



# CLOSE CALL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMELIA  
WILDE

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About the Author



**J**ails are bullshit.

Look at the damage that's been wrought by the carceral state and all its attendant dirty money. People in power are incentivized to send less-powerful people to prison and keep them there for absurd periods of time and then—what? Everybody's hopes and dreams come true?

Hasn't happened so far.

However.

In this *one* instance, I can admit that jail might have a purpose. It's the only thing in the world that's going to keep me away from the woman I kidnapped and then fell hopelessly, foolishly in love with, like the crime scene I am.

"Empty your pockets," one of the cops tells me in a dingy intake area. His name's Pearson. Parson? Something with a P. He sounds bored to death. I wish I felt that resigned to all this bullshit. I *was* resigned when the sun came up over the lake this morning.

A camera flashes in my face. The goal when I kidnapped Lily was to make her obsessed with me, and it worked. Her green eyes were huge and horrified when they put me in the car.

*This isn't funny.* She'd wanted to believe the whole thing was a joke. Classic Lily. It took forever to convince her that I was kidnapping her in the first place. It took no time at all to

want her. *Badly*. It took no time to lose my mind to her mouth and her body and the way she talked to me.

But then...my mind's been gone for years now. It might have been a coincidence.

There's no point in pretending.

It wasn't a coincidence.

Having her with me was so good that I'd have chalked it up to a hallucination if my hallucinations were ever that lovely. They're not. The nightmares I have—night terrors? whatever they are—feature my siblings dying in front of me and the never-ending torture of my own heart still beating.

No soft, red hair. No gentle green eyes. No sweet lips brushing up against my temple.

Lily's real, which in numerous ways is worse than if she were a figment of my imagination. I can already tell that she's not going to limit herself to my dreams. She'll haunt me every second, waking and sleeping, until I have a full break with reality or die, whichever comes first.

“Hill.”

Lily, radiant in sweatpants and a T-shirt, clutching my phone in her hand and staring after me like she thought I could stay. Like she thought my presence would be worth the heartache.

If I could say anything to her now, I'd tell her it's not. It's never worth it. Ask my siblings.

*Don't arrest him. I'm so sorry, but you came all the way out here for nothing.*

I'll give her that—she got one thing right. All those cops came out to the cabin for nothing.

Worse than nothing, if I'm totally honest. My life hasn't amounted to anything except for an extensive criminal record and a pain in the ass for Mason and his company.

Hey, there's a silver lining, Mason can—

“Jameson.”

*Jameson. Stop. Stop. I didn't ask for this.*

Yeah. That's the thing about a revenge kidnapping. The person who gets kidnapped is a piece on the board. They don't matter except in the context of the game.

I fucked that up, too.

Lily mattered.

Worse yet, she mattered to *me*, which is why I'm—

*"Jameson."* A hand on my shoulder. Pearson's face, leaning close. "Did we lose you?"

"Hope not."

I should probably pay closer attention to what's happening. If the cops don't have a handle on my general presence, it's up to me.

Not that I've been stellar at that lately.

Paperwork shuffles nearby.

"You're allowed one phone call," Pearson says. "Phone's behind you."

"Don't need one."

He narrows his eyes. "You don't?"

"Nobody to call."

Officer Pearson doesn't look like he believes me, but I stare at him until he shrugs his shoulders and takes me to the holding cell. Home, sweet home until they pick out a more permanent one.

An hour goes by.

A cop I don't recognize comes by and runs through a checklist. He wants to know if I'm a danger to myself. That's funny, but I don't laugh. It doesn't seem like it would go over well. I give him the shortest answers I can and watch him tick boxes on the form. He's wearing too much cologne. If he stays here too long, I'll forget the scent of Lily's skin.

I'll probably forget that anyway.



Two hours.

I spend most of it staring at a frosted window. The light from outside is colorless. From inside this room, it's impossible to tell it's summer.

Seasons are about to be irrelevant, too. *All* dates are about to be irrelevant.

Ah, fuck. I'm going to miss the anniversary.

I'm going to miss the annual trip we take to the cemetery to put flowers on our parents' graves and talk to them. Mason and Gabriel and Remy will do that without me.

A pang of guilt slips between my ribs like a blade that's been rusted to shit.

I'm torn, because I've never missed the anniversary before. I was there on the first one, when Mason lost it and his knee locked up on him and it was a long time before we could leave. We sure as hell didn't have the money to spend on flowers that year.

Gabriel came up with it anyway.

I knew, by then, how he earned enough to pay for decent bouquets for each of us. I'd known almost from the beginning. I can still feel the paper crinkling around the stems in my hand, and the sun beating down, and how my jaw hurt from gritting my teeth. Our parents would have been fine if he skipped the flowers, but I couldn't say that.

It would have given away that I saw him come back into our shitty apartment pretty much every time. I saw how he shivered, even when it was hot out. I heard him spitting into the sink like he'd been sick in the street outside. I felt like the world's most useless asshole when all I'd done was convince Remy to go back to sleep.

The least I can do is be available for the anniversary, given all that.

On the other hand, maybe I'm doing my siblings a favor. Since I'm in jail—and will be, for the foreseeable future—they

can concentrate on missing our parents, who actually had qualities that made them deserving of being missed.

“You got three good ones,” I point out to the empty cell. “Can’t beat yourselves up about a seventy-five percent success rate.”

Nobody answers. Not that I was hoping they would.

Temperature control in the jail isn’t great. The concrete slab-bed is cool, but the air’s lukewarm. Not much circulation, either. Even the oxygen is resigned.

Can’t deny it—I’m tired. Lily forced me to sleep for the better part of a day. I’m not sure she knew all that sleeping and fucking wouldn’t energize me. All it did was remind me of the existence of decent sleep, which isn’t something I can get on my own.

New goal: stay awake.

It’s not easy when there’s nothing to do. The noise of a past-its-prime air conditioning unit fades in until I recognize it for what it is and slap my cheeks until there are only jail sounds.

*Jamie.*

“Don’t,” I answer. It’s automatic after last night. “It’s just a room, Mom.”

*Why are you here?*

“I swear we *just* talked about this.”

*What did you do?*

“I didn’t do anything.” Just a run-of-the-mill kidnapping. Just a side order of falling in love.

*Then you should leave.*

“I’ll think about it.”

I jump from the bed when the sound of waves on the shore gets so clear I could stick my fingers in the water.

Nothing else from my mom.

Snatches of conversation bounce down the hall to my holding cell. A phone rings out front, the sound cutting off when somebody picks it up. People are coming and going, judging by the distinct *click* of the doors when they open and shut.

There was supposed to be some amount of acceptance in all this. I'd go to jail, she'd go back to her life, everything would be fine.

Unfortunately, I'm not three hours into what will probably become a twenty-year-stint in prison, and there is no acceptance to be found.

I slouch into another position on the concrete approximation of a bed in my holding cell and concentrate on *not* ripping my skin off.

My purpose might have been noble, or it might have been a delusion brought on by staying up all night for sixteen years. Either way, I've had it with the getting-arrested theater. The cops already had thirty-odd mugshots before they got one today. The ceremonial taking-away-of-my-wallet was a nice touch. What did they think I was going to do with a wrinkled family photo and a few twenties, pick the lock?

No. I have to stay in here, no matter how much I want to claw through the nearest wall with my fingernails.

If I'm in here, Lily's safe.

If I'm in here, Lily's *safe*.

She's safe because she's far away from me, which is the only way to protect yourself from a human train wreck. I want her countries away. Continents away. My siblings are never going to be convinced to make an international move, so the best way to keep myself from dragging them all into hell is to put myself there first.

Well. Here I am.

I feel a twisted kind of gratefulness toward the cops. I know, I know—it's not fair to use them as guardrails, no matter how much I want someone else to stop me from becoming completely unhinged. Right now, it doesn't seem

particularly fair to me, either. I hate being confined. If a door closes, I'll find a window. If I crash my car in pursuit of justice, I'll take the subway. I'll do whatever it takes to get free, and get some sense that the world hasn't totally fucked me over.

You know what they say—if the world is going to fuck you over, fuck yourself over first. That *is* what they say, isn't it? Because I've done that. I kidnapped a woman for revenge, handed her my house and my *bird*, and threw myself on the mercy of the cops.

When I think of it like that, it doesn't sound like the best plan.

What can I say? What's done is done. The best thing to do is settle in to a life behind bars. For once, there's no question—this is the most noble thing a crime scene like me can possibly do, given the circumstances.

I've just closed my eyes to concentrate on forgetting Lily Hayes when there are voices in the hallway. Footsteps. Keys clinking on a belt.

“Get on up, Jameson.” It's the cop who arrested me, all shiny and clean in his blue uniform and bulletproof vest. We've done this dance a few times before. He jiggles the keys in the lock of the holding cell and pops the barred door open. “Someone's here to see you.”

“I said no lawyers, Tommy.”

He rolls his eyes. “That's Officer Phillips to you.”

“I'm good.”

“Come on.” He waves toward the open door.

“I'm not doing visitors. I didn't even use my phone call.”

“I know you didn't. That didn't stop your fiancée from posting bail.”

“Tommy, I said—wait. What the fuck did you just say?”

“Your fiancée bailed you out.”

“That’s—” That’s incredibly fucking weird, considering I don’t *have* a fiancée. “—suspicious, don’t you think? I haven’t even had time to settle in.”

“Good. Then this shouldn’t take too long. Let’s not keep the lady waiting.”

“What the fuck.”

My fiancée. My *fiancée*.

That can only be one person, except Lily’s had enough time to come to her senses.

I get to my feet and stretch, ignoring my racing heart. The sore muscles are a nice touch. My abs. My legs. It’s not like I did anything but sob on the beach all night. That shouldn’t involve my calves.

There has to be *some* reason to stall. Some reason I can demand to be kept in police custody. Instead, my brain gives me nothing but *is it her? Is it really her? Did she come for you? Go find out. Please. Please. Please. Man the fuck up and go find out if it’s her.*

Tommy sighs like *I’m* the one causing the problem here.

Oh, wait—I am.

I open my mouth to give him something, anything, that would convince him to keep me here.

Tommy raises his eyebrows and gestures into the hall.

This is not the standoff I thought I’d be having with the cops. I’m not usually so poorly prepared, either.

Tommy gestures again.

“Okay, okay. Jesus.”

I follow him into the hall, my chest all tight and my lungs refusing to get with the program. This could be an epic prank on the part of the cops, though Tommy doesn’t strike me as the epic-prank kind of guy. In general, I’m the one who stages the pranks.

I haven’t staged this one.

Tommy's shoes tap professionally on the polished floor. Mine don't make a sound. It's possible I don't exist. That would make more sense than Lily coming to bail me out.

*Unless* she's more obsessed than I thought.

Tommy leads the way into the lobby and steps up to the reception desk. He leans in to give the pair of cops behind the counter my name, and I see her.

Lily Hayes. A real-life angel.

She stands in front of the reception desk with her chin up and her shoulders squared, Snowball's entire cage balanced on her hip. Her red hair falls in waves around her shoulders, catching sunbeams—*how*—and practically blinding me with them. When I left the cabin in the back of Tommy's cop car, she was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt. Now she's wearing leggings and a tank top with a flannel shirt—*my* flannel shirt, from *my* closet—and she looks so good I could die.

I might be having a heart attack right now.

Snowball hops around in his cage, tweeting his head off. He's clearly annoyed.

Lily adjusts her grip on the handle. That tiny motion jolts me out of Snowball's tirade, and I follow her fingers—cute—up her arm—how does she have such perfect arms?—to the curve of her neck—oh my God—and finally to her face.

To her pursed lips and her flushed cheeks and her green eyes with that fierce sunburst around the pupils, staring me down like—

Like an avenging angel. Like a terrifying one.

Oh, fuck.

I'm in trouble.



I have never been so furious with a man in all my life.  
That is *saying* something.

A woman doesn't get into Columbia Law without meeting a few assholes. I paid my dues when it comes to dealing with men like that, and then I got *kidnapped*, so I'm *done* dealing with men like that.

I'm almost done dealing with men like that.

Jameson's not exactly what I would call a man like that. There's at least one mitigating factor.

But I'm not here to give him a free pass.

Well...not a *totally* free pass, anyway. I'm here because his family doesn't deserve radio silence at a time like this, and I feel a certain obligation to give Jameson the news. Any decent person would.

Jameson looks at me like he's ascended to heaven and the trip was rough. His black eye looks worse than it did yesterday, and his hair's wild around his face, and he's spent most of the day in a police car and in *jail*.

Ugh. I'm so mad I could scream at him.

There's one tiny mitigating factor, though. I said I was Jameson's fiancée, and if we really were engaged, I probably wouldn't scream at him in the police station.

Also, his eyes lit up when he saw me. His face lit up. I don't think he knows that, because if he did, he'd have stopped



by now.

So there are *two* mitigating factors.

Snowball is beside himself to see Jameson. He hops and hops and *hops*, his tiny weight moving from one side of the cage to the other.

“I’m the one who brought you here,” I remind Snowball under my breath. “He’s the one who abandoned you.”

Except Jameson was the one to rescue Snowball in the first place.

There are a *lot* of mitigating factors, okay?

The police officers continue their conversation, checking Jameson out of jail. One of them hands a too-large plastic bag with Jameson’s wallet in it across the counter. Jameson bows his head as he accepts it like they’ve handed him a bar of gold, then reaches all the way down into the bag to get his wallet back out.

I’m not going to *laugh*. This situation isn’t funny.

Jameson tucks his wallet in his back pocket, then tucks the plastic bag into a nearby recycling bin. They hand him some other papers, which he folds to fit in his pocket, along with his belt. He puts it back on. I’ve hardly been paying attention to the instructions from the officers.

Those aren’t my problem. *This* is my only problem, and then...

Then I’m definitely going to make him drop me off at home. Our fake engagement will be extremely short-lived.

Jameson leaves the counter and strides over to me.

“You *asshole*,” I start in. It slips out before I can stop it, but at least I manage to hiss it under my breath so as not to arouse suspicion. “What the hell were you—”

His hands are on my face before I can finish my question. Jameson’s hip knocks gently against Snowball’s cage, and he lets out a *sorry* into my mouth and kisses me at the same time.

Kisses me like some unhinged kidnap-cabin proposal really did happen. Kisses me like he agreed to spend a week with me in a non-kidnapping scenario instead of getting himself arrested. Kisses me like he's been in here for years instead of hours.

He still smells like his soap and the early morning air at his cabin, and I shouldn't, I *shouldn't*, give him a second's worth of empathy. I shouldn't let myself fall into the kiss like I'd fly into a dance at The Membership.

I shouldn't *soar*.

But Jameson leans closer, his body shielding me from the view of the police officers, and deepens the kiss in a way that's decidedly more reminiscent of the cabin than a dingy jailhouse lobby.

"Jameson," one of the officers calls. I'm fairly certain it's the one who actually took Jameson into custody at the cabin. He sounds just as tired now as he did then.

Jameson nips at my bottom lip, then lets his tongue linger over the faint sensation of his teeth for *several* beats before he slowly, reluctantly pulls away. I have a moment of panic where I think he might stop touching me, followed by a flare of hot anger at the fact that I want him to keep touching me, followed by what I hope is cool reserve.

It's not. My face is warm, and my heart races, and the main thing I feel is relief.

Which is simply not appropriate.

Then again, we left appropriateness behind when he kidnapped me, so it could very well be a moot point.

He keeps his hands and his eyes on my face and turns his head. "Yeah, Tommy?"

"Officer Phillips," the officer sighs. His annoyance isn't sharp—it's almost like he wants Jameson out of here for *Jameson's* sake. I don't want to identify with that sentiment, necessarily, but every time I work myself up to righteous rage, I remember him falling to his knees in the sand, terrified.

“You’re right.” Jameson straightens up. He releases my face just long enough to take my free hand in his. “We’ll take this elsewhere.”

“Try to stay out of trouble,” Officer Phillips says.

Jameson’s already walking us toward the exit. “No promises.”

I look back at the officers over my shoulder. Officer Phillips has his arms crossed over his chest, and he’s wearing a paternal frown that matches the concern in his voice.

“Thanks so much for your help,” I call to them, and lift my hand to wave, except I’m holding Snowball’s cage, so it probably looks like I’m letting the *bird* say goodbye. Snowball fluffs his wings and tweets at them.

One of the officers behind the counter—the one who processed Jameson’s bail for me—raises *his* hand to wave at Snowball. A sharp look from his fellow officer, a dark-haired woman with a sleek bun, makes him think twice. He puts his hand back down.

Then she’s leaning in to say something to him while Officer Phillips watches us leave. Her eyes are on us, too, slightly narrowed, and the tiniest alarm bell goes off in the back of my mind. It’s not a necessary warning, I don’t think. Anybody would stare at a woman who showed up with a bird to bail out a man who’s not really her fiancée.

There’s no reason for them to be suspicious of that part after the way Jameson kissed me. The only missing detail is that I don’t have a ring, but we live in modern times. I’m sure people get engaged without rings all the time.

Jameson pushes open the first door to the station’s airlock and takes us through a pocket of frigid air. Then we’re through the second door, noontime summer sun pouring down on us. He spots his SUV in the second row and steers us toward it with a gentle tug at my hand.

Obviously, it’s better if we look like a real couple until we’re fully out of sight of the police, but it’s *wrong*.

It's wrong that it feels right to let him tell me where to go, and it's even more wrong to go along with it.

But it's the *most* wrong to like it.

Sweet mother of Charlotte E. Ray, it's awful.

Jameson pulls me around to the driver's side, takes Snowball's cage out of my hand, and lifts it up so he can look into the cage. Snowball hops up to the bars and lets out a stream of indignant tweets.

"Hey," Jameson says. "I didn't mean to piss you off."

"Are you for real?" Does digging my fists into my hips and glaring make me seem calm, cool, and collected? The verdict is *no*. "You didn't mean to piss off the *bird*?"

Jameson peers over the top of the cage at me, the green of his eyes heightened by the sun. "His name is Snowball."

"What the hell are you thinking, talking to a bird instead of me?"

"I kissed you before. I didn't say anything to him."

"I got you out of jail, you asshole."

Jameson inclines his head. "Thanks."

I whirl around and stomp away, but I can only go a few steps before I reach the back of the SUV, so I make a tight turn and stomp back to him. None of this is Snowball's fault, so I take his cage carefully from Jameson and put it on the asphalt out of range of our feet. When I straighten up again, Jameson's watching me. In the natural light, the bruise under his eye looks at least twice as bad.

"Thanks? That's what you're going to say?"

"What else do you want me to say?"

"You could apologize."

His chin dimples, just a little bit, and I feel no more pity for him. I don't. I don't even think about how he cried on the beach, or how he looked when I woke him up before he could sink into a nightmare. I don't think of any of that.

“That’s what I was doing.” He gestures toward the jail. “Apologizing.”

“For what?”

He tilts his head. “For kidnapping you.”

“For *kidnapping* me?” My shriek echoes across the parking lot, and Jameson blinks. If they’re all watching on the jail’s security cameras, they definitely heard. All the furious, conflicted emotion centers itself on my chest and makes it hard to breathe. My eyes burn. “That’s why you think I’m angry?”

Jameson gazes around, like we’re on some game show and a guy with a camera is going to pop out and announce that this was a setup.

His eyes meet mine again. “Yeah.”

“Well, I *am*. I—I *was*. I was angry about it before, but then you turned into an even bigger asshole.”

He shakes his head, like I’m not making any sense. “You don’t want a cabin?”

“I wanted you not to go to *jail*.” I’ll shriek at him again if I lose any more control. “I asked you to stay with me at the cabin so we could get to know each other. The kidnapping part was already over by then. Or did you forget? I bet you did. I bet it was completely meaningless to you, and you don’t care at all.”

For the first time in the conversation, Jameson’s face twists up with emotion. He fights it back. “That’s obviously not true. I remember all of it, and I felt like a criminal. I *am* a criminal. So this is where I belong.”

“I asked you to stay.” My voice has that weird, strained tone to it, as if I’m about to cry, and I’m not. “And you just left.”

“Right, because that’s what I wanted you to do. That was the plan.”

“For me to be into you and treat you like a person?”

Jameson sticks out his hand and rocks it a little. I cannot *believe* he's using a so-so gesture during this conversation. "I was aiming for obsession."

