at her neck and whispers words of prayer as tears leak out of her eyes.

And Lita sits upright in the reclining chair where she often sits during the day between physical therapy sessions.

My first response is to drop to the floor with relief. That's why it takes me longer than it should to notice that she's not staring, dull-eyed and unseeing, at a fixed point.

No, she's staring at me.

Lita's mouth opens and she tries to cough out a sound.

She winces, like the effort is painful.

She swallows and tries again. Her voice is a whispered rasp but her words are clear as a bell to me.

“Haven, what happened to your hair?”

PART II

*“You once said you didn’t know who
you are without football.*

I don’t know who I am without you...”

21. Conner

Gage leans against the kitchen wall and watches in silence as his wife stretches her arms around my neck for a hug.

Dani pulls back and smiles. “We’ve missed you. Didn’t think you’d make it today.”

“Surprise. I changed my flight.”

She nods, no doubt understanding why I hopped on a redeye to get here. “How long are you in town for?”

Between the grueling weeks of team training and a preseason game schedule on the road, I’ve been on the move a lot. “You’ve got me around for the next ten days at least. The first home game of the season is next Sunday.”

“I know. We’ll be there.” She rubs a hand over her belly, which still looks pretty flat under her loose shirt. “I might have already bought a collection of Cyclones onesies to raise the odds I’ll give birth to a football fan.”

“Conner, watch this. Total learned a new trick.” Charlotte holds a slice of fake bacon in the air above the head of her wiggling dog. “Total, shake hands.”

The dog’s tongue rolls out. He cocks his head to the side. He looks at me for help.

“Total, *please* shake hands,” Charlotte begs.

Total yawns with a tiny yelp at the end.

Charlotte sighs and gives him the treat anyway. He snatches it out of her hand and runs under the kitchen table.

“We’re still working on it,” Charlotte says, rather grumpily, and then brightens. “Is Robert coming today? His sisters will be here so I thought he might come too. After all, this whole party is for Lita. Do you think Lita might let me interview her for a school project? I need to interview someone who is interesting. She was in a coma for ten years. I can’t think of anything more interesting.”

Dani checks my reaction at the mention of the Marchenkos. Gage remains where he is, a silent observer.

I’m careful to keep my feelings from showing. “I don’t know if Robert will be here. Maybe.”

“But I’ll ask Lita about the interview,” Dani offers.

Charlotte accepts the answer and then wants to know if she can go out to the backyard with Total. She and the dog make a loud racket as they scamper through the house and out the patio door.

Dani moves across the room to slide her arms around her husband’s waist. She gazes up at him. He rubs her back, plants a brief kiss on her lips.

I can take a break from my own angst to acknowledge that the two of them are awful damn cute.

“What should we do to help out?” Gage asks.

Dani lays her head on his chest and stifles a yawn. “Just let me use you as a pillow for a second.”

“Go rest for a little while.”

“Can’t. Catering truck will be here any minute and so will everyone else. I’m all right.” She lifts her head, glances my way, then kisses her husband. “You should go talk to Conner.”

Gage doesn’t keep secrets from his wife. Whatever he has to say to me, she already knows.

Then again, if there was anything earth shattering to share he wouldn’t have waited to tell me. He’s aware that no matter where I am in the football realm my heart has been left behind in Em City’s east side.

Six weeks have passed since I had a moment alone with Haven. The night she ordered me out of the club I was already determined to fight for her. After all the time we spent together, no one could make me believe that she just woke up that morning and decided she was through. No fucking way. Enlisting Gage’s help with the undercover work, I planned to make a pest out of myself, confident that I could smash the brick wall she’d built.

Then Lita woke up. A shock and a miracle.

But it changed my approach. I’m insanely happy for Haven. I know how much she’s suffered over the years, how desperately she’s wished for this outcome. That’s why I had to step back and let her have this time with her sister.

So far Lita has stayed in the care home, working with physical therapists and psychologists while she gets used to the fact that she’s no longer a sixteen-year-old girl. I’ve visited her, never staying long. It’s easy to see that she’s struggling. Tess says she often cries out of frustration, although lately she’s been crying less.

Must be hell to be living your best life as a high school junior and the next thing you know, more than a decade has gone by and everyone has moved on without you. Kind of like you've just come out on the other side after a trip in a cruel time machine.

Whenever I do visit, Haven is always there, quietly standing by as her twin's steadfast guardian and protector. Tess says she's not sure if Haven ever goes home or gets any sleep. She always looks exhausted and she rarely speaks. Getting her alone for a private conversation has been impossible. She doesn't take my calls. She hardly looks me in the eye.

Now I'm told that Lita has made enough progress to be released. She can start the long chore of rebuilding her life, trying to figure out her place in the world. She's going to move in with her sister. That's what today's little informal gathering is about. Dani's idea, to help welcome Lita back into the friend circle.

Naturally, Haven will be here.

And I'm sure she's expecting that I won't be.

Dani drifts to the backyard to see what kind of trouble Charlotte and Total have found.

The second she leaves us on our own, my cousin jerks his chin to indicate I ought to follow him to his office. There are some topics that need to be closely guarded and the Marchenko crime family is one of them.

Once we're closed away in the dark wood paneled den that always reminds me of a bear cave, Gage perches on the edge of his desk and wastes no time getting to the point.

“What do you know about Estes Marchenko?”

The leather sofa creaks under my weight. “Never met the guy. He’s been overseas for a while. Why?”

“Because it seems like he’s dead.”

“Seriously?”

A stiff nod. “There’s been no announcement or obituary but the rumor is he’s taking a permanent nap on the floor of the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Shit.” From what little Haven shared about her uncle, he was a pretty terrifying character but she counted him as an ally.

Gage sees my alarm and peaks an eyebrow. “Doubt it had anything to do with family quarrels. He pissed off a mafia don and disappeared nearly two months ago.”

“Does Haven know?”

He shrugs. “Tough to say what Haven knows. She stays low to the ground and the people she surrounds herself with are tight-lipped, ferociously loyal. Plus she’s been distracted, off the scene for the most part since Lita woke up. But you know the woman with the Irish accent who runs the club when Haven isn’t around?”

“Fiona. Yeah, Haven trusts her.”

“Seems like it. But I’ve got a couple of boys tasked with keeping an eye on the club. There was an argument that spilled outside, between her and the wife of Jared Marchenko.”

“Sophie? She’s harmless.”

“Maybe, but she was having quite the tantrum. So drunk she couldn’t walk straight, waving around a broken bottle and screeching that she’s in charge. When Fiona tried to defuse the situation she got sliced in the arm for her trouble. Then Haven

shows up in the middle of that drama, grabs the bottle away and shoves Sophie toward one of her security guys with orders to bring the girl home. Haven was pretty pissed. Told Sophie not to come back for awhile.”

“Why is that a big deal?”

His fingers tap his thigh in patterns of five. Just one of his OCD habits. I’ve become so used to the sight I hardly notice it. “Might not be. But Sophie is the daughter of Rocco Castigliore. Big Vegas mafia boss. Then there’s also the fact that her husband and Haven aren’t on cozy terms.”

“Speaking of those clowns, what are Jared and Talon up to lately?”

“Nothing good but they haven’t been hassling Haven either. They’ve had their hands full trying to gobble up territory belonging to their uncles. With Estes dead and Aric stuck behind bars for another couple of months they’re pushing their luck to take advantage. Haven is small potatoes to them so as long as she stays out of their way it seems like they’re returning the favor.”

None of this really answers my question about what scared Haven enough to turn her back on me. I’ve run through that last conversation endlessly. I swore to her we’d get through this. I begged her not to shut me out.

And she said...

“I have to.”

She was miserable. I could see it. Hear it. Feel it in those last seconds when I held her.

Gage can read the struggle on my face. “Wish I had more insight,” he says.

“It’s not like I’m giving up,” I tell him.

He nods. “I’ll keep my team working on it.”

“Thanks.”

On the other side of the closed door there’s a sudden outbreak of joyful barking. Total’s claws click on the tile as he runs down the hall. Charlotte runs after him, shouting to no one in particular that Tess and Micah are here.

Gage nods to me. “Come on. Don’t want to be anti-social.”

“Says the anti-social king.”

“Used to be.”

“I know. Marriage has changed you.”

He scowls like he needs to prove he’s still a sullen prick.

I just laugh at him as he throws the door open.

The sound of baby babble echoing through the house reminds me how much I’ve missed seeing that kid every day. Even if I’d been in town lately, which I haven’t, my house is empty. Dash and his parents have moved across the street.

We find Micah in the kitchen holding Dash. Between the baby in his arms and the diaper bag slung over his shoulder, my take-no-prisoners, ink-covered cousin looks downright housebroken. Like an ad for parenthood.

He notices me and snorts with surprise. “What’s this? You come home and don’t even cross the street to say hello?”

I take the baby away from him. “Stop whining. I haven’t even been home. I drove straight here from the airport.”

Tess, who was busy admiring Dani’s tiny baby bump, looks up. “I thought you weren’t going to be home until late tonight.”

“Change of plans.” I bounce Dash. “And aren’t you happy to see your Uncle Conner?”

Dash laughs. Then he coughs up a glob of curdled milk, which lands on my shirt.

Tess plucks him out of my arms. “Sorry, he just ate.”

Dash, proud of himself, says some nonsense syllables and grins.

“I’m glad to see you too, buddy,” I assure him.

Dani orders everyone to go out back where the caterers are setting up cheese boards and shit but I’m currently decorated with baby vomit so I retreat to a bathroom instead.

When I’m finished scrubbing I’m left with a sizeable water stain over my heart but it beats the alternative. The house has emptied out and I follow the sound of voices carrying from the backyard.

Standing just barely out of sight inside the house, I see Lita first. She wears a long pink sundress and sits in a cushioned patio chair in the shade beneath a pergola. Her cheeks have filled out in recent weeks but there’s a fragile quality about her that didn’t used to be there and that doesn’t exist in her identical twin.

My eyes move on in a hungry search for Haven and I don’t have to look far. She stands a short distance from Lita’s chair, watching as her sister listens to Charlotte chattering a mile a minute. To my surprise, her hair has been dyed back to its natural blonde. She wears an old pair of jeans. Black Converse. A plain white tee shirt.

The longer I stare at her, the more my heart hurts.

Haven doesn't see me. She's focused on her sister. I doubt anyone has told her I'm here. Micah and Gage, hanging out by the food table, glance over to see what I'll do. Nothing for the moment. I'm happy to just stand back and watch her.

Lita smiles at something Charlotte says. Dash makes a loud noise like he's indignant over the lack of attention. Tess tries to hold him out to Lita and Lita starts to reach for him but then pulls back. Her hands curl and nestle together in her lap, like she's withdrawing into the pose she unknowingly held for years. She turns her head suddenly and Haven rushes forward. Haven bends low and whispers something in her ear. Lita shakes her head, mouths the words 'I'm fine'.

"Hey, stranger." The throaty voice is instantly recognizable. Bree Lambeau is the only Em City sports reporter I can trust not to spring some 'gotcha' garbage questions, which is why she's the only one I'll grant an interview to anytime she asks. We've known each other since high school. Bree knows everyone here. After all, a long time ago she was Lita's girlfriend.

"Hey." I sling my arm over her shoulders for a quick hug. "Where's Renae?"

"Home." She drags her eyes away from Lita. "She knows about Renae. Haven told her. But we didn't want to upset her."

I don't know what to say to that. Words of wisdom have never been my strong suit. Need a joke? A crude comment? A clown to break the tension? I'm all over the job.

But the right words that come so easily to some people get lost in my own head. Maybe that would have always been the case, concussion or not. We'll never know.

Bree sighs. "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

“Of course you should be here. We’re your friends.”

She manages a small smile and nudges my elbow. “Is this a bad time to shamelessly request an interview before the season starts?”

“Never a bad time for that. Set it up with Angela. You have her contact info, right?”

Bree nods. Her eyes move back to Lita. She swallows hard and holds her head up before stepping into the backyard.

Lita turns this way and freezes. Then she smiles. Haven hovers behind her sister’s chair and then finally notices that there’s more than one lurker on the premises. She straightens her back and while she doesn’t break into loud cheering she doesn’t look pissed either.

I’ll take it.

Haven remains close to her sister. Dani holds out a chair, appearing to ask if she wants to sit but Haven shakes her head. Lita’s hands relax and she returns Bree’s hug. They all fuss over Dash. There’s laughter and smiles. The tension disappears from Haven’s shoulders but she still doesn’t sit or take her eyes from her twin.

Meanwhile, Gage and Micah raid the food selection and stay out of the action. They were in the middle of a murmured conversation but quit talking when I approach.

“Gossiping about me?”

“Yup.” Micah pops a tiny cheese ball in his mouth. “We were trading bets on how long you were going to hide.”

I steal a cracker from the table. “Lay off.”

He grins, unable to resist the temptation of getting on my nerves. “Instead of brooding like a lonely kid at the middle

school dance, go talk to her.”

“Did you get a side job writing relationship advice?”

“I’m doing something right.” He’s smug as he shoots a look at his wife and son. “You should take notes.”

“Yeah, I know you’re the family man icon. No need to rub it in my face.”

“I’d never rub anything in your face. That’s disgusting.”

Back in the day I would have put him in a headlock until he agreed to behave. But that was before he could rival me in brute strength. Besides, we’re adults now.

Micah flicks an olive at me. It bounces off my forehead.

Adulthood or not, I’m now tempted to fire the fruit platter at his head. But Dani went to all the trouble to get this nice spread catered so I won’t.

Gage clears his throat loudly. I think that’s just his way of telling us to quit being assholes but when I look up I see another reason.

Haven is on her way over here. She crosses the yard slowly. Cautiously. Her thumbs are hooked into the belt loops of her jeans and she looks down at the sight of her shoes swishing on the carpet of grass.

Gage and Micah quickly find an excuse to move on. Haven raises her chin, sees me standing alone, and keeps walking anyway.

My heartbeat kicks up a notch. I don’t budge from this spot.

She’s the first to speak after coming to a halt a few feet away. “Hi.”

Her posture is shy. Awkward. Unlike her. She moves her hands to her back pockets and glances at her shoes again.

The first words out of my mouth end up being really fucking stupid.

“You changed your hair.”

Her eyes meet mine. “It made Lita happy. She’s had enough new things to get used to.”

“How’s she doing?”

Haven sucks in her lower lip and casts a quick look at her sister. “Sometimes she’s afraid to go to sleep. She thinks she might not wake up. I know it’s you sending the flowers three times a week. She loves them. So thank you for that.”

“No need.” I want to touch her so badly I can’t fucking stand it. On the far side of the yard by a column of oleanders, Charlotte plays fetch with Total. “I haven’t seen Robert.”

“He has a soccer game today.”

“No doubt Charlotte was disappointed.”

“Was she?”

“Yeah. You know how childhood crushes are.”

It was a nonchalant comment. The shift in her mood might be my imagination. But it seems to me she stiffens for a few seconds.

Haven finally turns my way again. Clouds have now gathered in her pretty eyes. “Conner, I don’t know how you can stand to talk to me after the way I treated you.”

Fucking hell. Doesn’t she know I would swim oceans for her?

Maybe she doesn’t.

Haven looks past me at the food. “I told Lita I’d get her something to eat.”

“Plenty to choose from here. Dani had a name for this setup. A shark town board.”

She cracks up. “That’s not what it’s called.”

I know. I just wanted to make her smile. Success.

I watch as she takes a white ceramic plate from a stack and selects a fork. “Lita will be living at your place?”

She spears a cheddar wedge and adds it to the plate. “For now. I should have found time to look for something better. A tiny apartment in a shitty neighborhood isn’t where she ought to be.”

“Good news. I’ve got some empty bedrooms in my house. Already furnished. Let’s get you both moved in before sunset.”

Her mouth twists into a smirk. “Funny.”

Unable to resist the distance between us, I close in and move a strand of hair, which is now blonde, from her cheek. “Dead serious.”

She sets the plate down. Shuts her eyes.

This isn’t the ideal time and place to pour my heart out.

Who the fuck cares?

I’m not letting this moment go by without clearing up something important.

Haven remains still when my arms circle her. I sweep aside her hair and inhale the beachy scent of her soap.

“I love you, Haven. And I know you love me too.” My lips graze the shell of her ear. “I would wait for you forever, baby.

But don't make me wait too long, okay? Every day without you hurts."

She softens against my chest, rolls her head back, and allows me to hold her close for a moment.

But only for a moment.

22. Haven

No matter how much Lita smiles I can still tell when she's hurting, or at least feeling overwhelmed.

Chalk it up to twin instinct.

She nods with relief, already rising from her chair, when I suggest that it might be time to cut the afternoon short.

"She still gets tired easily," I explain to Dani, who nods and packs up a tray of food for us to take home because the girl is an angel.

Lita accepts hugs from everyone. She bobs her head when Tess promises to steal her for a lunch date next week.

Bree is already gone. She wasn't sure she should stop by at all. She even called to check with me to make sure it was all right. I would never turn her away. She loved my sister. I'm sure that in some ways she still does.

"Allow me to escort you to your carriage." Conner holds his arm out for Lita to take, coaxing a smile out of her.

Lita allows him to hook her elbow. "Funny, I don't remember you being so noble."

"I've evolved. Tell her how much I've evolved, Haven."

"He's evolved," I say. "Even eats with a fork now."

Conner glances over his shoulder. Flashes a winning grin that never fails to turn me inside out. I might fall if I wasn't carrying a tray of cheese and crackers. My skin still feels hot and flushed from the sensation of having his arms around me earlier.

"I love you....Don't make wait too long, okay? Every day without you hurts."

Then he released me with a sigh because my answer was silence.

Why is the truth so difficult to speak?

The truth is that I miss his humor and his strength and his body so desperately I can't think straight.

The truth is that our story began far earlier than he thinks it does.

The truth is that I panicked over my cousins' threats and Conner was right about me. I'm not an island. I don't want to go it alone.

The truth is that I'm ashamed and I want to beg for his forgiveness.

Conner treats Lita like precious cargo and installs her in the passenger seat of my Lexus. I can't hear what he says to her next but whatever it is makes her giggle. The sound stops me in my tracks, which happens sometimes. I'm still amazed that I get to hear my sister laugh again.

Conner closes the passenger door and peers at me over the roof of the car. "You both need to come to the game next Sunday. Got some extra tickets in the prime seats. I'll even steal the game ball for you as a souvenir after I win."

How I would LOVE to go watch him play in person. “Another time. I think the crowd might be a little much for her. But do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Protect your ribs from now on.”

He chuckles over that. “Ah, you were watching yesterday.”

Of course I was watching. I upgraded my sports app package for the sole purpose of streaming his preseason games. In the third quarter he took a nasty direct hit after firing a short pass. He shook it off and played until the end. But I caught a glimpse of him wincing on the sidelines as he touched his ribs and my chest tightened.

“I’ll save you the winning game ball anyway,” he says, eternally cocky.

We stare at one another as the seconds stretch.

All the things that need to be said linger in the late summer air.

Then a dog barks and a tiny fur tornado bounds through the open gate. Charlotte shrieks her dog’s name as he heads for the street but Conner lunges and scoops him up before he even hits the sidewalk.

Charlotte runs over, breathless and half hysterical. “Don’t you ever do that again, Total.”

She takes her dog from Conner and cradles him, kissing his head. Total, however, seems no worse for the wear. He pants happily and shares a doggie smile.

“Remember what I said about protecting your ribs,” I tell Conner and duck into the car.

Within two seconds of flipping the ignition, there's a knock on Lita's window. Conner motions and moves his lips.

I press the control to lower the glass and he pokes his head in. "You didn't say goodbye."

"That's right. I didn't." I shift the car into drive.

Conner snorts a laugh before backing up.

Lita is staring at me. She waits until we've turned a corner before saying, "What was that about?"

"Personal joke."

"I see. You have a few of those, don't you? You and the quarterback."

No easy answer comes to mind. I stall by flipping on the music.

Lita snorts and punches the radio off. "My brain might have put me in a coma but it hasn't melted, little sister. Cough up the drama."

"It's complicated. And you're exactly a hundred and eighty seconds older than me. Doesn't give you seniority."

"Does too. Always has." She gets quiet suddenly. Her smile vanishes. "Stop the car. Stop!"

Lita throws her seatbelt off. She hardly waits for me to brake at the curb before hurtling out the door and running through the grass.

"Lita!" The sight of her running away lights a flame of panic, like somehow I'll lose her on a field of grass in the middle of the ritzy West Emerald enclave of our childhood.

She stumbles and falls to her knees before I catch up.

“You almost gave me a heart attack.” I drop into the grass beside her, my heart pounding.

Lita’s pale legs are splayed out, the hem of her dress riding up mid thigh. Her limbs are gaining strength every day with hard physical therapy but the muscle tone still needs some work. “Total only ran because he wanted to taste freedom for a second.”

“Total? Charlotte’s dog?”

“Yes.” She doesn’t object when I adjust the skirt of her dress to cover her bare legs.

“Do you feel like you don’t have any freedom?”

She stares into the distance. Not moving. Not talking. Just staring. That shouldn’t freak me out but it does.

Finally, she rubs her arms and exhales heavily. “I feel like I’ve been dropped into a dream. A dream about...” She trails off and frowns, shifting with frustration. This is what happens when the things on her mind are slow to ripen into words. “You are grown up. All of you. Tess and Micah have a baby. Dani and Gage are living happily ever after.”

Her chin quivers. She grabs a handful of grass and pulls, the blades tearing from the earth. “And Bree has a wife. I missed everything. There’s no going back.”

Somehow I was slow to realize exactly where we are. Beyond the open green belt where we’re sitting, I can see the wrought iron fences that enclose the grounds of West Emerald Preparatory Academy.

That’s why Lita jumped out of the car. She stares at our old high school as she shreds blades of grass in her long fingers.

When Lita woke from her coma I was ecstatic beyond words. The piece of myself that had been lost was found. I didn't see right away what a difficult road she would have to walk as she coped with all she had lost.

The best I can do is tell her what I know. And stay beside her when she wants to cry.

Getting more comfortable on the grass, I look toward the school and sort through old memories I haven't touched in a while.

"Your last class picture was blown up to poster size and placed on an easel in the courtyard. People left flowers and stuffed animals there every day. When the asshole administrators tried to take the display down Tessie wouldn't let them. She started a petition to keep it and it stayed. Your name was called at graduation. The applause was thunderous. I was given an honorary diploma to keep for you. I still have it."

She listens. There are now grass stains on her dress. The dense ivy covering the fence surrounding our old school is impossible to see through. The school year probably began recently, although the place would still be empty on a Sunday. The only sounds are the calls of nearby quail and the whisper of my sister's breathing.

She's never talked about what it was like, that long period in the void. And I would never ask. The question seems too private.

"Mom isn't coming back," she says.

"No," I agree. "She's not coming back."

Our mother flew into town right after Lita woke up. She stayed for less than forty-eight hours and was primarily concerned with booking press interviews. She sobbed about

her plight as the long suffering mother. She wailed about her joy over Lita's awakening. But when she did actually show up to visit Lita she was impatient, annoyed that Lita couldn't instantly return to being a carefree, happy schoolgirl. She complained that Lita just needs to try harder because 'nobody likes a goddamn basket case' and then Lita burst into tears. That was about all I could take. I escorted my mother from the room and ordered her not to return unless she grew a few ounces of compassion. She got on the next flight and hasn't called since.

"What about Dad?" Lita asks. "Did he talk about me often?"

I won't lie to her. But I don't have the heart to share the complete truth either. "You know how Dad is. Always busy with seventy different things at once and never a model of parental affection. He always made sure you had the best of care."

"How come we can't go visit him?"

I don't have a clear answer on why Aric Marchenko's visitation privileges remain suspended. The lawyer, who sounds like he just finished eating some adrenaline pills every time I call, gives some rapid fire answer about prison rules and politics. The few times my father has been allowed to take a phone call he's guarded, cautious. Doesn't have much to say. He sounds nothing like the east side crime king whose shadow makes men cower in fear.

My father and I haven't spoken about Estes. There are some things that can't be properly discussed with prison officials listening in.

And I've said nothing about Jared and Talon. Same reasons apply, plus I don't want to give those two pricks a

reason to break our unspoken truce. They've been staying out of my hair ever since Lita woke up. It's not hard to figure out why. Her story went internet viral. Everyone wants to hear about the Sleeping Beauty who awakened after more than a decade. I've fielded calls from modeling agencies, a Hollywood producer and even some television show host that wanted to drop her in the jungle with a bunch of strangers. I swear, people are fucking vultures. Anyway, I told them where to stick their offers.

Lita looks at me and I realize I never answered her question. "Dad's lawyer said we should be cleared to visit him soon. After that, he'll be released before you know it."

I'm not nearly as optimistic as I sound. Due to the fact that my father did not sign over any legal authority to me, I've been largely shut out of anything that's happening with him.

Lita is still watching me. "You're different," she says.

"I'm older," I reply and then wish I'd said something else. We're all older. She doesn't need to be reminded that she missed seeing it happen.

But Lita plays with her hair and grows thoughtful. "I was watching you with Conner today."

"I know. But I still won't share the tawdry details."

"Fine. Be a brat." She slaps my leg.

In the old days I would have retaliated. She'd hit back. I'd call her a bitch. We'd battle each other with kicks and scratches and punches galore. Our epic brawls toppled furniture and carved holes into walls.

To me, those times were so long ago they might as well have happened in another life. But to her, not so much.

Lita plucks at the fabric of her dress. “When I saw you together I was thinking about the night of the party. I knew how you felt about him. God, I was so pissed at him after he treated you like you were just some lousy one night hookup.”

“Trust me, Conner didn’t do anything to me at that party that I didn’t ask him to do.”

She shrugs. “I don’t care. He broke your heart so he got to be on my shit list.”

“Well, now I’ve broken *his* heart so you can take him off the list.” That was more than I meant to spill. I hug my knees to my chest, fighting the sudden threat of tears. I know what Lita would say if I told her why. She’d say I’m an idiot for failing to run into his arms today.

She’d be right.

My twin leans against me, touches the side of her head to mine. We must have started out in life this way, reaching out to each other for comfort, even before either of us even knew who we were.

“Do you know what I’d like to do now?” she says.

“What?”

“Go see our little brother. Can we?”

Lita and Robert have been quick to form a special bond. Vito, who has stuck by his promise to guard the kid with his life, brings Robert around often.

“Sure, we can go see him.” I check my phone and estimate he’s got to be finished with his soccer game by now. My former stepmother Aileen has her good points and she never objects to her son spending time with his big sisters. “Maybe the three of us can go out for ice cream.”

We can pretend for a little while like we're a normal family. Without a terrifying last name and a legacy of violence waiting to consume us.

"I'd like that," Lita says in a soft voice.

But she makes no move to leave the grass and neither do I.

For the moment I'm content just to sit here beside my sister.

23. Conner

Even if I didn't play for the Cyclones, Emerald City's stadium would still be my favorite. Nicknamed the Green Castle in a nod to the team's primary color, it's a gleaming modern masterpiece that dominates the skyline on the west side of the city.