"Wow, *that* backfired, didn't it?"

He drops his hand. "No, because I'm not obsessed with you."

Jameson August Hill, who was formerly Jameson None of My Business, is lying. Maybe he thinks he's a good liar because of his criminal past, but he's not. His face is all flushed and his mouth is twisted up and his shoulders have rounded forward, and I bet he doesn't even know.

"Cool. So...you just kissed me like I was your personal savior for no reason."

"You said you were my fiancée." He takes a step closer, and all at once I feel his height again. "By the way, why the fuck did you do that? Those cops are going to tell everybody in New York that the judge's daughter got engaged to a criminal asshole."

"No, they're not. I said that so they wouldn't assume it was me. And because I thought you might not come out otherwise."

His eyebrows go up. "Did you give your real name?"

"Yes," I snap. Actually, I gave my real name in a rush when I thought the police officers might not let me post bail, but Jameson doesn't need to know that. "I'm not the only Lily Hayes on the planet. I'm not even the only one in New York. It's *fine*."

The breeze ruffles Jameson's hair, and I'm seized with the urge to climb him like a tree and bury my fingers in it.

Instead, I draw myself up to my full height, which is still not tall enough for gravitas befitting this moment.

"Anyway, the real—"

*Reason* gets swallowed up in a hot, sudden kiss courtesy of Jameson. I thought he was going overboard inside the jail, but the way he holds my face now makes every single memory

from the cabin run through my mind at high speed, in supersaturated color.

His hands. His face. His voice. The way he touched me. The way he sent me past my outer limits and brought me back down again. The way he made me want him, which shouldn't have been possible, and the way I felt like *myself*. I've never felt more like myself before, except at The Membership. I didn't know a man could do that.

I crane my neck an inch to get some air. "I'm still mad."

"That's okay." He doesn't call me *angel*, but when his mouth meets mine again, that's what it feels like.

I break the kiss again. "I don't forgive you."

"Didn't think you would."

This time, when he comes back, his kiss feels like hope. It feels like the hope that we could get past this—the kidnapping, the jail, even his nightmares.

I'm already past the kidnapping.

No, wait—no, I'm not. It just feels like that because I was beside myself when he left, and I wanted *this*. I wanted to kiss him and talk to him and figure him out.

Jameson licks into my mouth, and then there's no room for analysis or rational thought in my brain.

Snowball tweets, louder and louder until Jameson pulls away with a frustrated groan. He turns his face to the side like he can't stop kissing me otherwise.

"You should know," he says, breath short, "that I wanted to stay with you. I thought this was better."

It's not *I'm sorry, angel, I'll never do something this foolish again*, but it's not nothing.

It's also not enough to make this into a situation that I can make coherent decisions about right now. I need time and space for that. I need distance, because being this close to Jameson is making me feel overheated and tipsy and like I might blurt out another vacation proposal any second.

“It wasn’t better.” And there’s another pressing reason I spent time getting myself together enough to find which jail he’d been taken to and drive here and get him out. I had to stop on the way to buy a pair of leggings and tennis shoes so I didn’t look like I dressed entirely in his clothes. I’m not a hundred percent sure it would have mattered, but it felt like it might. “But I didn’t just come here to fight with you.”

He frowns. “Okay?”

I fight off a twinge of guilt that I stood here making out with him when there’s a family emergency going on and take his phone out of the pocket of my leggings. Jameson takes it gingerly, like it might bite him, and glances up at me, his brow furrowed.

I tilt my chin toward the phone. “They started texting right when the police got there. I tried to say something, but you were already gone, and the officers who interviewed me wouldn’t tell me anything.”

He swipes his thumb across the screen, expression blank.

It stays blank while the color drains out of his skin. He scrolls faster, racing through his notifications.

“What the fuck,” he says. “What the *fuck*.”

“I didn’t answer them. I didn’t—I tried not to read more than I had to.” Damn having a moral compass. What would it have mattered if I *did* go through his phone? Would I have made things more even between us. “I hope—”

“I have to go.”

Jameson turns his back, then wheels around again to pick up Snowball’s cage. His hands shake on the handle of the SUV’s back door, but he takes the time to put the cage squarely on the seat and buckle it in.

“Jameson—”

“Get in,” he barks.

I consider my options. My wallet is down at the bottom of my bag with my cards and a little cash, but with no phone, I’ll have to walk into the jail again or ask at nearby stores.



There are no nearby stores.

Jameson stops halfway into the SUV. “I can’t leave you here. You proposed, remember? Get in the car.”

Unlike the night he kidnapped me, I still have a choice. It might blow our cover as an engaged couple to walk away while he peels out of the parking lot, but I *could* leave.

If I had the heart to leave when he’s pale and scared and about to rush to a hospital in the city to see if his brother and his wife and their baby are okay.

On the drive here, I convinced myself that I could be a heartless, ruthless winged creature of the night. I convinced myself that I could get back at him for getting himself *arrested* as if that was a more appealing idea than having a lot of sex in his cabin for another week.

From inside the SUV, Snowball tweets at the top of his tiny lungs. It sounds like he’s scolding me for a pointless delay.

Later. I can be a heartless winged creature later.

“I’m coming,” I tell both of him, then fly around the SUV and take my place on the passenger side.



I have to stop thinking I've hit rock bottom.

It's an open invitation for the world to slap me across the face and remind me that things can always get worse. Oh, you kidnapped a girl? Now you're in love with her. You got yourself arrested to keep her safe? Now she's bailing you out. You think you might have a fucking *second* to think about everything that's happened?

Not a chance.

I don't take a full breath all the way to the hospital. Normally, I wouldn't bother with the valet, but the thought of finding a parking spot might push me over the edge.

I might do something unhinged, like re-kidnap Lily.

She hops out while I'm handing the keys over and climbs into the backseat. A few seconds later, she reappears with her bag over her shoulder and Snowball's cage in one hand.

"Here. Hold this." I take the cage. Lily reaches into her bag and comes up with a hair tie. I'd rather watch her twist her hair into a neat red bun than walk into the hospital. I'd rather *untwist* her hair just so I could hold onto it. When she's done, she takes Snowball's cage back. He's a little white ball in some of his nesting material. I bet he hates hospitals, too. "Okay. Ready?"

"They're going to have a problem with Snowball."

She flashes me the biggest eyes I've ever seen on a human being, her face transforming from serious to painfully innocent

in no time flat.

“They’re not going to say anything to me. Let’s go.”

*Lily, I want to say. Angel. You cannot come to the hospital to meet my brother’s new baby and watch me get my ass kicked for disappearing at this critical moment. I can’t take it if you see this.*

But my heart’s so loud in my ears and I’m so close to throwing up on the sidewalk that I don’t say anything.

The main hospital lobby smells like clean carpet and lemon-tinged antiseptic. It has seating areas in a blue theme that’s probably supposed to be calming. Navy blue chairs float in little islands of multicolored nylon like they’re floating out to sea. Sunlight streams in through windows three stories high.

It’s nothing like the emergency room a cop escorted Gabriel, Remy, and I into the night my parents died, but it might as well be. My lungs have become deflated balloons. A sharp, aching hope like a heart attack wriggles behind my ribs and sticks there like I swallowed a chunk of concrete.

When my foot comes down on the floor for the next step, I’m not me anymore. Or—I’m the fourteen-year-old version of me, following a cop down a long, fluorescent-lit hallway while a little kid screams somewhere out of sight and my six-year-old sister clings to my neck like I can protect her. I’m wearing the last pair of Nikes my parents would ever buy me and praying to any god who has a chance in hell of existing that somebody made a mistake. It’s somebody else’s parents and brother who were brought here. The cop was vague about the details because no one is sure what happened, not because the worst happened, and soon my dad is going to laugh at the idea that anything in the world could take him from us, and my mom is going to say *don’t worry, Jamie, it was all just a big misunderstanding*, and we’ll all go home.

“Jameson.”

We’re out of the sun-soaked lobby somehow. Lily’s hair is bright against the silver backdrop of a bank of elevators.

“Yeah?”

“We have to go up, I think.”

My vision clears enough to see the sign next to the elevator doors. “Emergency is on this floor.”

Lily looks up at me, her face half as innocent as it was before and twice as gentle. “I asked at one of the reception desks. The woman I spoke to said they’d be on the maternity floor. That’s the fifth one.”

She holds the handle of Snowball’s cage in both hands, right out in front of her.

I could grab them both and run.

Before I can, Lily turns and pushes the button for the elevator. I never see the doors move. Next thing I know, we’re stepping out onto a quieter floor next to a big round desk with nurses behind it. Lily leans in and says something I can’t hear, or can’t understand, and the nurse’s eyes get wide for a fraction of a second before she’s back to being totally professional.

She comes around the desk in her pastel scrubs, and Lily keeps talking to her as she leads us away into a different hallway that has key-card access. Mason’s driver, Scott, is on the other side. We nod to each other like this situation is normal and fine, and then he nods to the nurse, and then we’re in.

The nurse never looks down at the cage in Lily’s hands. It’s like Snowball doesn’t exist. I genuinely believe she doesn’t notice him until we stop in front of a wide, pale door and she bends down to Snowball’s level.

“You’re so cute,” she says, and he titters at her in a flirtatious way. The nurse straightens up. “I won’t say anything, but try not to let too many people see, okay?”

Lily flashes her a delighted smile. “Absolutely no problem. Thank you.”

Pastel Nurse leaves.

A plastic holder on the wall has a cardboard sign that says *Hill*, so we’re in the right place. The door’s even open a few

inches. There's no reason at all I can't go in.

Except it doesn't look right. It keeps going gray and dingy with rust on the frame from being scrubbed down with bleach and I can feel little arms cutting off my air supply and my shoes feel brand-new because my mom took me to buy them last week and there's a whining hum in the air, an old, struggling air conditioning unit from next door, only that's never what it is, it's really the sound of Mason—

“Jameson, where the fuck have you been?”

Gabriel leans out the now-open door. Alive, not-dead Gabriel, wearing a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt, all of it flawless.

“I got held—” He takes me by the shoulder, pulls me in for an irritated-yet-relieved hug, and hauls me into the room. “I got held up. Sorry.”

“What happened to your eye?” Gabriel demands.

“Hail.”

He looks skeptical. “Did you get—”

“Jameson!” Remy leaps up from a sofa by the windows and jogs across the room toward me. It's a *big* room, with a swirling mahogany headboard taking up most of the wall behind the hospital bed, where Charlotte is, alive, and where Mason sits on the edge, also not dead. Remy throws her arms around my waist. “I was so worried about you. What happened?”

Everything changed. That's what happened. “Nothing, I just—we don't have to talk about me. I didn't come here to talk about—”

“Jameson.” Mason's watching me from his spot on the bed. He has every right to be pissed at me for falling off the face of the earth while some kind of baby emergency happened, but he doesn't look angry. He looks tired, but... happy? Which probably has to do with the little bundle of blankets in his arms. “You okay? Do you need some ice?”

They're all worried about my black eye. Jesus Christ.

“I’m fine. I don’t need ice.” I couldn’t stand to see this before, but now I can’t stand *not* to see. My feet take me across the room to the side of Charlotte’s bed. Her sunshine hair is in a twisty bun on the top of her head. “What about you, Sunshine?”

She smiles at me, and my heart slows from a breakneck pace to just a panicky sprint. “I’m good. I’m good.”

“I heard you weren’t so great this morning.”

Charlotte purses her lips. “The baby took us by surprise, is all. He came early. And fast.”

“So you’re not—there’s nothing—”

“No emergency situation now.” Mason uses a firm, quiet tone, and I feel like garbage. I feel like the world’s biggest piece of shit for having any questions at all. I should have *been* here. The bundle in Mason’s arms makes a quiet mewling sound. “Go wash your hands, and you can hold your nephew.”

I take a step back. “I don’t think—”

“It’s here.” Remy tugs insistently at my arm until I’m in front of a sink at the opposite side of the room. She gives me the hair tie from her wrist so I can get my hair out of my face. I spend the entire time I’m washing my hands trying to come up with a way to disappear.

It doesn’t work. I answer questions without hearing them, and then Gabriel and Remy run some campaign to get me to an armchair by the sofa. My heartbeat’s loud again. What the hell am I supposed to do with a baby? Babies are soft, defenseless people who need to be far away from crime scenes, not getting cuddled by them. My siblings don’t want this. Maybe they’re pretending for the sake of the day, but nobody wants me to *hold* a *baby*. Any baby.

Mason leans down to kiss Charlotte’s cheek, then stands up. He looks huge from this vantage point, but the way he walks ruins the illusion that he’s invincible. Mason never wanted anyone to pity him, so he learned to hide the damage the fall had done. Most people wouldn’t notice any difference in the way he moves.

I notice it.

He stops in front of me and nudges over a big, hospital-provided ottoman, which he sits on with only the slightest flicker of discomfort.

There's just no way I can take the baby from him. Not with Charlotte watching us from the bed with a smile on her face like this is the sweetest thing she's ever seen. Not with Mason looking like a proud new dad who has his life together. Gabriel's the pretty, charming one of my brothers, I'm the disheveled crime scene, and Mason's the one who forced himself to look the part until he *was* a multibillionaire with a thriving company and a beautiful wife and now a *baby* who I should never even look at, much less *hold*, so—

“How's the knee?” I blurt out instead of throwing up.

Mason glances across at me. He's doing a remarkable job of hiding how furious he is. Or maybe it's that another one of his dreams was to fill my spot in the family with people who were worthy of it, like Nate or his new baby son.

“It's okay.” The weird, gentle voice does not make me feel any better. He shouldn't be spending any energy on answering my dumbass questions. Wait, that's not what he's doing—he's just talking that way because there's a baby in the room.

“He's bullshitting you,” Gabriel says from somewhere to my left, out of sight. “After the first time he fell over, the nurses had to watch him, too.”

Remy comes to stand by Mason. She pats his shoulder and looks down at the baby. “I thought we said we were all going to forget about that.”

“So much for loyalty,” Mason grumbles, but he doesn't seem annoyed.

“You fell over?” I ask him. “Did they at least do an X-ray?”

“I didn't break anything, for fuck's sake,” he answers, in that same soft tone. “It just gave out at a bad time.”



“It’s a good thing I was here,” Gabriel sings. “Who else would’ve held you up so you could properly support your wife?”

“Excuse me,” Remy laughs. “I was also here. So was Elise. She went to get lunch,” my sister tells me. “Nate and Lydia are with her.”

They were *all* here, then. Everyone but me.

That’s—

That’s for the best. It only hurts because everything hurts.

“Shut up, all of you.” Mason shifts on the ottoman until our knees are touching. “Hold your arms out. You have to support his neck.”

“It’s really not—” Mason ignores me completely and leans forward. I have no choice but to make a circle with my arms and accept the blankets. The *baby*. “Jesus. Okay.”

Mason’s hands arrange the tiniest human being I have ever seen in my arms. I’ve never held a baby before, but it’s like some ancient knowledge snaps into place. There’s a certain spot that his head should go in the crook of my elbow, with one arm sort of under his body and the other one wrapped around him. The only right thing to do is hold him close to my body. I can’t have him dangling out in the middle of nowhere.

He’s warm. I didn’t expect him to be warm, for some reason. I also didn’t expect him to stretch out his tiny body against the blankets he’s wrapped in. My nephew makes a tiny rasping noise. I have no idea what that means. Is he about to lose his shit?

I hold my breath and lean back a little bit, in case—

I don’t know. I’m all ready for Mason to take him back and say *fuck, that was a close call, you almost ruined his life!* and for all of my siblings to have a good laugh about how relieved they are and for Charlotte to say *well, that was all very funny, you can head out now, Jameson.*

A few beats go by.

None of that stuff happens.

The baby settles, his face turned toward my bicep. He opens his eyes partway and makes another soft, rasping sound.

“No, this is it.” The words come out of my mouth like somebody else put them there. “This is the place you were looking for.”

He closes his eyes with a tiny baby sigh.

It’s silent in the room. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say. It doesn’t matter, I guess, because I end up staring down at my brother’s baby, just...looking.

He has wispy dark hair and round cheeks and a chin I recognize. It’s a new, perfect face with nothing but possibility out ahead of him. I know what kinds of terrible things can happen to a person. I know what kind of person those things made me into. But for right now, in this sunny, luxurious hospital room, I could almost believe that none of it will happen to him.

“He looks like you, but I can see Sunshine in there, too.” I glance up at Mason to see if this is the appropriate thing to say. At his side, Remy’s got her phone out. She must’ve been taking pictures. I don’t know if I like that, but it’s hard to be mad when I’m holding a baby. It’s even harder to be mad when the light catches Mason’s eyes. They’re filled with tears. “Did you want him to look like somebody else?”

Mason laughs. “No. Are you ready to know what his name is?”

My heart speeds again. “Yeah? I think it’d be awkward to call him *baby* for the rest of his life.”

“It’s Robin,” Charlotte announces from the bed.

“Robin,” I repeat. It’s too hard to keep looking at them, so I look back down at the baby—*Robin*—instead. My chest is all heart-attack mode again. “Nice. You know, if you’re ever interested in meeting another bird, I have—”

Wait. I scan the hospital room, pointlessly, since Lily didn’t come in here with me. I knew that. It only seemed like she was in here because—

She must have decided to wait outside.

I fucking hate that. I hate that I can't see her. But there's no non-awkward way to introduce my siblings and my new nephew Robin to the girl I kidnapped and who I'm pretty sure is still pretending to be my fiancée.

"I met a bird recently," I finish.

"Tell him Robin's middle name." Remy beams at Mason.

"Did you—" My throat gets tight. "Did you name him after Dad?"

"In a way." Mason rolls his shoulders. He's trying to be casual, and it looks fake. "His middle name is Jameson. It's after both of you."

Every atom in my body freezes. The blood drops out of my face like ice cubes falling out of a shitty plastic tray and landing on the floor in one useless, wasted chunk.

"Oh." I force a smile onto my face. It feels awful, like my mouth isn't connected. "Wow, Mase, that's—"

The worst idea I've ever heard. For one thing, I'm an unhinged criminal who kidnaps women and loses his mind to nightmares on a regular basis. I've never done anything worth the honor in my entire life.

And for another thing, that's it. That's the proof that I'm not needed here anymore. Mason's son doesn't just have a place in the family that he's never fucked up beyond repair. He has my *name*.

The hellishly awkward moment is interrupted by the door swinging open. Thank fucking God. If it's Lily, everybody will have questions, and we can redirect the conversation to my asshole behavior toward *her* and not the horrendous sinking feeling I have.

It's not Lily.

It's Gabriel's girlfriend, Elise, with a bunch of takeout bags in her arms, followed by Lydia, her younger sister, and Nate. All three of them live with Gabriel. It makes sense that they're here. So much fucking sense, given what Gabriel told me a

few nights and a million years ago about the plans he and Mason made to adopt him. Not as Gabriel's son, because they both think that would be too weird. No, the plan is for Mason to be Nate's legal guardian, same as he was for me and Gabriel and Remy.

What doesn't make sense is the puzzled expression Elise is wearing.

"We're back. Jameson! You made it. I got a veggie burger for you just in case, so don't worry." She pauses by a long countertop at the side of the room and drops the bags. "Did you guys see the bird in the hall?"

Charlotte cranes her neck. "There was a bird in the hall?"

Elise's eyes get huge and shiny. "The *cutest* little white bird."

"Flying around?" Gabriel asks.

"No, there was a lady with a cage out there. We asked to see the bird, and she showed us—*so* cute—and then she said she had to go, so I thought—wait." Elise rushes back out into the hall. "Wait, she left the bird!" She returns with Snowball's cage in her hand, her eyes bigger than I've ever seen. "Jameson, is this your bird?"

"Hang on." Gabriel steps into view and narrows his eyes at me. "I saw her, and I—damn it, Jameson, I was a total prick. She came here with you, didn't she?"

"I—"

"Ooh, what's her name?" Elise stops taking food out of the bags and just stands there with a stack of three burgers in her hands, staring at me.

Lydia and Nate exchange a look, then watch with bright eyes. Charlotte's staring from the bed. Remy. Gabriel. Mason.

They're *all* staring at me.

Snowball tweets a little tune like he's introducing himself.