Stepping onto the field in the Green Castle is an adrenaline rush like nothing else. I'm always pumped for a game, especially a home game where the crowd adds to the energy by roaring in one euphoric voice.

All of us players feed off that energy. But in this place I feel positively fucking invincible.

Most of my teammates have a game day routine and I'm no different.

Rise at dawn. Drink a protein shake. Take a long run or a bike ride to clear my head. Study the playbook. Read all the coach's last minute notes on what to expect from the opposition.

I'm known for showing up at the stadium early, even before the coaching staff, but I figure that's my role. Everyone looks to the quarterback to set the tone and my team needs to feel confident that I'm putting in the serious work.

The locker room is a hive of commotion as my teammates pace with nervous energy, pray in private corners or tease the shit out of each other to break the tension.

Dillon Pratt strolls by and then backtracks when he sees me hanging out on a bench. He holds his fist out. I meet him halfway, bumping his fist with my own.

His grin is all confidence. “No worries, big guy. Miami is tough but I’m here now.”

I snort out a laugh. “Hallelujah. Victory is in the bag.”

We played together in college. He was the biggest team acquisition this year, fresh off a Super Bowl win where his hands and his speed played a critical role.

Marcus Tulane, arguably the centerpiece of the defensive line, shuts his locker and joins the conversation. “Stay on your toes, Wiseman. Some of the fuckers they’ve got this season aren’t known for playing clean.”

He’s not telling me anything I don’t already know. Today I’ll be facing some real brutes who have no problem putting the hurt on their opponents, even if the move ends with a huge penalty.

Luckily, I don’t go down easily. I’m not even worried about that.

“I call dibs on the game ball,” I say out loud.

Dillon chuckles.

Marcus shrugs. “Sure. You’ll earn the win. Planning to have an auction?”

“Not quite.” I rise from the bench, unwilling to say more.

All week I've been trying and failing to keep my mind on the game.

But I dream about my girl. I wake up in the morning and immediately wish she was next to me. When I hear something funny I think about how she might react.

Yeah, I'm a complete lovesick fool. Not even ashamed.

This impasse has gone on long enough. After the game ends tonight I'm making a beeline for the east side. I've got five days until I need to get on a plane to Boston for next week's away game. I'm planning to use that time to prove to Haven Marchenko that this is it for me. She and I belong together. There won't be another girl who takes her place in my bed or in my heart.

I told Haven that I love her and I meant it. I'll repeat the words every day as long as there's still air in my lungs.

I'm so busy being a sentimental jackass that I'm not paying attention to where I'm going and smack right into Gage as I'm leaving the locker room.

Micah's right beside him, with Dash looking around with wide eyes and gripping his dad's shirt.

"How the hell did you guys get back here?"

Gage flicks at the laminated badge hanging from his neck. "Press pass."

"Who'd you pay off to get one of those?"

"What difference does it make?" Micah growls and transfers his son to my arms. "Hold the kid for a minute. He'll bring you good luck. Plus Tessie wanted a picture."

Dash is a little prince in his green and white Cyclones jersey with my number, twenty-nine, splashed across the front.

His shiny cap of black hair is neatly combed and he wears jeans and tiny green and white sneakers on his feet. Even though he can't quite walk yet I bet he appreciates the style points.

Dash rattles off a loose string of sounds like he's in the middle of telling an important story then shrieks with delight when I spin him around. Micah snaps a photo with his phone.

"Smile, goddammit," my cousin orders.

"Your daddy's cranky," I tell Dash. "Tell your mommy to get him some nachos or something."

Micah scowls. His eternally favorite expression. "Wasn't talking to my son. I was talking to you."

This time when I smile I show all my teeth. I probably look like a Halloween mask. Dash laughs. Micah's scowl withers and he manages to grin before snapping another photo.

A couple of female reporters walk by and say, "AWWWW!"

Gage stands to the side with his phony press credentials and waits for the fuss to die down.

"The whole circus is here," he finally says.

With reluctance, I hand Dash back to his father. "Who? I mean, besides Dani and Tess."

"Alta and Matilda. Henley and Charlotte too."

It's possible my aunts don't even know what a first down is. Aside from the name dropping aspect of having a pro football player for a nephew, they never took any interest in the sport. I wouldn't exactly call them fans now but in the wake of my mother's death they've started showing up sometimes.

Funny, how it's only just occurred to me that my aunts and I have never talked about my mother. Sometimes I forget that Edie was their little sister and they must have gone through their own shit after her very public last act.

The sudden twinge below my right hip isn't real. Just a phantom haunting the place where a bullet once struck.

"LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!"

Blood and screams and betrayal and death.

Not exactly a good place to send your mind minutes before a big game.

"Hey." Micah frowns at me. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." I force a grin and line my words with arrogance. "Just trying to guess the point spread for today's victory. Bet on the lead being at least three touchdowns."

My cousins exchange a glance. I can't fool them. I shouldn't even try.

This season doesn't have the same feel as every other season. Ever since high school, football has been my motivation and my heart. But now my heart has another owner.

This morning I left some tickets at the box office, just in case Haven changed her mind and decided to show up. Tess promised she'd pass the message along.

Micah, naturally, guesses why I'm moping. "Tess talked to her on the drive over here."

We all know who 'her' is. Well, maybe Dash doesn't. He's busy trying to chew on his father's t-shirt.

“Haven’s at the bar today,” Micah says, which surprises me.

“The Back Door is never open on Sundays.”

He shrugs. “I don’t think she’s doing business but she brought in a big screen and invited the staff to watch the game.”

I’m not unhappy about the news. I’d rather know she was here but Haven is hosting a watch party of my game. Definitely a close second to sitting in the stands. And now that I’m positive she’s watching today I’m even more determined to put on a good show.

“We ought to get back to the seats,” Gage says. He jerks his chin at me. “Good luck.”

“See you later.”

Micah lifts Dash’s tiny hand in a mock wave.

No sooner are they out of sight when I’m tapped for the final team huddle before we jog out to the field.

We’ve got a couple of rookies this season, along with a sprinkling of top tier veterans. It’s a good team. Hardworking and scrappy. I’m proud to be a part of it.

“Whose castle is this?” I ask in a booming voice.

“OUR CASTLE!” comes the unanimous chest-pounding answer.

“That’s right. Time to defend it, boys.”

With that, I lead them through the tunnel into the vivid mayhem of the stadium. The crowd was given green towels to wave and from here it looks like thousands of fluttering seaweed strands.

The loudspeaker overpowers all the other noise and calls us one by one.

“And number twenty-nine, our hometown quarterback CON-NER WISE-MAN!”

The roar is deafening.

Lights flash.

Camera lenses gape, each one looking like a gateway to the girl I love. She’s out there watching.

We score a touchdown on the first epic drive. A field goal follows. Miami answers back with a touchdown of their own. We trade triumphs until we’re tied with a minute remaining before the end of the first half.

I’m hell bent on scoring before the buzzer. The ball is ours. A snap and it’s in my hands. The Miami defensive line is effective. No matter which way I look I can’t find a hole. Every receiver is obstructed. Either I can throw the ball away or run with it. The tougher choice will be the one I take. It’s always the one least expected.

Then I see him. Dillon Pratt has broken free and runs toward the end zone. It’s easily a forty yard pass. He turns my way, holds his hands up to show he’s open.

I bend my arm back and fire.

The pass is a thing of beauty, spiraling above heads and chewing up yards as it hurtles to Dillon’s waiting hands.

I’m standing still, admiring the missile I just fired, when a freight train crashes into me from the right side. My eye was on the ball and I never saw the tackle coming.

There’s a fleeting sense of flying through the air, a glimpse of the cloudless sky above.

Then my head hits the ground with brutal force.

A switch flips off.

The darkness is complete.

24. Haven

This vibe in here is a welcome change. The club isn't officially open, but we're not turning away anyone who passes by and wants to come in and watch the game. The stack of pizzas that were delivered half an hour ago are going quickly. Instead of loud music, skin shows and the jeers of men, there's laughter and the sound of a football game in progress.

Andrei set up the monster of a screen on the stage and I'm having trouble taking my eyes off the sight of Conner in bold high definition. He's brilliant. Confident. A born leader on the field.

But the thud of my heart has nothing to do with admiration for his athletic skills.

I miss him.

I want him.

I love him.

Conner knew something about me that I had yet to admit.

I have no desire to go through life without love. Whether there's a fight on the horizon with my cousins, or whether an unknown battle hasn't taken shape yet, I want to be with him. We're better together, both of us.

That day in Dani's backyard, Conner asked me not to make him wait too long. He's been completely patient while I focused on Lita. It's now his turn to be rewarded. He deserves to hear everything, even the parts I've protected him from.

Romance and fate and love and commitment were written off as goals for other people. I convinced myself I wanted none of it. Conner Wiseman changed everything. He's my prince, my knight, my everything.

I won't make him wait any longer.

Lita snaps her fingers. "Know what I want? A beer." She's been having a great time, rosy-cheeked and gobbling up one slice of pizza after another while being treated like a celebrity by the girls. She looks at me like she's waiting for permission.

I can't exactly tell her no. She's long past the legal age of twenty-one. Fiona, sitting across from me, mashes her lips into a sympathetic expression. She understands that things aren't so clear cut when it comes to Lita, who is technically an adult but without the appropriate life experience.

"Coming right up," I tell my sister and rise from the chair. One beer won't do her any harm and I'll water it down.

Bruce sees me heading for the bar and starts to move from his table where he's sharing a pizza with his wife but I wave him away. The staff doesn't have to be here. This is a party and I want them to relax and have fun.

The pile of green Cyclones team t-shirts I purchased have been put to good use. Right now the place doesn't resemble a strip club. It looks more like a college town sports bar. Lita giggles as Destiny, one of the dancers, French braids her hair in two identical plaits.

On the big screen, there's a colossal howl of delight from the crowd and everyone here in the building joins in. I turn around to see the Cyclones have scored another touchdown. Conner jogs over and appreciatively slaps the back of the receiver who caught the ball in the end zone. The camera pans for a close up when he flips his helmet off on his way to the sidelines. The sight of that boy's smile takes my breath away. Always has, even when I resisted.

The excited voice of the announcer sings his praises. "Wiseman is at the height of his abilities and arguably the best quarterback in the game right now. Even this early in the season it's not unreasonable to say that the Cyclones will be the team to beat this year..."

I'll be there in person for his next game. As much as I'm enjoying this laid back atmosphere, I wish I was watching live, screaming until my throat is raw every time number twenty-nine steps onto the field. I bet Conner could hear me even above the racket of fifty thousand fans. I can be loud as fuck when I want to be.

On impulse, I pull my phone from my back pocket and dash off a text.

Can I see you tonight?

The phone is on its way back to my pocket when I regret the question.

It's just not good enough, gives no hint of all the churning emotions that need to be put into words so he understands just how much he means to me.

I miss you.

He won't see the messages for hours but he will see them eventually.

Tonight I'll tell him the rest in person.

A shadow falls over the open entryway just as I finish filling Lita's glass. We've had a few wanderers stroll in today, locals who happened to be walking by and were curious about why the doors were open. They are welcome to come in and watch the game as long as they cause no trouble.

However, when I look up and see Sophie, a piece of my good mood fades. My cousin's wife has gone from being an object of pity to a real pain in the ass. She picks fights and alienates the staff and lately I just don't have the energy to deal with her. The final straw was when she threw a wild tantrum and lashed out at Fiona.

As I watch her sashay through the door, I brace for another surprise in case her shitty husband is with her, but it appears she has come alone. Sophie scans the room with a sulky attitude and spots me at the bar.

Because I'm in no mood for a scene, I offer her a friendly wave. Call it an olive branch, to repair the fact that I told her not to come back until she learns how to behave like a fucking adult.

Sophie wobbles over on silver heels, huge sunglasses covering her eyes, her hair a much more bleached shade of blonde than the last time she was here.

Now when I look past her I can see a black Lincoln Navigator idling at the curb. My wariness increases. Jared owns a fleet of those for his men to use.

I cut a quick glance in Andrei's direction and see that he's already on high alert, prowling over to the door to keep a grim eye on the vehicle in case anyone else exits. He gestures to Alex, who has mercifully forgotten about me and now dates

Layla. Alex sets down his pizza slice and obediently trundles over to stand at Andrei's side.

Sophie pushes her sunglasses up and gazes around with obvious distaste. "You're having a party."

It's a huge effort to curb my annoyance. "Hey, Soph. Why don't you take a seat and have some pizza?"

Her nose quivers like a rabbit's. "I'm allergic to gluten. And I wasn't invited."

"We have hot wings too. And I just invited you."

She huffs and crosses her arms, her expression darkening to a glare as she takes in the sight of my sister laughing with a bunch of the girls.

She might be glaring at Fiona, who still wears a bandage on her forearm to cover the ten stitches needed after Sophie swung a broken vodka bottle like a samurai sword.

"No," Sophie says, then sniffs. "I've got someone waiting for me."

The more I watch, the more I think Sophie isn't really pouting in Fiona's direction after all. No, I could swear she's scowling at Lita.

Which makes no sense.

Sophie has shown absolutely no interest in Lita. They've only met once for a couple of minutes and then Sophie flounced away.

"What a bummer you can't stay." I'm not bummed in the slightest.

A shard of my sarcasm might have penetrated Sophie's dim brain because she turns her wrath in my direction. "I

know you don't care. Always thinking about yourself instead of thinking about what's best for the family."

Yeah, I don't have the patience for this shit. What's best for the family right now is for her to get out of my sight before I physically toss her into the street.

I'm about to tell her that I hope the door hits her ass on the way out when a glint of green catches my eye. Sophie doesn't have time to pull back before I dive across the counter and snatch her hand for a closer look.

My mouth goes dry as I stare at my dead uncle's ring loosely hanging onto her right thumb. "Where the hell did you get this?"

She yanks her hand away, scratching my wrist with the point of a candy-colored acrylic nail. "It was a present. It's mine." She twists the ring around her thumb. "It's for family loyalty. You should know that. Why don't *you* have one?"

I'm forced to remind myself that she's not very bright. Otherwise, I might lose my temper. Jared must have given her the ring, a cheap ploy to keep her in line so he can go off and do whatever the fuck he wants.

Or maybe she stole it. Who the hell cares? I just want her out of my way.

"Feel free to grab a pizza slice on your way out," I say. Even Sophie should be able to interpret the meaning.

Her nostrils flare. "Fine. I guess you don't care about being friends anymore. You don't know who your friends are anyway. And you don't need me now that you have your precious sister back."

That's about all I can take. The girl is a spoiled brat with a lot of growing up to do and if she sticks around any longer I'll

say something both cruel and true.

I grab a napkin and start walking away. “Bye, Sophie.”

When I’m back at Lita’s table I glance over my shoulder in time to see Sophie kick the door with her right foot. Not really a smart thing to do while wearing stilettos. She doubles over with a cry of pain and then limps out in her ridiculous heels.

“Good riddance,” mutters Fiona and rubs at the bandage on her arm.

Lita is mystified. “What was that about?”

“Nothing.” I set the beer down in front of her. “Just the trash taking itself out.”

Fiona snorts. Lita takes a gulp of her beer. And then another.

“Take it easy,” I tell her. “You’ll be drunk in ten minutes.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “This isn’t my first beer. Don’t you remember all those high school parties?”

I roll my eyes back at her. “As if I went to parties.”

Except for one. The party where I finally caught Conner Wiseman’s eye.

Up on the big screen, the Cyclones have the ball for a chance to take the lead before half time. My eyes are glued to Conner as the ball is snapped. He looks for an open receiver but the two teams are locked in a death grip in every direction. Then Dillon Pratt breaks away and runs toward the end zone. I don’t know how Conner is able to see past all the bodies and the havoc but he does and fires away.

I jump from my chair as the ball sails through the air. One second feels like an hour.

The pass was perfect. And Pratt's sure hands are a legend. He catches the ball and without missing a step runs the short distance to the end zone. The Cyclones take the lead.

I'm not too embarrassed to scream and jump up and down. But I'm puzzled when the celebration in the end zone comes to an abrupt halt. Dillon Pratt throws the ball down and sprints back to the field. The announcer stops speaking mid sentence.

Then the camera pans. The sight is a nightmare. The excitement has drained from the announcer's voice.

"Wiseman is down on the field. The ball was already out of his hands when the hit came from Miami's Aiden McDonald. He's not moving, folks. He's not moving. There's Pratt crouched at his side, now screaming for the medics. You can hear a pin drop here in Em City's Green Castle. Still no movement from Wiseman."

Horror is too simple a word. It does no justice to the agony of watching the man I love lying unconscious in the middle of a football field.

As a teenager, Conner's parents were cautioned not to allow him to play a sport with such a high likelihood of suffering a head injury. The brain damage he suffered as a result of his childhood accident makes him more vulnerable in the case of a concussion.

As I silently beg for a miracle, Conner's own confession plays in my mind, adding to the torment.

"A hard blow to the head would be a bigger deal to me than it might be to someone else. But the game is what I do. I doubt I'd know who I am without football..."

Lita understands my anguish. She stands at my side and circles an arm around my waist. Without it, I might very well

fall.

A stretcher is run out onto the field. When Conner's limp body is lifted onto the stretcher I clap my hand over my mouth, smothering a wail of heartbreak.

The game announcer says words but to me they are just garbled noise. Onscreen, the only movement is from the medical team that rushes Conner off the field. The players stand still. The crowd is silent. Right now it feels as if the entire world has paused.

My phone begins buzzing in my pocket. Whipping it out with a silent prayer, I see it's Tess. "Please tell me he's all right. Please, Tessie."

She struggles to speak. "Haven, we're trying to find out what's going on."

Tess pauses when a murmured male voice says something on her end and she says, "Oh my god," before coming back to the line.

"An ambulance is taking him to Em City Memorial Hospital." Her voice cracks. "He's still unconscious."

I feel like a hole has opened up under my feet. I would have sunk to the floor if not for my sister holding onto me. "How bad is it?"

"I don't know. But he's strong, Haven. He's so strong." She chokes off a sob. "He'll be okay."

She sounds as if she's trying to convince herself of this fact more than she's trying to convince me. A baby starts to cry. Tess tries to soothe her son but she's unable to stop crying herself.

"I'm going to the hospital," I tell Tess.

“Yes,” she says. “We’ll meet you there.”

“Call me the second you hear anything.”

“I will. See you soon.”

I have to find my keys. I can’t remember where I left them. My office maybe. I stumble in that direction but Fiona stops me.

“I’ll drive you. No arguments.” She shakes her own set of keys and then barks out an order to Andrei to lock up after everyone leaves.

I feel a dim sense of gratitude toward her as I allow Lita to steer me to the parking lot where we all climb into Fiona’s red Corolla.

In the backseat, I sit beside my sister and flash back to the countless times we shared a backseat on car rides as children. Fiona honks at a couple of idling pedestrians and makes a right turn.

She looks at me in the rearview mirror. “We’ll be there in no time.”

Lita reaches for my hand and gives it a comforting squeeze.

I nod my head. It’s terrible to remember that this hollow devastation is not unknown to me. I felt this way once before, right after I was told my sister might not ever awaken from her coma.

“I made him wait too long, Lita.”

She frowns with confusion. “What?”

“Conner said he loved me and begged me not to make him wait too long. But I didn’t listen. I made him wait too long.”

Lita, always the more sensitive twin, has no shield from my tidal wave of grief and she starts to cry too. I look out the window at the sight of the world continuing to turn even though I can't bear to say another word.

In truth, I don't even know if I'm still breathing.

25. Haven

Fiona cuts through Emerald City like she's auditioning for NASCAR. She pulls up to the hospital's emergency entrance and I barely wait for the car to roll to a stop before leaping out. I'm so intent on running into the building that I nearly miss seeing Dani standing outside until she shouts my name.

"Tess asked me to wait for you." She takes my arm. "Come inside."

The lobby is a carnival of people who look like they came straight from a tailgating party. Dani tows me over to the far side of the room, where Micah paces with Dash in his arms and Gage leans against a wall with a dismal expression.

"We don't know much yet," Dani says and now that I take a good look at her it's clear she's been crying. "I'm sorry, Haven. Please stay with us while we wait for word."

Impulsively, I envelope her in a hug. She stiffens in surprise. After all, we have kind of a stormy history. And of all the words people use to describe me, 'hugger' is not among them.

But Dani is one of Conner's best friends. She's part of his family. She's hurting too. In those fleeting seconds when she hugs me back, we're united in worry and fear.

In addition to the anxious Cyclones fans wandering around the emergency room lobby, there are also restless reporters and security guards posted at strategic locations. On the other side of the glass doors a pair of cops argues with a news crew until they move their boxy truck out of sight.

“Tessie sweet talked her way into the back,” Micah says. “No one would tell us anything and they’ve got the place locked down. But you know how persuasive Tessie can be.”

Dash, who can’t possibly know why all the adults in his life are so worried, lays his head on his father’s shoulder and smiles at me.

Gage departs from his post at the wall and reaches for his wife. Dani settles under his strong arm and blinks away her tears.

I’m afraid to ask this next question. “He hasn’t woken up, has he?”

Dani chews her lip and shakes her head. “One of his teammates confirmed he was still unconscious when he was being loaded into the ambulance.”

“Fuck.”

It’s as good a word as any to describe this nightmare. Nobody raises an eyebrow over the profanity.

I might crumble if I look any of them in the eye right now. Taking a few steps toward the window, I stare out at the ugly hospital parking lot and think of Conner’s smile and his constant jokes and the way he brushes his knuckles across my cheek because he knows the slightest touch from him makes me shiver.

“Haven.” Lita’s voice is so similar to mine that no one could ever tell us apart on the phone. Only our personalities

were opposite but to look at us, we were clones. Back when we were in grade school we switched places more than once but the game quit being fun when even our parents didn't notice.

The universe granted me one miracle when Lita woke up. I don't care if I'm pushing my luck. Right now I'm begging for a second miracle.

My twin lays a hand on my shoulder. My strength multiplies when she's close. But I could never be strong enough to withstand losing Conner. No, that is a loss I couldn't bear. If a choice had to be made, I'd take his place in a second. Just like I always swore I would have taken Lita's.

Of course, such an offer would never be accepted. That's not how the world works. And even if it were, the trade would not be accepted. Lita and Conner are much better people than I could ever hope to be.

"I'll never waste another day."

It takes a second to understand that I've actually spoken the words out loud.

They're all staring at me now. Lita. Dani and Gage. Micah and even little Dash.

Yet I'm not ashamed. My worst flaw is that I've failed to speak the truth often enough.

"There's Tess!" Dani detaches from Gage and practically tackles Tess as she bursts through a set of double doors.

"Conner's awake," Tess says with breathless relief.

It seems everyone is listening. Cheers rebound from all over the waiting room.

Dani dissolves into emotional sobs and clutches her best friend. Lita wraps her arms around me.

“Thank you, thank you,” I whisper to no one in particular.

On the heels of this good news, Dani and Gage leave the room to go call Matilda. Apparently Charlotte was so distraught over the sight of her cousin’s collapse on the field that her parents had to bring her home.

Tess now holds Dash. She urges us to follow her to a row of vacant seats. While discreetly nursing the baby she tells us what she knows.

She was not allowed to actually see Conner. It’s not every day the hospital gets a patient as high profile as the Cyclones quarterback so they are being exceptionally strict and ‘cousin’s wife’ is not considered to be a close enough relation to gain access. But Tess overheard the doctors say that Conner woke up when the ambulance reached the hospital. She also heard that Conner’s medical team was communicating with his father, who now lives in Kansas and will be flying out tonight. Tess, always enterprising, knew that Conner’s father owned an insurance brokerage and tracked down his cell number. He told her that Conner will need a lot of tests over the next few days but the fact that he’s conscious and able to speak is a very positive sign after the way he was knocked out cold.

“It was a fucking cheap shot,” Micah growls as he broods against the wall. “He didn’t even have the ball anymore. The piece of shit who sideswiped him ought to be tossed from the game for good.”

“Amen to that,” wheezes some old guy whose gut nearly cracks through his Cyclones jersey.

He was obviously listening to our conversation but I doubt anyone minds. I know I don't mind. Conner could use all the goodwill he can get. "Guess you heard the Cyclones pulled out a win. Miami ought to take the next plane out of town if they know what's good for them."

The game outcome means nothing to me at this point. But I know Conner will be pleased when he hears the update.

Fiona finds us and asks if I want her to bring Lita home. Naturally, I'm going nowhere until I see Conner, hospital rules be damned. But my sister stubbornly shakes her head and refuses to leave my side.

"I'm not going anywhere," she says.

"You go ahead," I tell Fiona. "I'll call a car later."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks for burning rubber to get me here."

She cocks her head with a sad smile. "When you see our hero, tell him he still owes me an autograph."

"Will do."

When Fiona is gone, I nudge my sister with my elbow. "You didn't have to stay."

Her mouth puckers, like she's insulted. "If you're here then I'm here."

Dani and Gage return and take the seats right across from us. Dani places a hand on her belly and watches Tess as she finishes nursing. Tessie starts to shift the sleepy Dash to her shoulder but without a word Micah reaches out and relieves her of baby duty.

Dani holds her husband's hand and still watches her best friend. Sadness now tints her pretty face. "We've seen a lot of this hospital, haven't we?"

Tess glances at Micah and a wrinkle of distress appears between her brows. "Too much," she agrees with a sigh.

They are thinking of the attack on Micah. And the one on Gage too, now that I'm remembering. He once took a knife to the chest to protect Dani. Conner has joked about a curse in their family. A long list of awful, violent and depraved events that span generations. He and his cousins nicknamed themselves the Wicked West Rejects, a nod to the fact that they would always stand united, come what may.

I know all about shitty legacies. I know about the useless pain of watching helplessly as someone you love suffers. I know about the evil humans can do.

But I refuse to believe in curses.

Futures are not set in stone.

"I can hold him," Lita tells Micah. "I mean, if your arms are getting tired."

There is zero chance that Micah's thickly muscled arms are weary of holding his baby son. But he hands the sleeping Dash over willingly, nestling him with care in Lita's waiting arms. Tess tucks a yellow receiving blanket around the baby and my sister's face takes on a soft glow. Just like when she used to hold our baby brother.

Dani's phone keeps blowing up. Apparently Matilda expects updates every five minutes. Dani finally gets annoyed enough to turn the phone off and bury it in her purse.

It's been over an hour and there's been no new information. Tess tries to call Conner's father again but it's

likely he's already on a plane.

Tess, never one to sit idly and wait for something to happen, paces and huffs and finally pulls me out of my chair. "Come on."

"Are we storming the security doors? If so, count me in."

"Maybe." With her free hand she grabs Dani. Then she remembers that we're leaving some members of our party behind. She zeroes in on Micah and Gage, who were talking quietly but are now giving us baffled looks. "You guys stay here, okay? We have a better chance of success on our own. Besides, you need to keep Lita company."

She's not exactly giving them room to argue.

Gage crosses his arms. "Man, your wife enjoys giving orders."