"Nobody." It comes out too slow, and Elise whips her head toward Charlotte, who gives her a *very* fucking meaningful

look. I guess I have to be louder. “*Nobody.*”

“Okay, Jameson.” Remy moves around to the side of my chair and leans down to gaze at Robin some more. “We believe you.”



## LILY

**M**y grandpapa's house in Cobble Hill is literally the only home I've ever known. All the key milestones from my life either happened there or were celebrated or cried over there. I know how the trees in the front yard look in every season. I know our neighbors' names and wave at them when I go out to run. A few of those neighbors have lived on our street for long enough to see me grow up and graduate high school, then finish at NYU.

So, yes, sometimes I've found it a little stifling. Sometimes, when I'm overtired from studying, I've daydreamed about making a reckless, free-spirit move and letting the universe find me somewhere else to be from.

But at the end of the day, the three-story former row house—it's not attached to other houses any longer—and its detached garage and its trees in the yard meant safety. They meant stability.

They meant *home*.

It feels unspeakably bizarre to pull up to the curb in an Uber only to discover that it's not the same house I left the other night.

It looks the same. Nothing has changed about the pristine white siding or the summer light filtering through the leaves or the neat pattern of the stone retaining wall around our yard. It's still a gorgeous house.

It's the way I feel about it that's changed.

It's *me* who's changed.

I don't trust it anymore. The house didn't do anything wrong. It sheltered me from the elements and gave me a safe place to have a childhood and everything a house is supposed to do.

Jameson's words echo in my head.

*Single guy with one daughter, maybe more, works his way up at a firm, becomes a prosecutor...and buys himself a mansion in Cobble Hill on a prosecutor's salary.*

The Uber driver puts the car in park. We do the dance of thanking each other, and I climb out onto the sidewalk with my cheap convenience store smartphone in my hand and my bag hooked over my shoulder. The driver cranes his neck to glance at me, like I might've changed my mind about being dropped off here. For a split second, I feel like I'm falling, like I've missed the hold on my suspended hoop.

I put on a big, bright smile and wave the driver away. The Uber trundles through the neighborhood and disappears around the corner, leaving me in peace on the sidewalk.

A shiver like a ripple on water moves down my spine. There's only so long I can stand out here, pretending to be deep in thought, before the neighbors will notice, so I turn to face the yard.

I can almost hear Jameson.

*Fancy house for a self-made man.*

In the grand scheme of things, I didn't spend very long at Jameson's cabin. The length of time doesn't seem to matter. My grandpapa's house looks almost obscenely large from the street. The two of us couldn't possibly have needed that much space.

*I know that when we were in the world's shittiest apartment trying to keep each other alive, he was getting a good night's sleep in his house in Cobble Hill.*

It just doesn't sound like something my grandpapa—the man who raised me—would do. The man I know would never



have sold out a family of orphaned children to fund his lifestyle, and he didn't have to. We didn't need to live in a house like this.

"I still don't have all the facts," I tell the house.

I absolutely believe that Jameson and his siblings were hurt in exactly the way he described. I don't doubt he believed what he said about my grandpapa.

But there's a tiny voice in the back of my head that repeats, over and over, *don't you owe your grandfather the benefit of the doubt?*

I owe him a conversation, if nothing else.

If Grandpapa is who Jameson said he is, then he's hidden it remarkably well for as long as I've known him.

And...I'd be lying if I said a tiny part of me wasn't holding out hope. Yes. The few days I spent with Jameson opened my eyes. Not just to the reality of men, or of Jameson, but of *me*. I've spent months—years, maybe—ignoring the sinking feeling I got whenever I thought about law school and the distinguished career that would most certainly follow. I told Jameson that I thought it was reasonable to reevaluate, and that's still true.

Which *means* taking a more in-depth look at...

Everything.

Because *most* of the reason I wanted to be a lawyer, and a judge, was that Grandpapa made the world a better, more just place.

I thought that's what he was doing, anyway, and if he wasn't, that confirms the feeling I had at Jameson's cabin—that there are other ways to help people.

The house sits steady and silent across the yard, as if it's waiting for me. None of the curtains twitch. The sounds of Cobble Hill are cut by the leaves, rustling in the breeze.

This is where the facts are. I need them to move forward, wherever I decide to go.

Boughs sway gently over my head on the way to the front porch. Usually, I'd go in through the back. This is the way a visitor would approach the house. This might have been the way Jameson would've approached the house the night he was going to burn it down, and—

You know. Kidnapped me instead.

Maybe he'd have gone around to the side of the house, or the back, and it's probably sick and wrong that I want to ask him for more specific details about the plan.

What's *really* sick and wrong is that I kept his phone number.

Not that I'm planning to call him.

I put him completely out of my mind, climb the stairs to the front porch, and press the code to open the lock. The buttons on the keypad flash green, the lock *clicks*, and I'm there.

I'm home.

Stepping inside feels like entering a library or a church. Some place I don't want to disturb, which is bizarre. It hasn't even been that long. I *know* this place.

I close the door as silently as I can anyway.

“Grand—”

“—usual places?” His voice comes from the back of the house. The kitchen. That's where I'd have walked in, if I'd driven here. “It's my impression that the requirements of the job have slipped your mind. No? Then explain to me how your team hasn't finished questioning every member of that godforsaken place.”

My body goes cold, every inch of me freezing before the meaning sinks in.

*That godforsaken place* isn't anywhere I'd attend a study group, or Columbia Law, or this house.

He can't mean anywhere but The Membership, and that was supposed to be a secret. I went to *lengths* to keep it a

secret.

“I want it finished by six o’clock. Do we understand each other? I’ve indulged this—this *fantasy* of hers for too long.”

I hardly recognize his voice. This isn’t the way he sounded on the phone with the police a few days ago, asking about my mother, and I know—I *thought*—that his feelings about her were more complicated than his feelings about me. I had no idea he knew about The Membership, and I had no idea he’d talk about anything I was interested in with this much disdain.

The urge to slip out through the door and run is strong.

But I’ve spent a lot of time practicing multiple-choice tests with tricky answers, and all my options hang there in my mind next to fillable circles. My grandpapa has people looking for me. He has people interviewing members of the club where I dance—danced—and that has to stop. If I disappear, I need to be prepared to lose myself in the world forever, and I’m *not* prepared.

Running won’t work. Not yet.

I reach behind me instead, open the door, and push it closed again. “Grandpapa?”

He appears at the threshold of the kitchen, eyes wide. “Lily. It’s her. She just walked in. Thank you for all your help.”

The harsh edge of his voice is gone, like it was never there.

If I wanted to, I could convince myself that it hadn’t happened at all. That I’d misinterpreted the conversation. That he was worried, and it was understandable.

“Hi, Grandpapa.” I smile at him, then let the smile fall away, let my eyes get huge and concerned. “Are you okay?”

“You didn’t come home.” He drops the hand holding his phone to his side and fumbles it into his pocket. “I got your note, but you didn’t come back. Your phone was off.”

The note. The *note*. I’d written him a note about a late-night study group, intending to be back well before dawn.

“Oh, no.” I go across the house to him, rushing a little, the way I did when I was younger. “Grandpapa, I’m so sorry, I—” In mid-sentence, I crash into him and wrap my arms around his waist. My grandfather hugs me so hard it almost feels like a blow. “I’m *so* sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you. We got into some—” He raises his free hand and strokes my hair. “We got carried away. You know how I can get about jurisprudence.”

He lets out a wry laugh that I hear muffled through his chest. “I do.”

“I’m okay, I swear. We got to talking about Columbia, and one thing led to another, and there might have been a mock trial—”

“Did you win?”

“You know I scored the highest.”

“Prosecution or defense?”

I pull my head off his chest and look up at him with my most serious, professional expression. “Prosecution, Grandpapa. I’m surprised you had to ask.”

The corners of his mouth lift. Both hands come up to my face.

“I was worried sick, Lily-bug.”

It’s only because I’m so close that I see his face change.

It happens on *sick*. The distress in his face twists into disgust. It lasts for the length of that word exactly and disappears like evidence at an unscrupulous police department.

“I’m sorry. I should have found a way to call once my phone died.”

Grandpapa shakes his head. “Phones.”

“I know.”

He lets out a breath.

It’s done, I think. We’ll have something to eat. He’ll ask me questions about the mock trial. I’ve done enough of those in my life to tell a good story on the fly.

“Lily-bug.” I’m ready to smile and accept dinner. I’m ready to steer the conversation in the direction of Jameson and his family without using their names so I can gauge Grandpapa’s response. “I’m so very happy you’re home.”

“I’m happy to be—”

“And I’m so very disappointed that you’d lie to me like this.”

The relief on Grandpapa’s face falters.

Or there’s another emotion that’s fighting to come through.

Like cold resolve.

Like *anger*.

I keep my eyes wide, my brain stuttering to a halt. There’s a reason I put so much time into succeeding at school. I had to be extra-prepared, because I can’t always guarantee an appropriate response when I’m caught off-guard.

“Lie to you?” The question will buy me a few seconds, at least.

“Security found your car in the lot at the end of the street. The vehicle was unlocked. What was I supposed to assume, Lilith?”

“Millie—”

His eyes go flat. “There was no study group. I had security contact your friends.”

“That—” Feels like a massive invasion of privacy. Last week, I might have made a lighthearted argument. That could be dangerous now. “I can see why you would. It’s my fault you were so worried.”

“Is it?”

Emotion’s back in Grandpapa’s eyes. A glint, like he holds all the cards and he knows it.

*Is it? He means, who else was with you?*

He might know about Jameson, or he might be trying to get me to admit to dancing at the club.

I don't want to admit to either.

He's not putting any pressure on my face with his hands. Would he stop me from moving if I pulled away?

Am I totally screwed?

*Again?*

"Grandpapa, I don't know what you mean."

He pats at my face and steps back, eyes flicking over me. Over my leggings and tank top and Jameson's shirt.

"Did someone pressure you?" Now he sounds like he did when I was much younger. "Convince you to act so irresponsibly?"

*Irresponsibly* could mean dancing at a gentlemen's club or asking a kidnapper to stay with him for another week or any number of things.

I'm not giving him Jameson's name.

According to the ideals of truth and integrity, that's the *only* way I should answer this question. It's completely true that Jameson pressured me to fall off the face of the earth by way of picking me up and putting me into the back of his SUV.

Before he did that, I would have believed wholeheartedly that Grandpapa would respond to the news of my kidnapping and subsequent abandonment by pursuing justice via the legal system.

He'd probably still pursue justice via the legal system, given the *judge* thing.

I'm no longer convinced that he'd do it in a way that was appropriate. In a way that didn't involve some shady legal justification for violence. In a way that wasn't corrupt.

It's not a great feeling.

"No." I let the word out on a sigh like I'm heartily disappointed in myself. "There was nobody else. I just..."

*Just* hangs there for so long that I think he might not say anything, and then I'll have to awkwardly finish the sentence by myself.

"Just, Lily-bug?"

"I just needed a break. The Immersive Scholars program is—it's amazing. I guess it's also...a little overwhelming."

"Ah." Grandpapa's face softens. Even after the phone call, even after *that godforsaken place*, even after the tacit admission that he's been spying on me, a small, childish part of me hopes desperately that this is all a misunderstanding. That he's exhausted himself worrying about me. That he's never been the kind of man who would throw orphaned children out of their home just to line his pockets. "That's perfectly understandable."

"Yeah?"

"Of course." His smile is as familiar as the bedroom I grew up in and the tree in the front yard. "I've had similar feelings a time or two in my career. I hope you won't think less of me."

"Grandpapa, of *course* I wouldn't."

"Good." He slaps lightly at his thigh with one hand. "Here's what we'll do. We'll take the weekend and talk it through. You'll rejoin your study group next week. I've already sent in your acceptance for the program, so—"

"You—Grandpapa, what?"

He gives me a concerned frown that's almost genuine. "Your friend, Millicent, had expressed concern that you might not return in time to accept, so I acted on your behalf."

"Actually, I—"

"No second thoughts." Grandpapa waves his hand in the air like he can dispel my crushing sense of doom. "You'll be attending the program. It's the perfect way to get back on track."

"I don't necessarily think I'm off-track. What I need is some time to consider—"

“You’ll have plenty of time to reorient yourself to your future, Lilith. For the time being, I think it would be best if you were driven to and from your study sessions. When the program begins, you’ll be escorted there, too.”

I can’t stop the shocked expression that takes over my face, and I don’t try. “Grandpapa, I’m—I’m perfectly fine to drive.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t. Not until you’re settled.”

“I *am* settled.”

“And that’s how you’ll stay.” His voice rises, and his teeth snap together, and I don’t move a muscle. My heart does not get the memo. It feels suspended on a hoop, spinning out of control. “That’s how you’ll stay, Lilith, because I’m not going to stand by and watch while you run off and get yourself killed.”

The blood drops out of my face. “Is that what happened to Mom? She got herself killed?”

“I don’t know.” Another flash of disgust crosses his face. “I don’t know what happened to my daughter, and it’s hell. I won’t go through that again. I’ve taken the keys to the car. I’ve made a driver available to you for the purpose of attending Millicent’s study group or the program at Columbia.”

“Grandpapa.” A laugh that’s definitely not *mine* flies out of my mouth. “Are you saying—are you *jailing* me?”

He doesn’t laugh.

He doesn’t smile.

He looks at me like I’m the one who drove his daughter to run away and never come back.

“You wouldn’t know the first thing about being jailed, Lily-bug.” My grandfather shrugs this off, like it’s a perfectly normal conversation to have. “Why don’t you get changed? I have a few calls to make, and then we can continue this conversation.”

He means it.



He's serious.

I have to get out.

I nod, probably too enthusiastically, because my heart is going to explode. "That sounds good. I'd like to keep talking."

He steps in and gives me another hug, then shoos me toward the stairs. Grandpapa's voice follows me up. He's already on the phone, but I don't know whether he's calling off a search team or calling *in* a security team to keep me here.

To *keep* me here.

I only stop in the bathroom to turn on the shower, then go down the hall to my bedroom. Close the door. Lock it behind me. My fingers are numb on the strap of my bag.

And then, for the first time in my life, I pop the screen on the front window and climb out onto the porch roof. I don't give myself time to think about it. On the right-hand side, there's a corner of the house with no windows. That's where I jump.

It's a harder landing than I thought it would be, and I crouch next to the porch for ten seconds to catch my breath. For several of those minutes, I think I might throw up in the grass. It's the most bizarre, sudden feeling, and totally isolated. I don't feel feverish. Just like...I'll quickly empty my stomach on the ground and proceed as usual.

It doesn't happen.

The leaves rustle just the same way when I leave the yard.

I don't go to the public parking lot. I turn the opposite way, zig-zagging through the neighborhood until I'm relatively sure he's not following me.

Then it's time to make the most ironic phone call of my life.



JAMESON

Charlotte's hospital room is really a suite. It has a second separate sitting area, an en suite with a tub and a shower, and so much natural light that nobody has to think about lamps. This room, in the private wing of the hospital, is quiet and sunny and surrounded by security. Mason wouldn't settle for anything less for his life.

I wish I could enjoy it.

There's plenty to enjoy, obviously. Gabriel and Elise and the teenagers they've taken in. Charlotte and Mason, obsessed with their new son. Remy, next to me on a couch that has no business being in a hospital.

None of them are thinking of anything but the new baby.

None of them are thinking about how this room might as well be a palace compared to the recovery room they put Mason in after he almost died. Why would they? All that's over. There's even a brand-new version of me, cuddled up in Mason's arms. *Robin* isn't a fuck-up. He's only been on then planet a few hours at this point, but that's long enough to know he'll never *be* a fuck-up.

I'm the fuck-up.

"Are you going to tell me who she was?" Remy whispers. There's no need for secrecy. Gabriel, Elise, Lydia, and Nate are in the other sitting room, talking about art. Mason and Charlotte are cooing over the baby. Nobody's paying attention to us.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“The lady who was babysitting your bird. *That* bird.” She just her chin toward the countertop, where Snowball’s cage is currently perched. Inside it, he’s asleep on a little nest of bedding.

“No comment.”

Remy scooches closer. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Rem.” I pair it with a smile that I know looks pretty real, since I’ve been smiling at my sister the same way since she was seven and I was fourteen and only one of us could fake it. That person had to be me. Mason was wasting away from constant pain, Gabriel was spending his nights in alleys with strange men for money, and somebody had to put on a face for Remy. Not a brave face. Just a semi-normal one.

She peers up at me with her blue eyes narrowed. “Did you get arrested again?”

Yes. Of *course* I got arrested again. The only difference this time is that I called the cops on myself, because in addition to being a crime scene, I am a colossal fool.

How would I phrase that, anyway? *Yes. I did get arrested, but it was for noble reasons this time. I mean...more noble than usual. Not that I think rescuing animals from being experimented on and fucking with rich, corrupt politicians isn’t noble. But it is fairly noble to right past wrongs. In this case, I was trying to make up for kidnapping a woman. No, I’m not joking. Yes, I let her go. No, she wasn’t the woman in the hallway. Why would you think that?*

“Remy.” I put on my best offended face. “Of course I didn’t get arrested. I can’t believe you’d say that.”

“Important stuff happened,” she answers lightly. “Like... Robin was born. There was a scene at Mason’s apartment. If you didn’t get arrested, why did you miss it?”

I scan the room. The rest of our family is still focused on other things. I’m so tired I could fall asleep sitting up, or standing. I have a persistent thudding pain across my chest and down both arms. I don’t know if that’s from spending the night

on the beach talking to my dead mom, getting arrested, or holding a baby who was named after me.

I've been lying to Remy for the majority of my life, and hers.

Fuck it.

"Don't tell Mason or Gabriel."

Her eyes go wide. "*Jameson.*"

"Don't tell Charlotte or Elise, either."

"You got arrested?"

"Yes, Remy, I got arrested. That's why I didn't see any of your texts until—until I did. But it's not a big deal."

"Did a *cop* do that to you?"

"Not so loud. And no. It was a chunk of hail."

Remy pulls back a few inches to look at my face. "If by *hail* you really mean a *cop*, you have to tell Mason. You know he—"

"Mason just became a dad," I shout-whisper at her. "Do you seriously think I'm going to tell him I got arrested right now?"

"He would want you to!"

"He wants to hold his baby, not deal with another one of his jackass brother's problems."

"You should not get punched by cops."

"I didn't get punched by a cop. I got punched by a piece of hail. Trust me, Remy, it looks worse than it is."

She looks so worried, and I don't know what to do with that. Nobody in this room should be giving me a scrap of their attention. It would be better if they forgot about me entirely, because I've crossed the rubicon. I stole a woman this time, not a baby pig. This isn't something I can come back from. It doesn't matter that Lily's fine, and she's—

She's somewhere else, away from me, just like I wanted.

My little sister screws up her mouth and squares her shoulders. “Will you please just tell Mason? If you got arrested, you need a lawyer.”

“Will you please just let our brother have fun hanging out with his new baby? I’ll get a lawyer myself if I need one.”

“What did you get arrested for? Did it have to do with that woman in the hallway you’re in love with?”

“For fuck’s sake, Remy, it didn’t have anything to do with her.”

Remy stares at me.

I stare back.

That was the wrong answer, and frankly, this is fucking unfair. When your sister is seven, you have more wiggle room with bold-faced lies. I was practically a god back then. Now I’m just a guy who keeps getting arrested.

“Also,” I add, like it’s just now occurring to me, “I’m not in love with anyone, much less some random woman in the hallway.”

“Some...random woman,” Remy echoes, a gleefully suspicious expression on her face. “Some completely random woman who got past Mason’s security and lingered out in the hallway and tried to catch a glimpse of you with her eyes all huge like—”

“How do you know what she looked like?”

“Lydia told me.”

I point a finger at her. “You made a promise.”

Remy points at *me*. “I didn’t promise not to say anything to Nate or Lydia, so you might want to be more careful with your demands.”

“Do not say anything to Nate or Lydia.”

“Fine, but only because you understand the value of freshly baked cake.”

Robin the Baby makes a scratchy sound like he's actually half-bird, or maybe half-dinosaur, and Remy and I both lower our accusatory fingers.

"Who was she?" Remy whispers. "She came here with you, so she must matter."

"Just someone who—"

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

"Someone you're in love with?" Remy whispers.

Someone I kidnapped. Someone I've fucked things up with forever. Someone who wanted to stay with me to figure out who we were together, which is a terrible idea. I'm a burned-out shell of an office building. I'm yellow police tape and flashing lights. I'm an arrest warrant.