Micah smirks. "Think of it as a mandatory suggestion." But the look he gives Tess is full of pride.

After dragging me and Dani across the room, Tess pauses to take stock of the staff milling around behind the reception desk.

"Okay, I have an idea." She starts wiggling her wedding ring off her finger.

She and Dani must be a hundred percent in tune with each other because Dani gasps and says, "Brilliant. But use mine. Your hands are too small."

I have no idea what they are talking about. The next thing I know, Dani is pushing a ruby ring on the fourth finger of my left hand. The instant she's finished, Tess seizes my wrist.

"Go along with everything I say," she hisses.

“What?”

“Everything I say,” she repeats, then stops a young nurse wearing pink scrubs the same color as the frame of her eyeglasses. “Hi, can you help us please?”

The woman straightens up, suddenly eager, like she was hoping to run into someone who would ask that very question. She adjusts her glasses. “Yes, what can I do?” Her eyes shift to me, no doubt looking for evidence that I’m injured or having an appendicitis attack.

I try to appear distressed, at least until I know what Tess has in mind.

Tess pulls me closer to the nurse and keeps her voice hushed. “We *really* need to get in to see Conner Wiseman.”

A frown displaces the friendly look. “That won’t be possible.”

“Oh, please help us. This is his WIFE!”

I look at Dani. She nods her encouragement to indicate I’m the ‘wife’ in question.

“His wife?” The woman’s eyes bug out.

“Yes. Shhh.” Tess furtively looks around like she’s sharing state secrets. “The news hasn’t been made public yet. But look.” She holds my hand under the woman’s nose.

The large ruby in the center of the ring glitters under the overhead lights.

I try to look wifely. “We were only married two days ago.”

“It was a beautiful ceremony,” Dani says.

“Very private,” Tess adds. “Only family was there. No press. They were going to make an announcement next week.”

The nurse is still doubtful but she's in the process of being swayed by the romance. "I'll have to check with Mr. Wiseman and his doctors."

"Yes, please do that." Tess flashes a winning smile. "Tell Conner that his wife is waiting to see him. Thank you so much!"

"Stay here," the nurse says before briskly disappearing through a set of double doors.

Dani grabs my hand with a nod of encouragement.

"This will work," Tess says with confidence.

She knows what she's talking about. Within a few minutes the nurse returns, happy to share the good news.

"Follow me," she says and holds the security door open until I walk through it.

26. Haven

Hospitals will always remind me of the unbearable days that followed Lita's coma. The smell of antiseptic. The view of wide, bright hallways. The sight of medical staff bustling around in comfortable scrubs. These scenes would all become very familiar to me over the years.

I'm not paying attention to where we're going. A left here, a right there, a labyrinth of hallways. My only purpose is to obediently follow the nurse in the pink scrubs who has promised to bring me to Conner.

She pauses and presses an elevator button. "He was just moved to a private room."

I nod without a word because I'm paranoid that if I say the wrong thing then I'll be stopped from seeing Conner and I'll absolutely have to fight someone if that happens.

"So, tell me." The nurse inches close enough for me to read the name on her hospital badge. Penny Pope. The corners of her eyes crinkle when she smiles. "How did you two meet?"

There's no easy answer to that question. "I've always known Conner."

This is not quite accurate but I don't care enough to elaborate. She waits to hear if I'll say more but luckily the elevator dings and the doors slide open.

"This way," she says and after a few more turns she stops in front of a door that's no different than dozens of other doors we have passed. She raps twice on the wood and twists the silver handle without awaiting a reply.

"Congratulations on the wedding."

It's the last thing I hear her say before I rush into Conner's room. The door whispers shut at my back.

He sits up in bed and although the side of his face is slightly puffy, he's undamaged and beautiful. He waves. "Hey there, angry girl. Guess I was knocked out for longer than I thought. Seems like I've acquired a wife. I was hoping she was you."

Most people look vulnerable and weak when lying in a hospital bed. Conner, even dressed in some absurd powder blue hospital gown, looks like a sun kissed god. The bed seems like it should be inadequate to hold him. That lazy grin of his instantly heals the broken pieces of my heart.

I want to leap into bed beside him and pledge my undying love. But he did just suffer a serious concussion. Conner's blue eyes follow me as I pull a chair over to his bedside.

He's unhappy with this arrangement. Before I get settled into the chair his arm shoots out and snakes around my waist. He lifts me with no effort and pulls me into bed beside him.

"That's better," he says and locks his hands around my body so I can't move.

Not that I want to move. With the warmth of his body and the thud of his heartbeat under my palm I feel like I can take a

deep breath for the first time since I saw him fall.

“Are you okay?” I hear the crack in my voice and can’t stop a tear from rolling down my cheek.

He looks down at me and swipes at the tear with his thumb. “I’m fine, baby. Just got the wind knocked out of me.”

I sit up and examine him more closely. My fingertips brush over the swelling on his face. Tenderly, my fingers explore his head, needing the reassurance that he really is in one piece. “Conner, that was terrifying.”

“Hush. Everything is all right now.”

“You were unconscious. And I thought-”

He doesn’t let me finish, choosing to possess my lips with a rough kiss. His tongue demands access to mine and I don’t hold back, kissing him with all the passionate desperation I’ve been storing for all these weeks we’ve been apart.

Never again will I deny him anything.

“I’m sorry.” I kiss his lips, his jaw, his cheeks, breathless with the need to cover every inch of him with kisses to make up for it all. “I’m sorry and today I was so afraid that I waited too long to tell you.”

Conner pulls back and curls one big hand around the back of my neck. His eyes now simmer with intensity. “What is it you want to tell me, Haven?”

“Everything,” I whisper, captive in his grip.

He approves of this plan with a nod and relaxes his hand. “I’m listening.”

But then he winces and flops back on the pillow with his eyes screwed shut.

“What’s wrong?” I’m already scrambling out of bed in a panic. “Hold on, I’ll call a doctor.”

“No.” He grabs my wrist and cracks an eye open. “Just a wave of dizziness. It’ll pass.”

An IV drips liquid into his left arm. Aside from the slight damage to his face there are no other visible signs of injury. But I remember his words all too well about the possible cost of a head injury. A renewed sense of fear eats away at my stomach.

Conner’s forehead has broken out in a cold sweat. Grabbing a bunch of paper towels from a silver dispenser on the wall, I run the stack under a stream of cold water at the sink and gently mop his brow.

He’s amused by my clumsy nursing efforts. “I think it was worth the ambulance ride to get this kind of treatment.”

“Bullshit. You better never scare me like that again.” I curl up next to him once more. “What have the doctors said?”

His grin wavers. Then disappears completely. He looks away, facing the window where dusk falls over Em City. “A few minutes ago I had a chat with the chief neurologist. He strongly advised that I ought to quit football for good. He said the risk of taking another knock to the head is too great. Next time I might not wake up.”

My chest tightens in panic. “What will you do?”

He shrugs. “Get a new doctor.”

“I’m serious, Conner.”

“So am I. And you should take those jeans off.” He flicks the button on my pants to make his point. “You’ll be more

comfortable. But you can keep the shirt on for a little while. I like that you're wearing my number."

"Wiseass." I push his hands away from my pants.

"Built into the name. Wiseman. Wiseass. Whatever you want to call me, I'll *come*."

"Oh my god." I roll my eyes and swing my leg around to straddle him. We need to be face to face for this conversation. "Quit thinking about sex for a minute."

He looks me over with obvious hunger and runs his hands over my hips. "And you think this is the best position to get me to stop thinking about sex?"

I take his hands from my body and hold them in mine. His are so much larger. Threading our fingers together, I keep my gaze trained on the sight of our joined hands as I collect the words I need to speak.

Then I look into the eyes of the man I love, take a deep breath, and begin our story...

"Conner, we met for the first time as children on a West Emerald basketball court. It was the spring before your accident. I was ten and you were eleven. You were nice to me. You loved basketball and taught me everything you knew. I didn't really have any friends so it meant the world when the most popular boy in school treated me like an equal. We started hanging out every Saturday when I was supposed to be in ballet class. You were funny. And smart. You would tell me stories about all the trouble you'd get into with Micah and Gage. You listened when I told you how it felt to be a twin who wasn't nearly as well liked as her sister.

Once you asked me about my birthday. When you heard the date was June twenty-ninth you made me a promise. You

swore that someday when you made the varsity basketball team, you'd wear number twenty-nine. For me.

“The day before my birthday I was waiting for you at the basketball court but you never showed because you were in the hospital. Tessie was the one who told me about your accident but she didn't know we were friends. No one did. Except Lita. And even she didn't know everything.

“But I thought about you all summer. I heard you had to go through months of therapy after losing parts of your memory. We didn't see each other again until school resumed. Then there you were, standing beside Micah and Gage like nothing was wrong. I was so relieved. Despite all the rumors you looked just fine. I went running to you, shouting your name, but when you looked up I knew right away that you had no idea who I was. The fall from the tree had robbed you of many things. Our friendship was just one of them.

“And for years I watched you, longed for you, even though you had no idea. I saw you abandon basketball and become a football star instead. I saw you choose the number twenty-nine and thought that that somewhere deep inside there had to be a part of you that remembered me.

“Then there was the party. Finally, you noticed me and I was in your arms. A dream come true. All those years I'd been so sure that if I could just get you alone then all the memories had to come flooding back. You'd understand that we were meant to be together. Of course, that was never a reasonable wish. And it's not what happened. When I saw you the next week at school you were in the courtyard talking to other girls. Like always. You smiled at me but when I asked you to the Emerald Ball you had to tell me you already had a date. That's when I finally understood that I'd been kidding myself. I

couldn't shake the agony of another rejection in my life. Believe me, I'm aware that I should have just told you everything, instead of feeling crushed and lashing out. You didn't understand. Everything rotten that has happened between us, both then and now, has been my fault. But you are still what you always were. The boy of my dreams. I love you, Conner. I love you so much I can hardly breathe. I didn't realize that today. I knew it all along."

Any length of silence after a weighty confession that bares your soul would be excruciating.

This one stretches on for longer than I'd like it to.

Conner doesn't stop me when I release his hands and scoot back a few inches.

"Are you angry?" I'm terrified of his answer.

"No."

"Do you want me to leave?"

He sniffs out a dark laugh and turns his head to the window again.

Maybe it was too much, unloading all this angst on him on a day like this. If he needs some time to process it all I'll have to accept that.

His head whips back when he feels me moving away. With lightning quick reflexes he grabs me with both hands before I can gasp. He hauls me forward until my chest smacks into his. I don't even have room to squirm. His arms are a vice, keeping me in place.

"You're not going anywhere," he says. "Not today or any other day."

I feel the rise and fall of his breath, almost as fast as mine.
“Okay.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

“I thought it would hurt you, to be reminded of all you’d forgotten.”

Conner doesn’t budge, refusing to let me escape scrutiny.
“And why did you chase me away?”

I’d rather keep him out of that mess but I owe him the truth. “I needed to protect Lita. And the rest of you.”

A storm brews in his eyes now. “From who?”

“Terrible people. It’s the family business, Conner. I shouldn’t say more than that.” I try to look away but he seizes my chin and demands to be faced.

“You listen to me. Your business is now my business too. This is what love means. *We* are the family. You and me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I shouldn’t be on the verge of crying again but a tear leaks out anyway.

He softens and brushes his lips across mine. “I do love you, Haven Marchenko.”

“Conner.” I throw my arms around his neck and my sob shakes the very foundation of my soul. “You once told me you wouldn’t know who you are without football. I wouldn’t know who I am without you.”

He answers with no hesitation. “I’m yours. That’s my job now. It’s us forever.”

My head rests on his strong shoulder as he rubs my back.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper into his neck. “I’m so sorry. I’ve made mistakes but I’ll make it up to you.”

He breathes deeply and kisses the top of my head. “I know you will.”

Minutes pass and I have no desire to move, although at some point I need to tell Tess that all is well. I’m sure they’re all out there anxiously waiting for word. I’ll get to that shortly, and I can ask Tess if she’d mind hosting Lita tonight. I’m not comfortable leaving Lita on her own on the east side and she’ll be safe with Tess and Micah. She’ll also enjoy the opportunity to spend more time with baby Dash.

“Do you think I’ll be allowed to stay here?” I ask. I hope the answer is yes because I’d have to be dragged away. I’m not leaving this man, not ever again.

He teasingly tugs a section of my hair. “I’ll insist. After all, you’re my wife now. You have to live with me.”

As I burrow even closer to his strong body, I have no intention of arguing with anything he just said.

27. Conner

The backyard is full of people but my eyes only follow her.

Haven sits on a picnic blanket in the grass. Dani and Tess occupy the blanket with her. All three of them break into laughter as baby Dash makes another jailbreak attempt to crawl to freedom, only to be thwarted by his mother.

Dash scrunches up his little elfin face but Tess distracts him with a toy turtle that makes music. Interested, he sits up and bangs his fist on the colorful buttons speckling the turtle's back. He's already taken his first steps. Any day now he'll be racing around like a champ.

Which reminds me that I need to put a fence around the pool. I'll look into that this week. After all, I'll have plenty of time on my hands now that I'm technically unemployed.

Haven swings her hair over her shoulder and leans on her palm. Dani says something that makes her throw her head back and laugh. It's cool to see those two on such friendly terms.

My girl finally looks up and finds me sitting here in the shade. She blows me a kiss. How cute. If only she knew that in my mind she's totally naked and unable to speak because I'm in the middle of fucking the thoughts out of her head.

I can't wait to make that vision a reality.

A hospital room isn't exactly the height of privacy. We still got some action because there will never be a day when we can lie in the same bed and keep our hands off each other, but we had to play it safe to avoid traumatizing the staff.

Tonight, however, all bets are off. We're home and I'm making her mine in every filthy sense of the word.

"Quit perving on my sister." Lita slaps my knee and flops into a cushioned patio chair.

"No way," I scoff. "Get used to it."

She stretches her long legs and props her feet up on a table. "Your dad flew back this morning?"

"He did. It was time." My father decided to remain in town until I was released from the hospital. He even stayed here at the house.

Lita plucks a sprig of mint from her lemonade glass. "He's a nice guy, your dad. Very different from my father, that's for sure. But all the news crews and weird ass photographers that have been stalking the neighborhood were freaking him out."

"My dad hates cities. Hates crowds even more. That's why he moved back to his tiny hometown in Kansas. The publicity surrounding my mother's death was way too much for him to deal with, plus having a pro athlete for a son means everyone knows his name."

"But he's proud of you. Talks about you constantly."

Of that I have no doubt. I wouldn't say my dad and I are close, yet I understand that wherever he is, he's on my side. It's good to know.

"How do you like your room?" I ask. "You all unpacked?"

She sips her lemonade. “Love it. Went on a shopping spree with Dani and Tess. We broke the bank redecorating.” Lita sets her glass down and fidgets. “Conner, it’s really decent of you to let me move in. I’m sure you weren’t looking for a package deal that includes a helpless sister sidekick.”

“Don’t say that. I’m glad you’re here. We’re family now. Your sister is my wife.”

When she rolls her eyes she looks exactly like her twin. “That’s just a convenient lie you told the hospital so you could grope her in your room.”

“Not a lie. It’s reached internet news status. That makes it true.”

She laughs. “How are you feeling?”

“Damn near a hundred percent. Just some dizzy spells now and then.”

“Yeah, I still get those even now. It’s why my doctors won’t yet clear me to drive again.” She exhales. The whir of the ceiling fan lifts a few strands of her light hair as she watches me with curious eyes. “No more football, huh?”

“Not for me.” After a shitload of tests and second opinions and third opinions, every doctor was in agreement. The next hit might a killer. I can’t let that happen. I’ve got too much to live for. The news has shaken the foundations of the sports world.

The worst part of giving up football is the knowledge that I’ve let the team down. The Cyclones built their plan around me. This was supposed to be our season.

On the other side of the backyard, Dash throws his toy turtle. He’s got a pretty good arm. It lands in the pool. Haven

scampers over and fishes it out. She wrinkles her nose, making a funny face as she hands the turtle back to him.

He's delighted. Throws it in the pool again. Definitely his father's son.

Lita decides that she wants to be part of Dash's fan club so she leaves me with my thoughts on the patio and joins her sister on the picnic blanket. Haven smiles at her twin and makes room.

She doesn't understand the things she does to my heart.

How could I have ever forgotten her?

Yet when she told me the whole story in the hospital, I knew. Couldn't remember. Couldn't picture it all clearly, but I *knew*.

I've always belonged with her.

Footsteps crunch and Micah stalks into view. He searches for his wife and son, then sniffs out a laugh when he sees Dash hamming it up for his audience. Charlotte parades around the yard with Total in her arms. She points out the sights and talks to him like he's a person.

Meanwhile, Gage is currently trapped by Matilda over by the gazebo. Gage is clearly not listening to a word my aunt is saying as she carries on, flapping one arm in the air for emphasis while the other arm holds tightly to her eternally confused husband. Gage sends a scowl of disgust this way.

Micah snickers and claims a chair. "Better him than me."

"What's your mother harassing him about anyway?"

"Pestering him to sit on the board again. She'll be pestering you too so stay alert."

“Thought she gave up on turning us into corporate minions.”

“Nah. She might have given up on me. But she figures you two can still be beaten down.”

“Well, I am looking for a new career. Maybe I’ll listen to her pitch.”

He shoots me a quick look, then faces away again. I could almost detect anxiety in his face, which isn’t likely. Micah is as anxious as your typical lion.

“I chased those fuckers off,” he finally says.

“Why didn’t you invite me? I was unaware that there were fuckers to chase.”

“Damn reporters skulking like rats.”

“Do rats skulk?” Honestly, I don’t know.

He kicks my leg with the toe of his shoe. Sometimes he’s like a gigantic, ornery toddler.

Micah glances at his wife to see if she’s paying attention. “Don’t tell Tessie that I kicked you. I promised to be extra nice.”

“All right. But that sounds kind of dull. Anyhow, did the fuckers leave in peace?”

“Sure. At first they refused to move and kept shouting football questions but once I started waving my handless arm they got scared and ran off.”

“Good. But I’ll have to answer the football questions sooner or later.”

Aside from a ten minute press conference at the hospital yesterday afternoon, I haven’t made a public statement. I

turned my phone off because my agent kept calling every five minutes with offers. I could appear on Good Morning America. Or I could get interviewed by Oprah. There was even an idea pitched to star in a reality television show, like I'm a Real Housewife of Kardashian Whatever.

No thanks.

All I want to do is love my girl and maybe find a hobby or two.

Micah's watching me. "I'm really sorry about football. I know how much it means to you."

"Meh, I choose to look on the bright side. Now I'll have plenty of time for landscaping projects."

Micah doesn't smile. Guess I should improve my jokes. His intense blue eyes can be a little unnerving sometimes when he stares in silence.

"You think I ought to build a shed in the corner?" I point to an empty spot in the yard. "One of those sheds that looks like a barn. Or maybe I'll take up tennis. Not a contact sport so it should be fine. You might be seeing me at Wimbledon."

Micah still doesn't crack a smile. "I know it hurts, Con. No point in pretending it doesn't."

Sure, it hurts. I'm at the peak of my skills and I have to walk away. Micah understands better than anyone. His MMA career was just taking off when he lost his hand.

Yet as I sneak a look at my dream girl, sitting there with a smile on her face, I know I'll do anything to keep it there.

I'll do anything to keep *her*.

"Football is a game, Micah. That's all it will ever be. We know what really matters."

“Damn right we do.” He finally cracks a grin.

Micah decides to take pity on Gage after all and rescue him. I guess he figures since Matilda is his mother she’s partly his responsibility. Either that, or he wants to give me a minute alone with Haven when he sees her brush the grass off her jeans and walk this way.

“Any headaches?” She bends down and peers into my eyes, searching for concussion evidence.

“I’m fine.” In fact, I’m looking down her shirt. The view is awesome. “Kiss me.”

She smirks and pecks my cheek.

I’m outraged. “What the fuck was that?”

“Shh.” Her mouth lingers close to my ear, teasing me with her ticklish breath. “You know how hard it is for us to stop once we get started.”

I know it’s *hard*. I definitely know that.

Haven sweetly presses her lips to my forehead. “I’ll get you some lemonade. And I’ll bring out the sandwiches. You should eat something.”

I’m not going to argue because it’s extremely adorable, seeing her become all domestic and shit.

But before she goes, I reach out to squeeze the back of her thigh. “Later.”

I say it like a promise. An obscenity.

It’s both.

Her lip curls into a knowing smile. She can guess what I’ve got in mind.

Hope she’s ready to get used rough.

Also hope she knows that she will absolutely fucking be my wife.

28. Conner

Haven wants to make sure Lita is settled and comfortable before coming to bed so I've been waiting atop the covers and enjoying dirty thoughts.

For a little while I was naked.

Then it dawned on me that Haven and I aren't the only people in the house and there was a possibility that Lita might poke her head through the door. I wouldn't want to give her nightmares about my dick so I've thrown my boxers back on.

Finally, Haven slides into the room and swiftly shuts the door behind her. She's casually gorgeous in a green and white tank top and a pair of loose nylon shorts. Her feet are bare. Her long hair hangs down her back and no makeup obstructs her natural beauty.

My heart thuds.

And my cock swells.

"Get over here." It's a command and that's exactly how it sounds.

Haven saunters to the bed, climbs on and kneels at the edge. "How are you feeling?"

"Horny. Take your shirt off."

Her eyes flicker to the bulge in my boxers. She's taking too long to make a move so I grab her wrist and pull her to me.

"You're supposed to be resting," she objects as I push her knees apart and force her into a straddle. "You were just discharged from the hospital this morning."

"My head is fine." I slip my hands inside her shorts and knead the soft flesh of her ass. "It's my cock that needs some attention."

To prove my point, I grind into her pussy. Her breath hitches and her palms brace on my shoulders. She presses her lips together and moves her hips in a slow, seductive roll.

But my triumph is short lived when she wiggles free and jumps off the bed.

Hissing through my teeth, I lean forward on my knuckles and give her a warning. "There's no chance you can outrun me."

Haven stops in front of the closet. She creaks the door open and peers inside. Now I'm puzzled because she appears to actually be looking for something, briskly sifting through the contents, hangers scraping on the rack.

She stops and reaches for an object in the back. "We need to deal with a situation first."

With each passing second I'm more impatient to do depraved things to her. "Can't it wait?"

"No." The object she was searching for is now in her possession and she turns around, suddenly solemn. "I need to atone for my sins."

A leather belt hangs from her right hand.

This is sure getting interesting in a hurry.

Things get even more interesting when she drops her shorts and kicks them away. Her panties are basically a scrap of black lace that barely covers her pussy.

I approve.

Haven abruptly cracks the belt and a sharp thwap slices through the air.

Her lips purse together at the sound. “Too loud,” she says and struts to the adjoining bathroom. “We should do this in here instead. I don’t want to wake my sister.”

I’m not a hundred percent sure she’s serious. But there’s no way I’m not following.

Two seconds later I barrel through the open door and find Haven standing in front of the sink. Her palms are flattened on the white marble countertop. Beside her left hand is the folded leather belt.

She watches me in the mirror as I take in the scene. Keeping both eyes on me, she moves her feet back and widens her stance, her sexy ass in the air, her upper body bending just enough to convey the message.

It’s an obedient pose, one of submission.

Well. If she wants me to dominate the fuck out of her, I’m happy to cooperate.

I can’t remember the last time I wore this belt. It’s possible I’ve never worn it. The leather is heavy and thick. There’s no doubt it would hurt if cracked against bare skin.

“This is really what you want?”

She nods solemnly. “Yes.”

Looping the belt around my hand, I thread it through the buckle and trail the slack end across her skin. “Just so we’re clear, what is it I’m punishing you for?”

She gazes at me in the mirror, all kinds of angelic and sorrowful. “For pushing you away.”

“And keeping secrets from me.”

“Yes, that too.”

I run the length of the belt through my fingers. “There are no more secrets between us. And after this you won’t make the mistake of pushing me away again.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I won’t. I’m sorry, Conner.”

I’m right behind her, that ripe ass inches from my throbbing dick, which begs to be released from the confines of my boxers.

“Hey.” I run my hand over her back and meet her eyes in the mirror. “You let me know if I’m being too rough.”

She bends her head back to look up at me, still full of stubbornness and rebellion. “There’s no such thing.”

Fucking hell.

She lowers her head, her expression hidden inside curtains of hair. She arches her back and gives me full access to anything I want.

The first thing I need to do is shred those ridiculous panties. Twisting one finger into the sliver of a waistband stretched across her right hip, I yank hard until there’s an audible snap.

Haven flinches but stays put. I repeat the move on the other side and catch the falling ruins.

Balling up the useless fabric in my hand, I push it right under her nose. “Don’t you dare put anything else in my way tonight.”

“Try and stop me,” she whispers. Her ass wiggles. A taunt.

I have no qualms about playing sex games. Whether it’s creative positions or adding a little extra bondage to the spice, it’s all good as long as everyone is getting their kicks.

The first hit of the belt barely grazes her ass.

And she laughs. *Laughs.*

“Pathetic. Come on, tough guy. You can do better.”

Of course I can. I just wanted to make her ask for it.

This time the belt sings through the air and lands with a satisfying crack. Her skin reddens instantly. On either side of the sink, her fingers curl into fists.

“Barely felt that,” she grits out, her hair hiding her face. “Is your arm tired or something?”

If that’s the way this is going, she needs to feel the burn in her pussy. With a grunt, I jerk her hips back, then press a hand to her spine to get a good angle. I expect her to be wet already so I’m not surprised to test her out with two fingers and discover that I’m correct.

Perfect. I catch sight of my own smug smile in the mirror and withdraw my hand from between her legs.

The next snap of the belt lands across the backs of her thighs, high enough to add a lick of fire to her exposed pussy. She inhales sharply, her muscles now tense, white knuckling the counter.

Without giving her a break, I repeat the same strike. She recoils, releasing her breath in a long hiss.

I bend close to her ear and push her hair aside. “Had enough?”

“Not even close,” she answers, loud and clear. “I can’t feel a thing.”

The raw, swollen look of her skin tells a different story. The belt hangs slack in my hand, ready to deliver another blow.

Confused by my hesitation, she lifts her head and looks at me in the mirror. Tears, summoned by pain or frustration or just an overload of emotion, swim in her eyes.

My heart contracts. Enough of this. The belt is thrown down and I drop to my knees. “No more. I’d never want to break you, baby.” With tenderness, I kiss the angriest looking welt. “I’ll always love your fire.”

Haven swivels her head, peering down over her shoulder to watch me as I touch my lips to every inch of reddened, chafed skin. She says nothing but I feel the knots of tension leaving her muscles as I nudge her legs farther apart. When my mouth strays to her pussy she unleashes a soft moan. She shudders at the first flick of my tongue. She quivers when I lick her long and slow.

Yeah, she’s ready for Part Two.

“Now face the fucking mirror again.” I get to my feet and drop my boxers. “I didn’t say I was done with you.”

The startled sound that leaves her mouth might have been a word.

We’ll never know.