I'm not for a person like Lily.

I don't recognize the number on the screen. I swipe to answer it anyway. "Hello?"

Remy leans in, and I put my fingertips on her shoulder and push her back.

"Jameson?"

Lily. It's Lily. It's her, with an unsteady voice, like she's been running. I didn't know she had my number. I never gave it to her. I gave her my entire phone, though, and it wasn't locked, so I guess my number was free for the taking.

"It's me," I tell her, in what I hope is an extremely nonchalant way.

"I should preface—" A pause, during which a car goes by in the background. "I should preface this by saying that my actions this morning don't constitute any kind of obligation on —"

"Are you okay?"

"Not really. I ran away from home. I'm a runaway."

"You're too old to be a runaway," I point out, my heart lodged somewhere at the level of my jaw.

Remy's mouth drops open. "Is it her?" she whispers.

"I'm too old to be grounded, but that seems to have happened, too."

One second, Remy's looking at me from across the couch. The next second, I'm looking down at her. That's because I've jumped to my feet. "You went *home*?"

"It was part of the discovery process."

"Holy shit, L—" I'm not going to shout her name in this hospital room. "Holy *shit*. Stop making lawyer jokes and tell me where you are."

She names a couple of cross-streets that I vaguely remember. "If you're not busy, could you come get me?"

"I have to go," I announce in a way-too-loud voice. Robin the Baby lets out a screech and starts up a raspy wail. That wakes up Snowball, who jumps around in his cage until I pick it up with my free hand. "Sorry, man. It sucks. But I have to go. I have my phone, so all of you should feel free to call or text." Gabriel and Elise have come back into the main room with Nate and Lydia. They're all staring at me, even Charlotte, who's trying to settle Robin. "Congratulations, Mason. Charlotte. Great job being born, Robin. I'll be in touch."

Robin's scratchy cries follow me out the door.

"What the fuck was that?" Gabriel says, just before they're all out of earshot.

"Are you still there?" I ask the woman I previously kidnapped, then released, then left jail with, then briefly lost when she left the hospital without me.

"Yeah. Is everything okay with your family?"

"They're fine." I'm dismissive about it, but only because leaving them all there in that hospital room is worse than rushing to find them in the first place. As soon as I'm in the elevator, I can't remember what the room looked like. My mind superimposes Mason's horrible recovery room over the whole thing, and Mason in that bed, and our lives falling apart. "Are you actually okay?"



“Physically, I’m unharmed. Emotionally, I don’t know.”

Yeah. The lawyer-ly descriptions are convincing as hell. If I had to guess, Lily’s emotionally in denial, and later she’ll be furious.

Not that I have any experience with that.

“What happened?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Because he touched you?” If that bastard of a judge hurt Lily in any way, it won’t just be his house I burn down. It’ll be all of Cobble Hill.

“He didn’t hurt me, Jameson, but he was scary, and I’m not going to tell you anything else because I’m pretty sure you’ll do something ill-advised.”

“No, I won’t.” I silently judged her too soon about the denial. At best, the idea that I *wouldn’t* do anything that could be classified as a criminal act is wishful thinking.

“Yes, you will.”

“*Ill-advised* is a matter of perspective.” That’s not bullshit at all. My mother raised us to take our own feelings into account, not only shitty laws and systems put into place by rich people. I don’t hear a word from her right now, which is probably for the best.

“I think you can’t afford to get arrested again.”

Outside the hospital, I put Snowball’s cage on the sidewalk and press my ticket into the valet’s hand. One of his guys sprints away to get my SUV. I can’t afford a *lot* of things. I can’t afford to fuck up anything else about my nephew’s first days on earth. I can’t afford to give into the urge to fuck things up for other people who deserve it.

I can’t afford to lose Lily.

I know how ironic that sounds. I know how badly this entire enterprise has blown up in my face.

Now’s not the time to think about it. My SUV pulls up to the curb. First things first, I get Snowball buckled into the

back. Then I shove the stray twenties from my wallet into the valet's hand, get behind the wheel, and go.

"Okay," Lily says. "I'm hanging up now."

"The fuck you are."

"It's not safe to be on the phone while you're driving."

"I'm not even—" I let the phone drop into my lap, then stab at it with my thumb until it switches to speaker. "I'm not touching it."

"Concentrate on driving. I'll see you when you get here."

"Lily—"

She hangs up on me.

*She hangs up on me.*

Lilith Hayes, who just ran away from her grandfather's house and asked me for a ride, hung up on me.

I accelerate away from the hospital at twenty-five over the speed limit.

It's half an hour to Cobble Hill from the Upper East Side on a good day. Forty-five minutes on *this* day with all the traffic. I cut people off like I'm rushing to the hospital with my pregnant wife.

Which is not a scenario I'll ever have to worry about. I just have to worry about picking up my not-fiancée before her evil prick grandfather gets to her.

This motherfucker tried to *ground* her?

I have less than zero business getting indignant about that, but it's never stopped me before, and it doesn't stop me now. My jaw hurts from gritting my teeth by the time I'm five minutes out from the Brooklyn Bridge.

A text appears on my phone.

It gives the name of a coffee shop and a dry cleaner's. I put the first one into the map. It's in Brooklyn, a mile, mile-and-a-half from Cobble Hill.

“I hope you haven’t been standing in one place this whole time,” I say to the text message.

Snowball gives significant commentary from the backseat.

Traffic sucks in Brooklyn, too. I have to go around two extra blocks with one-way streets to be in the correct position to literally drive up on the sidewalk if I have to.

My heart feels as big as a soccer ball, thumping away at my ribs. Half a mile. A quarter mile. A tenth. Lily’s not tall enough to be visible over parked cars, and it’s driving me out of my fucking mind. If I don’t see her in the next five seconds, I’m parking in the middle of the street and going to look for her.

There’s the sign for the dry cleaner’s. The coffee shop next to it has a blue awning.

And between two parked cars, I get a glimpse of red hair. Black leggings. My shirt.

I brake so hard the guy behind me swerves around, his horn blaring in a tinny, pathetic way. Lily’s green eyes snap to mine, and she runs.

There’s nobody on the sidewalk around her, but I get wanting to leave as fast as possible, so I lean over and throw the door open.

Lily scrambles inside, breathing hard, and yanks it shut.

“Hi.” She fumbles for her seat belt, sinking down in the seat, her hair windblown and her cheeks pink. “I realize this is awkward, but I didn’t want to call any of my friends.”

“Oh? Did they sell you out?”

I pull the SUV back into traffic. I want both of us away from this place as much as I did the night I took Lily.

“Uh, yeah. They did.” Lily frowns, like this betrayal is the most upsetting part of having a corrupt prick of a judge for a grandfather. “I guess we never had an explicit discussion about covering for each other.”

“Huge oversight.”

“Did he take your car keys, then?”

“He really did. And maybe I should have—I don’t know. *Not* jumped off the roof at the first sign of—”

A loud, echoing *crack* bounces off the driver’s side window. Lily lets out a stifled shriek at the same time something *thunks* into the door on my side.

“Hold on,” I tell her, pointlessly, since she’s already clutching at her seat belt with both hands. It’s all the warning I can give her before I drive up onto the sidewalk. The driver’s side mirror scrapes against a delivery truck. A chalkboard sign splinters underneath my front wheels. One of the big store windows shatters, but not because I’ve driven my SUV into it.

Because somebody’s *shot* into it.

“Oh my God,” Lily whispers in a high, thin tone that I absolutely fucking hate. “Oh my God, oh my *God*.”

I’d hold her hand, but I can’t let go of the wheel. We bump down off the corner and take off down a one-way street.

“Jameson,” Lily shouts over about a hundred pissed-off car horns. “Jameson, this is the wrong way.”

“Close your eyes.”

“No!”

Snowball lets out some sharp tweets that sound like *what the actual fuck are you doing, trying to get her killed?*

“Do you want to drive? Is that it?” I shout back at him.

“Jameson!” Lily and Snowball both scream.

I turn the wheel just in time to avoid a head-on collision with a Tesla. There’s a siren in the distance, but we’re almost to the nearest highway.

From there, it’s just a race against time and some guys with guns.

I let a Camry get on the entrance ramp ahead of me. Lily’s mouth drops open. “Why are you—what are you *doing*? Why are you slowing down?”

“Might need to have a good deed banked later.”

“We could *die!*”

“Yeah.” There’s nothing else to say. I pass the Camry the second we’re on the highway. Accelerate. Accelerate again. Of course we could die. A car accident’s not the only way it could happen. Her grandfather has a few other options in mind.

That seems to sink in for Lily as I come up behind a black truck and tailgate him until he lets me pass.

“Oh my God,” she says softly. “We could die.”



Someone shot at the car.

Someone shot at *our* car. The car that Jameson and I are in.

Someone shot at us.

My brain can't take this in. Or—it can take in the facts, but not the meaning, because—

How can this be a coincidence? How could it possibly be coincidental that I ran away from my grandpapa's house and now someone *shot at us*?

I whip around in the passenger seat and search the highway for evil-looking cars chasing after us. Snowball jumps around in his cage, fluttering his wings. My pulse is like a door slamming again and again, shutting out the world in an incredibly inconvenient way.

“Anybody back there?” I'm honestly surprised I can hear Jameson at all. My heartbeat pulls back at the sound of his voice. It's like he's asking if another cute animal stowed away in the backseat instead of whether I can see the people who were just trying to kill us.

“I don't know. I can't tell. It could be any of them.”

“I'd look for a black SUV. Guys with guns love those.”

“Did you *see* a black SUV?” I take my eyes off the traffic to make sure he's not joking because he's been shot and is suffering the effects of blood loss.

There's no visible blood. His expression is calm, almost nonchalant.

He must feel me looking, because he glances over. "What?"

"Did you see a black SUV? Is that what they were driving?"

"Oh. No."

"*Jameson.*"

"Lilith." He checks the rearview mirror, then pulls into the passing lane and sails by three cars.

"How can you be so—so *chill* about this? Someone shot at us! Someone tried to kill us!"

"We don't know that. They could have been shooting near us, not at us."

"Are you *kidding*?"

Another glance at me, his green eyes catching the light. "It's fifty-fifty at this point."

"What the hell, Jameson? When are you going to start acting like—"

"Like we're in a high-speed chase, running from gunmen who might have been hired by your grandfather?" Jameson checks all his mirrors, then puts his blinker on and exits the highway. We stop at the light. When traffic moves forward, he eases behind a red car, sticking to the speed limit. "How else should I act? Should I scream?"

My heart is about to climb out through my mouth. "First of all, this doesn't seem very high-speed anymore, and second —"

"I feel like doing ninety down this street would draw unwanted attention."

"And *second*, I don't know how you should act! Maybe with a little more urgency! Maybe you shouldn't have gotten yourself arrested at all, because then we wouldn't be doing this?"



Jameson narrows his eyes. “Nobody shot at us outside the jail. That only happened when you decided to go meet your grandfather for tea time.”

“There was no tea,” I snap at him. “I wanted to know if he did what you said. I wanted to see if he was that kind of man.”

Jameson doesn’t look at me. He leans back in his seat, watching the cars in front of him. “What did you find out?”

“I don’t know.”

“You found out he wanted to keep you prisoner.”

“You *did* keep me prisoner.”

His green eyes dart to mine, and I can’t decide whether he’s skeptical or ashamed or scolding. “I let you go. Was he going to let you go?”

My throat closes up. “He would have had to eventually. You can’t keep a full-grown woman under lock and key forever.”

“You could try.”

Tears swim across my eyes, which makes it hard to see if anyone’s coming up behind us to shoot some more, so I turn back around and slide down in my seat. Jameson steers us through some more turns. We’re on surface streets, heading toward Bushwick and through. Buildings slide by, block by block. Bright flyers flutter on newsracks. Everyone’s outside in shorts and sundresses, having a day that probably didn’t involve getting grounded by their grandfathers and jumping off the roof and getting *shot* at.

We leave Bushwick behind and head north toward the highway again. My throat aches every minute. It’s almost impossible to keep being terrified when Jameson’s obeying traffic laws, hiding us in the natural flow of traffic, but every few minutes I get a fresh jolt of adrenaline.

He takes the on-ramp.

“It could be someone else,” he offers, accelerating into the passing lane. “I’m sure there are several people who’d like to take me out.”

“I didn’t tell him about you. I didn’t say I was with anyone.”

“Like I said. This could all be for me, not you, in which case you’d be better off if I dropped you—”

“Holy crap, Jameson, you’re not dropping me *off* anywhere. Don’t say that again.”

There’s a pause, like he might argue.

“Okay.”

The more Jameson drives, the calmer he is. It’s not like the night he took me. That night, he was tense. Something else was bothering him. It wasn’t the fact of the crime at all.

It was his parents. He was thinking about his parents, and his family.

I steal a glance at him and it hits me, all at once, that Jameson doesn’t get arrested by mistake. He’s calm because this is the kind of situation that makes him feel most in control. I’d bet the entire Supreme Court that every time he’s been taken into custody, it’s because he’s allowed the cops to do it.

Okay.

*Okay.*

We take the tunnel back to Manhattan. Jameson drives less than a mile before he takes a sharp right and pulls into a parking garage.

“You’re parking?”

“That’s step one.”

He parks on the fourth floor. Step two is to collect Snowball and take the stairwell down to the street. Jameson puts a hand on my arm and keeps me close to his side while we walk.

Five blocks later, Jameson leads the way into the shadiest parking garage I’ve ever seen. Three flights of crumbling cement stairs later, he stops at a tan four-door and sticks his hand under the wheel well.

“Keys,” he announces.

We get in and go.

There’s another parking garage after that, and then a public lot. The final vehicle is a neat blue SUV. Snowball safely buckled in the back, we drive north.

I have a headache.

Miles of city roll by on either side of us and disappear. Then Manhattan’s in the rearview mirror.

“Where are we going?”

Jameson looks over at me, his eyes skimming my face with something like concern. “The cabin.”

“Won’t they find us there immediately? The cops came for you.”

He shakes his head. “I told them it was a rental. It’s not in my name.”

“Oh my God. Did you steal the cabin?”

Jameson rolls his eyes. “I didn’t steal the cabin, Lily. I bought it under a holding company.”

“You would have some anonymous hideout, wouldn’t you? You’re not just a kidnapper. You’re a criminal mastermind.”

“Former kidnapper. You wanted to vacation with me. And I’m not a mastermind. I’m just a regular criminal with an expanded skill set.” He passes a white car with an old man behind the wheel and an old lady in the passenger seat. “Are you still pissed?”

“I don’t know what I am.”

The hum of the tires on the road is the only sound in the car.

“I’m sorry for leaving you at the cabin. I shouldn’t have done that.”

I wave my hand at him. “It’s fine.”

“Not really, since you’re still pissed, and you look like you’re going to cry. I’m also sorry I let you leave the hospital

by yourself. Your grandfather sounds like an absolute piece of shit.”

“It’s really fine,” I insist, but my voice is all weird from not crying.

“Lily.”

I stare out the window.

“Angel.”

“If I was an angel, nobody would shoot at me.”

“If a real angel descended into Manhattan, everybody would take a shot. Those things are—”

“Terrifying. You’ve said.”

Jameson turns on the radio, then reaches across the center console and takes my hand. He holds it while we get farther from the city, rubbing the pad of his thumb over my knuckles. I don’t recognize any of the songs on the radio. Commercials for used cars and vitamin supplements leave bits and pieces in my mind.

Snowball falls asleep in the back like a kid. For a minute, as the radio plays an ad for the *biggest selection of vehicles in the tristate area*, I can imagine heading north for a weekend away with an actual baby napping in the backseat.

I wouldn’t mind that.

I haven’t done much daydreaming about babies and kids and husbands. Up until Jameson yanked me out of my life, I had a plan that didn’t take a family into consideration at all. When would I have had time, between law school and working as a prosecutor and becoming a judge and serving for most of my natural life span.

“Have you ever thought about having kids?”

Jameson squeezes my hand fast, like a startle. “What?”

“Kids.” I keep looking out the window. “Did you want to have any?”

“Nobody in their right mind would have a baby with me.”

“That’s not really what I asked.”

Jameson’s quiet for a few miles.

“I don’t know—” He stops. Clears his throat. “I don’t know if I want kids. Wouldn’t be fair.”

“Because of your criminal lifestyle?”

He squeezes my hand again, softer this time. “What about you?”

Not only his criminal lifestyle, then. Maybe it’s his nightmares. Or the fact that his parents are gone. Or that he really does plan on spending most of his life in jail.

“An illustrious law career was going to be my main focus. But...I’ve always liked the idea of having a kid.” Another knot forms in my throat. “There are reasons it might not be fair, though.”

Jameson scoffs. “What, are you an undercover criminal?”

“No, but I could be like my mom.”

“Your mom...” His thumb strokes idly over my knuckles. “A free spirit? There’s nothing criminal about that.”

“She left, though.”

“Is that what you’d do?”

Only days ago, my answer would have been an unequivocal *no*. I would have said there were no circumstances that would cause me to leave my baby behind.

I don’t think I can say that now, having been shot at, having jumped off the roof to get away from Grandpapa. What if my mom thought her life was in danger? What if she was choosing between dying in front of me or never seeing me again?

“I would hope I didn’t have to make that choice.”

I’m going to have to make a lot more of them, now that I’ve fled the house. I have no idea what’s next, other than going to Jameson’s cabin. I should probably send a text to Rob at The Membership so he knows I’m not dead, and so he

knows they can tell Grandpapa to leave them alone. But then he'd have information about me. What lengths would my grandfather go to get that information?

I don't want to think about it.

We get off the highway and cruise down roads I recognize. It's a relief. It shouldn't be. The part of my brain that divides activities into *appropriate* and *inappropriate* is quieter now than it's ever been, but it's still there.

I do my best to ignore it.

Jameson turns down a rough road, and we bump over it until we reach his driveway. He lets out a breath. It's the first time he's shown any signs that he was stressed by our getaway drive.

Up by the house, Jameson parks, then gets Snowball's cage out of the backseat. It's late afternoon, but summer days like this one last forever. It's going to be light out for hours, which makes me feel exposed, even surrounded by trees and nature.

The calm expression on Jameson's face looks shallower by the time we go into the cabin. My headache is worse from all the adrenaline and all the waiting and all the driving around like absolutely nothing's wrong. My muscles ache. I need to *do* something.

If I could, I'd dance.

Jameson takes Snowball's cage into the kitchen, refreshes his water, and cleans up his seeds. I don't know what to do with myself, so I end up hovering in the doorway, watching as Snowball pushes his head into Jameson's fingers.

When the cage is presentable, Jameson washes his hands, then moves past me, into the living area.

"Where are you going?"

He doesn't answer.

Two *thumps* say he's kicked off his shoes. A door opens. I follow after the sound and arrive at the bathroom threshold just as he turns on the shower.

“Jameson.”

His eyes meet mine.

I’ve made a mistake.

He’s not such a criminal mastermind that he has no feelings about this. From the razor-sharp look in his green eyes, he’s had *all* the emotions, and they’re about to burst out of him like a bolt of lightning.

Maybe I should run. Maybe it would be safer.

I step into the bathroom instead.

Jameson pounces.

His hands are all over me in a second. He yanks me in, tips my face up, and kisses me hard, with teeth. Jameson’s careful with me. He doesn’t seem to care at all about my clothes.

I don’t care. Another huge rush of adrenaline speeds through my veins, the headache disappearing under the movement of his body against mine. It’s like we’re both stripping off the day and tossing it into the hamper. I’m not sure what happens first—does he lift me, his broad hands on my ass, or do I climb up like I’m desperate for him?

I *am* desperate for him.

Somehow, he gets us both into the shower without falling. Hot water streams down over us. I bite at his lip. Let his tongue into my mouth. Wrap my legs tight around his waist, so tight that my bare pussy brushes up against his abs. Jameson readjusts me with a grunt and slides me once, twice, over the entire length of his shaft.

This is better.

This is what we should have done this morning.

This morning seems like a hundred years ago.

I lean into him, and he leans into the wall, and it feels like being suspended from the hoop above the stage, ready to fly.

That’s my favorite hobby, and when I’m out there, it’s all up to me. I’ve done *enough* today.

So I put my arms around Jameson's neck and let him move me however he wants, which happens to put my clit in direct contact with hard, hot skin, which happens to feel so good that it replaces all the adrenaline in my body with something warm and hazy like wine.

Just when I think he can't possibly do this much longer, he keeps going.

And going.

And *going* until I'm drunk on the steady rhythm of it and the pressure and heat of the water and I have no choice but to go from throbbing nerve endings to coming all over him. He waits until I've dropped my face into his shoulder to push inside me, and *that's* so good I have to tip my head back just to stand it.

I mean for kissing him to be a little revenge, but when I get my mouth on his again, it doesn't feel like that at all.

"You would rather be in jail than do this?"

"No," he answers, voice low and tight.

"Then don't *do* that again."

He shudders, rocking me harder onto his cock. I feel just as stretched and sensitive as I did the first time. I want it just as much as I did the first time.

"No promises."

"Yes, promises," I insist, and push my hips into him. I probably shouldn't. He's standing in a wet shower, and I could take us both over. "*Jameson.*"

Jameson opens his eyes and looks into mine.

It takes my breath away.

I've seen Jameson lose it completely from a nightmare, and I still had no idea how much he's been hiding all day. Behind the heat is so much raw emotion that I think it could crack him wide open.

Today started the way it did because Jameson got himself arrested, but he had no control over anything else, and it was



too much. I was too wrapped up in information-gathering and getting shot and our weird slow-speed escape from the city to feel the raw tension he's radiating. The raw hurt.

He tilts his hips and brings me down harder. It's the smallest change, but it makes everything new. We're here to fuck in Jameson's shower. Whoever shot at us earlier didn't get what they wanted. We still have time.

"Okay," I gasp on his next thrust. Or my next thrust. I'm not sure which of us is more in control. "No promises today."

He makes a sound that's closer to a growl than anything else and hauls me in, his grip hard, fingers digging in. It isn't my plan to claw at him, but that's what happens. My nails slip through the water on his shoulders and find skin. He leans his forehead against mine, breathing fast, and I relax a little bit more, hold on a little bit tighter, and let him take what he needs from me.

Jameson presses his head harder against mine and makes a sound that's almost pained. Then his hands lock on my ass. He pins me against him, his hips moving into my body in small, powerful motions while he comes.

It's a long, long time before he stops shaking.

He bends to kiss my shoulder, then the side of my neck. Breathes into it once, then twice, then a third time. Jameson's muscles tense like he's about to put me down.

Before he does, he turns his head, putting his lips next to my ear.

"I won't," he says.

It sounds like a promise.



JAMESON

**F**ucking in the shower should be enough to take the edge off. I bet it would be if I were a normal person, or even a person who did normal shit when they got tired and went to sleep instead of feeling violently awake.

I'm neither of those things, and faking it seems so far beyond my capabilities that I don't bother to try.

Instead, I get dressed, find my shoes, and head outside.

Lily's drying her hair in the bathroom. The hum follows me outside, getting fainter as I go but never disappearing. At this point, I'm not sure if I'm hearing the dryer itself or just her presence in the cabin.

I didn't mean for both of us to end up here. I meant for the opposite to happen. Maybe, if I'd agreed to stay with her for a week, it would've worked out the way I planned.

Not the way I *wanted*, damn it, because I wasn't in jail five seconds before I wanted her back.

That's going to be a problem.

It's nothing I'm going to solve today though.

The sun's only just beginning to set. Shadows slant over my driveway while I walk out to the road and stand there, listening. Nothing but forest sounds. Crickets chirping. Birds calling. Some general rustling. No cops barreling through the trees. No cars speeding over the road. No gunshots.

Something's not right about that.

Nothing interrupts the stillness. I can feel the reason it's wrong lurking in the back of my mind like a weird mist, but it doesn't become anything tangible.

When the quiet seems steady enough to be boring, I go back to my storage shed.

The cans of accelerant are right where I left them, lined up against one wall.

Calm down. I'm not lighting my own cabin on fire. Yes, I might've lost it a little bit today, but that wasn't the cabin's fault.

What I'm looking for is toward the back, hanging on a set of hooks bolted into the wall. It's a joke, see? My skin already feels like it's on fire. Burning my cabin down would be redundant.

Chopping wood is a way better idea.

The axe gives my body an upper limit, at least. Can't ascend out of myself when I've got my feet on the ground and weight balanced on my shoulder. The air smells like green grass and sunshine, like summer should, and every time I blink I can see the backyard at home, just like it was in that picture Gabriel took of our parents. The main difference is that it was wetter, because my dad put out a billion sprinklers.

I don't have any sprinklers. Maybe I should get some. But then—I'm never going to have a big spontaneous cookout at the cabin. It would be too different.

Or it would be too similar. I don't know.

At the tree line, I've got a dwindling supply of stacked firewood, a big round stump, and several haphazard chunks of logs, ready to be hacked apart.

I get one onto the stump and scored, then swing.

*Thud.*

That feels good.

I've spent at least three-quarters of my life wanting to run into something that hard. *Thud* my entire body into another

solid object. This is close enough for now. The swings and *thuds* vibrate all through my arms and shoot up to the top of my head and run down to my toes. There. That's my entire existence. *Thud. Thud. Thud.*

The back door on the cabin opens, then swings shut with a *creak* and *snap*. I don't hear Lily approach across the grass. She appears in an honest-to-fuck shaft of sunlight a safe distance away from the stump, her hair in one of those shining ponytails on top of her head and a can of lemonade from my fridge in her hand. She's wearing dark leggings and a pink tank top and all of it is perfect.

This could be real for somebody else. A girlfriend—fiancée?—bringing a lemonade out to the lawn to spectate some wood-chopping.

I swing the axe again.

*Thud.*

"I didn't know you had an axe," she says, after a few more swings. I'm all warmed up. "Should I be worried?"

"Are those two things connected?"

"You tell me."

"I've had the axe the whole time. If I was going to murder you with it, I'd have done it already."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm not worried you're going to murder me with it. I'm worried you're going to, like...cut yourself."

"I'm not going to cut myself. I don't even know how I'd swing it like that."

Lily Hayes is so gorgeous in that shaft of light that I can't stand to look at her. My heart rate is up from all the chopping, and there's a knot in my gut that's beginning to seem permanent, and I don't have a firm grip on what that means.

She sips her lemonade and watches me chop wood.

"How was it?" Lily asks. "The hospital, I mean."

“Terrible.” Sick heat flashes through my stomach. I could throw up, which would make the chopping considerably less sexy. As an alternative, I go for stripping my shirt off over my head and tossing it on the ground. “Everyone’s fine.”

Lily tilts her head to the side, eyes skimming all over my body.

“You’re being exceptionally shameless, angel. I’m not a sex object.”

She purses her lips. “You kind of are.”

“I’m not fucking you on this stump.”

“Good. I don’t want to get splinters.”

I laugh out loud, surprised as hell that it happens at all, and pick up the axe again. Is she doing this on purpose? Making jokes and pretending I’m not a human fucking train wreck and talking to me like she cares?

“Did you hold the baby?”

Another *thud*. “Yeah.”

“How did it go?”

“I didn’t drop him or anything.”

“Oooh, him?”

I glance over at Lily, and her eyes are huge and excited over the rim of her lemonade can.

Oh. She’s into babies. That explains the questions in the car on the way here.

“I didn’t ask how much he weighed or his height, so I can’t tell you that. He seemed pretty normal-sized, and he sounded like a dinosaur.”

Between swings, I catch her scrunching her nose. I don’t think that description gave her any details she could realistically find cute, but she’s putting on a good show.

“A dinosaur?”

“I guess new babies sound raspy and weird at first. He was loud, though. Good set of lungs, or whatever people say.”

“That is good, though,” Lily says thoughtfully. “Some babies don’t have a good set of lungs, and then it becomes a thing.”

“Are you sure you were going to go to law school? You sound like a nurse.”

“One of my friends liked this show about midwives, so she played it sometimes while we studied. I noticed things.”

Lily also looks like she’s noticed quite a bit about me. I *am* the one who took my shirt off and very recently fucked her in the shower, so I’m not shy about being half-naked in front of her. It would be nice if it didn’t feel like she could see my heart through my skin, that’s all I’m saying.

“Did the baby get a name yet?”

“Robin,” I answer, and make an instant, defense decision not to tell her what my new nephew’s middle name is. She’ll think that’s cute, too, and wonderful, and a great honor, and I’ll have to pretend that I completely understand why my non-fuckup of an older brother would name his firstborn son after the biggest fuckup of us all.

“Robin,” Lily says softly. “I like that.”

“You were the talk of the event.”

Her mouth drops open. “What?”

“Everybody was talking about you. The girl in the hall with the bird.”

“I hope I didn’t make things awkward.”

“If anybody made things awkward, it was me.”

There’s a longer pause, which I use to put the next chunk of wood on the stump.

“Did you…” Lily starts. Oh, good. She’s considering her next words carefully. I’m sure I’m going to love this line of conversation. “Did you get them up to speed on—” She waves her can in a circle, encompassing the cabin and the backyard and the trees. “Everything?”

“No.”

“No?”

“There wasn’t a good segue. Oh, hey, you had a baby! By the way, I kidnapped a woman and got arrested and then she pretended to be my fiancée to get me out of jail so—”

“I wouldn’t lead with the kidnapping, maybe.”

“Yeah? What would you lead with?”

“Probably the fiancée part.” Lily looks into the middle distance, then seems to remember I’m shirtless and runs her eyes over my abs instead. I can’t tell if she’s exceptionally committed to this fiancée thing because it’s hilarious to think she’d genuinely want that or because she *does* genuinely want that or an unknown third reason, but she doesn’t take it back.

“You think I should have gone in there and told my entire family I got engaged to a woman I kidnapped?”

Her green eyes come up to mine. “No, I—you should leave the kidnapping part out completely. Obviously, do not tell them you kidnapped me.”

“Just that we’re engaged.”

“In this hypothetical, yes.”

“You do know that if I tell my family we’re engaged, they’re going to plan a wedding, right? My sister-in-law is a clothing designer. She’d probably insist on making your dress herself, and don’t get me started on Gabriel’s talent for parties.”

“You’re saying this like it’s a bad thing.”

I put down the axe so I can give Lily my full attention. She doesn’t look like she’s in shock. There was a while, when we were still driving, that I thought she might be. Now she looks freshly showered and comfortable and pretty, as if the two of us getting married could turn out to be great, now that she thinks about it.

“Lilith.” Her eyes get darker, and what the hell, I could end up fucking her on this giant stump. “Angel. We are not throwing a fake wedding.”



“If it’s a real dress and a real party, I’m pretty sure it’s not fake.”

“Holy shit. Look at your hand.”

She thrusts the can away from her with a gasp. “What? Is something on me?”

“No. There’s nothing on you. There’s no ring. Because we’re not engaged. That was something you made up for the police.”

Lily lets out a breath. “I thought there might have been a bee.”

Yes. Because that would be the apocalypse compared with being engaged to me. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to freak you out with that end-days scenario.”

I pick up the axe again, my heart pounding.

“I freaked you out, though,” Lily says softly.

“What?” Swing. *Thud.*

“I freaked you out by pretending we were engaged.”

“That’s not why I was freaked out.”

“Why, then?”

“Because...” I swing the axe again, forcing myself to take deeper breaths. I wanted to clear my head out here, not die of oxygen deprivation. “Because I knew how pissed you were going to be, and then I thought about all those cops looking at you, and I wanted to get you out of that place before anything happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“So much bullshit could have happened in there. You have no idea. Tommy’s a decent enough guy, but you can’t always count on cops to be trustworthy. And you were just *in there*, connecting yourself to me for some unknown fucking reason, and if anything had gone wrong they could’ve just kept me in there where—”

“Jameson.”

I'm already overheated from the chopping and the sun, and it gets worse. If I were a magnifying glass the forest would be on fire.

"Where I couldn't get to you, and then I'd have had to—I don't know. Then I'd have had to do something drastic, like dig through concrete with a fork to make sure nothing terrible was happening to you."

"Jameson, it was fine."

I mean to split the wood on the stump, but at the last minute, my arms rebel and I hurl the damn thing into the trees and round on Lily. I don't want to tower over her because I'm not an asshole, and I'm not trying to scare her, I'm just ready to explode out of my own skin.

"Literally fucking nothing about today was fine." I back up another step. My hands go up in front of me like she'll be close enough to touch, but she's not. I've made sure of that. I still want my fingers in her hair. "That was a nightmare."

Lily shakes her head a little bit. "I thought you said things at the hospital were okay."

"They *weren't* okay. For fuck's sake. I can't walk into those places without being right back there at the—at the other \_\_\_"

She bends down, and I can't figure out why until the sun catches on her lemonade can. Lily abandons it in the grass and comes over to me as if I'm not an axe-wielding criminal kidnapper who let her get shot at today. Her arms go around my waist, and she presses her body up against mine, her cheek on my chest. I put one arm around her and fumble with the elastic in her hair until it's loose again and I can curl my fingers through it.

Better.

That's better.

"What did you remember?" she asks.

"It wasn't nice. Before—when they took Mason, after the fire. It wasn't a nice place or a private floor or anything. And

the cops—”

It’s a little fucked up, actually, that I get arrested so often when it takes almost nothing to remember the red-and-blue lights flashing in our driveway.

“The cops came to the house to take us to the hospital. Gabriel and Remy and me. She was so scared, so I carried her. Even though she was six. It wasn’t like she was a baby. She kept losing her shit over and over again. People kept coming in to tell Gabriel things because he was the oldest one who wasn’t in surgery, and then they—”

Lily makes a bunch of noises that aren’t really words. They remind me of lullabies, or things I used to say to Remy when she woke up in the middle of the night. Most of them weren’t true at all. The lie I told the most was that everything was going to be okay. We were all going to be okay. She didn’t have to worry.

“We waited for a long time in this little waiting room, and then they came in and said they needed Gabriel to help with Mason, because he’d woken up too early. Something like that. He’d come out of the anesthesia early in the recovery room, and they thought it would help if someone from the family came to talk to him. So Gabriel went.”

Lily takes a deep breath and lets it out. “You didn’t go, though? You stayed with Remy in the waiting room.”

“Somebody was screaming.” The words don’t feel like they come from my mouth, necessarily. They’re just happening. “Somebody had been screaming, down the hall. Remy would get used to it, and then she’d notice it again, and then she’d cry, and that was the only time I couldn’t hear it, because she was so loud.” My throat feels like *I’ve* been screaming. “Yeah. Gabriel went, and we stayed.”

“Did he help, though? Was it worth it?”

“No.” I let out an unhinged laugh. “No, it didn’t help. He was gone for a while, and whoever it was kept on screaming and yelling. Remy passed out in the middle of it. She couldn’t stay awake anymore. But I was awake when Gabriel came

back, and he looked...frozen. There was no color in his face at all. And I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That it was Mason.” I’m looking at the cabin, and the backyard, and a little sliver of lake. I know that. But all I can see is the waiting room and the particle-board chairs and Gabriel staring down at me like I was a stranger. “He was the one screaming.”

“Oh.” It’s a breath of a word.

“It wasn’t going to be better for a long time. It was never going to be better.”

A breeze picks up, ruffling her hair. I run my fingers through, letting the wind lift the ends, then settle my grip back in it.

“It did get better, though.” Lily gives my waist a squeeze. “It got a lot better. That was a really nice part of the hospital.”

“Didn’t matter. I still thought about everything else when we were in there. And I thought about telling all of them that they should ban me from being within a mile of that baby, because they’ve got him now. They don’t need me.”

Lily pulls back to look into my face. “That’s not true. You know that’s not true, don’t you?”

“It *is* true.”

“Jameson.” Her expression goes soft, and all at once I can feel my pulse in every inch of my veins. There’s too much heart. I have to get it out of me. “That’s not true. They all wanted you with them. They texted you *so* many times. I almost—” She laughs, her cheeks turning pink. “I almost called them from your phone just to tell them where you were.”

“Holy fuck, Lily, you didn’t.”

“No! I didn’t. Otherwise, they’d all have known that we’re engaged.”

“We’re not engaged.” My abs hurt from a short, sharp laugh. “Don’t kid yourself.”

“Fine,” she says, a smile flickering onto her face like a sunbeam. “I wanted to call them so they wouldn’t worry. If you really think they don’t need you, then I’d have to argue against that.”

I really think they don’t need me.

I don’t say that to Lily.

“I’m not in the mood to argue.”

“Good.”

Lily stands there with me by the stump and lets me run my fingers through her hair, over and over and over. It’s not as much impact as chopping wood, but it feels just as good.

It feels better.



**W**hen I asked Jameson if we could stay at his cabin for another week, I pictured the two of us doing everyday things together. I didn't know he chopped firewood, or even that he owned an axe, but it's a normal enough cabin thing to do.

However, I didn't expect it to be this...tense.

Jameson lets me hug him for a long time, his fingers in my hair, tugging with extreme gentleness. It reminds me of the way I used to hold a baby blanket with satin edges when I was younger. Not to do any damage, just to remind myself that it was still there.

Then he takes a deep breath and goes back to chopping wood.

I don't hate it, as far as manly chores go. Jameson looks hot in the dappled sunlight with his skin all glistening and his hair curling at the temples, beginning to come loose from his man bun.

I'm not going to ask him any more questions about the hospital, but he's right. It is a little sex-objecty to stand here staring without saying anything.

Plus, there's something about his face that worries me, and it's not the black eye courtesy of the hail. He was *so* animated when he was talking about me and the hospital and his horrifying past experiences, but it settled back into strained tension, like something's eating at him.

More than one thing is eating at him, obviously, but I don't know how to...lighten it, I guess. I don't want it to be so heavy on his shoulders. I tried to hint that I like him and, yes, care about him by reminding him that technically he's still my fake fiancé, but I don't think I pulled it off.

I pick up my lemonade again and wrap my hand around the sweating can.

“So.”

He brings the axe down, showing off the unbelievable lean, hard muscles in his shoulders and back, and glances over at me. Jameson's eyes are the same green as the forest leaves behind him. “So?”

“How long have you been chopping wood?”

He balances the axe on the ground and swipes at his forehead, blowing out a breath. “I don't know. Half an hour? Forty-five minutes?”

“I mean, when did you first learn how to do it?”

“Oh.” Jameson hoists the axe and splits another piece of wood. “When I bought the cabin.”

“Through your criminal mastermind holding company.”

He cracks a smile. Holy mother of moral certainty, that's a relief. Jameson's looked distant, like he's in some other life, since he told me those things about his siblings.

“Can't be a criminal mastermind without a holding company.” Jameson abandons the axe again to stack the wood he's split and get another chunk. “I bought the cabin about five years ago.”

“It seems like you've been here longer.”

I think he might make a joke about how I haven't known him long enough to have an opinion, but he huffs a laugh. “Yeah. It does seem like that.”

The wind sends tendrils of my hair across my forehead, so I turn my face the other way and let it undo the annoying thing it's done.



“Were you working for your brother’s company by then?”

His shoulders tense, and the energy in the air gets more palpable. The topic could be too close to the hospital. I’m no professional, but I get the sense that if we avoid talking about his family, it’ll only make things harder.

What things? I don’t know. Everything.

Jameson picks up the axe, swings it in a bright arc over his head, and lets it sink into the wood.

“I’ve always worked for Mason’s company,” he says slowly, as if he’s wading into the conversation in small increments. “Since college.”

“You went to college?”

He shoots me a narrow-eyed look that somehow manages to be playful. “That’s offensive. Of course I went to college.”

I let out a laugh. The deadpan tone from him is *funny*. “I didn’t want to assume.”

“Can’t be a criminal mastermind without a degree.”

“What was your degree?”

Jameson sighs, bringing the axe down especially hard on the chunk of wood, and when he looks over at me, he’s *blushing*.

“Oh my God.” I clutch my can of lemonade to my chest like I’m giddy about this turn of events because I *am* giddy about this turn of events. Jameson doesn’t get embarrassed. He made me ride a vibrator on the arm of his couch for hours and never got pink in the face. Now his face is several shades darker than even the most vigorous chopping would make it. “Did you...Jameson, did you get a cute degree?”

He scowls, but it’s the least scary thing he’s done with his face so far. “Did you not like it when we fucked in the shower? I swear I felt you come at least once, and you’re out here trying to kill me.”