She doesn't get to finish it before I seize her hips and drive my rigid cock into her with such force she cries out in shock. There's no feeling on earth that compares to being buried balls deep in this girl.

For leverage, I keep one hand on her right hip. With the other hand, I twist her hair into a long rope to keep her under control.

She gets no mercy as I pound her against the sink. Not that she wants any. I know exactly what she wants; to be fucked like we're enemies. She's ready to come within a minute. I feel how her muscles tighten. I watch the way her eyes screw shut and her mouth falls open. There's an earthquake inside of her now and each tremor squeezes my cock until I'm ready to black out from the supreme effort of holding back.

But I won't let go, not yet.

Not until she's finished being destroyed by every scrap of pleasure and ready to fall on the floor in the aftermath.

She gasps and she trembles and she curses. She hangs onto the edge of the sink like it's her motherfucking life raft. And as she comes down from the orgasm peak she's so wet the sound of my cock slamming into her pussy fills the room.

Despite the fact that my balls are ready to explode I want to hear the words from her first.

Tightening my grip on the rope I've made from her hair, I wait until her eyes flip open before letting her know what she needs to do next.

"Tell me you love me, Haven."

A lone tear slides down her cheek. "I love you, Conner."

I've hit my limit. With a final, brutal thrust, I empty myself inside of her, refusing to exit until there's nothing left.

She's *mine* now.

Nothing on earth could convince me to give her up.

Anything or anyone that gets between us is going to have a really fucking bad day.

Haven sighs when I finally leave her body and release my grip. There's a small tub of aloe in the medicine cabinet and I grab it before lifting her in my arms. She's pliable, clinging to my neck and allowing me to carry her to the bed.

She bites her lip in pain when I sit her on the mattress. I bend down to kiss the tear tracks on her cheeks. She's still wearing the stupid tank top so I pull it over her head before issuing my next order.

“Lie on your belly, honey.”

Haven glances at the aloe in my hand and obeys, stretching out her exquisite body on top of my bed. Which is now *our* bed. Because I'm unwilling to spend another night away from her ever again.

She turns her head to the side and folds her arms under her cheek as I rub ointment on the raw patches on her backside.

“Better?” I ask her.

She nods and sits up on her elbows. Strands of her long hair fall across her face and she brushes them aside. I swear, I could watch her all day. I would memorize every move she makes.

“I love you, Haven.” I should have said this earlier when I was still inside her. “There's nothing I wouldn't do for you.”

But the familiar stiffening of my cock decrees it won't be long before I'm inside her again.

Haven gracefully rolls to her back. She opens her legs, bends her knees up and offers up a clear view of temptation.

"Then love me." She touches herself and watches my face. "Keep loving me and never stop, Conner."

Fuck, she's the queen.

My heart and my soul and my fantasy.

She's everything.

I'm not going to question what I've done to deserve her or wonder why we both had to go through so much messy shit in order to get us here.

We *are* here.

With that thought in mind, I cover her body with mine and claim her again.

29. Haven

My office was never soundproof but today that annoys me more than usual. The loud music sets my teeth on edge. The blended smells of alcohol, perfume and the occasional whiff of tobacco turns my stomach. And the lewd cheering of men fuels my temper.

Though I've been here at the club for just two hours, already I can't wait to leave. The attitude shift might be considered strange. For years the club was more of a home to me than any place else. Now it makes my skin crawl.

Fiona, on the other hand, seems impatient to escape the dull chore of going over the books. She'd rather return to the action.

"It's Amateur Night," she points out. "Always good for a laugh."

True. There's never a shortage of people who want to get their freak on and experience a moment in the spotlight. But it's rare that any of them know what they're doing so it's closer to a comedy act. Not that I can talk. I wouldn't be able to rock a pole dance either.

Staring at all these spreadsheet columns is making my vision blur. I flip my laptop closed and return it to my bag, which is then deposited in the safe for now.

“Why not?” I’d been toying with my favorite pair of dice and now I sweep them into a desk drawer. “Had enough of staring at numbers for now anyway.”

Fiona stays seated, eyeing me with a sparkle in her eye that’s almost as bright as the sequins layered on her tight dress.

Abandoning my comfortable chair, I face her with my hands propped on my hips. “Speak up.”

She lifts her shoulders. “And just what makes you think I have something to say?”

Might be my imagination but I could swear her Irish accent has grown stronger. Or maybe I’m just no longer used to hearing it all the time. When Lita woke from her coma, she became my priority. Now Lita and Conner both are my priority and the needs of the club are hardly on my mind. I’m grateful that Fiona has been capable of stepping in to manage the place as well as I do. Maybe better.

I drop my hands from my hips and hop up on the desk. “In case I haven’t mentioned it lately, I owe you big time.”

The overhead light catches the dots of glitter in the corners of her eyes. Her crimson painted lips split into a warm smile. “You’ve mentioned it. And you’ve been quite generous to my bank account. Besides, I’ve enjoyed playing the boss.”

“Lucky for us that you’re good at it.”

She is. The staff adores her. She doesn’t hesitate to keep the rowdiest customers in line and the club’s profits are as high as ever. I’ve given her my apartment since the location can’t be beat. In truth, this office is more hers now that it is mine.

Her eyes flicker over me. “I see your wardrobe changes have become permanent.”

Today I'm swimming in one of Conner's old tees, paired with comfortable jeans I've owned since high school. I can't remember if I applied any makeup this morning. I don't think so. Yet somehow I feel more brazenly self confident than I ever did in my savagely sexy club costumes. Spending every day with a man who can send me to my knees with a glance yet treats me like a goddess works wonders for my attitude.

"More than one change has become permanent," I admit.

She twirls a red curl around one finger. Her smile deepens to mischief. "Dirty gossip only, please. Remember that you owe me."

"All right, here's the gossip. Conner fucks me incessantly, has the stamina of a bull and I'm lucky I can walk today. Will that do?"

She heaves out a breath of annoyance. "Awful short on details."

"Do you want to watch Amateur Night or hear about how hard I come on my boyfriend's huge cock?"

"Amateur Night." She checks the zippers on her knee-high leather boots and pretends to yawn. "Cocks are so boring."

I don't agree. Conner's cock is one of my most favorite things on earth. Right after his smile. And his laugh. And the incomparable luxury of falling asleep in his arms every night.

Emerging from the office has never felt more like stepping into the middle of a three ring circus. Fiona cuts through the thick crowd and I follow the crown of her bright red hair to the bar. Up on the stage a group of women are giggling a lot and dancing badly as they bump into each other. Obviously friends. At least they're having fun. Women should always have fun on their terms.

When a hand grips my elbow I jerk away on instinct. Whirling, I'm confronted with a grinning Andrei.

"Good to see you, boss." He holds out a hammy, heavily tattooed fist.

Instead of meeting his fist bump I startle him with a hug and an affectionate thump on the back. He can blame Conner for that. Thanks to Conner's influence I now inflict hugs on people whether they're expecting them or not.

Andrei chuckles and keeps grinning through his beard. He deserves as much gratitude as Fiona for holding down the fort. Though he's a man of few words his allegiance is unwavering. My father always preached about the necessity of surrounding yourself with loyal people. One two-faced traitor who turns on a dime can topple a kingdom.

My father forgot to point out that when the traitors are in your own family the threat is much closer. But I've heard so little from Talon and Jared in the last two months I can almost believe they'll remain in their reptile dens. By now it might have occurred to them that my father will eventually be released and they'll be in deep shit when he catches wind of their antics.

Whatever. Let the lot of them fight those battles with each other. We're family in name only. The mark on my chest doesn't mean shit. If not for my concern about the people who work for me, my east side days would have been over a long time ago.

Andrei gets distracted by a big group that suddenly pours through the door. Darkness hasn't even settled and already the night is looking hectic. Meanwhile, Fiona is having a word with Bruce behind the bar. He's got help tonight. A new girl is back there pouring a row of tequila shots. Fiona has the green

light to hire and fire and I do remember her dropping the news about the bartender. Still, it feels weird seeing someone working here that I didn't handpick.

A muscled arm catches my eye. Andrei gestures to me over the heads of new arrivals and I don't know why.

When I finally see the reason I mutter a curse string that causes some dude in a biker cut to spin on his bar stool and glare. I glare right back at him. He's smart enough to return to his drink.

"Haven!" Sophie squeals and then captures me with skinny arms and overpowering designer perfume. "I've missed you," she declares, still hanging on me.

Fiona, still behind the bar, makes a gagging face. Sophie has shown up here a few times in recent weeks. She never stays for very long, arriving in a car from Jared's fleet that's manned with two of his minions while blocking traffic in front of the building. Apparently Jared has had second thoughts about letting his wife roam around the city unchaperoned. Maybe her father complained. Or maybe Jared just figured out that a damaged mafia daughter translates into bad consequences.

In any case, I've managed to avoid Sophie since the day of the game. I have no clue why she's here and behaving like we're best friends.

Some effort is required to disentangle from her grip. "How have you been?"

She adjusts the fringed lace shawl draped over her shoulders. "So busy. You've been busy too, haven't you? That's why I'm not even mad that you didn't call me back."

She's left me two rambling, whiny voicemails. I didn't even finish listening to them before hitting delete.

"Is Conner here?" She cranes her neck. There's an unsightly hickey on the right side.

"No. Conner isn't here."

"I heard you two got married. But then I heard that wasn't true. Of course, I knew it wasn't true. I would have been invited to the wedding."

Instead of commenting, I check the time on my phone and hope she'll disappear.

Sophie grabs my arm. "I hope you're not still mad at me. The thing is, I've been taking this new allergy medication and it makes me do so many weird things."

"I'm not mad at you, Sophie." And I'm not. But this conversation is stupid and I've got better things to do.

"Thank god." She squeezes me in another hug. "I wish I could stay and hang out with you but I've already got plans tonight. I have an idea. Next week I'll throw a dinner party. You'll have to bring Conner."

I can think of few things less appealing than attending a high tension gathering on my asshole cousin's turf. Not a chance in hell I would bring Conner into the middle of that bullshit.

"We'll see," I tell her, mostly to escape this conversation.

Sophie looks over her shoulder and sighs. "Anyway, I should go. I said I'd only be in here for five minutes. But I'm so glad we got to talk. You look gorgeous by the way. You always do. Say hi to Conner. Bye!"

Since I want to make sure she actually leaves, I trail her out the door. She climbs into an idling Navigator with two shadowy men in the front seat. The windows are tinted so dark that it's impossible to tell if Jared or Talon is one of them.

"The maniac is leaving so soon?" Fiona nudges my arm and sips the drink in her hand. "What a shame."

"Sarcasm noted," I say, satisfied to see that the vehicle is turning out of the parking lot. "The girl's a train wreck but I still feel sorry for her."

Fiona extends the arm with healing stitches. "My feelings are less charitable."

"Can't blame you for that."

There must be some weed smokers nearby. The smell is pungent enough to tickle my nose.

"Hey." Fiona pokes me with her elbow. "I've got this covered if you want to take off. Tonight will be easy money with little trouble. We can catch up on the books during the week."

The fact that I'm ready to follow her advice leaves me feeling guilty. Conner is at the house with Lita. She's safe. He's safe. Tess and Micah are right across the street in case of an emergency. Really, I have no excuse to skip out of the club when I've barely shown my face here in weeks.

Fiona drains her drink and waits for me to grapple with my conscience.

"Are you sure?" I ask her.

"Go home to your lover, my queen. I'm sick of watching you daydream about his dick." Her smile becomes gentle. "Really, we don't need babysitters. You're needed elsewhere."

It's not hard to swallow my guilt. For years I was chained to the club and to the ugly world built by my father. That wasn't living, not really. Now I know what living really is.

“All right, I'm going. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything.”

She raises her glass, now empty. “You know I will.”

After doubling back to the office to collect my bag from the safe, I take a minute to check the contents. It cost a pretty penny to build into the wall and would require a detonation of some kind to breach. There's no reason for me to feel a twinge of worry as I peer inside. Still, I exhale with relief when I see that nothing has been touched. It's foolish to leave so much cash in here but I avoid banks whenever I can.

After double checking to ensure everything is locked up again, I make the choice to use the back exit. To my surprise, Andrei is waiting just outside the office.

He checks out the bag on my arm and the keys in my hand. “You're leaving.”

“Do you need something?”

He shifts his weight. Looks down the hall. “Nah, but I'll walk you to your car. Just can't be too careful.”

I feel confident that I don't need a bodyguard but I won't turn down the offer.

Andrei holds the door for me and stays alert on the short walk to my Lexus. I'm about to duck inside behind the wheel but I can't shake the feeling Andrei has something on his mind.

“You sure nothing's up?”

He scratches his beard and thinks. Then ultimately grins. “Everything’s cool, boss. You take care now.”

As soon as I climb into the car, Andrei shuts the door behind me. He stands guard as I drive away. I have the uneasy sense I’ve failed to take an opportunity to hear something important.

The idea persists as I navigate the winding roads of the east side, constantly checking the rearview mirrors out of habit, just in case anyone is tailing me. By the time I reach the freeway the disquiet has faded, the buzz of excitement taking its place.

I’m going home to Conner.

30. Haven

Across the street the lights are all blazing and the shutters are open. I see Micah and Tess cuddled up on the living room sofa with a bowl of popcorn. Light flickers from the television. It's safe to assume that baby Dash is in bed. Tess lays her head on her husband's shoulder. He pulls her in for a kiss.

There's a sense that I'm intruding as I watch them in the dusk. I lock my car and walk to the front door.

The Star Wars theme music blasts to life the second I step inside. I follow the sound to the living room and find Darth Vader promising to destroy the last of the Jedi. Other than the action on the television screen, the room is deserted. Locating the remote, I turn the volume of Vader's baritone threats way down and hear the splash of water. The sliding glass doors are open to the backyard and the pool lights are on.

"I wasn't ready!" Lita yells. "Serve it again."

"Yes, ma'am." Conner tosses a beach ball in the air and bops it over the net that has been stretched across the length of the pool.

The pool volleyball net was Conner's idea to help Lita with her physical therapy. He also had the idea to take her to the horse sanctuary owned by his assistant. Angela and her

husband rescue horses and train them to be therapy animals. We spent the afternoon there yesterday. Lita was given the gentlest horse to ride. At first I balked when Conner urged me to saddle up. I'm glad I gave in. Though I hadn't sat in a saddle since I was a child, I had no trouble remembering the simple joy of trotting alongside my sister. Conner stayed behind, content to watch from a chair and chat with Angela's husband as she led us on a leisurely walk.

Lita raises her arms and smacks the ball back to Conner. He lightly taps it back in her direction. She nails the ball with her fist and it lands in the water on Conner's side.

"Point!" She claps her hands. "Even though you weren't exactly trying."

"I was totally trying. Volleyball just isn't my game." He scoops up the ball. "Your serve."

"Not your game," she mimics. "Stop letting me win or I'll tell my sister you're a wimp."

"She knows. That's the reason she sleeps with me; pity."

"Weirdo." Lita laughs.

She serves the beach ball.

Conner deliberately gets under it so it bounces off his head, sails over the new pool fence and rolls under a patio chair.

"Watch it." I move outside so they can see me. "You'll give him another concussion."

Conner rubs his head. "Yeah, that really hurt, Lita. Don't be so savage."

Her mouth falls open. "It's a beach ball, Conner. It probably weighs about three ounces."

Conner holds his arms out to me. “Honey, I need you to save me from your brute of a sister.”

Retrieving the ball, I tuck it under one arm. “If you kids can’t learn to play nice then you won’t be allowed to play at all.”

Lita yawns and wades to the steps. “I’m getting tired anyway. Thanks for the game, Conner.”

“No problem,” he replies, looking at me.

Lita shakes water out of her hair and grabs the towel I hold out for her. “I thought you said you’d be home late,” she says.

“Changed my mind.”

She nods and then yawns again. Though she looks far healthier now than she did when she first emerged from her coma, she still gets tired easily. But she seems to be having a good day. Not all of her days are so upbeat. Sometimes she gets quiet for hours. Other times she panics suddenly, convinced that she’s about to be lost to the darkness again. Her therapists help her work through the emotions. The things I take for granted, like falling asleep and waking up, will never be easy for her.

Lita drapes the towel around her shoulders. “As you can see, I borrowed your bikini. Hope it’s all right.”

“Always.” Hard to believe there was a time when we would go to war with each other over borrowing a piece of clothing.

She combs her fingers through her hair. “I think I might watch something on my tablet and then go to bed.”

“Do you need help with anything?” I always ask that question.

My twin pulls her towel tighter and stares at me.

It's not the first time that I wonder what she sees.

A face just like her face. A terrible sister who clashed with her relentlessly. The person she's now stuck relying on.

"No," Lita says softly. "I don't need any help."

Her doctors have encouraged her to look ahead to the future, perhaps finish her education. So far she's given no sign she's even considering the idea.

There are times when I'm tempted to ask if she remembers any part of those endless hours when I sat beside her, speaking to her far more than I was willing to speak to anyone else. And never with any reassurance that she could hear a word.

Please don't take my sister away...

"Let me know if you need me," I say.

She nods. "Night. Good night, Conner."

He's still in the pool, his thick arms crossed atop the tiled deck as he watches us with a thoughtful expression. "I'll try to be a more worthy water polo opponent tomorrow."

She snorts with laughter before retreating into the house. I watch her until she makes a left at the end of the hall and disappears into her bedroom.

I forgot I was still hugging the beach ball. I toss it back into the pool.

"Missed you," Conner says. His chin is propped on his mighty arms. His wide shoulders drip with water beads. He's scandalously sexy.

"I missed you too." Kneeling on the deck, my intention is to swoop in for a kiss but Conner has another idea. A split

second before our lips meet he seizes me at the waist and drags me into the pool, clothes and all.

“Conner!” I sputter as my waterlogged shoes become dead weights. Then I laugh because the water feels good and I like being surprised by him.

He grins and pushes my arms up to hook around his neck. “Hold onto me, baby. I won’t let you sink.”

“I wouldn’t sink very far. The water is only five feet deep.”

“Hold onto me anyway,” he whispers. His tongue darts out to tease my lips.

Lust slices sharply through my belly. Our kiss goes from playful to hungry. A thick groan rumbles in his throat. His knee parts my thighs and I wrap my legs around his waist.

Conner breaks the kiss and peers down at me with the vivid blue eyes that always have the power to leave me hypnotized and weak. “I’m glad you’re home.”

My arms tighten around him. “And I’m glad my home is with you.”

He smiles and brushes a tender kiss over the tip of my nose. “We got takeout for dinner. Your favorite chicken strips are in the fridge. Ahoy There said to tell you hello.”

“Nice to know that Ahoy There remembers me.” My stomach rumbles at the thought of food. At the same time, warm happiness blooms in my chest because I’m in love with a man who remembers my favorite foods and misses me when I’m not in his arms.

Conner’s hands roam my body but his expression is serious. “I worry when you go to the east side alone. I was

tempted to bring Lita across the street to stay with Micah and Tess and follow you anyway.”

“Your concern is noted but I can handle myself. Anyway, Jared and Talon haven’t collected the nerve to even breathe in my direction lately. You know that.”

His frown only deepens. “There’s something Gage is always saying.”

“What’s that?”

“Snakes tend to wait for the right moment to strike.”

“Speaking of your formidable cousin, is he still sending his minions to spy on me these days?”

“Not spying. Protecting. And only because I asked him to. I just worry about you.”

“No need. I’m fairly formidable myself.” To prove this, I unwrap my legs from his waist and promptly dunk him underwater.

Conner could have stopped me with ease. Instead, he plays along and rises to spit a stream of water from his mouth.

I’ve already jumped out of the pool and kicked off my shoes. “I’m starving. And I’m stealing your towel.”

Conner stays where he is while I wrestle out of my soaked jeans and haul the sodden shirt over my head. Then, because he’s watching, I slowly remove my bra and panties, draping them carefully over a chair before wrapping my body in a fluffy blue towel.

“Killing me,” he groans and rubs a hand over his jaw.

I have no doubt. He’s practically panting. But a different kind of hunger wins right now so I retreat to the kitchen, find

the food waiting in the fridge and take a seat at the quartz-topped island.

Within a minute Conner wanders inside, dripping water everywhere. He looks pleased at the sight of me eating in the kitchen and whistles his way down the hall. He's gone for less than thirty seconds before re-emerging in a dry pair of shorts. I'm glad he wears nothing else. The view of his hot body is always appreciated.

Conner pauses to drop a kiss on my cheek while my mouth is full. He pulls two beers from the fridge, cracks them both open with his teeth and hands me one.

He tips his head back and drinks most of the beer before needing to come up for air. "I got you a present."

Not to be outdone, I seize my own beer and keep gulping until I see the bottom of the bottle. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and set the empty bottle down. "Is it better than chicken and beer?"

"Maybe. It's in the bedroom. Go see for yourself."

"That sounds promising."

Conner follows at a respectful distance as I travel the short distance to our room. Pausing at the fork in the hallway, I look toward Lita's closed door. I'm tempted to knock and ask her once more if there's anything she needs but I've already been hovering like a worried hen. Sooner or later she's bound to get annoyed.

The new addition to our bedroom is so decadent that I laugh. An enormous mirror has been nailed to the wall. Easily eight feet high and three feet wide with an ornate gold frame, the thing dominates the wall space opposite the vast king-sized bed.

“Nice.” I stand in front of the mirror. With my cheeks flushed and my hair a mess, I’m already sporting the just-got-fucked look.

Conner shuts the door and steals my towel. He hungrily surveys the sight of my naked body.

“Even nicer,” he says. Then he drops to the floor and buries his tongue in my pussy.

I’m eager to cooperate, hooking one leg over his shoulder and arching my back to give him deeper access. It’s no lie to say that Conner has a gift when it comes to eating pussy. Watching in the mirror as I fuck his face with abandon only makes the scene hotter.

He slides his tongue out and torments my clit, nibbling and teasing. My fingers rake through his hair and my hips buck in a fast rhythm.

I’m breathless and making all kinds of noise. “Conner, you get me every time.” It’s true. One touch from him and I’m worked up into a frenzy like nothing else.

His tongue launches another furious assault. I love how he fucks me, like he can never get enough. Less than a minute later I come on his face with my eyes fastened to the pornographic reflection in the mirror.

There are dozens of reasons why Conner is an unparalleled lover but my favorite is how he never withdraws until he’s positive I’m completely satisfied. I’m still catching my breath when he finally takes his tongue back and grins up at me.

I know he deserves a reward.

“Stand up and drop your shorts,” I say.

His grin widens and he jumps to his feet, practically tearing his shorts off along the way. As expected, his cock is at full salute.

Glancing at the mirror, I fall to my knees, tilting my head back to gaze up at him. “I made a mess of your face. Give me the same treatment.”

He sure doesn’t need any convincing. He tangles his fists in my hair and groans when the tip of his cock hits the back of my throat. He’s so big that sucking him off is always a challenge. Good thing I enjoy a challenge.

It’s his turn now to abuse my mouth while watching in the mirror. I know when he’s getting close and I grip his tightly muscled ass to keep the rhythm going.

“Fuck, I’m there, honey,” he groans and pulls out of my mouth.

I watch from my knees as he takes his cock in his fist, aims and fires at my face and tits. I take it all without complaint. When he finishes he reaches down and rubs into my chest what he left behind, painting over my tattoo. He’s aggressive about it, erasing that old brand with a new one.

And why not? I do belong to him.

I’m all his and he’s all mine.

Conner lifts me in his arms and carries me to the shower. We take our time in there, just enjoying being close. But before we leave he pins me against the wall tiles and hammers me from behind until I see stars.

After all that exercise we’re both ready for a nap. We crawl into bed naked and Conner switches off the light. The wind is picking up outside and thunder bellows in the distance.

Conner's arms curl around me and I revel in the thud of his heartbeat against my cheek.

"Where should we get married?" he says in a lazy voice as his fingertips trail over my back.

I snuggle closer to his warmth. "I'll marry you anywhere, Wiseman."

He rolls until I'm flat on my back and he's on top. He lifts himself up on his elbows. A flash of lightning shows me the intent look on his face.

"I won't forget that, Marchenko."

His kiss seals the promise.

31. Conner

Curiosity has gotten the better of me. My aunts aren't in the habit of asking to meet for lunch. In fact, I'm sure this is a one-of-a-kind event that has never happened before in history and is bound to never be repeated.

Though I recall Micah's warning that Matilda is on the hunt for corporate accessories, I'd like to hear the pitch on the off chance it'll be entertaining. There's no doubt she's recruiting Gage for his superior financial skills. There's even less doubt that she sees me as nothing more than a famous name to use for publicity. Frankly, I have about as much interest in the property business as I have in knitting blankets but maybe this outing will be good for a laugh.

Besides, I have nothing else to do. Haven is busy this afternoon, escorting Lita to various therapy sessions. I'm getting bored with sitting at home and dodging calls from nosy reporters.

The Cyclones rookie quarterback put on a good show this past Sunday and pulled off a win. I hope he works out. The team deserves some good fortune.

Though I'm told my head is healing just fine, the fact that my playing days are over is an entirely different kind of wound and it's still fresh. Each time I remember how I'll never

again run out under the stadium lights and fire a pass into the end zone, I console myself with thoughts of Haven.

The old idea that I just didn't have what it takes to fall and to fall *hard* has been shattered.

I just fucking love that girl. It's that simple, and that complex.

Right now I'm in the thick of the glittering downtown business district. Everyone who passes me looks pissed off, whether staring at their phone screens or glaring straight ahead as their shoes click on the yellow cobblestones carpeting this section of Emerald City.

I'm meeting my aunts at a restaurant called The European Cavern. The hostess who greets me at the door sounds like she might come from Texas and there's nothing especially European-ish about the interior vibe, which just looks like a standard high priced eatery where everyone drinks from crystal fluted glasses. Or maybe this is what Europe looks like. I don't know, I've never been there. I should ask Gage. He lived in Europe for years.

Whatever the theme, this is clearly a lunch destination for people who view themselves as super important. They all have the same haughty my-shit-don't-stink pinch to their uptight faces. If Micah were here with me, he would have taken one look at the setting and walked right the fuck out.

The hostess leads me past tables where hushed conversations are happening over plates that hold food served in tiny portions. Beats me why places that boast the fanciest gourmet fare need to be so stingy. Give me a basket of cheese fries and a loaded double burger any day over the plate I'm looking at right now, which features a puck of possible tuna

fish squirted with lines of something that looks like barbecue sauce but probably isn't.

“Here is your party, sir.” The hostess gestures to a large corner table where my aunts are slurping from wine glasses and not speaking.

“Thanks,” I say at the exact second Matilda notices my arrival and beams.

“There's our nephew.” She's using her acting voice right now. That's what Dani calls it. “Conner, you're looking so healthy. We've been incredibly worried.”

I have zero memory of ever receiving any affection from my aunt but here's Matilda, fluttering around the table to assault me with her perfumed arms while sending air kisses in the general direction of my face.

At least Alta doesn't break character. She silently raises her glass a few inches and then just keeps drinking.

“You should have talked the boys into coming with you.” Matilda fans a napkin on her lap.