“If I wanted to kill you with jokes, I would have done it by now.”

Jameson snorts and turns his head before I can get the full effect of his grin. “You know what? Maybe they were cute. It’s sexist bullshit to assume *cute* has a negative connotation just because of its feminine associations.”

He wraps his fists around the handle of the axe and swings it with a level of muscular grace that has me hot between the thighs, shower fucking notwithstanding.

Wait.

“Hang on. *They?*”

Green eyes skate over mine. “They,” he confirms.

“You have...multiple degrees?”

“Can’t be a criminal mastermind without—”

“Why didn’t you *say* so?” My voice goes high and shocked. “Don’t you think that would have been a cool thing to share with your fiancée?”

Jameson rests the head of the axe in the grass and stares at the leaves in the branches long-sufferingly. When he tilts his chin back down at me, there’s a darker emotion in his eyes.

“If you keep saying that to me, I’m going to propose.”

My heart goes from shirtless-man-racing to pounding out of control. “I dare you.”

He lets out a shallow breath. “You of *all* people should be more judicious about your dares.”

I wonder if he can tell my face is on fire. “My dares? I’ve never dared you to do anything before.”

I swear to the highest court in the land, his eyes *glitter*. “Yes, you have.”

“I’m pretty sure I haven’t.”

Jameson clears his throat and curls his hand over the upright axe handle, leaning on it like he’s modeling for a *Vanity Fair* forestry tools edition. “Hope no hot guys are waiting to mug me in this parking lot. I *dare* you.”

My mouth drops open so quickly that there's no chance I haven't turned into a human cartoon. I have a terrible sunburn, or else all the blood in my body has rushed into my face and scorched the skin.

"You did not," I choke. "You did *not* just make fun of me for what I said when I was being kidnapped."

Jameson laughs, so satisfied that he's almost given himself dimples from his smile. "Technically, that's what you said *before* you were being kidnapped. Sealed the deal, if you ask me. How could I not respond to a dare?"

"I can't believe you heard that." I have nowhere to hide but behind my lemonade can. It's only big enough to block Jameson out if I close my other eye.

"Well, yeah. I was right behind you. Hard to kidnap someone from the opposite side of a parking lot."

"No. No!" I take the lemonade can away from my face and hold it like a brave, independent woman whose kidnapper didn't hear the silly joke she made to what she thought was an empty parking lot. "This is a distraction. If you're going to propose, just do it."

"I don't have a ring."

"Fine. Then tell me what degree you got at college. What *degrees*."

Jameson groans. "I'd rather not."

"Because I'll think you're cute?"

"That's not it."

Jameson busies himself with the axe again, and I let him split two more pieces of wood before I forge ahead into the same giddy feeling as before.

"Are you a secret genius? Is that what's so embarrassing?"

"I'm not embarrassed of my degree." Swing. *Smack*. "Degrees."

"Okay. Tell me what they are, then."

He takes his sweet time setting up another chunk of wood and splitting it. This goes on for so long that I think he might've forgotten my demand.

Then, after one more powerful swing:

“I have a Master’s in Public Administration and I got my JD at the same time.”

I shake my head so hard that I really do turn into a human cartoon.

“*What?*”

“I have a Master’s in Public Administration,” Jameson says, slower this time, and splits another piece of wood. “And I got my JD at the same time. A Juris Doctor is—”

“Jameson!” The squeak lends some hysteria to his name. “Jameson. *Jameson*. I know what a Juris Doctor is. What are you even—what are you *saying*? You have to be joking. You have to be—you didn’t—you—but if you did all that, then why didn’t you take the Bar?”

He shrugs. “I was doing other stuff.”

“Those are graduate level degrees.” Maybe what happened is that I stepped into an alternate universe when I jumped off the roof of my grandfather’s house. Or maybe I made *one joke* about Jameson being a secret genius and he turned into one right in front of me. Or maybe he always has been, and I didn’t think about it, because I was too caught up in the way he was an obvious genius at making me hot enough to come twelve thousand times in two days. “That means you needed a bachelor’s, too.”

“Yep.”

*Yep*, he says, as if going to college and getting two graduate-level degrees at the same time is incredibly normal and average.

“So...” I gesture with the lemonade can, my brain still struggling to catch up. “What was your undergraduate degree?”

Jameson splits the last chunk of wood, then sets the axe aside and bends down to gather and stack the remnants. He brushes off his hands, smooths down his hair, and looks out over the lake.

“Uh...” It’s one of those distant moments again, when I’m not sure what he’s thinking of. After a few beats, he blinks. “I got a B.A. with a concentration in environmental studies with a minor in business.”

I just.

Don’t have the words to respond.

Jameson stands under leafy, swaying branches, shadows shifting over his skin, hair beginning to escape from his bun and forming curls around his face from the heat.

He looks hot.

He literally looks like he’s warm from chopping wood, *and* he looks hot. He looks so hot my mouth waters.

And he just announced that my secret genius joke wasn’t a joke after all.

“How—” I lift both hands, helpless. “How did you do all that? I can’t even—I could *never* have done that. School was —” Tears swim into my eyes out of nowhere. I’m not jealous of him. I never thought about dual degrees or double majors or anything like that. Law school was the only thing on my mind. “School was so *hard*.”

He slips his hands into his pockets, the corners of his mouth turning down. “Yeah. It was.”

“Not for *you*, obviously.”

“Angel,” he says, just as my chin dimples. That’s not going to happen. I’m not going to cry because a man I happen to think is hot has more degrees than me and probably always will.

“Don’t feel bad for me!” I rattle the lemonade can at him. “I have a degree, too, so—” So we’re even. “So there.”

“Oh, yeah?” His eyebrows go up, and his green eyes get wide, and he is pretending to be interested. It makes me laugh anyway. “What did you get?”

“A B.A. in—” It sounds like nothing compared to Jameson’s list. “Politics. I have a bachelor’s in politics.”

“That’s cool.”

I drag my non-lemonade hand over my eyes. “I’m serious. How did you do all that? It must have taken you forever.”

“It took five and a half years.”

I make an unattractive choking sound. “That’s impossible. That’s too many credit hours to fit in five and a half years. You’d have to give up sleeping.”

“That’s how I did it.” Jameson has zero traces of humor in his face. “I’d already given up sleeping by then.”

Another high, weird sound comes out of my mouth. “People can’t give up sleeping. There’s a reason sleep deprivation violates the Geneva Convention.”

Jameson nods.

He doesn’t say anything else.

He lets the shadows move over him, his hands in his pockets, and looks at me with his beautiful face.

With ridiculously belated understanding, my stomach turns over and flops onto the ground. A slideshow of the way he was after the beach ticks through my mind like a fan of index cards rippling through someone’s fingers.

He hadn’t wanted to go to sleep, and when he did, he fell hard. The dreams never took very long to come. It wasn’t always easy to wake him up. He was *always* panicked. Always disoriented.

It’s not physically possible for Jameson to have stayed awake every night since his parents died. He would have died, too, if not from his brain going haywire then from a car accident or something similar.

I think it was possible for him to be awake most of that time.

I think he *was* awake most of that time.

“You stayed up and got three different degrees.”

“Mm-hmm.” He runs his hands over his hair. “I need another shower.”

“Oh, good! I’m going to watch.”

“Wow. I’m once again objectified.” Jameson picks up the axe, balances it on his shoulder, and leaves his wood-chopping project behind. He bumps his hip into me on his way past, a cute, normal gesture that makes my heart warm. Jameson’s shirt is a crumpled pile of fabric by the stump, so I do my part and retrieve it, then hurry to catch up with him. We have a cute, normal walk to his shed.

While Jameson’s hanging up the axe, I finish my lemonade and check him out. The storage shed isn’t very full. There’s a saw on one wall and a lawnmower in the back corner, and...

Several shiny cans of gasoline lined up next to each other.

His voice comes back to me.

We’d been talking about his parents and what happened after they died. I knew by then that he’d left something out when he told me the story on the beach, and during that conversation, he gave me the missing piece.

The missing piece was my grandfather.

Jameson had come to the neighborhood the night he kidnapped me because of my grandfather, not because of me.

But...

*I was going to burn his house down with the two of you inside.*

“Hey, Jameson?”

“Yeah?” He turns around, axe-hanging finished, his expression open.

I point one of my toes at the cans. “Were these...” The words get lost on the way out, and I have to find them again. “Was this how you were going to burn down my grandfather’s house?”

He frowns at the cans. “I’m not sure it would have been enough. But that’s what I got.”

I give the cans another look. A *long* look.

“Lily.”

“Hmm?”

Jameson’s watching me, his brow furrowed. “Do those freak you out?”

I think of Grandpapa looking into my face and that split-second flicker of sheer disgust. I don’t want his house burned down, but...

“No,” I tell Jameson, and mean it.

He takes another shower, and I watch.

He sits on the couch, and I straddle him and pretend to be kidnapped until we’ve both come.

Jameson doesn’t seem as shaken as he did earlier, but he never settles. Never relaxes. Never yawns.

*I’m* tired.

He gathers me close on the couch and scrolls through his phone while I drift, listening to the far-off lap of the lake and the wind in the trees and the night coming down on the cabin.

At some point, I realize Jameson isn’t warm anymore.

Jameson’s turned into a throw pillow and covered me with a blanket.

A soft scrape near the door startles me out of my shallow sleep and off the couch. “Jameson?”

“Go back to sleep, angel.”

“Yeah, right.” He’s by the front door in dark jeans and a dark long-sleeved shirt, a bag slung over his shoulder, stepping into his shoes. “I’m going with you.”



“Lily. I’m a criminal mastermind, and I have some errands to run.”

“What kind of errands?”

“High-stakes ones.”

“Are you going to do *crime*?”

“I’m not going to do anything bad,” he insists. “I just need to check something out. It might not be safe. You stay here, and I’ll be back in an hour or two.”

“No *way*. If you leave without me, I’m breaking our engagement. Let me brush my teeth.”

He lets out a long, frustrated groan, but there’s affection in the sound, too. I brush my teeth and put my hair in a braid, then steal a black hoodie from Jameson’s dresser.

My last stop is the kitchen, where I pick up a sleeping Snowball’s cage. It just doesn’t seem right to leave him here.

“Okay.” Back at his side, appropriately clothed for some not-bad crime, I stick my feet into my shoes. Luckily, I bought sensible ones in a dark blue color that’ll be fine for...whatever we’re doing. “I think I’m good to go.”

“Yeah. You are.”

“I am?” I straighten up and find Jameson biting his lip.

“You look hot like that,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean you’re a criminal mastermind, Lilith. You have to follow my lead.”

“I can’t follow you if you’re not moving.”

“Jesus, I love you like this.”

I do not make another joke about getting married.

When Jameson leaves the cabin, I go with him.



JAMESON

The place I'm looking for—a farmhouse, I guess—is north of the city, closer to Manhattan than my cabin is.

Lily sits in the passenger seat, peering out at the dark countryside with narrow-eyed concentration.

“The crime isn't going to jump out at you,” I tell her over the radio, which is crackling out a throwback song by a boy band I can't remember the name of. “In this case, we're the crime.”

“I'm watching for deer.”

There's a nervous tension in the silence. Maybe a nervous excitement. I don't get the impression that almost-lawyer Lily is big on recreational crime.

“I meant it,” I offer, because she's put up with a lot from me today, and I don't want her to think I'd make her an accomplice in a felony or anything. “We're not going to hurt anything.”

“What's the crime, then?”

“Trespassing. That's it.”

She turns, her hair catching the light from the center console.

“Trespassing for what?”

“For justice.”

I keep my eyes on the road, watching for glowing eyes and shadows at the tree line. Lily keeps looking at me. I can feel

her eyes in the dark.

Slowly, eyes forward, I reach down and turn on the radio.

A woman's voice fills the silence talking about the power of love or some bullshit.

A Pat Benatar song fades in.

Lily sighs. "How does trespassing help anyone get justice?"

"It does if you find some hostages."

"*Hostages?*"

"Look, it might not be that bad."

"Wait. Wait." Her hand flashes in my peripheral vision. "How did you decide on this particular crime? Is there, like, a message board where would-be criminals gather and exchange tips?"

Well.

"Yeah."

Lily twists in her seat until she's completely sideways. "Are you *serious?*"

"Shh. You're going to wake up Snowball."

She breathes deep, like she's on the verge of bursting into flame. "A message board. You get your tips from a message board."

"Some of them. Other ones I get on Facebook. It varies from time to time..."

"Don't say it."

Now I *have* to. "...or from crime to crime."

"Oh my God."

"You still think I'm hot, don't you? That's the worst part."

"Yes." Lily folds her arms over her chest and slumps back in her seat. "Yes, it is."

We listen to Pat Benatar.

The song ends.

A commercial for a no-commitment cell phone plan comes on.

“You said you were checking on something,” she says finally. “Have you been to this place before?”

“Nope.”

“What are you looking for, then?”

“The tip said there might be some kids there.”

“Jameson.” Lily’s voice goes deadly serious. “You *cannot* kidnap children. I won’t allow it.”

“For fuck’s sake. I’m not going to kidnap anybody. It said there’s kids in a bad situation. Some piece of shit owns the place, and he has enough money that everybody’s willing to look the other way.”

“Then...wouldn’t this guy have enough money to get back at you, if you get caught?”

“I’m not planning to get caught.” The GPS flashes the quarter-mile warning. I pull off the road near what looks like a dirt path through the woods and stop. “And that’s pretty much the situation I’m in now, so...”

“So you want to make it *worse*?”

“So why not make sure a rich bastard isn’t hurting some kids? It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

“You could do *me*,” Lily mumbles under her breath.

I turn the SUV off, toss the keys in the center console, and put my hand on her perfect legging-clad thigh. “I could do *both*.”

There’s not enough light to be totally sure, but I think she blushes. Lily pats at my hand. “If we’re doing this, then we should get going before Snowball wakes up.”

“Even if he does, he’ll be fine. He has seeds and water.”

“It’s not too late to turn back, you know.”

“Come on.”

The road is nothing special. Two lanes. Narrow shoulders. Lily tips her head back and looks at the sky while we walk.

“You can see *so* many stars out here.”

“Yeah. It’s weird.”

“It’s, like, the country.”

“It’s not actually that far from the city. There should be more light pollution.”

She considers the sky for another few paces. “Maybe it’s blessed.”

“By what?”

“God. Or fate. Something like that.”

“You think God exists *and* he’s taken an interest in whether this patch of nowhere has less light pollution than other places?”

“Sexist,” Lily says. “God could be a woman. And *she* could be interested in whatever she wants.”

The grunt that comes out of my mouth doesn’t sound very much like I agree with her, because I don’t. I sure as fuck hope God doesn’t exist, because regardless of gender, God is a fucking asshole.

If *God* looked down on us after my parents died and decided that situation was chill, then fuck Them.

We continue down the road, following the instructions of my phone’s GPS. Night sounds come out to meet us from the woods. An owl *hoots*. Something rustles in the underbrush. Wind moves through the leaves.

“Huh.” Lily looks off into the forest. There’s not much to see. “It’s getting quieter.”

“Probably because we’re here.”

The trees fall away, revealing a field. I can see the corner of a white farmhouse, practically glowing in the moonlight.

Another patch of trees covers it up again.

I turn off the GPS and scroll to a screenshot of the tip.

“We’re looking for a gravel driveway.”

“Shouldn’t we, like, sneak through the woods?”

“If we just walk up the driveway, we can pretend we got lost and needed directions. Harder to do that if you’re acting like a creep in the woods.”

“That’s very criminal mastermind of you.”

“Thanks.”

The gravel drive comes into view between a gap in the trees, and we crunch our way onto it. Lily walks a little closer to my side.

“It’s *really* dark,” she says.

“I thought you were into that. It’s why we can see all the stars.”

“I’m not that into it right now, to be honest.”

I turn my phone around and let the glow light our path.

The driveway winds around through the trees, then lets us out into a yard. I stop Lily by the edge of the forest.

“What?” she whispers. “Did you see something?”

“I’m seeing if I see something.”

From here, it looks picturesque in the moonlight. The driveway ends between the white farmhouse and a big red barn. It could be on a postcard with a bubbly script font that says *Visit Upstate New York!*

There are no lights on in the farmhouse.

There is no light on the outside of the barn.

There are no night noises from the woods around us. They’ve all gone silent, except for the wind in the leaves. Even that seems muted somehow, like the leaves are softer, or farther away.

“I don’t think anybody’s here,” Lily says. “No cars.”

“Maybe they park in the barn. Let’s find out.”

I can tell she wants to argue, but she doesn’t.

We head to the barn first. The doors in front have handles, so I take one and pull.

The door just...opens.

Smooth, like somebody oiled the hinges.

I refuse to be creeped out by that.

Lily and I step into the barn.

“It’s a barn,” she whispers.

“Yep.”

“They don’t park in here.”

“Not that I can see, no.”

I make a loop around the barn. It has a weird, dusty smell, but there’s nothing in here—no animals. No hay. If I had a barn, I’d probably store all kinds of shit in there, but this one’s empty.

“Look.” Lily points. “A shovel.”

There is indeed a shovel propped in one corner. You don’t need a whole barn to store one shovel, and the sight of it makes my chest get tight. I have no idea why.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking it out.”

“Like, to see if there’s a trapdoor?”

“Sure.”

It doesn’t look like there’s a trapdoor in the light of my phone. The shovel has some chunks of dirt on it. There isn’t a more normal shovel in the world.

I take it by the handle in case it’s really the trigger for a trapdoor. The second I touch it, a *shock* goes through my hand and spreads all across my chest. A completely involuntary gasp comes out of my mouth.

“*Jameson.*”

I drop that thing like it’s on fire and step away, knocking into her in the process. She puts both hands on my elbow,



which is about when I realize I have both hands on my chest.

“What happened? Did it cut you?”

“No, it—” It *felt*. It sent something into my chest. Which is not possible for a shovel to do. “I had a weird feeling when I touched it.”

“What feeling?”

A heavy one. I can still feel it now. It has the weight of holding back tears and trying to breathe through snot and swallowing even though your throat’s closed up. Like having to dig a deep hole even though it’s the middle of the night and you’re so tired you can’t stand it. Like knowing that nothing is ever going to get better.

“Like heartbreak.”

Her hands tighten on my arm. “We should go.”

“Not yet. It’s not a magic shovel. It’s just—” I try to shake it off. “I must’ve been thinking about something else.”

The only other thing we find in the barn is a small wicker basket tipped on its side. We stay clear of it while I shine my phone light on it.

“Are those raisins?” Lily whispers.

“I don’t think you have to whisper.” I nudge the basket with my toe. It rolls over, and dried fruit spills out, along with a single, round blueberry. “I think it’s dried blueberries.”

“How did that one stay like that if most of them are raisins?”

“Raisins are dried grapes.”

She elbows me.

“I don’t know. Maybe...” Maybe this single blueberry was just picked today. That’s what it looks like. “I don’t know.”

We leave the barn.

The farmhouse has a big wraparound porch. We circle around the whole thing, looking for signs of life.

There's nothing. Not even a curtain twitching in a window. There are two greenhouses choked with plants on one side of the farmhouse, and beyond that, a little cottage tucked into another stand of trees. We couldn't see that from the road. It's dark, too.

"This is so fucking creepy." I've got a constant drip-feed of adrenaline going on right now, and there's no way I can resist it. "I'm going inside."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

Lily grips my arm *tight*. We climb up on the porch. There's a white storm door.

I try the handle.

It opens.

Soundlessly.

I exchange a look with Lily and push the second door open with my fingertips. It swings inward, opening on a narrow entry with a hallway and stairs leading up.

It's *silent*.

There's nobody inside. I just know it.

I go in anyway, taking Lily with me.

On the first step across the threshold, I'm hit with the urge to hold my breath. Not really an urge—more like a habit. It feels so familiar that I do it, listening hard, and realize after a few seconds that Lily's doing the same thing.

She lets hers out slow. "I don't hear anything."

"Neither do I."

We make a quick, quiet circuit of the ground floor. There's a living room with well-worn furniture and a braided rug. Some kind of sewing room with an antique sewing machine and pieces of fabric tucked into a shelf on the wall. Lily touches one of the rolls of fabric, and it slides out into her hand, a folded piece of paper coming with it.

She tucks the fabric back into place and unfolds the paper. I shine my phone at it and literally hear the breath go out of Lily.