I'd probably be forced to bribe Micah and Gage to get them to tag along but there's no reason to point that out.

“Maybe next time.” Scanning the menu, I see no burgers, fries, pizza or steak. I don't even see fried chicken. “Ah, fish and chips. I ordered that from a food truck once. Good stuff.”

“That's the children's menu,” Alta says.

I flip the menu face down. “Then I'll order a double portion. Cool?”

“Of course, Conner.” Matilda has now decided to sweet talk me as if I'm five years old. “You are allowed to order anything you would like.”

“Gosh, thanks Auntie Matilda. If I promise to lick my plate clean can I also have dessert?”

See? I can be obnoxious too.

Alta titters into her glass.

Matilda switches to business mode. She moves her hands as if she’s straightening papers that aren’t there. Matilda loves to give monologues. This one features a detailed list of all the hotels and luxury office towers and other boring projects currently in the Yellow Brick Properties pipeline.

While she’s babbling away, my attention wanders. At a table on the other side of a glass partition, a group of four women have noticed me. Two of them hold their phones up, filming this rare event of catching a football player in the wild.

Scratch that. *Former* football player.

I don’t care if they’re filming but I wonder if people understand how goofy it looks when they brandish their phones like tiny shields. I wave at the other table because it’s more fun than listening to Aunt Matilda speak. They can have autographs if they ask but nothing more. I’m one hundred percent taken.

“How does that sound?” Matilda finishes her speech.

“Great.” I think I might have just agreed to something I didn’t plan to agree to. At least my fish and chips have arrived.

“This is what makes the most sense,” Matilda says. She sticks a spoon into a bowl of beige soup with a chestnut floating in the middle like a turd. “Naturally, you wouldn’t be expected to come into the office every day. All the tedious details of management and contract negotiation would not be your responsibility. Your position will be absolutely stress free.”

I think I've just been told not to worry my pretty little head about business. I chew on that idea while I chew on my fish and chips. They could use some ketchup.

Alta has checked out of the conversation completely and scrolls through her phone.

“YOU MEAN all I'll have to do is show up at company events once in a while so everyone can see that your famous nephew is part of the team?”

“Yes!” Matilda is pleased that I understand.

It's not the most outrageous proposal in the world. But suddenly I'm sick of the way my cousins and I were raised in a family that ignores its scandals and neglects its skeletons.

Or maybe I'm just in the mood to be an asshole.

In any case, I choose this moment to say, “So what was my mother's job description when she worked for you all those years? I was never sure.”

Now I've done it. I've mentioned the unmentionable. There are many such topics in our family but Edie sits at the top of the Do Not Discuss list.

Alta perks up and sets down her phone. She waits for a reaction from her only remaining sister.

Matilda drops her spoon into her beige soup and then shifts her eyes in search of someone or something to rescue her from the memory of Edie.

“Oh, I have to take this call,” she says, snatching up a phone that never made a sound. “I won't be but a minute.”

She flees with impressive speed. Alta and I are left behind to enjoy the awkward silence.

Gage's mother finally sighs. "If evading the past were an Olympic sport my sister would undoubtedly earn gold."

"Are you any better?" I sound snotty. I don't care.

Alta shrugs. "I suppose not. Just ask my son."

The marriage between Gage's parents was ugly and dysfunctional. The two of them constantly used him as a pawn. For years, Gage and his mother didn't speak at all. Even now that they are on somewhat polite terms he remains wary of her.

"It's a little harder for me than it is for the two of you to pretend that my mother never existed."

To her credit, Alta grimaces. She runs a hand through her short black hair and sighs. "I know. We should have talked to you about Edie, Conner. I regret that we didn't."

This sudden show of honesty is a surprise. "Here I am. Feel free to talk."

Now that she's on the spot, Alta squirms before continuing. "I'm sure you've wondered if I ever saw it coming, if I had any clue what Edie was capable of. From the time she was a child I dismissed Edie as a careless fool. My opinion of her didn't improve when she grew up. We didn't argue often because she wasn't worth the effort. No, I had no clue who Edie really was. Neither did Matilda. One of the few things we have in common."

Dishes clatter. People laugh. A man wearing a blue suit strolls past our table and snaps a photo of me while I think about my dead mother.

“I don’t forgive her,” I tell my aunt. “I know that bullet was an accident. She didn’t mean to hit me. But she’d killed before and was about to kill again. She left a mess and then didn’t stick around to face the consequences. For that I don’t forgive her.”

Alta nods. “As far as I’m concerned, forgiveness can be overrated.” She pauses and clicks her red polished fingernails against her glass. “Maybe this is no consolation, but Edie did love being your mother. She was the first of us to have a child and she adored you. She was so damn proud when you were drafted to the NFL. Edie wasn’t good at much but she was a better mother than I ever was.”

She’s not lying. I have a lot of good memories of my mother and a few extremely terrible ones. But there’s no time to brood over that because Matilda makes a big production as she returns to the table.

“Conner, it has been such a treat to join you for lunch but I’m afraid we are urgently needed back at the office.”

“We are?” Alta says.

Matilda ignores her. “Sometimes being a leader means being the one to put out the fires. Oh, but we have a running tab here so you ought to stay and order dessert if you’d like. We’ll talk soon about your start date and in the meantime I’ll get your new office all set up.”

I doubt it would do much good to tell her that I won’t be working for her. I shove the last of my chips in my mouth. “Bye.”

Alta mutters something under her breath, chugs the last inch of her cocktail, and sullenly trails after Matilda.

My double portion from the kids' menu didn't quite hit the spot so I order something called a torte and check my phone. There's nothing new from Haven but Gage left an abrupt text, which is really the only kind of text that ever comes from Gage.

Call me.

That's not exactly a cry of alarm, yet my gut tenses as I press the call button.

Gage answers on the first ring. "Where are you at?"

"I was hanging out with your mother. Now I'm waiting for a torte. Why, what are you doing?"

"Waiting for your call while flipping through the baby name book my wife dropped in my lap."

"I recommend Conner. Great name."

He grunts. There's a pattern of tapping on the other end, likely Gage's OCD urges. He has something to tell me. Gage doesn't get dramatic over nothing.

An aproned server delivers a plate with a multi-layered slice of cake that would look pretty good if I wasn't hanging on Gage's next words. I thank the girl by nodding.

"You know that I've been keeping watch on the east side," Gage says and the tension in my stomach intensifies. If he's leading with news of the east side, then this call has something to do with Haven's family.

"I thought those cousins of hers have been maintaining a low profile. Did something change?"

"No. I kind of wish it had. The calm before the storm isn't a good place to linger."

“Haven says they’ve been keeping their distance. Could be that they’re getting nervous. The old man is going to get out eventually and he’s bound to do something about their bad behavior. This morning Haven heard from the lawyer that she’s been cleared to visit him tomorrow.”

Can’t say I was too excited to hear that my lady will be taking a field trip to prison but I can’t very well order her not to go. Like it or not, Aric Marchenko is her father.

More tapping from the other end of the connection. “Jared and Talon keep stacking up muscle and steel. Instinct tells me they’re planning something.”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t know. Might not even affect Haven as I’m not sure they see her as much of a threat. After all, Marchenko didn’t put her in charge before he reported to lockup. She’s tolerated in his inner circle but doesn’t get promoted. Still, she’d be loyal to her father. And there’s no doubt Talon’s got his eye on what little territory is technically under her control. That’s why he and his brother are trying to lure away the people she trusts.”

My right fist closes. “What people?”

“They didn’t have any luck with that gruff bruiser, Andrei. He’s been pretty loud about telling them to fuck off. But I got curious about that Irish chick after she was spotted on Essex Street.”

“Fiona? Doesn’t seem likely she’d turn on Haven.”

There’s a long pause. “What does Haven know about Fiona’s history?”

“Not much. I asked about Fiona once and was told she was born in Ireland and worked the Vegas scene for a while. Haven

doesn't know any more than that. She says people are entitled to some secrets if they need to be."

Gage snorts. "Secrets are one thing. An entirely fabricated identity is another."

"Huh?"

"Fiona Carney is indeed the name of a woman who was born in Ireland and was living in Vegas. But she's dead. The woman who Haven thinks is her best friend has had so many aliases they were tough to unravel. She has stuck with the Fiona Carney character since arriving in Em City three years ago. But her real name is Jessica Roswell. And she was born in San Bernardino, not Dublin."

I have no clue what to make of this information. Sometimes people run from their pasts and change their names. But adding an accent while assuming the name of a dead woman is a whole new layer of disturbing.

"Have you told Haven any of this?" I ask my cousin.

"No. I'll leave that to you." He clears his throat. Then clears it again. "Con, you stay alert, you hear me?"

"Will do." I turn the phone over and look out the window.

Outside the restaurant, the day is vibrant and sunny.

The sense that shadows await somewhere close by must be all in my mind.

32. Haven

Conner argued that retired quarterbacks make great bodyguards. I laughed and insisted I didn't need a bodyguard to visit the Central State Correctional Facility. He grumbled but I kissed his worries away and promised I'd be home early.

I understand why he's uneasy. There's shit that needs to be dealt with on the east side and I need to figure out my next step. Conner wants to sit down with Gage and come up with a plan in case Jared and Talon are stupid enough to risk open warfare. That will need to wait until tomorrow. Today I'm bringing my sister to visit our father, who hasn't seen her in over ten years.

Lita is nervous in the passenger seat. Her hands are restless in her lap and she keeps checking her reflection in the rearview mirror. Ahead of us, the sprawling prison looks less like a fortress and more like an industrial park featuring barbed wire around the perimeter.

The parking lot is moderately crowded and as I swing into an empty space, my sister heaves a loud sigh.

"We don't have to go in," I tell her.

She raises her chin and squints at the ugly prison. "It's hard to picture him in there."

That thought has crossed my mind. Part of me is ashamed that I have not missed my father at all in the months since he started serving his sentence. A good daughter would have made more of an effort to communicate and would surely feel some distress at the thought of her father locked up in a place like this.

Then again, a good father wouldn't recruit his children to join a vicious criminal enterprise.

I suppose that means we're even.

My hand is on the door handle but I'm not in a hurry to open it, even though I'd also like to get this visit over with. The buzzing of my phone delivers a momentary reprieve and I'm hoping the caller is Conner, simply because I don't want to hear from anyone else.

No such luck.

Lita looks over with puzzled eyes when I release a hiss of irritation.

"Sophie," I explain and nearly ignore the call before having a change of heart. Though Sophie remains annoying, she's still worth pitying and I suppose she keeps calling me because she doesn't have anyone else to call.

I hold up one finger to tell Lita this will just take a minute.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Sophie sounds like she's chewing on six pieces of gum at once.

"Nothing special," I answer because I don't feel like giving her more information than I have to.

She's not chewing gum. She's taking loud bites of an apple. "We should go shopping or something today."

"Sorry, but I can't."

She stops chewing. “You just said you weren’t doing anything.”

Lita, who can hear every word of the call, rolls her eyes.

“I’ve got some errands to run,” I tell Sophie.

“Fine.” She sighs. “Fiona’s still mad at me, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know, Soph. Honestly, this isn’t a great time to talk.”

“Well, I think she is still mad. I tried to talk to her when she visited but she totally ignored me. She was here talk to the boys and I don’t even know why because I was kicked out of the room.”

Sophie’s offhand nugget of information is unsettling. I’ve never pushed Fiona to share more details of her life story than she was comfortable with. For me, it was enough that she proved to be a loyal friend and ally. As I’ve spent less and less time on the east side, I’ve come to rely on her more and more.

Fiona has never given me any reason to doubt her. Still, I felt blindsided when Conner told me what Gage’s undercover efforts revealed. Whatever else she is, Fiona is clearly a gifted actress.

And now she’s taking meetings with my enemies.

Meetings she hasn’t bothered to tell me about.

That will need to be dealt with. I’d hate to think that a reasonable explanation might not exist. There are few people I would classify as true friends. Fiona is among them.

“Sophie, listen. Sorry to cut this short but I have an appointment I need to get to.”

On the other end, there’s a long beat of silence.

“Mm’kay,” Sophie says slowly, with a lack of enthusiasm. “I have things to tell you but I guess you don’t want to hear it so I’ll talk to you some other time.”

Sophie cuts the call off before I can respond.

“A piece of work, that one,” Lita mutters.

I’m always appreciative when my sister’s original sarcasm resurfaces.

With a chuckle, I toss my phone into my purse. Since guns aren’t permitted inside prisons for obvious reasons, I need to remove the one I’m carrying and store it in the glove compartment.

My sister watches. “Were you expecting a shootout today?”

I lock the glove compartment. “Can’t be too careful.”

She’s still looking at me. I’ve told her very little about the ugly reality of our family. She doesn’t need to deal with that stress on top of everything else.

“Let’s go.” I check the glove box once more and climb out.

Inside the prison, we need to endure multiple security checks before being shown to a small, airless room. We’re not waiting in there for long before the door opens and my father is escorted inside, wearing cuffs.

I stifle the urge to gasp. Lita doesn’t.

My father was always a powerfully built man who thrived off his talent for intimidation. Since I saw him last, the life has leached from his face and the muscles have shrunk from his bones. The lawyer had mentioned that a special diet was approved to accommodate my father’s food allergies. I wasn’t aware he had any food allergies.

His light hair has thinned from his scalp. His cheeks and eyes are sunken. His shoulders droop and he grimaces as he settles his body into the cheap metal chair on the other side of the square table.

“Ten minutes,” rasps the beefy, expressionless prison guard who stands in the corner, staring straight ahead.

Aric Marchenko, the father I’ve loved and feared and desperately craved approval from, looks into my eyes. His gaze shifts to Lita. He swallows. Then smiles.

“Didn’t think I’d ever get to see my girls together again.” His voice has lost its commanding quality.

“Hi, Dad,” Lita’s greeting is shy. Hopeful.

Our father stares at her. It seems as if his eyes mist over slightly but that would be a first. He looks back at me and puckers his mouth into a frown. “Why didn’t you bring the boy?”

Because Aileen doesn’t want her twelve-year-old son visiting a prison for any reason and I don’t blame her. Even Vito, faithfully acting as my brother’s defender, has said the kid should be protected from the truth of the situation. I’m used to the fact that Aric Marchenko prizes his son above all, but Lita might have forgotten because I feel her wilt beside me.

“Robert has school today, Dad. But you’ll be seeing him when you get out of here. It won’t be too much longer.”

For some reason this positive spin doesn’t cheer him up. The cuffs clink when he moves his hands and the guard flinches, his eyes focused this way with suspicion while one hand covers the stick hanging from his belt in case trouble erupts.

But no, the movement from my father is out of simple agitation. He's going nowhere. I'm staring at his hands now. Stripped of his rings. Dry and wrinkled. Even the ink from his tattoos looks faded.

Without thinking, my own hand flies up to cover my heart, which pounds under the snake tattoo hidden beneath my shirt. When Lita saw it for the first time she gasped. And I wished I could make it disappear.

My father leans forward, his jaw set. "The poison will get me before then."

"Poison?" Lita looks to me in horror.

"Dad." I force my voice to sound gentle and patient. "Are you feeling sick? There are doctors here."

He shakes his head with impatience. "They keep telling me to eat. I'm not doing that. They stick needles in my arm when I won't eat."

"Who's they?"

He shrugs.

I look at the guard, who now listens with a raised eyebrow. He moves one thick finger in a circle at his temple. The universal gesture for crazy.

I throw him a glare and try to reassure my father. "I'll speak to your lawyer, okay? If you're not getting proper medical care then we'll fix that."

He grins. A dreadful laugh fizzes from his throat.

I have the impression I'm staring into the eyes of a man who is no longer completely sane.

Aric Marchenko quits laughing and gazes at us. “I have to tell you something.”

Lita struggles not to cry. I know that without looking at her and I reach for her hand under the table.

“We’re listening,” I tell my father.

Though he lowers his volume to a whisper, I can hear every word he says.

“Marino’s breathing on me, girls. Now you both take care of my treasure. You know where to find it.”

Goosebumps sprout on my skin. “Dad, what are you talking about?”

My father rises from his chair. “I am glad I got to see my twins once more. So thank you for that. But time’s up.”

The guard looks puzzled because time actually isn’t up, but he opens the door and pulls my father away like a man leading a dog.

Lita shivers beside me. My protective instincts kick in. I need to get her out of here.

We exit as swiftly as possible, not saying a word as we escape the labyrinthine corridors of the prison. The air has a stale taste and I avoid taking a deep breath until we’re free of the building.

Why wasn’t I told that my father’s health and mental state had declined so much?

The minute we’re back inside my car I place a call to that garbage bin of a lawyer. Voicemail answers. The message I spit out is harsh, peppered with profanity. I don’t know if I have the authority to fire him but I’m firing him just the same.

Maybe Conner can call Gage and ask for lawyer recommendations.

Right now I just need to get my sister away from this horrid place.

Lita's face is pinched with confusion. "What did he mean, Haven? What was he talking about?"

I click my seatbelt, then check to make sure hers is fastened as well. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

The sound of my confidence doesn't match my restless dread.

It might be paranoia, this sense that invisible walls are closing in.

Or the cost of my family's sins might be about to catch up to us all.

33. Conner

Micah looks down. “You think it’s big enough?”
Lita leans over and also looks down. “I think it’s plenty big enough. Conner?”

I stick my tool in the hole. “Bigger is always better.”

Scooping out another shovelful, I toss the dirt on the growing pile and narrowly miss clipping Micah, who shoots me a death glare.

“Try that again and it’ll be your head that gets buried in that hole instead of a tree.”

Funny. My cousin is a funny guy.

I grin at him and collect another round of dirt. “Seems like somebody missed his naptime today.”

He grunts and seizes my shovel. “Out of the way.”

With impressive strength and one-handed skill he spears the shovel into the ground and cuts away a big chunk of earth. The dirt gets slung over my head, landing in the rocks.

“Now it’s big enough,” Micah gloats and throws down the shovel.

“Showoff,” I mutter.

Lita laughs and picks up the orchid sapling we just bought at the tree farm a few miles away.

Haven said she needed to go to the club this morning and asked me to stay here with Lita. I didn't like the idea, even though she insisted she just wanted to look in on the place, touch base with Andrei, and check the books while it's quiet. Still, I hate letting my girl out of my sight and if that makes me a growling barbarian then I don't care. But Haven is stubborn and I can't exactly chain her to the bed post.

At least, I can't do that *all* of the time. We do enjoy our kinky fun when we're alone.

She ordered me to quit grumbling, kissed me goodbye and promised to be home by noon. With the skies a deep cloudless blue and the heat of summer easing, I decided to plant a new tree in the front yard. I like trees. Plus I know it'll please Haven when she finds out that her sister and I were teamed up for a wholesome task in her absence.

I check my watch. It's half past ten. When I feel for the phone in my back pocket it's gone. I find it lying in the rocks beside a sage bush, where it must have fallen out. Feeling not at all guilty for being a stalker, I check Haven's whereabouts on a tracking app called Here I Am. The app was her idea so it's not like I'm being shady. She suggested using it when I kept griping about her excursions to her old neighborhood. Now I'll always know where she is. And she'll always know where I am. No secrets between us.

I breathe a little easier when I see that her location shows up at Back Door. The thought of her being on the east side for any length of time doesn't sit well with me. I should have insisted on tagging along. I'm tempted to abandon the tree planting, leave Lita with Micah and drive down there anyway.

If she gets annoyed I'll have fun reminding her how loveable I am.

"She'll love this." Lita touches the petals of the blooming light purple orchids on the tree.

Micah evaluates the hole again. "We ought to loosen some of the soil in here so the roots don't get stuck when they expand."

"The tree king has spoken." Leaving the phone in an empty bird bath, I follow his advice and stab the dirt repeatedly with the point of the shovel. I'm accidentally-on-purpose careless when flinging the dirt and some of the shit lands on the toes of Micah's shoes.

"You fucker," he swears and shakes the dirt off.

"Sorry."

He knows I'm not sorry. This is how we are. We'll never change.

With Tess and the baby off visiting Dani in West Emerald today, Micah was home alone, working on his graphic design business, when he spotted us from the window of his office. He decided to barrel across the street and give us an education on how to plant trees. I doubt the fool has planted a single tree in his life but it's always amusing to have him around because then I get the chance to piss him off.

I lift the tree up by the trunk and Lita pulls the plastic pot away. Once the thing is centered in the hole, Micah reclaims the shovel and starts piling dirt in there. He plays a tit-for-tat game and drops dirt on my shoes but manages to spray some dirt on Lita too and then he has to apologize to her.

"You guys." She sighs but also smiles. "You're almost as bad as Haven and I used to be."

“Is that right?” I’m always eager to hear Haven stories.

She nods. “We kicked down doors. Broke furniture. Threw utensils.” Lita sets the plastic pot down and steps away with a pained expression, staring down the street. “Now I wish we hadn’t fought so often and so brutally. I think maybe the lost years would have been easier for her if we’d gotten along better. Haven blames herself, even now. I wish she didn’t. Our endless war on each other was my fault too.”

Micah leans on the shovel handle and looks down at my feet. “Sorry about your shoes, man.”

“No worries. They were too clean anyway.”

“Isn’t that Gage?” Lita says and moves to the sidewalk for a closer look.

Sure enough, the red Jaguar convertible heading this way is definitely my cousin. Gage screeches to a halt in front of the driveway, rips his sunglasses off and vaults over the driver’s side door.

This isn’t good. Gage doesn’t get bent out of shape over nothing. I shoot a glance at Micah and see that he’s already tossed his shovel down.

Gage stops walking when he sees Lita. “Haven.”

“No,” says Lita. “Other twin.”

Gage’s eyes swerve to mine and my blood runs cold. “Where’s Haven?” he asks.

“At the club. Why?”

He glances at Lita again. Hesitates. Not like him at all.

Micah stands at my side. “What happened?”

Gage pulls no punches. “Aric Marchenko is dead.”

Lita's hand claps over her mouth. Automatically, I reach out and take her arm to make sure she doesn't fall over.

"When in the hell did this happen?" I ask Gage.

"Early this morning." He looks at Lita and his shoulders drop. "I'm so sorry, Lita."

"How?" she chokes out. "How did he die?"

Gage shifts his weight and looks away. Again, this isn't usual for him. Gage doesn't shrink from the truth. There's deep uneasiness in the way he looks around and keeps one hand on the gun holstered at his side. "The story that will be fed to the press is that he got caught up in a cafeteria riot."

Micah can read between the lines. "And what's the *real* story?"

"I have an inside connection there. Aric was found unresponsive in his cell with deep stab wounds in his chest and ligature marks around his neck. He doesn't share a cell. Someone with the keys had a reason to kill him. That points to a hit." Gage looks at me. "You tell Haven to drop what she's doing and get the hell out of there. I have some reliable boys on their way over here to act as security until we get a handle on what's going on."

I'm already scrambling for the phone, which is still sitting in the bird bath. Somehow when I was busy digging a tree hole I missed a text from her.

I'll be home soon. Love you.

The message is something of a relief but hearing her voice would be a big improvement. Fuck, I should have stuck to her like glue.

My thumb hovers over the green call button just as tires screech on the north end of the street. A glossy black Escalade wildly turns a corner. Gage, gun already drawn, steps in front of Lita to shield her.

The car slows, swerves, and ultimately crashes into the metal pole of a street lamp. A piece of the street lamp falls, crashing into the windshield. Smoke rises from the grill of the vehicle. The door to the passenger side is flung open and Gage raises his gun.

But the person who staggers out to the sidewalk is a kid. A kid covered in blood.

Lita screams. “ROBERT!” She sprints toward her younger brother.

Gage gives chase, shouting at her to wait.

I’m faster than both of them. I’m the first to reach Robert Marchenko. He wears a soccer uniform and the shirt must have been bright white before the front was soaked with blood. He blinks at me but I get the impression he sees something else.

Gage approaches the vehicle with his gun still drawn. “Shit.” He lowers the weapon.

There’s a familiar face behind the wheel. He’s someone Haven trusts, someone she sent to protect her little brother.

Vito sweats heavily. Two spots of red have blossomed on his white shirt. Gunshot wounds. He’s still conscious, but barely.

Lita is in full panic mode, grabbing her little brother by the shoulders and searching for the reason he’s bleeding. “Oh my god. Where are you hurt?”

The dazed boy doesn't say a word as I join Lita in trying to locate the source of his wound. There might be more than one. Blood stains can be deceptive. I look at his back and see nothing, no obvious sign of trauma.

Vito groans inside the car. He coughs. "Nah, that ain't the boy's blood."

Robert chokes out a cry, followed by a low moan. He slumps against his big sister and Lita wraps her arms around him.

Gage is the one to ask the crucial question. "Then whose blood is it?"

"His mother's." Vito's jaw hardens. "She's dead."

34. Haven

I can't shake the feeling of dishonesty, even though I told Conner exactly where I was going. I even told him I was going to meet with Andrei. Conner trusts Andrei, especially after Gage confirmed that Andrei told my cousins to piss off after they tried to collect him for their team.

He's not sure what to think of Fiona. I'm not either. My initial instinct was to defend her. She'd always been tight lipped about her past and I always figured she must have her reasons. But I keep waiting for her to come clean about being summoned to Essex Street and she hasn't.

There is one tiny detail I didn't share with Conner about my current errand. Andrei's request to meet at the club for a chat is out of character. In all the years I've known him, he's never been anything but a stoic straight shooter. If he planned to do me any harm, this sure as shit isn't the way he'd go about it. But I doubt he'd speak his mind in front of Conner. When I get home I'll tell Conner everything that was said. But right now I take comfort in the fact that Conner is at home with Lita as I rocket toward the east side with a gun in my lap.

Soon enough I'll have no reason to return to this side of the city. I'm leaving the family business.

My future will not be blood and depravity. My future is with Conner.

It's thoughts of Conner that keep my mind clear as I drive into the murky east side. The more time I spend away from here, the uglier it looks when I return.

This is Saturday morning and aside from clusters of children playing games too close to the street, there isn't much going on. The parking lot of the Back Door is deserted except for a single car. Andrei's ancient Malibu is parked crookedly beside the dumpster.

Though the shadows interfere with a clear view, there's definitely someone sitting in the driver's seat. Andrei's profile is distinctive. I'd know his hulking shape anywhere. He might have dozed off while waiting for my arrival. His head is tipped back in the driver's seat and he doesn't stir when I approach.

My steps slow down and my heart speeds up. I'm glad to have the gun in my hand. Because now that I'm right next to the car's window I see the reality of the situation.

There's a hole in Andrei's right temple. I freeze, listening for the slightest sound that would reveal the presence of someone else. Someone alive. Someone who kills.

"Marino is breathing on me, girls."

My palm sweats around the handle of the gun. There's no noise other than the rustle of traffic on the next street. The dumpster is spattered with dried blood and the blood is being attacked by flies. He was killed out here beside the dumpster and then moved inside his car.

Andrei's mouth hangs open, like he's shocked to be in this condition. Sudden grief tightens my throat. Andrei had always been a friend. Sure, he had his enemies. Who doesn't? But I

can come up with no explanation for why he would be sitting out here in his car with a hole in his head.