It's a child's drawing. A boy in a blue shirt, with a round body and blocky arms and legs. He has yellow hair, two small, black circles for eyes, and a lopsided smile. He's holding a bouquet of flowers.

Whoever drew this took special care to make each of the flowers a different color.

There's writing next to the picture, with almost no space between the words.

"Eleanor," Lily reads, tracing under the letters with a fingertip. "I love you. Even—" She squints. "Even though you didn't take me away."

Below that, there's an *H*.

"Okay," she says, her voice shaking. "Let's..."

"Yeah."

She puts the letter in her pocket. We peek into the kitchen, where there are some chairs around a table and a pan in a drying rack by the sink, then go upstairs.

There are four small bedrooms, almost empty except for blankets on the beds that look like they were made from fabric scraps. The bedroom in the front of the house is hard to breathe in, so we get the fuck out of there.

The bedroom in the back of the house—the biggest one—is so still that my heart pounds. Rumpled blankets cover the bed, and a chair is turned over on its side. For a second, I swear my heart stops.

It's frozen in there. Not cold, but...unmoving, somehow.

I go to look out the back window and something crunches under my foot.

A watch.

I lean down to get a look at it.

The second hand ticks forward, and then ticks back.

“Holy fuck.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I tell Lily.

There are only two other doors to open on this floor. One of them leads to a tiny bathroom. The other leads to a narrow staircase. I squeeze myself up there for the sense of completion.

The attic has more bedrooms.

“What the fuck.”

It feels more lived-in, somehow, but everything about the attic is worse. Mattresses on the floor. Thin-ass walls between bedrooms barely wider than the mattresses. One of the rooms has a closet in it. When I snap the door open, a breath of air floats out that smells like lilacs.

Lily makes a noise.

“There’s nothing in there.”

“It smells like there were *flowers* in there. Like...tons of flowers. That was *so* strong.”

Personally, I thought it was more of a hint of lilac, but I’m not going to argue the point.

She finds a scrap of paper that looks like it was torn out of a notebook sticking out from under the mattress and holds it up for my phone-light.

“It’s a list.”

*18th - 2*

*19th - 1*

*20th - 4*

*21st - 1*

*22nd - 1*

*23rd - 2*

*24th - Cronos came for Christmas, 6*

*25th - 3 overnight, did not wake up*

Lily shivers. “I don’t want to know what this means.”

“There’s definitely no kids in here.”

We leave the farmhouse by silent agreement. Lily lifts her chin and makes a beeline for the cottage by the trees. I’m right behind her.

I choose not to mention that I’m pretty sure one of the greenhouse plants moved like it had a head and it was watching us.

The cottage is unlocked, just like the farmhouse. It has a small living area in the front. Lily leads the way across to a small bedroom.

“There’s just...” She shivers again. “There’s no *dust* here. There was dust in the barn. But there’s no dust here. Like they just left.”

“If they *just* left, we would have seen them on the way in. Or we’d have seen a car.”

Lily moves to the bedside table, where there’s a tipped-over picture frame.

She sets it upright.

It’s empty. No picture.

Lily huffs, then goes over to the closet door and opens it.

There are no clothes inside, but there is a crib.

“Why would *anybody* have a crib in here?” Her voice has gone high and more than a little freaked out. “And all those weird bedrooms? How many kids did your group say there were?”

“Four.”

She shakes her head.

The last place to check out in the house is the kitchen.

There's no hum of electricity, so I open the fridge expecting nothing.

Instead, a gust of cold air hits me in the face. The light inside turns on.

"Ruth Bader Ginsburg," Lily whispers.

The only thing in the fridge is a half-gallon of milk.

"Somebody *does* live here. There's, like, milk."

"I don't think they do."

"Why not?"

I step to the side and point. Lily tucks herself into me and leans down. "What am I looking at? It's milk."

"The date."

"It's good for another—*oh*."

It's good for another week. That's what she was about to say.

And it would have been good enough for another week, if we were here nineteen years ago.

Lily jerks upright and slams the door of the fridge. Her eyes are *huge*. "Is this some kind of trick?"

"That *I'm* playing on you?"

"Yeah!" She puts her hands on her hips. "Is this—is this some kind of haunted house bonding experience?"

"If it is, *I* didn't do it. I've never been here before."

"That milk should be *black*."

"I agree."

"There aren't any kids here. Nobody's put anything in that fridge for, like, twenty years."

"That's what it looks like."

"There's no *dust*."

"The dust is weird. Do you want to leave?"

“Yes, but now I’m worried there *are* kids here, somewhere we’re not seeing.” Her eyes shine, and there’s something in her expression that says she desperately wants me to say the right thing. She wants me to be the kind of person who wouldn’t give up on kids just because of a mild creep-factor.

She’s been thinking about kids a lot lately.

I can’t let her down.

“The post said it’s a big property.” I run my hands over my hair. “It’s probably too big to search everywhere. But we can do a loop. Okay?”

Lily’s shoulders relax. “Okay. Do you think Snowball’s still asleep?”

“Yes.”

I put my hand on her lower back and steer her out into the night.

I pretend that everything’s going to be fine.





**T**his is the creepiest place I have ever been, and I was recently kidnapped.

I guess I'd have more of an argument if Jameson's cabin was creepy, but it's not. It's a normal, trending-to-nice cabin. Nothing about this farmhouse is normal at all.

Jameson keeps his hand on me until halfway down the driveway, when his shoe scuffs over the gravel and it makes the wrong sound. A higher sound, like...

"What was that?"

He frowns down at the driveway, looking, then bends and picks something up.

"This, I think."

Cupped in his palm is a diamond.

It's like if you searched *diamond* on the Internet and Google spat out the ideal gemstone. Perfect facets glint in the moonlight. Jameson holds his phone over it, and it *shines*, even though it's jet-black.

"Seems like a weird place for a diamond," he says.

"Do you think it's fake?"

"I'm not a gemologist."

"Why not? You couldn't fit it in between criminal mastermind-ing and getting your JD?" It doesn't sound as

lighthearted as I want, but then again, this place is scary as hell.

A smile flashes onto his face.

“You’re right. I should have. Maybe I’ll get a certification.” He rolls the diamond in his palm. “It feels real.”

Jameson puts it in his pocket, and we go out past the barn to the tree line. Everything is slightly pale and glowing from the light of the moon, which does nothing to decrease the creep factor.

“I keep trying to explain it,” I tell him, climbing over a rise in the grass.

Jameson raises his eyebrows at me. He’s still acting calm, but there’s a tightness around his mouth that says he’s just as freaked out as I am. “Explain what?”

“The milk. The dust. Or—the non-dust. I want an explanation. Like, a real one. It feels abandoned, but not. And it’s like...somebody mowed the lawn, but...”

“But it doesn’t smell like cut grass.”

“No.”

We reach the trees. Jameson turns on the flashlight of his phone and shines it into the forest. Nothing moves. Nothing hides from the light.

Nothing does *anything*.

“One of the plants in the greenhouse moved,” he mentions.

That makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. “Well. That’s...that’s a thing plants do. They move. Especially if an animal got into the greenhouse and rustled around.”

“They don’t usually move like they’re watching, I don’t think.”

*Jameson, I want to hiss. We should run.*

But there might be kids here, and if I’m this creeped out, I can’t imagine what it would be like to be a child.

“And,” he continues. “We haven’t seen a single animal since we got here.”

“Oh my God.” I grab his elbow. “We’re in a horror movie, and we’re the fools who decided to go check out the strange sound.”

“Wouldn’t you say it’s more the *absence* of—”

“Are there supposed to be other buildings out here?”

“I don’t know.”

A path comes into view in the wash of light from his phone.

“Nope. No. I’m not going into the creepy forest path. That’s just—”

Someone shouts.

It echoes across the grass. Jameson puts his arm around me and drags us down the path. We reach a curve and go around it, and then Jameson pulls me into the trees and pushes me up against the large trunk.

He has both arms propped by my head, his body close like he’s going to shield me from whatever mystery person has appeared on this murder-farm.

“Shh,” he says.

“I didn’t say anything.”

Jameson covers my mouth with his hand.

My heart beats so hard that I can’t hear much of anything. This must be what *real* adrenaline feels like—jittery and cold and like I’ve had several gallons of an energy drink that should probably be illegal on account of the outrageous caffeine content.

When he must be sure I’m not going to make any noise, Jameson takes his hand away and turns off the flashlight of his phone.

“Are they coming?” I whisper, as quietly as I can.

“I don’t know. I can’t see a fucking thing.”

“That feels like an oversight.”

“Sometimes you have to improvise.”

He pushes away from the tree and glances around. We’re in a small clearing, a shaft of moonlight shining down on us. The rest of the forest is mostly obscured.

“Is there another path?”

Jameson turns away from the tree. “I’ll find—fuck.”

“Are you okay?”

“I tripped over something. A root, or—” He takes a careful step over the place where he stepped and looks down at it. “—or a grave.”

“A *grave*?”

“A headstone.” He pulls a plant to the side—little round leaves, not a tree—and there *is* a headstone.

A *small* one.

“Jameson,” I whisper.

He meets my eyes with a careful blank expression, and lets go of the plants. They pop back into place, hiding what looks a lot like a child-sized gravestone.

Then he comes back to the tree, closes his eyes, and takes several deep breaths. After the last one, he reaches for my hand.

We’re once again surrounded by silence.

“Okay,” Jameson says under his breath.

He moves a branch out of his way and steps out onto the path.

The beam from a flashlight hits him in the face, and that’s all I have a chance to see before he shoves me backward into the clearing.

“Woah,” Jameson says. “Is there—”

“You’re trespassing on private property,” a voice answers, loud and rough. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“No problem. Can you point me toward the road?”

“Hey,” the voice snaps. “No sudden fucking movements.”

“I didn’t—”

There’s more yelling, and Jameson saying *guys, guys, I’m not doing anything* and then his voice gets a little farther away. I’m pressed up against the tree, and if—

“You’re resisting arrest,” one of the voices—a different one—barks. “We’re authorized to use lethal force if you become—”

The sound of a fist hitting a face is pretty unmistakable.

It happens twice.

It’s loud, even in the eerie, not-right silence, and I feel it like they hit me and not Jameson.

“—the *fuck*,” he says. “What the—”

“Where is she?” The third voice is the scariest one. “The redhead. We know she’s here with you.”

“Oh, is that what this is about?”

They hit him again, and I startle in spite of myself.

What do I *do*?

“The judge wants a word with his granddaughter.”

“That’s too fucking bad.” It sounds like Jameson spits. “Because I’m not telling you anything about my fiancée.”

What happens next sounds like a free-for-all, a nightmare, and I have to do something. I can stop it if I just walk onto the path and tell them I’m right here, and this is all a huge misunderstanding, and they can let Jameson go.

I take one step back from the tree and run into something.

Something *alive*.

A scream bubbles up in my throat, but I put my hand over my mouth and *stop* it, because there’s something huge in the clearing with me. Something huge and softly panting.

Very slowly, as slowly as I can, I turn my head and look down.

It's a dog.

A *huge* dog.

It looks up at me, and when it sees me watching, it—

Nudges at me.

I whip around and put my back to the tree, just so I can keep it in sight. Oh my God, it's big, and it's just staring, and in a place like this, it could be—

I don't know. Some supernatural dog. Some killer dog that could rip my throat out and drag the remains wherever it wanted.

Okay.

I can't climb the tree. There are no branches low enough. But if I can get to one of the other trees, one of the ones with branches, I can—

The sound from the path gets quieter, and I still can't move. I definitely won't save Jameson if I'm getting attacked by a dog, but I'm pretty sure they're taking him away.

I'm pretty sure those were *cops*. At least some of them were cops. If I burst out onto the path and chase after them with this dog, they could shoot me.

And there's, like, no way to tell the dog that the cops are the villains in this scenario.

I want to throw up.

I don't even have my phone.

I'm going to get maimed by a dog, probably, and it's all because I wanted to make sure there were no kids in some *other* creepy building on this property.

And because Jameson saw a post about kids who *might* be in danger and couldn't help himself, even though he's—

“*Shit,*” I say out loud, into my hand.

Even though he can't afford to get into trouble again right now.

The voices are almost gone.

As soon as I can't hear them, I need to—

Well, first, I need to evade the dog. Maybe if I move slowly and carefully, it will leave me alone.

Then I need to get back to Jameson's SUV.

He left the keys in it, so I can theoretically drive it, as long as I haven't been maimed.

And then—

Then I need to find out where they took him.

Probably jail.

My grandpapa would like that, because then Jameson would be in *his* system.

I listen as hard as I've ever listened for anything, my heart in my throat.

Are those voices, or am I imagining them?

Is that a cop *who is clearly working for my grandpapa* breathing, or just the dog?

Just when I'm certain that there are no voices, someone says, "Conor."

The dog perks up, and then it starts walking toward me, and I just—

I freeze. I don't know what to do if it casually jumps up and bites me or something. The dog—Conor, I guess—moves closer on big feet, then—

Pushes at my leg with his nose.

I put my hands down and mouth *I can't go out there*.

"Conor," the person says again. The *man*. It's a smooth, cold voice, and it sounds like the dark, but not necessarily a *scary* darkness.

The dog nudges me again.

If the choice is between moving or getting bitten, I choose moving.

And so, though I want to scream and throw up and lie on the ground, I let it nudge me out of the clearing and onto the path.

Where I *do* scream, a little bit, because I wasn't expecting the man out here to be this tall and obviously a killer.

He blinks at me as my scream dies away in the trees.

"Hello," he says. "Are you lost?"

My entire body shakes. My teeth chatter. My heart clenches blood so hard and fast it hurts. The dog goes to his side and sits, pointing its nose at me like it's showing him what it found in the clearing.

"No!" I shout, because if *this guy* is one of the cops, I'm going to lose my mind. "No, I'm not lost. I'm here because I heard there was some sicko keeping kids in a—in a bad situation, so I came to—to see. If that was happening. Since certain acts aren't only felonies, they're morally reprehensible, and—"

His eyebrows have gone up, as if he can't quite believe what he's hearing.

"You came to save them?" he says softly.

"Yes," I hiss, at the same moment his clothes register. I can't see all the details in the dark, but I can tell they're expensive. All black. It could look weird on a guy who's blond. It doesn't, probably because he's extremely handsome. Not, like, as handsome as Jameson, but...extremely. "You look rich. Are you the one who's keeping them here?"

He laughs.

It sends a shiver down my spine. Not because it sounds evil, but because it sounds—

I don't know. I can't describe it.

"No. I'm not him," he says, his expression sobering.



“Do you have *proof?*” I yank the picture out of my pocket, unfold it, and thrust it toward him. “Because it sure looks like there are kids here. Like *this* kid.”

He scans the drawing and doesn't react.

He doesn't react *except* that his shoulders slope a little, and he lets out a breath. “There aren't any children here.”

“Because you did something to them?”

“Because we grew up.”

I take a step back.

Look at the drawing.

Look at him.

Feel like screaming and throwing up and lying on the ground.

Slowly, he reaches into his pocket and takes out his phone.

His face is illuminated in the light from the screen, and when he glances up at me, I get a shock—

His eyes are black.

I couldn't see that before.

He holds up his other hand, palm toward me, as if to say *don't freak out*. Then he takes a long step forward and turns the phone so I can see it.

On the screen is a picture of an old photo.

Three little boys stand on a porch, in front of a door. It's the one from the farmhouse. I was just there. The boy in the middle looks like he's spent all summer in the sun. He's practically glowing with it. He's smiling like his life depends on it, looking straight at the camera, and he has both arms slung over the other boys' shoulders.

The one to his left is dark-haired. His mouth is in a thin line. He seems like he's looking somewhere in the distance, past the camera.

The third one is very, very blond.

He's not smiling, either. He's looking down and a little away.

But there's no question in my mind—from the angles of his face, even years removed, the boy in the photo is the man standing in front of me.

I look up into his eyes. I don't know why. To see if he's lying, maybe.

He looks back.

He's, like, *really* tall.

“There was a gravestone in the clearing,” I say in a rush. “Are you *sure* it's not because there was a kid—”

His face does a funny thing. “What clearing?”

“The one right there.” I point off the path.

The man sighs. “I intend to have a very frank conversation with my brother. Maybe even tonight. He should have told me.”

“Should've told you what?”

Another blink. “None of the children died. Did you come here alone?”

I should probably deny it, but—

“No. I came here with my—with my fiancé. He was the one who saw the post about the kids.”

The corners of the man's mouth turn down. “Where did he go?”

“Um.” My throat feels all hot and choked, and there are tears in my eyes, out of nowhere. “Some cops found us. And they beat him up and took him away. So, if you could just pretend I wasn't here, I'm going to go get the car and, like, find him and bail him out or whatever I need to do to make sure my grandpapa doesn't kill him.”

“Your—”

“Never mind,” I shout. “Forget that part. Forget—just don't look at me, and I'll leave, and this will never have

happened.”

“Where is your car?”

“On the—” I wave in the vague direction of the farmhouse, hot tears slipping embarrassingly onto my cheeks. “Like a quarter mile down the road.”

“Come with me. I’ll drive.”

He turns and starts walking away, his dog close at his heels.

“It’s really okay.”

“Come along,” he says, not unkindly.

I have to run to catch up with him. Conor pads along at his side. He doesn’t look like a killer dog anymore. He looks sweet, almost.

Nothing weirder has ever happened to me in my entire life.

As we’re walking—as he’s walking, and I’m half-jogging—I stick out my hand to him.

“Lilith Hayes.” I have to say something, or I’m going to freak out. “Everyone calls me Lily.”

He takes my hand and shakes it. A strange, subtle pressure zings up my arm and almost pops my ears. “Hades.”

I let out a completely unhinged laugh and drop his hand. “Is that a code name or something? An alias?”

“No.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Hades laughs, mostly to himself. It sounds bewildered. “What did you say your fiancé’s name was?”

“I didn’t say. And it’s Jameson.”

“Jameson...Hill?”

My heart again, then restarts. “Yes?”

He says something that sounds like *why is it always him?* then takes his phone out and taps at the screen.

It rings loud and clear. He must have it on speaker.

“What do you want, motherfucker? I have a baby. I’m not coming over to lose a card game just so you can feel better about yourself.”

Wait.

That’s—

“Mason,” Hades says. “I’d love to kick your ass at cards, but there’s a more pressing situation.”



JAMESON

**E**verything hurts.

I'm not a doctor—not enough time between being a criminal mastermind and getting my JD, ha fucking ha—but I'm fairly certain that one of those motherfuckers just missed breaking a rib and another one just missed driving the steel toe of his boot into a kidney.

Couple of close calls.

They didn't miss my face, though, so at least that's something.

The lights in the small-town jail are like hellfire. I don't think I've been booked here before, but I can't tell. My head throbs at one temple and stabs at the other. I have a split lip and—no. My jaw isn't broken, but *fuck*.

My main concern is getting back to Lily. That's top of the list.

My second concern is that the gang of cops who claimed I was *resisting arrest* in the middle of a creepy forest when I definitely was just standing there might not have been made up entirely of cops.

I think that because they brought me in through the back, handed me off to some bewildered sheriff who had no idea why he was being interrupted in the middle of his dinner, and left.

They didn't fill out any paperwork.

Not to paint with a broad brush, but in addition to being walking red flags, cops loved paperwork. A real cop would've relished in writing down the many details of my threatening behavior and suspicious movements and such.

It's weird that they didn't.

Although one of them might've handed something off to the sheriff. Couldn't see before, because most of my vision bailed on me at that particular moment.

Fuck, my rib hurts.

There's no good way to sit. I don't blame the holding cell for that. It's pretty quaint, as far as holding cells go, like a historical replica. I dripped a little blood on what I know for a fact is an antique hardwood floor.

"This place would go for at least a million," I say.

The sheriff doesn't answer. He's been on the phone since I got here. His desk is about ten feet away down the hall. There's nobody else here.

"People like old shit," I go on. At this point, I need to focus on staying awake. Could be some concussion action going on. Gabriel had one of those when he jumped out of that building. I thought he was dead, and he pulled himself up on my sweatshirt and then hurled all over said sweatshirt. On the upside, I haven't done that. Yet. "You could get a zoning exception and make it multi-use. Stay in the old-timey sheriff's office. Arrest some—" My stomach turns. "—bad guys or whatever. Mug shots. Operate it under a non-profit and build some new parks. Places like this always have parks. Maybe there could be a park next door, and then you can have a walking path."