Taking a shrewd look around, I see nothing out of place. Mine is still the only other vehicle in sight. Across the street, a pair of elderly women leave my old apartment building and laugh over a private joke as they walk down the street.

But the door to the club is open. And it shouldn't be.

Common sense whispers that if there was a killer around who wanted me dead then I would have already found that out. Blood pounds in my ears and my throat is dry as I step through a door I've walked through thousands of times before.

The lights are on. Fiona sits at a center table, halfway between the stage and the door. Her tight dress is covered with purple sequins and her red curls are piled on her head. With every light shining the club looks seedy. Ugly. A place that feeds off vice and corruption.

She drops something from her hand. The pair of dice I always keep in my desk clatters to the scarred wood. Both land on the number one.

"Snake eyes," she says. "Fitting."

My hand flexes around the gun. With my other hand I close the door behind me and flip the lock. Whatever is about to happen, it's only between me and her.

Fiona pushes back from the table and appraises me with mild interest. "I didn't know you'd be stopping by today. But I'm glad you're here. You should go pour yourself a drink. You can pour me one too."

"Andrei is dead out in the parking lot."

"I am aware," she says in her Irish singsong.

“You can cut the shit now, Jessica. That’s your name. Jessica Roswell. And you’re from fucking San Bernardino.”

Her expression shutters. Slowly, she rises to her feet and steps away from the table. “You should have just requested my full biography, Haven. It would have been less theatrical.”

Her accent has melted with the façade. She sounds like someone who was born and raised in California. Which would be accurate.

“I didn’t think your full biography was relevant.”

“It isn’t relevant at all.” The Irish accent returns, and she laughs with a shake of her head. “Habit. You play a part for so long you begin believing it.”

She crosses to the bar while I keep a wary eye on her. In a pair of gold heels she’s a couple of inches taller than I am in my Converse. She’s one of the few women around who could match me in hand to hand combat. However, the hole in Andrei’s skull indicates her tactics might be more lethal.

So be it. Mine are as well.

If she hears the click of the safety on the handgun at my side, she offers no clue. Instead, her slow movements show hints of fatigue as she fills two shot glasses with whiskey and carries them to a table only a few feet from where I stand.

“Relax. Have a drink.”

“No. And no.”

Her gaze strays to the gun in my hand and she blows out a breath of exasperation. “Put that down.”

“I think not.”

“Fine.” She swallows the contents of one shot glass. Then the other. She throws the glasses in the general direction of the bar. They jointly shatter. Her mouth bends into a grim smirk and she kicks her heels off. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

She advances in a blink, latching onto my right forearm and twisting, no doubt expecting that I’ll drop the gun.

Stupid bitch.

I’m not made of fluff.

My left hook collides with her cheek and she staggers. Her bare feet have put her at a disadvantage and I use this by stomping on her manicured toes.

“Fucking hell,” she spits and whirls, releasing my arm.

Rather than let her take a breath and regroup, I use a wrestling move I learned years ago in a self defense class, seizing her around the waist and slamming her to the ground. She gasps, the wind knocked out of her for an instant. That’s all the time I need to trap her between my knees while she’s knocked flat.

Fiona’s eyes widen when I raise the gun. Her pile of curly red hair has escaped its clip and fans out on the floor.

Straddling her prone body, I hold the gun steady. “Now that the games are over, you’re going to answer some questions.”

She coughs. A bruise, courtesy of my fist, already colors the side of her face. “If you wanted me on my back, Marchenko, you could have gone about it a little more gently.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You made the first grab. This drama is on you.”

This fact penetrates enough to make her frown. “I guess that’s true. Ask away.”

“What happened to Andrei?”

“Someone killed him.”

“You?”

“Of course not.” She grimaces. “He was dead when I arrived. I think he’d been out there for a while. I don’t know who killed him.”

Though I’m no forensic expert, the sight of a dead man isn’t new to me. Judging by Andrei’s stiff position and the dried spatters of blood, I’d have to agree he’d been dead for hours.

But there’s more than one unpleasant piece of business to sort out. “Why didn’t you tell me about your big meeting?”

A flicker of surprise flares in her eyes and then disappears with a sneer. “What fucking meeting?”

“The one you had with my cousins. I’m guessing they promised that if I disappeared from the scene, you’d get to manage the club.”

“Maybe I thought you’d take the news badly. Point a gun at my face or something.”

“Is that a confession?”

Her shoulders twitch, a version of a shrug. “Yes, I should have told you. But you were dealing with a lot of personal baggage and I didn’t want to pile on.” Her eyes sweep over me with curiosity. “Was it Andrei who told you that?”

“No.” I don’t feel the need to elaborate.

She can guess anyway. “Must have been that jackass, Sophie. She was around when I was summoned to Essex Street. Even though she was thrown out of the room I could see her shadow hovering outside the door. But now that the cat is out of the bag, yes Jared said I would be running the place once you were convinced to step aside. That is, if you didn’t go along with their plans. They want to use the club as a headquarters for their brand new human trafficking pipeline.”

“And I wonder how he planned to *convince* me to step aside.”

“Keep in mind your cousins probably would have moved against you already if they weren’t so wary of Conner.”

“What the hell does Conner have to do with any of this?”

“If they mess with you then they mess with Emerald City’s hometown hero. The last thing the Marchenko boys want is to have the eyes of the world landing on the east side. That bought you some time, but only a little. Your cousins aren’t the kind of men who accept losses with grace. Believe me, I know the type.”

“Perhaps you could find work as their hired assassin. Seems like you’d need some more training though. You’re easy to beat.”

A laugh scrapes out of her throat. “This is why we’re best friends. You’re fierce, girlie.”

“Yeah, betrayal makes me a little salty.”

Her smile falls. “I didn’t betray you.”

“Prove it. Tell me why Andrei needed to talk to me so urgently. What was so important that he would only tell me in person?”

She frowns at the door, maybe remembering that our dead friend is still out there in the parking lot. “Andrei didn’t agree with my plan. I’m sure that’s what he wanted to talk to you about.”

“What plan?”

“We were going to kill them for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Those two clowns who share your last name are a fucking plague. Once they’re in charge of your family no one on the east side will be safe. Andrei wanted you to know what we were going to do. I told him you’d know once the job was done.”

I keep the gun trained on her. “Give me a reason to believe you.”

She smiles even though the barrel is pointed at her freckled forehead. “Look down, my queen.”

Now I feel it; the point of a blade pressing against my ribcage.

Fiona’s smile turns sad at the state of our standoff. “I could have cut your heart in half before you raised the muzzle of your gun. But I would never.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m your friend. Because I’ll *always* be your friend. Even if you decide you hate me after today.”

My finger eases off the trigger. The gun is lowered. I can’t stand the weight of it in my hand. I drop it on the floor and kick it away.

Fiona takes her switchblade away from my ribs. She makes a face. “As sexy as you are, hot stuff, I’d prefer not to bear all of your weight on my stomach.”

“Shit.” I roll off her and scoot backwards until my spine collides with a chair.

Fiona (or Jessica or whatever her name is) coughs and slowly climbs to a sitting position. She slides across the floor until she’s facing me directly.

“If you have more questions,” she says, “ask them.”

“Who was Fiona Carney?”

She shuts her eyes and sighs before answering. “A friend. Sweet girl. I was on the run for the fourth time in as many years after yet another city and another name didn’t work out. I landed in Vegas with ten bucks in my pocket. Fiona let me crash with her even though she lived in a tiny basement studio and didn’t have two nickels to rub together after her pimp of a boyfriend cleaned her out. He kept threatening her, stalking her, always hanging around, following a few paces behind wherever she went just to remind her that he was watching her every move. Then she disappeared. One night she left her shift at a casino on the strip and was never seen again. The damn cops said she just skipped town but she wouldn’t have left all of her stuff behind. She didn’t even take her passport or the wad of cash in her sock drawer. They didn’t bother to question the ex boyfriend too carefully either. He must have congratulated himself, thinking he’d gotten away with it.” Her trip down memory lane inspires a bleak smile. “Imagine his surprise when his throat was sliced ear to ear just before dawn as he staggered home drunk.”

“You killed him?” I can’t say that I disapprove.

“I avenged *her*. And then I came here, to Emerald City. Where I met you and found a new kind of family here in the club. For the first time, I felt like I was where I belonged. I have you to thank for that. You’re family to me, Haven.”

“Tell me about Jessica Roswell.”

She sighs. “Jessica was a sad girl who had terrible things done to her and had to do some terrible things to survive. If you need to know more then I’ll tell you. There aren’t many people whose opinions I care about but I care very much about yours.”

While mulling this over, I look into the eyes of my friend.

She stares back at me.

No, I don’t need her to share every hideously painful piece of her past.

“What do I call you?” I ask her.

“Fiona suits me better. I never liked Jessica.”

“All right.” I climb to my feet and extend a hand to help her up.

Fiona reclaims her gold heels. “So are we going straight to Essex Street to kill those motherfuckers or do you have a better idea?”

Storming my cousins’ territory would be suicide. We’d never make it past the first layer of their security.

No, I can’t fight them here. And I can’t fight them alone.

Rather than act impulsively and sign my own death warrant, I need to go home. Together, Conner and I will figure out what to do next. Thanks to Conner, I have more allies in my corner. No doubt the first call Conner will place is to Gage

Silvestro, who will undoubtedly have no patience for anyone seen as a threat to his family.

My cousins won't win this war. Jared and Talon aren't nearly as strong as they think they are.

After a long, haunting look around the familiar setting of the club, I know what I need to do.

"Wait here for a minute," I tell Fiona.

She moves to the bar. "Think I'll have another drink in the meantime."

That's fine. She might as well drink at the bar while she still can.

Once I'm in my office, a fleeting twinge of loss stops me in my tracks. I'm sticking to my plans anyway. Grabbing a large shopping bag that once held takeout Chinese food bought by Conner, I open my wall safe and dump the contents into the bag. There's nothing else of value in here. But before I leave for the last time I double back and snatch a vintage copper lighter from my desk.

Back at the bar, Fiona is taking more leisurely sips from her new glass of whiskey. She raises an eyebrow at the sight of me lugging a shopping bag into the room.

"They can't have it." I heave the bag on top of the bar. "My cousins can't have this place to use for their sick schemes."

"What are you going to do?"

I show off the lighter. "Burn it the fuck down."

Her mouth falls open. Then she picks up the open whiskey bottle sitting on the bar and fires it at the stage. The sound of shattering glass is satisfying.

I push the full shopping bag at her. “There’s something I need you to do for me.”

She shrugs. “Anything.”

“Split this up and give it to the girls. Also, Andrei has a sister living here in Em City. Make sure she gets a cut too. That’s what he’d want.”

Fiona looks at the bag. “You’d trust me to do that?”

“Yes. I trust you. After all, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

She flashes a brief smile. It fades quickly. “What are you going to do?”

“Go home to my man. Then I’ll do something I’m not very good at. Ask for help.”

“In that case,” she says as she picks up the shopping bag. “Jared and Talon don’t stand a chance.”

“Just keep a low profile. Don’t stay at the apartment. You’re on their radar.”

Fiona tosses her red curls. “Don’t worry about me. If I have one talent it’s escaping from men who wish me dead.”

“You should go now.”

She hesitates. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Get out of here before the fire starts.”

Her mouth twists. “I don’t want to leave you to do this alone.”

“I’m asking you to.”

She sighs and slowly trudges to the door, looking over her shoulder at me. “I’ll see you soon, Haven.”

“Right.” I pick up a vodka bottle in each hand. Then I throw them on the floor to make puddles of alcohol. As good as gasoline. “Hey, Fiona? You be careful out there.”

A hint of her dazzling smile returns. “You know I will.”

And then she’s gone.

In the club’s last minutes of life, I stand in the middle of the floor and indulge in a moment of silence. With my gun in one hand and a full tequila bottle in the other, I turn the bottle upside down and allow the contents to pour out in a trail behind me as I leave the building for the final time.

I’ve ended the tequila trail a few feet from my car and I’m about to light the flame when my phone pings.

I can’t bring myself to ignore it, even in the midst of burning down my club, just in case the message is from Conner.

The text is not from Conner. It’s from Sophie. All caps.

PLEASE HELP ME I NEED YOUR HELP!!!!

I’m still staring at the text, unsure what to think, when a call comes in.

“Sophie, what’s the matter?”

She hyperventilates on the other end, spitting out words in a jumble. “I’m hiding because Jared will kill me and I don’t know what to do because his guys are everywhere so I snuck out and came here but now I’m afraid to leave because Jared said I have a big mouth and someone should make sure I can’t talk and can you come get me, Haven?”

“Calm down, Soph. Jared wouldn’t be stupid enough to hurt you.”

She gulps and wails. “Yes, he will, this time he really will because I heard him talking to Talon and Talon told him to just do it already so that’s why I ran and hid here.”

“Hid where? Where the hell are you?”

Sophie gasps and coughs. “I’m-I’m-I’m in that old building that used to be a motel on Pearl Street and I ran here but it belongs to Talon now so they’ll look for me here sooner or later.”

I know the place she’s talking about. I can be there in five minutes.

“P-p-please Haven.” Cough. Hiccup. “I’m s-s-so scared.”

Pearl Street is only a few blocks away. If there’s any chance that Sophie really is in danger then I can’t just abandon her here. Once I get her to safety, her father can send his whole mafia army here to deal with Jared and Talon. That might solve everything.

“Wait there,” I say. “Don’t go outside. Don’t call anyone else. I’ll be right over to get you.”

“Thank you thank you thank you.” She hiccups again. “It’s so dirty in here and I just saw a rat so please hurry.”

“Breathe. I’m on my way.”

Before pocketing my phone, I dash off a text to Conner. It’s impossible to sum up current events at the moment. I’ll save that lengthy explanation for later. For now the best I can do is tell him I’ll be home soon.

Then I flick my lighter and bend down to touch the flame to the trail of flammable liquid. By the time I’m in my car with the engine started, the fire has reached the threshold and

crawled inside. Once the doorway is glowing orange as the flames lick the club's interior, I drive away.

35. Conner

For the tenth time I try to get through to Haven as chaos reigns all around me.

After a series of rings, a robotic voice invites me to leave a message. It won't hurt to add another urgent voicemail to the ones I've already left.

“Baby, call me as soon as you get this.”

I stare at the phone in my hand and try to turn it into a portal that would send me straight to Haven. Switching over to the Here I Am app, I hiss out a curse when I see it's still stuck and not updating. Fucking piece of shit. The app shows Haven's last location as the club. But there's no answer when I call there either.

Lita's hopeful expression fades when I shake my head. Beside her sits a very traumatized Robert. Vito, who refused to allow an ambulance to be called, growling that he's been shot six times before and doesn't intend to die now, is being shepherded to the hospital by a trusted member of Gage's security team while Gage consults with a couple of other armed guards. Got to give my cousin credit; those guys sure did speed over here in a hurry when he snapped his fingers.

I've been distracted by my attempts to contact Haven. Micah edges over to stand at my side and quietly fill me in on

the details I missed.

While Robert was playing a morning soccer game, Vito received word of Aric Marchenko's death. Vito decided to take no chances and ushered Robert and his mother off the field. It wasn't soon enough. They were ambushed by a masked gunman in the parking lot. Vito used his own body to block the bullets meant for Haven's younger brother but he couldn't save Robert's mother when she was grazed in the neck, hitting an artery. She died within a minute.

Never a guy to trust law enforcement, Vito refused to wait around. Even with two bullets lodged in his gut, Vito's only thought was to get Robert to safety.

Naturally, hearing this only escalates my dread.

Haven's family is under attack.

She's not answering her phone.

And I can't sit here for one more fucking minute.

"I have to find her," I announce loudly.

Gage pauses in the middle of a conversation with his men.

"Can I borrow that?" I point to his holstered gun.

He crosses his arms. "Do you even know how to shoot?"

"Sure. You just aim it and pull the trigger. Seen it a million times on television. Now hand the thing over."

Gage glances at Micah and the two of them have a short, silent conversation with each other.

"We're coming with you," Micah says.

"Can't stop us," Gage adds. "You carrying?" he asks Micah.

Micah scowls. “No, I’m not you for fuck’s sake.”

Gage shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. I’ve got spares in the car.”

“Argue about it on the way to the east side.” I jingle my keys. “I’m driving.”

Gage snatches my keys away. “No, I’ll drive. You keep trying to get in touch with Haven somehow.”

My only hesitation is that I don’t want to leave Lita and Robert. But Gage swears they’ll be safe here with his men. I have to trust him. I don’t exactly have a lot of options right now.

Gage gives last minute instructions to his team. “Stand guard outside. Nobody gets in here.”

He has no doubt his orders will be followed because he’s Gage fucking Silvestro and people tend to do what he says.

Lita has been watching us as she tries to comfort her sobbing brother. Her eyes lift to mine. Her chin quivers and a tear slides down her cheek.

This is all too much for Lita. Her father is dead. Her brother just survived a murder attempt. And nobody has heard from her twin sister.

“Bring her home,” Lita begs. “Please bring her back home to me, Conner.”

“I will, Lita. I promise.”

It’s a vow uttered with utter conviction.

Because the alternative is unthinkable.

I’m already dashing out the door. Micah and Gage run to catch up. Gage argues that his car is the fastest and I can’t

really deny that a luxury sports car can speed past a pickup truck any day.

I smack his arm. “You just better drive fast or so help me I’ll toss you out of the fucking driver’s seat and take the wheel myself.”

He nods with no argument and revs the engine.

There are no new calls, no new messages. With my heart in my throat and wordless prayers running through my mind, I refresh the Here I Am app and grit my teeth, willing it tell me what I need to know.

Finally, I catch a break. The app stutters and refreshes at last. Twenty minutes ago Haven traveled a distance of a little over a mile. She went from the club over to a building on Pearl Street. According to the app, she has not moved.

I don’t know what it means but I don’t fucking like it.

“What’s on Pearl Street?” I ask Micah, since he’s more familiar with the east side. “That’s where she is.”

“Nothing special,” he replies from the backseat. “A few crappy bars, some even crappier apartments. Lots of empty buildings covered in shitty graffiti. Let me see on the map.”

I pass the phone to him.

“Huh. I could swear that place is an old motel. Been closed for years.”

That news definitely doesn’t sit well with me. There’s never a good reason to go to an abandoned motel and not answer your phone.

Micah reads my mind. “She’s tough, Con. And far from stupid.”

I know that. But Haven is also the woman I love. And until I'm holding her again I won't forgive myself for letting her out of my sight.

Gage accelerates on the freeway. I have no complaints over the way he expertly weaves around other vehicles and pushes way over the speed limit. It doesn't take long for the dense maze of the east side to loom ahead like a medieval metropolis. In the middle of that complicated tangle of dim streets, a funnel of smoke stretches to the sky.

"Two more exits," Gage says.

I despise every square inch of road that separates me from Haven. I try her phone again. The only answer is voicemail.

Panic will get me nowhere.

But panic doesn't follow instructions very well.

Gage slows down and pulls to the right, taking the exit leading to Haven's neighborhood. The lights from emergency vehicles flash up the street. We're close to the smoke cloud now.

"Conner." Micah's voice is sharp.

He doesn't need to say more.

He sees what I see.

The worst of the fire has been extinguished and only a smoking, charred husk of a structure remains.

I know the place well. I've been there many times.

Before it became ashes it was a stripper club called The Back Door.

36. Haven

Sophie's hideout is a shitty motel that was owned by Uncle Estes before he got snuffed out somewhere in Sicily. The building is a crumbling relic that looks like it's being eaten alive by gnarled threads of ivy. He picked the property up for peanuts after the city condemned it. I suppose with Estes out of the picture, Talon has now seized all of his ground.

Talon's greed, however, is the least of my worries right now.

My rearview mirror captures the haze of smoke from the fire at the club. Emergency sirens wail from every direction as they rush to the blaze. They'll find the club in ruins and a dead man in the parking lot. Just another day on the east side.

The north end of Pearl Street leaves a lot to be desired. The parking lot that runs the length of the squat two story motel is a mess of broken asphalt, weeds and garbage left behind by vagrants.

Easing the car into the lot slowly, I keep my eyes peeled and the windows open. Other than a small, frightened rodent dodging discarded drug needles, there's no sign of life. The only noise is the echo of howling sirens.

I'm trying to steer around the mounds of garbage. The last thing I need right now is a punctured tire. It's difficult to picture Sophie cowering inside the decrepit motel. Most of the windows have been sloppily boarded up and some of the boards have been pried away. Urban artists and wannabe gangsters have tagged their illegible signatures all over the place.

Already impatient to be out of here, I call Sophie's cell. "Hey, I'm outside. No one else is around. Come on out and let's go."

She's crying again. "My suitcase is stuck."

I grit my teeth and try not to scream. "What?"

"I found a closet to hide in and put my suitcase in there but it fell into a hole and I can't get it out."

"For fuck's sake, leave the suitcase. You can buy new clothes."

"I CAN'T because my mother's doll collection is in here. She gave it to me before she died and it's the only thing I have left of her."

Maybe I'm awful but I'm half tempted to tell Sophie to call an Uber if she can't get her ass out here in the next ten seconds.

She sobs softly. "Please don't leave without me, Haven. You're the only person I can trust."

The parking lot is still empty. The buildings next door and the ones across the street are also abandoned. No cars have even passed by.

"Where are you?" I mutter.

"I got in through the door to the office."

“Yeah, I see it. Wait there.”

With my phone stuffed in my pocket and my gun in my hand, I walk slowly and remain on high alert. A crooked white sign with peeling black paint letters that read ‘Office’ hangs above a weathered door with a broken pane of glass.

Stopping ten feet from the entrance, I try to peer into the shadowed interior. “Sophie?”

Her face appears in the gap of broken glass. “Hi.”

There are streaks of dirt on her cheeks and mascara tear tracks under her eyes. She looks terrified and pathetic and I can’t help but soften my attitude.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” She wipes her nose with the back of her hand and jiggles the door handle until the rusty hinges creak open. “I’m so glad you’re here. It’s been so scary being all alone.”

After glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one is creeping up behind me, I curse my own paranoia and step through the door. The interior smells like piss and rotting wood. A counter that must have once served as the reception desk is littered with mouse droppings. An abandoned office chair lies on its side and bleeds foam stuffing. Parts of the floor are rotted and water damage warps the walls.

Sophie notices the gun in my hand and begins to cry again. “I hate those things. I don’t wanna look at them. They remind me of my father.”

With a sigh, I set the gun down on the counter beside my small handbag. “Yeah, they remind me of my father too. Now where the hell is your suitcase?”

“Oh, it’s in here.” Before I can flinch, she grabs my arm and excitedly pulls me through an open doorway.

This room must have been the manager’s residential quarters. A filthy sagging sofa sits in the middle of the space. Wires hang from the wall where a television set was once mounted. A wall that used to separate this room from a small bathroom has been broken apart, exposing metal pipes and rotting wood.

Our presence seems to have disturbed something alive. Soft animal noises whisper somewhere nearby. “You hear that?”

She cocks her head. “Rats. There’s a lot of them in here. Don’t get bit. They can carry rabies.”

Sophie drops my hand and flings open another door. A deep closet beckons and there, in the corner, sits a giant Louis Vuitton rolling carrier. It appears to be partially sunken into a hole in the floor.

Sophie steps into the closet and tugs on the handle. “It won’t move,” she whines.

“Out of the way,” I grumble and wait for her to scurry out. The closet is easily eight feet deep, just about large enough to be a tiny bedroom.

As I grab for the suitcase handle, one of my father’s favorite pieces of advice comes back to haunt me.

“Never show anyone your back. That’s where they always bury the fucking knife.”

He’s a split second too late.

I whirl around just in time to see the light disappear when Sophie slams the door closed. As I hurl myself at the door, an

ominous lock clicks and all I succeed in doing is bruising my shoulder.

“Sophie!” I pound on the door with my palm. “What the hell are you doing?”

Dumb question. Whatever she’s up to, it’s not good. My eyes try to adjust to the gloom. The only light comes from a tiny sliver at the base of the door. I rattle the handle, not shocked when it doesn’t budge. Worse, a rapid exploration of the door shows me a detail I’d missed earlier.

Unlike the decaying, broken doors elsewhere in the building, this one is solid. This one is made of metal.

Dropping to the floor, I put my eye to the light beneath the door. There are shadows moving, the sound of footsteps. No other voices. I’m guessing that Sophie is still alone. Somehow that makes the situation more outrageous than ever. I’ve been trapped in a closet by one of the biggest morons walking planet earth.

Fuck.

An object lands in front of the door, blocking out the light. The vague whispered noises I heard a moment ago are much closer. A brick of dread drops in my belly because now I recognize the sound.

Jared and Talon have a taste for showing off. They use their live rattlesnake collection as both a prop and a weapon. They like to have their pets in the room during family meetings as some kind of petty show of force. That’s why I’m very familiar with the sounds that rattlesnakes make when they’re caged together and trying to escape.

I can’t fucking believe I left my gun on the counter.

Not that it would do me much good. I can't blast my way through a metal door.

My phone is still in my back pocket. Yet that sense of relief is short lived when I discover that I have no service.

There is rustling from the other side of the door. Not the snakes. Sophie is hovering nearby.

"Haven, are you trying to use your phone? I thought you might so I just switched on the cell phone jammer."

That's not a welcome piece of news but it is surprising. Certainly shows more brain power than I would have expected from Sophie. But then again I also allowed her to lock me in a closet so maybe it's my judgement that's off.

I take a breath and keep my voice steady. "Can I come out now, Sophie?"

"No!" she yells. "No you can't come out. You have to stay in there until we're ready for you."

We?

That doesn't sound promising.

"You totally deserve what's coming to you, Haven. What did you expect? You never put the family's interests first."

I roll my eyes even though there's no one to see it here in the dark. "Who told you that? Your worthless, wandering prick of a phony husband?"

"Shut up. You can't hurt my feelings anymore. All I ever did was treat you like a sister but the minute Lita wakes up you act like I'm not alive."

Hearing her speak Lita's name gets my blood simmering. "We aren't sisters. I thought we were friends but apparently

not.”

“Friends,” she sniffs. “You don’t even like me.”

She’s not going to open the door if I play nice.

In that case, I might as well be honest.

“Let’s see, you’re a self-centered, attention-seeking brat and you can’t go twelve hours without getting piss drunk and throwing a tantrum. And now you’ve locked me in a closet for reasons unknown. What’s not to like about you, Soph?”

“You’re an asshole!” she shouts and thumps the door.

“Yup.” I slide down to sit on the floor. “Go cry about it.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? No way. I’m going to go get the boys now. You stay here.” She starts giggling like a fucking lunatic. “But the snakes will stay. They’ll keep you company.”

So help me, when I get out of here I’m going to tear her bleached, overprocessed hair right out of her stupid head.

Her footsteps click in the opposite direction and I’m left alone. Just me and the snakes.

There’s still absolutely no service on my phone.

Using the phone’s flashlight, I take stock of my surroundings. The only thing in here besides me is Sophie’s mega suitcase. Pulling it free, I yank on the zipper and discover there’s nothing but a bunch of thick books inside. All the titles have something to do with the law. Jared went to law school. He just never practiced. So Sophie stuffed Jared’s books into a suitcase, dragged it down here and then plotted a way to get me exactly where I am now.

A sitting duck.

That's an indignation I'll ever get over. Of all the ways I could have been duped, this has to be just about the most infuriating. And I need to come up with a plan before Sophie returns with 'the boys'.

My heart pounds faster at the idea of being at the mercy of my cousins. Judging by Sophie's comments, I would guess she planned this little abduction on her own. Jared and Talon wouldn't go for an idea so low key and haphazard.

That still leaves a big, glaring question.

WHY?

I'd rather not stick around to find out.

An examination of the door lock doesn't bring much cheer. I know how to pick a simple lock but this is much sturdier. It's probably where the manager kept his valuables, which would explain the metal door. A complete inventory of Sophie's suitcase only uncovers more law books, some tissues and a tube of lip gloss. None of that is useful.

Miserable and defeated, I sit with my back to the wall and look at my phone again. There's still no service, but I can flip through my pictures.

The last one I took is of Conner.

He was standing beside the pool and having an animated conversation with Lita. He said something that made her laugh. In that moment I was overwhelmed with love for him. I raised the phone and he looked over in time to see that I was about to snap a photo. He smiled.

Oh, how I adore him. He's the center of my universe. A dream I never dared to hope for.

And I am getting the FUCK out of this shithole and going home to my man.

Sophie's suitcase is shoved aside and I explore the small hole in the floor. The edges of the hole are jagged, like something ate through sections of the wood. But when I pull a few pieces away there's enough space for me to stick my arm through the opening. There's nothing underneath except slightly cooler air. As I shine the phone's flashlight, I can see enough to confirm that directly beneath where I'm sitting is an empty basement. The floor isn't that far down. If I jump I likely won't even get hurt.

Clawing away chunks of the floor turns out to be harder than it sounds. The planks are nailed together and glued. I'm helped by the fact that they are also rotting but it means pulling free one scant inch at a time. My fingers get scratched and savaged by splinters but fuck it. If I'm alive later, I'll get a tetanus shot.

I've been so intent on my task that I'm not keeping track of time. I don't know how long I've been at this before the voices start.

"What difference does it make? You've already fucked everything up." That's Jared.

Talon's deep cackle chills me to the bone. "I did what had to be done. You know it."

"It was only supposed to be the old man. You were *never* given permission to go after the boy."

"Fuck your fit. In the old days it was a given that you need to take out the next one in the line of succession. That's the boy."

The boy?

THE BOY!

“Robert,” I whisper.

I’m going to vomit. I’m going to kill.

My hand reaches frantically for the only weapon I can find; a shard of decaying wood that I just pulled out of the floor.

Sophie, however, is cheerful. “Guys, I need to show you what I have for you. Move aside, little snakes.” She pushes the container of snakes away from the door.

“What the hell are we even doing here?” Jared sounds weary. “I’m up to my eyeballs in fucking problems today. What was the life and death situation that couldn’t wait?”

“This!” Sophie has a tough time opening the door but finally she manages to unlock it.

My plan to go on the attack with a piece of rotten wood is cut short when I’m faced with the view of Sophie pointing my own gun at my head.

“I lied.” She’s practically giddy as she pulls back the hammer. “My father used to make me go to the gun range all the time. I knew how to shoot long before I knew how to drive.”

Behind her, my two cousins gather closer to see what all the fuss is about inside the closet.

Jared’s eyes bug out when he sees me. “Shit,” he says.

His brother has no comment.

Talon simply smiles.

Chapter 37

Haven

Sophie gets immediately impatient. “You’re welcome!” She waves the gun for emphasis. “Didn’t think I could do it, did you?”

Jared recovers from his shock and glares at his wife. “What the fuck?”

Sophie scrunches up her face in a pout. “Try being grateful for once. Now you can finish off the job you started. She’s the last piece, right? WE are the family now. The three of us. Out with the old, in with the new. I know what has to be done.”

“You fucking idiot.”

“WHAT is the big deal? Talon said you were probably going to kill her anyway. He said once the rest of the Marchenkos were dead then there wouldn’t be anyone left to argue and then you could take on my father. Well, here she is, ready to be killed.”

Jared throws up his hands in disgust.

Sophie is still trying to explain. “Guys, I want you to use the snakes. Just like you did with that man who owed you money and cried for his mother as you cut off his fingers.”

Jared ignores her and his irritation shifts to his brother. “So you’ve been plotting behind my back? You and this bubble

brained piece of ass?”

“Shut up!” Sophie turns the gun on her husband. “You can’t talk about me like that anymore.”

Jared’s hand moves to his own weapon. “You’ve got two seconds to throw that down or your skull will be in pieces you dumb bitch.”

Sophie looks to Talon. He gives her a nod. She tosses the gun on the filthy sofa and crosses her arms, sulking.

With everyone distracted, there’s no better time for me to go full warrior princess and take down whoever I can. The jagged wood is still in my hand. Jared and Talon are off balance, unprepared for this particular confrontation. There’s no sign of their army. If I can slice a neck or take out an eye or two that might cause enough confusion to get the upper hand.

The one I’m aiming for first is the most evil among them. The one who would murder a twelve-year-old child.

Talon throws me a look of mild amusement before sidestepping the attack. His leg sweeps my feet out from under me and the jolt to my spine is painful when I land on my ass. I lash out blindly, frantically, but Talon gets behind me and he’s a hell of a lot stronger than Fiona. One strong arm becomes a chain around my chest, pinning my arms to my side and lifting me painfully. His other hand casually begins squeezing my throat until I gasp for air. My only weapon clatters to the floor.

I never stood a chance.

Talon’s sour breath brushes my cheek. His laughter shakes his chest. “Let’s find our guest a place to sit so we can have a talk.”

“I have an idea!” Sophie runs out to the lobby. After a series of crashes she rolls the mangled office chair into the

room. “Ta da!”

Jared looks vaguely exasperated, like he’d rather be off golfing instead of watching this sideshow.

“Have a seat, cuz.” Talon dumps me into the chair and bends down. His eyes don’t blink. “Take another swipe at me and I’ll break your fucking neck.” He chucks a finger under my chin. “Do you doubt me?”

“No. You’re a fucking child murderer.” I can hardly get the words out. I’m choking on my agony. “Sadistic coward. My brother was a little boy. Your own goddamn cousin.”

He hisses out a breath and stands up straight, peering down at me with scorn. “Your brother’s alive. For now. Remains to be seen how much longer you’ll be in the same condition.”

“Traitor. Burn in hell.”

“Nah, not yet. But your father is.”

I was so stricken by what they said about Robert that somehow the news about my father didn’t sink in. But of course ‘the old man’ Jared referred to could only be one person.

Their boss.

My father.

The air leaves my lungs. There’s no one left to stop my cousins from doing whatever they want. Now they will take out whoever stands in their way.

“Look what else I have.” Sophie dangles a pair of handcuffs in front of my nose. “So she doesn’t try to run away.”

Talon snatches them from her and promptly cuffs my right wrist to an exposed pipe in the wall.

“You killed Andrei too.” Maybe I just want him to admit it. A grim confession for the sake of a man who was my loyal friend.

“Andrei?” Talon glances at his brother. “Who the fuck is Andrei?”

Jared shrugs. “That bald dickhead from the Back Door. Made him an offer. He told me to go fuck myself. Now he’s not telling anyone anything.”

Talon suddenly turns furious eyes back to me. “It was you who burned down the club today.”

If there was ever a time when I ought to keep my mouth shut this is it.

But I just can’t seem to help myself.

“Yup. And guess what? I’m going to burn down your whole fucking kingdom.”

Not far away, the snakes flop around and hiss within their clear container. They seem to enjoy the tension.

Sophie, as if summoned by a need for oblivious comic relief, has retrieved my purse and digs through it avidly. “You don’t even have any gum in here.” She gives up her search, drops the purse on the floor and nibbles on her lip. “Honey, you’re not mad at me, right?”

It would make sense if she was speaking to Jared. After all, he’s married to her.

But it’s not her husband she cozies up to. Not his crotch she starts rubbing. Not his neck she begins slobbering on.

“We’re gonna rule everything.” She reaches into Talon’s pants and moans when she finds what she’s looking for. “Just wait until my father hears. He’ll be sorry.”

Tearing my eyes away from this episode of some porno version of the Twilight Zone, I look over at Jared to see how he’s taking the news that his wife is cuddling his brother’s dick.

Jared checks the status of his diamond cufflinks and finally frowns at the sight of his wife giving out a hand job. “Knock that shit off before I lose my temper.”

Talon snorts but he yanks Sophie’s hand out of his pants. “Since when do you care?”

Jared rolls his eyes. “I don’t. Like I told you, go ahead and fuck her until her pussy breaks if it keeps her quiet and out of my face.”

“Hey!” Sophie complains. “You can’t talk to me like that. I’m part of this family too.”

“Shut the hell up.” Talon pushes her away. “I’ll get you off after we sort out some business. Until then, stay out of the way.”

The news cheers Sophie up. She plays with her hair and gives her lover a dreamy grin. “I want to have both of you. At the same time. Like we did that one night.”

I may be about to die but apparently that’s no buffer from getting completely grossed out. If she says another word I will throw up in my lap.

Still, this is preferable to the surge of sick fear that engulfs my senses when Talon remembers I’m in the room. He folds his arms and gives me a cold appraisal, clearly making plans

inside his twisted mind. He unfolds his arms and roughly grips the neckline of my shirt.

“This,” he says with a cold grin, “is something I’ve been dying to do for years.”

With a savage yank, he tears the fabric in half, exposing my lace bra and my belly.

A different kind of panic steals my breath.

Jared shifts his weight and sweats. “Tal, what the fuck? Too far.”

Talon ignores his brother and steps away. He shakes out my purse and examines the contents.

“You could have just asked for a tampon if you needed one,” I mutter.

He finds something in the pile and plucks it free. It’s the lighter I used to set fire to the club. He flicks the wheel and a flame ignites. Watching my face, he’s pleased when I cringe. Of all the ways to die, I’ve decided that being burned to death sounds the least appealing.

But that’s not what he has in mind. At least, not yet.

Talon slips his insignia ring from his finger and holds it under the flame. Sophie has taken an interest in this sequence of events and inches closer. Her eyes are wide and shining. I’d happily scratch them out of her demented head.

“Ooh,” she breathes as Jared heats the metal.

My plan to kick him in the nuts is thwarted when he clamps my legs between his knees. I punch him with my free hand and he laughs, painfully seizing my wrist as he presses the hot metal to my skin just above my breast. Right at the edge of my tattoo.

I'm unprepared for the pain. The ring digs into my flesh, twisting and turning. The acrid smell of my own scorched skin brings the taste of bile to my tongue. I bite my lip and refuse to cry out.

Talon takes the ring away and admires his work.

Sophie looks over his shoulder. "Wow, you burned the whole head off her snake tattoo. But your ring was upside down. Instead of an M there's a W. Oh my god, it looks so bad."

Talon leans in to breathe right next to my ear, his voice a lethal whisper. "Tell me how that feels, cuz."

"I bet it hurts," Sophie says.

Talon backs up to eye me coldly. "You never fucking deserved the honor anyway."

I spit at them. It's the only ammunition I've got.

"Disgusting." Sophie pouts and wipes a drop of saliva from her dress.

Talon snaps his fingers at his brother. "Give me the hook."

Jared frowns. He doesn't agree with this course of action. That doesn't mean he'll take my side. He bends down, picks up something that looks like a metal rod and tosses it over.

Talon catches it cleanly.

He waits for me to understand what he's about to do. When he's satisfied that the horror shows on my face, he moves closer to the snakes. He removes the lid of the container.

"Western diamondbacks," he says. "My favorite because they're native to the area. Before buildings and concrete

covered Emerald City, there were snakes. One bite won't kill you right away. But the more bites you get, the quicker you die. The poison shuts down organs one by one. Painful way to go. Men far stronger than you beg for a bullet when they can't deal with the agony."

Jared rakes a hand through his hair. "Wait, she gets a choice. That was what we decided."

Talon selects a snake and lifts it out of the box. The thing twists and hisses with anger. I can't take my eyes off it.

Talon dangles the snake in the air. "If I had my way, Haven, you would already be rotting in a landfill somewhere for being a treacherous bitch. But my brother wants to give you a choice. So here it is. You can swallow your pride and join the family. Or you can refuse and die while we watch. Let me know."

The snake writhes and tries to free itself.

Lying won't save me.

Because I understand what Talon is. He wants to kill. He'll find an excuse. Jared might get squeamish. He might even bellow out a complaint or two. But he won't stop his brother.

No one will.

"Fuck you." I flip him off for good measure.

Talon clucks his tongue "Wrong answer." He drops the snake in my lap.

The rattler sits there stunned for a second. I hold my breath and try to muster any dormant knowledge about deadly rattlesnakes.

You're not supposed to move. I do know that.

The snake unfurls its body, exploring my exposed skin, sliding north of the waistband of my jeans.

The room is silent.

My lungs begin to shriek for air.

The snake coils its body on my thigh and shakes its telltale rattle.

Conner, I'm so sorry. Take care of Lita. Protect Robert. I love you...

I gasp out a heaving breath.

Sharp teeth sink into my belly.

Venom is pumped into my blood.

And then, finally, I scream.

Chapter 38

Conner

Gage's nature is more calculating than mine. I'm ready to rush the crumbling walls headfirst and rescue my girl but my cousin grabs me by the collar with a bleak warning.

"Can't save her if you're dead." He insists on parking around the block.

I know he's right.

A red sports convertible that retails for six figures would be noticeable in most neighborhoods and around here it would raise every single suspicion. There's no way to tell what waits at the motel but we sure as hell don't want to give them a heads up to expect us.

Hang on, baby. I'm coming for you.

The image of the destroyed club flashes through my mind and my heart sinks. At the scene, Micah spotted a firefighter he knew from back in the day at the MMA gym and cornered the guy for a quick chat.

Due to all the alcohol on the premises, the club went up in smoke rapidly. There's no word yet on the cause of the blaze. There was one body found in the parking lot inside a car.

Judging by the description, it's got to be Andrei. No bodies were found inside.

Haven wasn't in there. A relief. Her phone location hasn't moved since arriving at the Pearl Street motel.

Gage rolls into a weed-choked lot behind a boarded up gas station. Beyond that, a ten foot high chain link fence stretches across the property line. Thick strands of ivy weave through the fence, obscuring the view of the abandoned motel on the other side. I'm about to scale the fence and run right into the storm but Micah pulls me back and gestures to a gap in the fence behind the empty lot next door. He and Gage both have their weapons drawn.

Micah crouches at the hole where the fence was parted by wire cutters. From this vantage point we have a partial side view of the motel.

"That's her car." I point to the nose of the silver Lexus. It's the only vehicle in sight. That doesn't mean there aren't others parked out front. It just means we can't see them from here.

A shadow stirs in the shade of the building. A man strolls into view. Short and stocky. A holstered gun sits on his hip, nearly blending in with his dark trousers. He pauses to yawn and dig something out of his nose as he looks down the street.

"There would never be just one lookout," Gage says.

Gage usually knows what he's talking about. A direct assault would probably mean a full blown shootout in the parking lot. Not a good option when we don't even know where Haven is. Or what's happening to her.

I'm getting inside that fucking building, whether anyone is ready or not.

First, I need to make one thing clear to my boys.

I grab a fistful of Micah's shirt and get right in his face. "Once you asked me to save the girl you love even though it meant leaving you behind. You remember?"

He already knows where I'm going with this. He doesn't flinch. "I remember, Con."

"And I did it, Micah. It killed me to leave you but I did it. Not just for Tessie but for you. Because I knew her life was what you cared about more than anything. That's why you need to listen to me right now. If you see the chance to save Haven then you take it. If you have to make a choice then you choose her. Got it?"

Micah blows out a breath. "Yeah, I got it."

I look to Gage. "I'm talking to you too."

"Understood." He nods.

"Stay here for a minute," I say to my cousins. "I'm gonna go make a friend."

Gage sputters but he has no chance to interfere before I dive through the hole in the fence and start casually walking toward the man who seems kind of bored with his security duties.

"Hey!" I wave my arms in the air to make it look like I'm just a harmless idiot. "You there!"

He pivots and nervously grabs for his gun but then his hand drops.

"Holy shit," he says, suddenly getting excited.

He recognizes me. Good. I was counting on that.

"You're Conner Wiseman." A giddy fan boy look replaces all suspicion.

“Yeah, that’s me.” I look around and notice there are two other vehicles parked out here. A flashy Lamborghini and a black Lincoln Navigator with dark tinted windows. I can’t tell if there’s anyone inside. “My car broke down and my phone battery died so I’m a little lost.”

The guy is so eager to be of some use that he doesn’t think this sounds at all weird. “Shit, I never expected to run into you down here but you can damn well borrow my phone.”

“Appreciate it.” I’m about to send him down into the dirt and seize his gun when the door of the Navigator flies open and another man steps out.

“Greco, what the hell’s going on?” He barrels over here, scowling all the way, and I can tell at a glance he’s far sharper and more skeptical than his counterpart.

Looking past him, I see that he left the car door open. There doesn’t appear to be any additional occupants. Good to know.

Greco points to me excitedly. “It’s Conner Wiseman!” He thinks this is sufficient explanation.

His buddy doesn’t agree. The man looks me over with contempt. “Yeah, I know who you are. Now get the fuck out of here.” Then he changes his mind and draws his gun. “Know what? Fuck that. Smile, asshole.”

That’s the last thing he says. There’s a loud crack and a hole appears where his right eye used to be. He gurgles and drops.

Greco is slow to catch up. “FUCK!” he screams and scrambles for his gun.

Instead of watching that happen, I tackle him to the ground and let his face meet my fist. His eyes roll back and he goes

limp.

Gage, an expert marksman, fired the shot that killed Greco's pal. He now stands over the dead man's body, takes a shrewd look around and waves us ahead.

"Let's go before someone comes to investigate the noise."

The unconscious man doesn't notice when I drape him over my right shoulder.

Micah stares. "What do you plan to do with that?"

"Cover me." Before my cousins can object, I cross the distance to the door in record time, using Greco's body as a primitive shield.

A broken window pane is set into the door. Above that is a warped painted sign that reads 'Office'. I look through the broken window. There's nothing to see inside except a filthy room that looks like it might have been a reception area. My ears strain to hear a low murmur of voices. I see no one.

But I know she's here. I just know.

"Conner." Behind me, Gage's voice is hoarse, intentionally muted. He wants me to wait until he gets a lay of the land.

The door is partially open. The noise is minimal when I creak it open wider and step into a small lobby that must have seen better days.

An open doorway yawns to the left and sounds drift from that direction. A man curses. A woman giggles. A repetitive scraping noise stabs at some deep vortex inside my brain. I know the sound. I just can't place it.

Right at my back, Gage and Micah slip through the door without a peep.

Then Haven screams and my soul splinters.

Without thinking, the man on my shoulder gets hurled into the next room like a two-hundred-pound missile.

The result is effective. There's a loud crash, the thud of one body hitting another, a man's yelp of pain.

Gage cuts past me and drops to a crouch, gun raised, just inside the room. I follow with Micah breathing down my neck.

The scene is my worst nightmare. All it takes is a millisecond for the sight to be branded into my mind.

Haven sits in a chair, cuffed to a metal pipe. Her shirt is torn in half. They burned her. *The motherfuckers burned a hole in her chest!*

And worse.

Pieces click together in my brain. The sound that puzzled me a few seconds ago is now ominously clear.

One snake is curled at her feet. Another slithers from the edge of the chair. More snakes flop around and fight in a nearby plastic bin as they strive to be the next one freed. The next one to get the chance to bite.

There are multiple bite marks on her stomach. The surrounding skin has already begun to swell and turn an ugly color. Two more snakebites are visible on her forearm, the arm that isn't cuffed.

My knowledge of snakes is limited. I remember hearing that one rattlesnake bite is easy to recover from with prompt medical treatment. But Haven has suffered a lot more than one bite.

She's already struggling; breathing hard and trying to hold her head up.

How long can she live after being bitten so many times?

One of the snakes at her feet raises its ugly head. It rattles its tail and hisses, almost like it heard the desperate question in my mind and laughs because it knows the answer.

Haven doesn't have long.

She blinks at me in confusion and shakes the cuff keeping her shackled. The two snakes on the floor get excited by the noise.

"Don't move, baby," I tell her.

Not only is movement likely to provoke the snakes but the more agitated she gets, the quicker the venom will course through her blood.

I'm not sure she heard me but she sits still.

Meanwhile, there's a whole lot of less important shit kicking off all around me.

Greco the human cannonball landed on another man. The guy extricates himself from the dead weight and stumbles, trying to get his bearings, leaving Greco behind on the floor where he groans as his shoulder hangs at an unnatural angle.

A third man nervously trains a gun between me and my two cousins, who both point barrels back at him. He looks to the first man, the one who bore the brunt of the Greco attack.

I've never met these two in person but I know exactly who they are. The one who crawls out from underneath Greco, throws murderous glares this way beneath a fringe of light hair and wears ink all over his neck is Talon Marchenko. Jared Marchenko is slightly more polished, with slicked back hair and a dark suit that fails to make him respectable.

"Conner, you're ruining everything," Sophie complains.

Somehow I overlooked her but there she is, acting like I've just crashed her party. Don't know what the fuck that's about but she just earned a prime spot on my Most Hated list.

When I try to move closer to Haven, Jared aims his gun squarely at my chest.

"Do it," he sneers, "and your football career won't be the only thing that's history."

I don't care if he shoots me.

I'm about to rush him and hope for the best when Gage catches my eye and gives me a small headshake, one that pleads *'Let me handle this.'*

Gage is always better at making deals. Especially right now. His head is clear. Mine is ready to give the order to rip limbs out of sockets.

I trust Gage. I'd trust him with my life. I have to trust him with Haven's too.

"Let her go," Gage says to the Marchenko boys, "and this is over."

Talon coughs and weaves on his feet. It looks like being crushed by Greco did some damage. Not enough though. He's still breathing. He glances at Haven, tied to a chair and trying to remain conscious. A gruesome grin slices across his face.

"If she dies, neither one of you walk out of here," Gage warns. "That's a fucking promise."

Jared sneers. "Yeah, I know who you are, Silvestro. Your dad might have been a beast but you smell like pussy."

Gage seems to be considering the observation. Then he abruptly shoots at the floor. A snake that was coiled by

Haven's shoes blows apart into pieces. It's a hell of a shot. The other snake slithers away.

But while we were all distracted, Sophie located a gun that was lying on a filthy sofa. She pauses with the gun in her hand and looks over her shoulder, right at me. She smiles.

I've stared into the face of madness before.

The site of a healed bullet wound chafes below my right hip.

"LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!"

The same energy is here in the room.

Sophie bends at the waist and peers into Haven's eyes as Haven fights to keep them open. "I wonder how long it will take her to die."

I'm one breath away from launching a full scale assault when I see movement from Micah.

He raises his arm. The one without a hand. The one that can't hold a gun.

Micah makes the sign of a cross, which makes no sense because Micah isn't even slightly religious.

Haven notices him and they lock eyes.

He's sending a message to her.

You still have one free hand. Use it and use it now.

Sophie giggles, having the time of her life. But she lets the arm holding the gun go slack at her side.

Haven sees an opening and takes it.

Though her free arm is swollen with snakebites, she's strong enough to seize a fistful of Sophie's hair. She slams

Sophie's head into the metal pipe with enough force to make bones crunch.

Sophie screams. "YOU BITCH!"

Blood spurts everywhere. The snakes go berserk.

"FUCK!" Jared wildly fires the gun. A bullet whizzes past my head.

Gage takes Jared's kneecaps out with two rapid shots. Micah moves in and kicks the gun right out of his hand.

A snake finds Greco's big belly and sinks its teeth into the prize. The man jerks awake. Now he's screaming too.

But the last motherfucker in the room?

He's all mine.

Talon is still dazed and can't even aim his gun properly before I charge like a bull, driving him into the wall so hard it cracks.

He might be tough. I'm tougher. And he will die SCREAMING for what he did to my girl.

Using my shoulder, I slam into him again. He releases a satisfying cry of pain as the force of the hit breaks the wall. Pieces of sheetrock rain down on his head. To the left, an empty closet yawns open. The snakes are going wild inside their container.

And I have an idea.

Since I'm good at picking up men and throwing them like a bag of bricks, I haul Talon off his feet, take a couple of steps in the direction of the closet, and hurl him into the dark depths. He lands in a groaning heap but I'm far from finished.

I kick the entire container of snakes at his head and then bang the door shut. There's a lock on the outside. How convenient. I flick the bolt closed.

The screaming begins immediately.

Micah is already trying to free Haven while Gage makes sure no one gets up for a final scare. With one strong arm, Micah bends the pipe Haven is cuffed to. He slips the cuff free but she doesn't seem to notice. She's fading fast.

"Haven." Gently, I gather her in my arms. "Baby, look at me please."

Haven's long lashes flutter at the sound of my voice. Her face is an unhealthy shade.

Micah checks the pulse at her neck and grimaces. "She needs to get to the hospital." He sees a set of car keys on the floor and dives for them. "These hers?"

"Yup. Let's get the fuck out of here." I kiss Haven's lips. "Stay awake, sweetheart. You need to stay awake."

Greco has awakened to chaos and pathetically slithers out on his belly. Jared is busy bleeding out on the floor. Talon continues to scream in the closet.

One of the snakes squeezes through the door crack and searches for another victim. The thing slithers in Jared's direction.

Sophie sits on the couch and wails. Her mouth is missing teeth and her nose is pulverized. Blood drips between the fingers she holds to her face.

"What about that?" Gage says.

"Shit, let the snakes have her," Micah argues.

Can't say I disagree.

"Tempting," Gage grunts but he lifts the fucking traitor in his arms anyway.

Sophie perks up. "Are you Conner's brother?" Blood keeps dripping from her ruined face. "You're so strong."

Micah is already out the door, Haven's keys in his hand.

"Don't wait for me," Gage says. "Just go."

No need to tell me again.

As I step out into the sunlight I press my lips to Haven's forehead. Her skin is cold and clammy. "You'll be fine, honey. You'll be just fine. Hold on. Please hold on."

She opens her eyes, just for a second. Her head rolls on my shoulder and her voice is weak. "Conner, are you real? I thought I'd never see you again."

"I'm here." I hear Micah start the car engine. Despair rips me to shreds on the inside. I can't let her know. "The monsters are gone, baby. We killed them. You're safe."

My love. My queen. My whole world.

"I love you more than anything, Haven."

But she doesn't hear that.

She's already drifted away in my arms.

Chapter 39

Haven

The points of fire on my body are the first things to greet me when I leave my dreams. On my chest there's the blistered burn from the searing metal. My swollen wrist aches from being cuffed. Deep scratches scar my fingers. And on my left arm and my belly, there's the lingering prickle of multiple snake bites.

I remember the hospital. The doctors speaking in medical jargon about the anti-venom treatment. Lita crying. Conner at my side, pressing a cool cloth to my feverish forehead.

"I love you, Haven. I love you. I love you. I love you..."

Above all, I remember the horrid awareness of my body battling the poison coursing through my blood and threatening to steal me from this world.

That fight was won.

The proof is in the fact that I can recognize the feel of sunlight on my cheek. I know I'm at home, in the bedroom I share with Conner.

A voice hums close to my ear, the same voice that has always been with me since before the time of memory. Instinctively, I curl closer to the voice, closer to the person who was born to be my other half.

“Please don’t take my sister away,” Lita sings. Her hand holds mine. She lays on her side with her knees drawn up, her head on a pillow just above me.

She stops singing when she sees my eyelids flutter open. Bright light filters through the shutter planks. Though I’ve slept so much since returning home yesterday and the hours have blended together, I can tell that the sun sits high in the sky right now.

“Hi.” My sister smiles down at me. “How do you feel?”

“Bruised.” I cough and wince. “Thirsty.”

She turns to grab a tumbler sitting on the nightstand. “Here. Drink some ice water.” She directs the straw to my mouth as if I’m a child.

I drink greedily until I need to take a breath. “Thanks.”

She sets the tumbler down and helps me sit up, taking care to fluff a pillow and place it gently behind my back.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“Half past noon. Conner has been keeping constant watch over you but I took over so he could have a break. He hasn’t even eaten yet today. I’m not sure he slept at all while you were in the hospital.” She leans back into the pillows and sighs. “You’ll be all right. The doctors all said so.”

“Guess I’m tough to kill.”

She stares at me. Her chin trembles. “If you ever scare me like that again I’ll kick your ass just like the old days.”

The laughter that bubbles out of my throat hurts only a little. “Yeah, you wish you kicked my ass.” I roll to my side. Our noses are only inches apart. “I’m sorry that I scared you.”

She makes a face. “While you were lying in that hospital bed I made a deal.”

“A deal with who?”

“I don’t know. Whoever it is that decides who lives and who dies. I offered to trade my life for yours.”

My throat tightens. “I’d never want that. Anyway, there are no such deals. I can’t even count how many times I offered up my soul if you could be given a second chance. No one was listening.”

“I’d never want you to give up your life for me either.” She sighs. “Haven, you were the first person I looked for. When I woke up and there were all these strangers around. They knew me and I didn’t understand why I didn’t know them. You were the *only* one I wanted to see. It hurt to speak but I kept repeating your name over and over. Did they tell you that?”

“No, they didn’t.”

She gnaws at the corner of her lip. A shadow falls over her expression. “I can’t explain where I was all that time. It wasn’t really a place. It had no name. But I know that you were always close, always watching over me.”

“I’ll never stop watching over you.”

Her eyes are watery. “Nothing is fair, is it? Somehow I found a way out of that lost world but so many others never do. And I don’t know why I get to be here.”

“I don’t know why either. But I missed you, Lita. Every day I regretted the fact that I should have been a better sister.”

She sits up on her elbow. “You are the *best* sister, Haven. The very best in the world. So brave. Crazy smart. And no one has a bigger heart.”

Gazing at her, I whisper our magic words. “Please don’t take my sister away.”

She lets out a soft cry, perhaps some part of her remembering the countless times I uttered that sentence next to her ear. She throws her arms around me and hugs tightly. We’re still locked in a twin embrace when Conner cracks the door open.

“You’re awake.” Conner stands at the foot of the bed. He’s disheveled and unshaven. He’s beautiful. And his smile is happy.

I sit up and reach for him. “My hero.”

Lita scoots off the bed. “This is my cue to exit. You guys deserve to have a moment alone.”

My twin sister pauses at the door. We exchange a glance that has more love and understanding packed into it than can be properly expressed in words. She shuts the door softly behind her.

Conner climbs into bed and carefully collects me in his arms. Days of anxiety have taken a toll that is now etched into his handsome face. “Are you in pain?” he asks.

“Not too much. I don’t want to take anything for it.” The bandage on my chest is uncomfortable when I move. I’m sure there will be a scar. “How’s Robert?”

“He’s glad you’re home, but he’s quiet. Micah and Tess have been around a lot, helping to look after him. Dani brings Charlotte and Total to visit because that seems to cheer him up a little. They’re here now. Micah says the kid has a tough road ahead and needs all the support he can get.”

Yes, Micah would know. As a child, he witnessed his own father being butchered. He likely feels a sad kinship with my

brother. What a tragic club to be a member of.

It's difficult to fathom the hell my little brother has been through lately. His father was killed in prison. His mother was murdered right in front of him. Aileen and I were never close. She was only my stepmother for a short time. She was a good person. And she adored her son. Her small funeral was held while I was in the hospital.

"There is no other family," I tell Conner, in case this hasn't been clear. "We are Robert's guardians now."

Conner nods with no hesitation. "This is his home. He stays with us."

"How is Vito doing?"

"He was also released from the hospital yesterday. Says he and his wife are planning to move to Palm Springs but if you ever need him he's at your service."

I'm relieved that the man who saved my brother's life gets to ride off into the sunset. It's a welcome bright spot in the aftermath of so much violence.

There are other questions I haven't asked yet. In the hospital, Conner asked me if I wanted to hear the rest of my family's story and I didn't. There would be plenty of time for that later, once I was no longer fighting for my life.

It's now later.

"What was done with my father's body?"

Conner holds me close and kisses the top of my head. "Your father didn't leave any instructions. Lita made the choice to have him cremated. You and your brother and sister can decide what to do with the remains."

“My father was far from sentimental. He’d probably laugh and recommend scattering the ashes in an east side parking lot.”

He chuckles. “You give it some thought. Fiona visited the hospital every day. She wanted to make sure that you knew she did everything you asked her to. But she wouldn’t tell me what that was.”

“I asked her to give all my money to the people who worked for me. Sorry to tell you this, but I’m now broke. You’ll have to support me.”

He snorts. “Good thing I’m sitting on many millions. That number just keeps growing because Gage is an investment genius.”

“Speaking of Gage, was I delirious or did I hear you tell Lita that he personally escorted Sophie back to Las Vegas?”

“You weren’t delirious. Gage wanted to make sure there was no misunderstanding with the Vegas mafia. Castigliore is not real pleased with his daughter. I expect Sophie will be locked in some Vegas ivory tower for the foreseeable future to keep her from embarrassing the family again. Gage, however, will be back home today.” He clears his throat and exhales loudly. I know he has something else on his mind.

“What am I missing?”

“Gage says Estes is back in the city. He wants to see you.”

I can feel my mouth pull into a scowl. “I suppose I’ll have to get that over with at some point.”

As if all the recent shocks weren’t enough, my father’s younger brother has risen from the dead. Or, more precisely, Estes was never dead in the first place. Jumping off a yacht after being riddled with bullets should have earned him a

destiny as shark food. I suppose it's a miracle that he managed to cling to a boulder long enough to be discovered by a local fishing boat. He had no identification on him and for a long time he wasn't expected to survive. When he did begin to recover, he kept his identity a secret. A smart move, considering he was stuck in a foreign country where the powerful men who wished him dead assumed they'd succeeded. Estes didn't emerge from hibernation until the news of my father's death reached him.

Gage was highly skeptical of the tale, but after checking it all out with his overseas contacts, he assured Conner it was legit.

The news of my uncle's impending homecoming just leaves a few final loose ends to tie up. "I suppose Estes has also heard that Talon's dead."

Talon Marchenko died in an abandoned east side motel. The cause of death was massive organ failure due to the level of venom in his system after sustaining twenty-nine snakebites.

Twenty-nine. My favorite number.

"Yeah. Presumed to be a mob hit. Gage had something to do with reinforcing that idea to a couple of friendly reporters. Jared will likely be seeing his brother soon. He's in a coma right now and his odds aren't looking good."

"Sounds like poetic justice. What's the latest on Uncle Desmond?"

"He's got his hands full trying to squash anarchy in the ranks. Gage says the east side is like a tinderbox right now, ready to explode into war."

“Not surprising. Desmond wouldn’t be able to keep order in a dog kennel. All the other gangs and so-called families now sense an opportunity.”

Inwardly, I grieve for the people who will be caught in the crossfire. Men launching brutal wars to claim things that don’t belong to them is nothing new.

The cycle sucks just the same.

Conner strokes my hair as I lie on his chest. Our reflection in the giant wall mirror stares back at me. We look like an ordinary couple sharing a tender moment. Anyone who didn’t know us wouldn’t be able to guess what it took to bring us here.

Then again, that’s probably always true. There are no ordinary love stories.

“Are you feeling well enough to come outside?” he says. “I have something to show you in the backyard.”

“Sure. Just give me a minute in the bathroom.”

Upon standing, I’m dizzy for a second. Conner’s hand shoots out to steady me. But once I take a step I feel stronger.

After I wash up and change to real clothes rather than pajamas, I take a moment to gingerly explore the wounds currently protected by bandages. As soon as I can, I’m getting the remains of my tattoo removed. Maybe the doctors can even do something with the burn scar.

With my blonde hair pulled back into a loose ponytail and my face free of makeup, the image staring back at me over the sink appears younger than it has in years. This despite the bruises on my neck and the circles under my eyes.

The mirror smiles.

This is the real me.

The girl who will never erase all of her sharp edges but who remains furiously devoted to the people in her life.

The girl who is deeply in love and hopeful about the future.

Conner has waited for me. Of course he has. He slips an arm around my waist as we leave the bedroom.

Together, we follow the sound of voices coming from the backyard.

Chapter 40

Haven

My eyeballs wince at the bright light and I blink to adjust.

Lita holds baby Dash on her lap as she talks to Dani and Tess. Micah lounges in a nearby patio chair, apparently asleep under a pair of sunglasses.

Robert sits on his knees in the grass. Charlotte has primly claimed a seat beside him. Her lips move rapidly. He says nothing in return but he raises his head with a vague smile at the sight of Total rolling in the grass.

Then I see what Conner wanted to show me. A large square of concrete has been added to the right of the pool.

“You installed a basketball hoop.”

“Do you like it?”

I pull him down for a kiss. “Almost as much as I like you.”

Lita hands Dash back to his mother and rushes this way. In a stark reversal of roles, she insists on helping me into a chair and orders me to relax while she pours a glass of lemonade. I have no objection. It’s nice to be loved.

Tess sets Dash down so he can show off his walking skills. The miniature sneakers on his feet are stinking adorable. His

grin is full of pride as he toddles on his own two feet and he comes right to me when I stretch out my arms.

Dash only allows me to hold him for a couple of seconds before he demands freedom. He ambles over to his father and smacks Micah's leg to get his attention. Micah jerks awake and scoops his son up with a grin.

Conner drinks from my lemonade glass and sits beside me with his hand resting possessively on my knee.

“Gage should be here within the hour,” Dani says.

She rubs her belly. There are a lot of reasons why I owe Dorothy Ann Silvestro, but one reason rises above them all. I can't shake the suspicion that she was the magnet that pulled us all together, like everything that has happened somehow began with her.

“Do you know yet?” I ask. “If you're having a boy or a girl?”

“Not for another few weeks. Gage swears we're having a girl. If so, we'll name her Cecile.”

“My grandmother would be proud,” Conner says.

“If you're hungry,” Dani tells me, “I tried out a homemade chicken strip recipe. Conner said it was your favorite food. I left the tray in the fridge.”

“Our Dani feeds the world.” Tess throws a fond look at her best friend.

“Thank you,” I say to Dani, even though it feels inadequate. “Thank you for everything.”

She holds my eye. “What are friends for?”

“We're more than friends, Dani. We're family.”

She swallows and gets a little misty eyed. “You’re right, Haven. We are.”

There’s a small commotion when Total jumps to life and darts across the yard to chase an innocent pigeon pecking in the grass.

“Total, don’t!” Charlotte runs after her dog.

Robert stays behind, lost in his thoughts, staring glumly down at the grass.

Conner holds onto my arm when he sees me rising from my chair. I shake my head to show that I’m just fine. Then I walk over to my little brother.

Robert doesn’t look up until I ease down in the grass beside him. Then he blinks and straightens his back.

“Hey there, kiddo.”

“Hi.” Worry lines crease his forehead. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“Conner told me what happened. About the snakes and everything. He talked your doctors into letting me visit but you were asleep at the time.”

“I’m home now.” I choose my words carefully, searching for the right ones. “This is *your* home too.”

“I liked my old home.” His face crumples. “I never wanted to be an orphan.”

“I know. But I’m here for you. We all are.”

“Where will I go to school?”

“We’ll figure something out.”

He sniffs and wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “I miss my mom. I keep thinking I hear her voice but I know that’s not true. I saw her die.”

“She was a good mother. She would be happy that you’re safe. And we can talk about her anytime you want.”

Robert sniffs again. But he doesn’t resist when I give him a gentle hug.

Something furry touches my hand. I look down into Total’s grinning doggie face. He has dirt on his tongue.

Charlotte runs up to us, breathless. “I found a hummingbird nest in the jasmine bush. Robert, come and see.” She grabs his arm with impatience.

He rolls his eyes. After all, Charlotte is two years younger and Robert probably doesn’t share her enthusiasm for bird’s nests. But he gets to his feet and follows her to the corner of the yard.

I watch as Charlotte hops up and down and points excitedly. Robert humors her by peering between the branches.

Then Lita calls my name. A chill tickles the back of my neck. Part of that extra sensory twin talent perhaps. In any case, when I turn toward the patio, I’m unsurprised to see that some new guests have arrived.

One is Gage Silvestro. He stands with his arm slung protectively around his wife.

The other man is barely recognizable. Like his big brother, Estes was always strong and physically powerful. He now looks positively shrunken beside Conner. He still resembles my father, but it’s the version of my father that I last saw in the grey setting of a prison.

“Marino is breathing on me, girls.”

Lita waits uneasily to see what I’ll do.

She doesn’t need to worry. I stand up, brush the grass from my legs and walk with confidence, my head held high.

Estes Marchenko leans on a thick wooden cane and watches me with zero reaction.

I slip my hand into Conner’s and deliver a cool nod in my uncle’s direction. “Let’s go talk in the house. Lita, you should come too.”

Estes struggles with a limp that is obviously painful but he doesn’t need to walk far. We take seats at the kitchen table. I sit across from him, between Lita and Conner. No one sits at the head of the table.

My uncle’s expression has often been inscrutable. He might be thinking about what he’ll eat for dinner tonight or he might be plotting ways to disembowel someone who has annoyed him. Never can tell.

“You look like shit,” I say because it’s true and because I don’t have much appetite for useless small talk with a man I don’t trust.

The hollows in his cheeks are deep. He grins. “You’ve looked better yourself.” He glances at Lita, then back at me. “Damn, it’s nearly impossible to tell you two apart until you open your mouth.”

“True. I was always the bitchier twin. What do you want, Estes?”

He leans back in the chair with a grimace. A joint pops. He doesn’t seem insulted by the question. “Just wanted to check in with my family. What’s left of it, anyway.”

“As you can see, we’re healthy enough around here.”

“Heard you got bit by some snakes.”

“I did. One of them is dead and the other one will probably be dead soon. That’s what happens to snakes that bite.”

He nods. “Those two were always bad eggs. As for Desmond, someone ought to just put him out of his misery. You agree?”

“I don’t care. I’m out of the family business.”

Lita quietly rises from her chair. She heads to the kitchen and I assume she plans to offer our uncle some refreshments. I would have told her not to bother. The sooner he’s out of here the better. But she starts rummaging through a drawer beside the sink.

Estes clucks his tongue. “That’s too bad. I would have given you all of Essex Street.”

“No thanks. Maybe you ought to go back to the hospital. I could swear you’re about to pass out.”

His cough sounds dry and painful. “Still have some metal in my body. But now that I’m back in the states I’ll be getting that fixed. It wouldn’t be smart to bet against me, girl. And you were always smart.”

“I won’t bet against you. I won’t be betting at all.”

Lita returns and retakes her seat before holding her hand out and dropping an object in the center of the table. It’s an insignia ring, with a thick M that trails off into a snake head. A gaudy emerald squats in the center.

“Sophie had it,” she says. “But Gage took it back and gave it to me.”

Estes picks the ring up with thin fingers and examines it. “Never thought I’d see this again.”

“It’s been through a journey.” I watch him slide the ring back on his finger. It’s too big now.

He lifts bushy eyebrows. “Haven’t we all?”

His gaze strays to the window. He stares at the far side of the yard where Robert hangs out with Charlotte.

Instantly, every muscle in my body tenses. I can guess what’s coming next.

“I’ll take the boy,” Estes says, still staring at my little brother. “He’s been raised with the expectation that he’s the future of the family. Give him to me. I’ll turn him into the kind of man who makes our name mean something.”

“*No. Fucking. Way.*” Conner speaks before I do. He’s practically snarling as he leans forward a few inches to make his point with a frosty glare.

“You can’t have him.” Lita is ready to dive across the table and strangle our uncle if necessary.

“We would fight you to the death,” I add. I’m not even exaggerating.

Estes sits back. He seems amused. “No, I think there’s been enough death for now.” He leans heavily on his cane as he stands. “I have a car waiting. Guess I’ll be getting out of your way for the time being.”

“Yeah, I think that’s best.”

He smiles. “Thanks for returning my ring.” He doesn’t get three steps before turning to drop one more landmine. “You can finish raising the boy. But once he’s a man he gets to make

his own choice. And if he seeks me out, I'm keeping him. You know it's what your father would have wanted."

My uncle doesn't await a reply.

"Don't count on it," I whisper.

After I hear the front door open and close, I take an anxious look out the window where my brother pets a dog and laughs with a little girl, with no idea that his fate has just been fought over.

Conner's arm slides across my shoulders and I lean into his strength.

Lita twirls a piece of hair, her face troubled. "I think he's wrong."

"Damn right he's wrong. He's never getting his vile, corrupt hands on our brother."

"True, but it's not what I meant. Do you remember the last thing Dad said to us?"

"Take care of my treasure. You know where to find it."

"Yes, but I have no idea what treasure he was talking about. I thought it was just his way of ordering us to protect his empire."

She quits twirling her hair. "Maybe not." She takes a pointed look out the window. "Maybe he was referring to something else."

It's not out of the question. Nothing meant more to Aric Marchenko than his only son. Perhaps once he suspected he'd soon be facing his judgment day, his mind was on protecting Robert from the blood-soaked destiny that had been mapped out for him since birth. And my father understood no one would be better for the job than us.

Anyway, I'd like to think so.

Lita pats my leg and stands. "It's good to have you home. Do you need anything?"

I have to laugh because I've asked her that same question a thousand times since she woke from her coma. She stares, confused. Then she laughs too.

"It's my turn to hover, little sister." She winks on her way back to the patio.

I don't even balk at her use of 'little sister'. Instead, I tip my face toward Conner and await his kiss.

He cups my chin in his hand and seductively uses his tongue. Despite injury and exhaustion, my whole body hums with pleasure. I can't wait to be alone with him later.

For now, I look into his eyes and remind him of something. "You did promise to marry me."

He nods. "Just say when."

"I'm saying when."

"Like right now?"

"Right freaking now. That is, if you're still into me even though I look like I just staggered out of a bar brawl."

His face softens and he touches my cheek. "You get more beautiful every time I look at you."

I take his hand and kiss the palm. "I love you, Conner Wiseman. Marry me. Please."

It dawns on him that I'm serious. He pulls me to my feet. Kisses me passionately. Then ushers me outside in a hurry.

Naturally, everyone in the backyard is startled when Conner starts shouting questions about wedding ceremonies.

But as it turns out, Dani and Gage's neighbor is a retired judge. The man is also a huge football fan so all it takes is one phone call that drops the name 'Conner Wiseman' and he's on his way over.

Lita won't allow me to marry anyone while wearing a pair of nylon gym shorts. With Tess and Dani's help, she shoos me back indoors to perform a rapid makeover. I don't own a single white dress. We have to settle for a simple cream-colored maxi sundress from Lita's closet. The bandage covering the burn on my chest is visible and my arm still looks bad from the snake bites but I don't mind. Conner won't mind either. My hair is curled and adorned with purple flowers from the bouquets Conner left all over the house to celebrate my homecoming.

Lita is hell bent on applying makeup to my face. She won't take no for an answer. She finishes with a dash of lip gloss and then steps back to make a critical assessment. "You are the perfect bride."

I raise my eyes and stare at the face that looks just like mine. "Do you remember when you used to beg to do my makeup?"

She smiles. "And today you finally let me."

By now the judge has arrived. Micah and Gage have also returned from their mission to find rings. Conner shows me the plain gold bands from a nearby department store and swears that tomorrow he'll buy me whatever ring I want.

"Silly boy." I stretch on my toes to kiss his lips. "I'm keeping this one."

The judge waits under the basketball hoop. The people we love form a circle around us as we face one another and say

our VOWS.

All it takes is a few short minutes.

Conner's lips touch mine.

Now I'm married to the man of my dreams.

Epilogue

CONNER

Robert dribbles the ball around me and shoots. The basket makes a satisfying *swish* sound and he raises his arms with a cheer.

I catch the ball on a bounce. “Third time this week you’ve won.”

He crosses his arms. “Somehow I think you’re letting that happen.”

“Untrue. I’m trying my best. Don’t make fun of me.”

“Yeah, right. Guess what? I was thinking about trying hockey.”

“Hockey, huh?” The kid’s determined to play every single sport. It’s awesome.

“Yeah. Haven says we can check out the new ice rink that just opened up and see about joining a local league. Will you come too?”

“Absolutely.”

The kid grins. It’s good to see him smile. Only two months have passed since his world was turned upside down in a very gruesome way. He’s living in a new place, going to a new school, and trying to deal with his grief. We’re not his parents

but we're all doing our best to give him the love and guidance that he needs.

Robert stretches. "I'm gonna go inside and grab a soda. You want any?"

"Nah. But thanks for asking."

He trots toward the house. One of his big sisters has been watching from the shade of the patio and catches him in a hug. She fondly messes up his hair before letting him go.

"Hey," I call to my sister-in-law as I bounce the ball. "How about a quick game?"

Lita scoffs. "Forget it. Took me over an hour to get ready."

Abandoning the ball in the grass, I trot over to her. "You nervous?"

Lita looks down at her dress and sandals and takes a deep breath. "A little. My first date in over a decade."

"No worries. She'll fall over when she sees you."

Haven's twin raises her head. "As long as she recovers in time to take me out to dinner. And maybe dancing too. I miss dancing."

"How's the studying going for the high school equivalency test?"

"Slowly." She adjusts the strap of her dress. "But I'm setting an ambitious goal to take the exam by Christmas. Then maybe I'll get to go to college. After all the time I spent with physical therapists, I was thinking maybe that's what I want to do."

It's good to hear Lita getting excited about what her future might hold. We're all trying new things nowadays. I've been

flooded with job offers; everything from coaching positions to NFL game announcer. I might take one of the announcing gigs. Can't deny that I really like to run my mouth.

In the meantime, I've been staying busy with local charity work. Next week I'm helping with a telethon event for a dog rescue. To make everyone happy, I've even extended a peace offering to my aunts and agreed to put in strategic appearances at corporate events.

Haven's voice drifts from the kitchen. She's telling Robert not to eat too many snacks because we'll be having dinner in a little while.

"So what's my role in this whole date thing?" I ask Lita.

"Your role? You have absolutely *no* role, Conner."

"I'm the protective brother-in-law. I'm supposed to shield your honor. Or something."

"Dumbass." But she giggles.

"Last name's Wiseman. Just don't take it too literally."

Lita's smile fades. She shakes her head. "Actually, Conner, I think you're the wisest guy alive."

"I'll always take a compliment, even if it is unearned."

"The compliment is not unearned. You're wise enough to see the best in people. Most importantly, you see *her*. You see her even better than I do."

Haven laughs in the kitchen. If my heart had music, that would be the sound.

Almost without thinking, I touch the gold band on my left hand. I never take it off. "She's easy to see. Even easier to love."

Lita nods. “That she is.”

The doorbell chimes and Haven pokes her head outside. “Are you ready?” she asks her sister.

Lita takes a deep breath. “I’m ready. It’s time to get back to the land of the living.”

“Stay here,” says Haven. “I’ll answer the door.”

She disappears and Lita fidgets. She adjusts the strap of her dress and checks out her reflection in the window.

“Don’t look desperate,” I whisper.

She wrinkles her nose and pinches my arm.

Haven returns to the backyard with Fiona Carney. The two of them have been working on a business plan to open up a sports bar. Fiona’s eyes search for Lita and she breaks into a smile that’s almost shy.

“You’re beautiful, Lita,” Fiona says. She holds out a gallant hand. “Shall we?”

Haven edges to my side and hugs my waist. “Keep in mind that we’ll be waiting up.”

Lita rolls her eyes but her cheeks are flush with happiness as she takes Fiona’s hand. “Screw that. Maybe this will be the night I finally lose my virginity.”

Fiona chuckles but gives Haven a subtle headshake to set her mind at ease.

“Have fun, ladies,” I tell them and hug my wife closer.

“Bear with me,” Lita tells Fiona before stepping through the door. “My romance skills are a little out of practice.”

Fiona winks. “We’ll just have to take it slow.”

“Fiona,” Haven says. She waits until her friend turns around before finishing her thought. “Please take care of my sister.”

Fiona tilts her head. “You know I will.”

Haven and I remain on the patio, just listening, until we hear the front door swing shut.

I move my hand up her back and rub her shoulders. “Should I start firing up the grill? Everyone will be here soon.”

We’re celebrating. Micah, Tess and Dash will be crossing the street. Dani and Gage will be driving across town. Yesterday they received excellent news. They are having a daughter. A little girl who will be named Cecile in honor of a very special lady. My grandmother would have been delighted.

“In a minute.” Haven kisses me and then escapes. It looks like she’s going to jump in the pool with her clothes on but she detours, smoothly scooping the basketball out of the grass and jumping over to the court. “Come and play with me, Wiseman.”

No way would I turn down such a request from my wife.

Haven dribbles the ball, her back to me. She tries to keep it away as she approaches the basket. Then she squeals when I lift her up at the waist. The ball is splashed through the net. She’s laughing as I set her down. She throws her arms around my neck.

My mouth finds hers and makes demands. She presses into my chest, always eager for more.

We lose ourselves in the kiss. I’ll get lost with her anytime.

My grandmother once gave me some precious advice in the moments before her death. She told me to find my happiness. She'd be glad to know that I have.

There might be no shortage of things in the world that I don't understand.

But there's no limit to what I'm still willing to learn.

And beyond all that, there's one certainty that is unshakable.

One fact that will endure forever.

I belong with this girl.

Loving her is by far the wisest thing I've ever done.

Author Note

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Three love stories. Nearly 400,000 words.

What a journey this trilogy has been.

I hope you've enjoyed the ride.

Love,

Cora

P.S. Reviews are always much appreciated!

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