"Jameson?" The sheriff oozes in front of the bars of the holding cell. People aren't supposed to move like that. Must be my eyes. Except I did see a plant watching me earlier, so it's anybody's guess. "I brought you an ice pack."

"I'm going to be honest with you, Tommy—"

"I'm Sheriff Dawson."

“I’m going to be honest with you. Your buddies fucked me up in the woods tonight.”

He grimaces. “From the report, you made several threatening gestures.”

“Like this?” I put both hands up in front of me.

At least Sheriff Davis has the grace to look ashamed. “From the report...”

“I’d like to see a copy of that.” There’s blood in my mouth. Good. “Think you could give it here?”

“Your lawyer will have to—”

“Right, right, right. My lawyer will have to file some motions and appear before the judge and argue my case. Fine.”

He lifts a floppy blue shape. “Ice?”

“If I stand up, I’m going to throw up all over the floor. I bet it’s—” A throbbing pain starts in my gut and spreads around my waist. “Properly sealed by your department, so the damage wouldn’t be permanent, but you never know.”

“I’ll slide it over.”

“For the best.”

He bends down, and a few seconds later there’s a crispy wet sliding sound. The ice pack hits my foot.

There’s actually no way in hell that I’m going to lean over and pick it up without hurting my ribs and throwing up, so I poke at it with the toe of my shoe.

“Have you thought about applying for a zoning carveout?”

“What?”

I close my eyes and try to imagine that I have no internal bleeding and getting kicked by an asshole with steel-toed boots can be healed with positive energy.

“You could make a killing with a few targeted renovations.”

“To the sheriff’s station?”



“Yeah, buddy. You get it. You know what I’m talking about.”

“No, I—”

Sheriff Dailey gets interrupted by a door—probably also antique hardwood—absolutely crashing open out front and my brother bellowing, “Who the fuck is in charge here? Come out where I can see you right the fuck now.”

I laugh, because that’s Mason’s rage-voice. It’s the one he used on the guy who made it hard to get his first mortgage.

I don’t laugh for long. It hurts.

The sheriff is gone. His pounding footsteps head away, like he doesn’t want to keep my brother waiting.

“Good instincts,” I tell the space he left behind.

“Evening,” he says. “I’m Sheriff Dawson, and I’m assuming you’re here about—”

“Where the *fuck* are you keeping my little brother?” Ouch. *Little* stings. I’d prefer *creative genius* or *justice enthusiast* or *tall, handsome, and capable of taking care of himself*, but I’ll take what I can get. “You sent *six men* to harass him? Are you fucking kidding me? Six guys, and they’re claiming he was resisting arrest? How the *fuck* could one unarmed guy who’s barely fucking paying attention—” Double-ouch. “—have six presumably fucking full-grown officers of the law with service weapons pissing their pants and kicking the shit out of him?”

Silence rings.

“Sir—” The sheriff starts.

“You’re fucked,” Mason shouts. “I’m going to own your ass. I’m going to make very fucking sure you get re-elected to work in this theme-park-ass jail and we can talk every single fucking day until you quit or die. You are going to be fucking miserable, and if—”

“Mase,” I call, because the poor theme-park sheriff has to be scared.

Heavy footsteps charge down the hall, every single one of them giving me a brand-new and distinct headache.

Then Mason's the one oozing in front of theirs. He rattles them with one fist and snaps his head to the side. "What the fuck are you waiting for? Open this."

Sheriff Theme-Park hustles to Mason's side and pulls out his keys. His hands shake, and Mason stands there, openly judging him while he tries to get the key in the lock. Finally, the lock clicks, and Mason pulls it open and throws the bars right into my sheriff buddy's face. He barely stops them from slamming into his nose.

Then my brother's in the cell with me, crouching down like I'm five years old, his hands hovering a good six inches from my shirt.

"Don't do that," I tell him.

"I haven't touched you."

"You'll hurt your knee."

He looks up at me, and his face—

It's red, from how angry he is, and his eyes look huge and green and *so* worried. "My knee is fine. What happened?"

"I was trespassing."

"I don't care what they brought you in for. What happened?"

"There was a tip about some kids in a horror-show house." Yikes—I think a little blood just trickled down my chin. I swipe at it with my sleeve. That hurts, too. "I was just looking."

"Did you hit any cops?"

"Nope. Other way around. But I don't think it was Tommy's fault, actually."

"Sheriff Dawson," Theme-Park says quietly.

Mason shoots him a glare that, if it were a bomb, would level the entire county.

Then he turns back to me. “Why do you think it wasn’t his fault?”

“Cops didn’t stay. They had a report ready to go. Some of them were definitely cops, but the other ones might not have been. They might have been...working for somebody else.”

“Who?”

“My grandfather.”

Lily’s voice is a genuine surprise. I don’t know where I thought she’d be. Out in the woods, maybe, crying and wringing her hands for a few minutes, then doing her avenging angel thing, if she could find out where the cops and fake-cops took me.

It doesn’t seem like there’s enough time for her to have gotten here.

Hallucination?

I turn my head like it’s made of glass, or something more breakable than my skull, and there she is, in her hot criminal-mastermind-sidekick clothes, leaning against the opposite wall with Snowball’s cage in her hands.

He hops up and down like he’s going to throw hands, tweeting his ass off. I don’t know how I didn’t hear him before.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” I tell both of them.

“You think?” Lily says, her voice shaking.

That heavy door *bangs* open again, which is like getting an axe to the brain, and then there is more shouting.

“—mindset issue,” a guy is saying. A guy with a strangely familiar voice. The voice makes me think of a fancy party. A real banger with tiny foods on silver trays. “We could come back tomorrow and bring Persephone. You know how she loves wearing black and haunting people’s dreams. If you were a devoted husband—”

There’s a *thunk*, like a hand hitting ribs or a torso at high speed, and then a *slap*, and then another *thunk*, and a sound

like two people hissing in each other's faces, and then some breaking glass.

"I *am* a devoted husband," another guy says, and his voice is like ice in the dead of night. A loud *thump-thump-thump* says he's pounding a fist on the desk out there. "Does anyone *staff* this place?" He doesn't shout, but his voice carries, crisp through the building. "How long do I have to stand here waiting to file a report for trespassing? I can *assure* you that you're going to need the extra time for investigating an extra-legal gang of officers assaulting people on my property without a fucking warrant."

Hold on.

I know that voice.

I swivel my head back toward Mason. My lips want to laugh, but my gut wants to die, so I end up with what's probably a goofy grin on my fucked-up face. "Isn't that your buddy? Your friend. Your best friend. You love him."

Past Mason's head, Theme-Park takes a step back, his face white.

More footsteps mean I have to turn my head again to stay apprised of the situation, but it's worth it, because two guys come down the hall, one of them in gray sweatpants and a blue crewneck and the other the kind of all-black no-brand-name fancy shit you see in paparazzi photos of people who have enough money to buy Australia.

I burst out laughing.

It hurts so bad.

"Hades, man. How did you come to be involved in this?"

He looks at me, his weird black eyes narrowed. "It's funny, Jameson. I was wondering how you came to be taking a nature hike on one of my properties."

"*Our* properties," the other guy says. It's his brother. They're not DNA brothers. Not genetic brothers. They don't have the same parents, is what I mean, and it's obvious,

because Zeus has this golden, sun-kissed thing going on, with dancing golden eyes, and Hades looks...

Like he does *not* go in the sun.

“Shut the fuck up, Zeus,” Hades says.

“I heard something shady was going on,” I put in, since he asked me a question. “Post on a message board.”

Hades looks at Zeus with a flat expression. Zeus shakes his head slowly, like they’re constantly plagued by message boards.

Then Hades looks down at Mason, who’s still crouched on the floor. “Could you and your brothers—I don’t know, learn to use a cell phone? We could have told you that the property was uninhabited.”

Going there wasn’t Mason’s idea. I’m compelled to defend him. Or at least reveal that I’m the one who doesn’t know how to use a cell phone. “I didn’t know it was yours,” I say.

Hades gazes at the ceiling for a long moment. “Between the three of us and your brothers, we could tell you if *any* property was uninhabited and spare you the travel.”

“Can’t ask about that stuff. It’s against the code.”

Mason rubs his forehead. “Jesus Christ, Jameson.”

“Honestly, I should have put it together.” My vision blurs, then straightens out again. “There was an H on that drawing. But that was a kid, and you—” I wave at him, which hurts my entire arm. “Are like that.”

“Yes, thank you.” Hades doesn’t sound that thankful.

“Drawing?” Zeus asks.

“Shut the fuck *up*, Zeus.” Okay. Hades does not want to talk about the drawing.

“Wait.” All of them look at me. “Wait. If you—” I point at the two of them, then Lily. “Did you—”

“You have it right,” Hades says. “I found your fiancée abandoned in the forest and brought her here.”

Mason whips his head around. “*Fiancée?*”

“Yeah. I mean, it was fake, but I feel like our bond has been tested enough that it’s real. Plus, her grandpa’s trying to kill me, probably. And he’s a judge. So he’s probably going to send me to prison for life. And all that.”

“I can’t.” Mason gets to his feet. “I can’t. Come on. We’re going on a fun trip.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital.”

“It will be fun.” He leans down, puts his arm around behind my back, and pulls me up to my feet.

The room spins, a total three-sixty, and the pain gets so bad that I could swear somebody hit me again.

I throw up all over the hardwood floor, then manage to focus my barely working eyes on Mason’s shirt.

“Ha. I missed you.” The floor tips. “Tell Gabriel I won.”

Then I pass out.



I thought being kidnapped would be the most awkward thing ever to happen to me, but nothing is more awkward than showing up to a county sheriff's office that looks like it was built at least two centuries ago and having to play it cool while your fake fiancé's brother listens to his—apparently—close friend describe how your fake fiancé got beat up by the cops, and then follow him inside the county jail while the close friend stays outside to argue with *his* brother.

And that only stays in the top place for about five minutes because the close friend, a guy who is actually, literally named Hades, casually announces that you are engaged to the man in the holding cell.

And *then*.

You're obviously not going to let your fake-real fiancé get carted off to the hospital alone—well, not alone, but without yourself and his bird—and he's basically unconscious, so you get to chat with his brother, who is *pissed*.

And.

*Then*.

When said fake-real fiancé is once again conscious, pumped full of painkillers, and within his rights to refuse observation at the hospital, you go home with him.

To his brother's penthouse overlooking Central Park.

Where his.



Entire.

Family.

Has gathered.

And by the way, they know you were the girl hanging around the hospital *before* with the bird.

There seems to be some silent consensus when Mason takes Jameson into the penthouse and I follow them, Snowball asleep again in his cage. The elevator—it has an elevator, because penthouse—opens into a beautiful entryway.

“It wasn’t me this time,” Jameson says in his high-on-painkillers way. “I want credit.”

“Sure,” Mason says. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

A blonde woman with striking blue eyes who looks like she’s probably around my age pops around the corner, and her mouth drops open. “Oh my *God*, Jameson! Oh my God! What the hell!”

“Run-in with the cops, Rem. It looks worse than it is.”

“He’s lying,” Mason says. “It’s bad.”

“Remington.” Jameson’s hanging on Mason, unsteady on his feet. “This is Lily, my fiancée. Lily, this is my sister, Remy. She loves dirt.”

“I’m going to school for archeology. The dirt is just the cost of doing business. And I thought you said you didn’t know her.” Remy’s voice is light, but she’s obviously worried. I would be, too. Jameson looks like hell.

Jameson gasps. “I would *never* say that.”

“Okay. Everybody’s in the living room, waiting for you.”

“I hope you didn’t keep Robin awake for this.” Jameson frowns at her.

“Nobody keeps Robin awake.” Mason somehow manages to sound proud and slightly irritated at the same time. “He

doesn't know the difference between day and night. Try not to scare him with your face."

Jameson tries to salute Mason and almost falls over. Mason catches him with a subtle wince and a not-as-subtle grunt. "Okay. Couch. Let's go."

"Lily," Jameson calls over his shoulder. "Angel."

"Yes?" I must be *bright* red. "I'm right here."

"Would you be so kind as to bring my bird?"

"Um...yes."

"*Thank* you ever so much."

Mason gives Jameson a look. "Did somebody make you a duke or something? Do you have lands?"

"I do," Jameson says solemnly. "I have many lands. A veritably huge yard."

Remy comes over and gives me a side-hug. "Hi. It's nice to officially meet you. I'm sorry Jameson is being so weird."

"It's honestly not that bad? I think I would be more freaked out if he started acting like a staid businessman."

I can picture it, actually. I can picture Jameson *pretending* to be a staid businessman. I can't imagine him actually being one, or managing to keep up the pretense for more than a few minutes.

I always thought that if I *did* ever date anyone seriously, if I could fit that in around my prosecutorial career and judgeship, that it would have to be a man who trended toward a certain staid-ness. Someone with credentials. Someone who people trusted not to influence my judicial opinions.

Jameson *does* have credentials, but he also has a record, which would have disqualified him in my theoretical future.

Thank *God* it doesn't disqualify him in the present.

I'm still not used to being relieved about that.

Remy laughs. "Well, it's late, and it's guaranteed to be even weirder from here on out, so we might as well go sit

down. Can I get you anything first? Coffee? Tea?”

“Tea would be amazing.”

“You know what? Let’s just do this.” She takes me by the arm, and we go down another hall to a big kitchen filled with warm light. Remy pushes the button on an electric kettle and opens a cupboard filled with mugs. She takes down a white one that has a drawing of a smiling pebble and says *My life is in ruins!*, then a red one that has Mickey Mouse on it. “Mickey is Jameson’s, but I don’t trust him with hot liquids in an open mug right now, so you can borrow it.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to keep it safe.”

“And I think your bird—what’s his name, by the way?”

“Snowball.”

Her eyes light up. “Cute. I think Snowball can go right there on the countertop. There’s room.”

I settle Snowball’s cage onto the countertop. He stirs, ruffling his wings, and settles back down.

Remy opens another cupboard and takes down a box of tea bags, then a sugar container, then a little container of milk from the fridge.

It reminds me of the nineteen-year-old still-white milk in the fridge in that cottage.

Yeah. I’m not thinking about that.

“So,” Remy says as the kettle starts to steam, a light on the front flashing red. “How did you and Jameson meet?”

“We ran into each other.”

After a beat, she glances up at me, her eyebrows raised. “Seriously?”

“He was going for a walk by my house.” To decide how to burn it down, I think, but that’s beside the point. “I was out for a run. I think technically I ran into him. I thought he was going to mug me, but he didn’t.”

Jameson’s sister purses her lips. “That tracks.”

For the time being, at least, I decide not to mention the kidnapping.

Remy puts tea bags in the mugs and pours the hot water over them. “Milk? Sugar?”

“I like it to be basically tan,” I tell her. “So a bunch of both.”

“You and I are going to be friends.” Remy puts milk and sugar in both mugs, then hands the red one off to me. “If you don’t want to brave the whole gauntlet, you don’t have to. It can be a lot.”

“Gauntlet?”

“My brother Gabriel is here with his fiancée, Elise, and their two teenagers.” We go out of the kitchen, cross a hallway, and go into a big—well, I don’t know what it is. A big room with lots of windows, with a dining table on one end and a seating area in the middle. Voices come from an open door on the other side. “They didn’t, like, have kids together. Nate didn’t have a place to stay and Lydia is Elise’s sister. And obviously Mason and Charlotte and Robin. And they’re probably all going to want to talk about what happened at length, so—”

At that moment, the elevator opens in its hallway with a soft *hiss*.

“Oop,” Remy says. “And I guess more people? I should —” She hurries toward the foyer, and I follow her. “Oh, hey!”

I peek around her at the foyer, where extremely tall, handsome Hades is arguing in a low voice with his extremely tall, handsome brother, who is—no joke, and I was rude to make one before—named Zeus. Conor, the dog that almost scared me to death, sits at Hades’s feet, wagging his tail.

Zeus beams at Remy. “Remington!”

“Zeus!” Remy says. “Hades! Conor! What’s up?”

“Absolutely nothing good,” Hades says.

Zeus slaps his arm. “That is a mindset issue.”

“*You* are a fucking mindset issue.”

“Remington.” It’s late, and I’ve been in a creepy forest and a creepy farmhouse and a county jail and a hospital tonight, but now that Zeus is in the room, it seems fine. Or like it might *be* fine in the near future. “Could you show us to your brothers?”

“Everybody’s in the living room. We were just going that way. Come with.”

Hades says something to Zeus that comes across as an irritated hiss. Zeus tries to slap him again, but Hades catches his wrist and tosses his arm away before his hand touches.

I fall into step next to Remy. At the living room door, she holds up her mug. “Everyone, Hades and Zeus are here.”

It looks like even more people than she said, now that they’re all in one room. A comfortable, lived-in room with warm colors and built-in shelves and a big TV.

Jameson’s feet stick out over the arm of a sofa. The two teenagers, who must be Lydia and Nate, have taken a nearby love seat. A man I saw very briefly at the hospital—Gabriel—sits on the opposite end of the sofa. A dark-haired woman sits in an armchair next to an armchair-slash-rocker that’s occupied by a gorgeous woman with sunny blonde hair. She looks up at us from her baby and smiles like Jameson hasn’t ruined anything at all.

“You must be Lily.” She adjusts the baby in her arms. “I’m Charlotte, Mason’s wife.”

Someone brushes by behind me—Mason. He goes to Charlotte and takes the baby out of her arms.

Almost immediately, he starts crying, a raspy, heart-wrenching sound.

Remy clears her throat. “Let’s do the introductions so it’s not overwhelming.”

It’s overwhelming anyway, but she goes around the room, patting each person’s head and telling me their names. There’s a very brief commotion when Gabriel and Zeus decide to

rearrange the furniture and drag in another love seat so that everyone can sit down, though Hades and Zeus choose to stand anyway, Conor curled at their feet. Finally I end up in Gabriel's spot, Jameson's head on my lap. His eyes are closed.

"I'm not asleep," he says, like he can feel me looking. Then he opens one eye and peeks around the room. "That dog is fucking huge."

"He seems nice, though."

Mason stands in front of the turned-off TV, his baby son fussing in his arms. "Now that we're all here—Jameson, what the fuck?"

"It's a whole thing." Jameson closes his eyes again. "I went after a judge."

I didn't expect to hear him say it so bluntly.

"What judge?" Gabriel asks.

"*The* judge," Jameson says.

"What fucking judge?" Mason demands.

"The guy who went easy on that prick from Remy's class. And the guy who made sure we didn't have any fucking money."

They all talk at once after that. I can tell they're trying to keep it together, probably because there are a bunch of randos in here, such as the girl from the hospital with the bird, and it takes a while for the pitch of the discussion to lower again.

"I took her to my cabin," Jameson finishes. "And then I got arrested. I got myself arrested. And she said she was my fiancée because she's a masochist."

Charlotte gasps.

Mason flicks his eyes toward the ceiling.

"And then I might have said it again when the other cops came to the farmhouse."

"Someone shot at your car," Mason says, voice flat. "Someone lured you to *this* guy's house—" He jerks his chin

at Hades.

“It’s not my *house*,” he shoots back. “It’s one of my properties.”

“One of our properties,” Zeus says.

“And had six guys jump you in the woods and take you to jail.”

“Yep,” I say. “That’s what happened.”

Robin cracks open a fresh new cry, ramping up again.

“Then...” Mason tries unsuccessfully to shush his baby. Robin cries louder. “Then is there a possibility that—”

Hades makes a sound that’s somewhere between empathy and resignation. He pushes himself away from the wall where he’s been leaning, takes a blanket from the arm of Charlotte’s chair with a quiet *may I?*, and tosses it over his arm. Then he approaches Mason, who’s pretty red in the face, and takes the baby.

He doesn’t seem to be aware that everyone’s staring at him—Lydia with her mouth hanging open—as he kneels down on the carpet, spreads the blanket out, and puts Robin in the middle of it, answering his piteous cries with a series of *shushing* sounds and *yes, I know, terribles* and *won’t take long, you’ll have to trust me*.

I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anybody swaddle a baby before, but Hades does it like I have to imagine an expert baby-swaddler would. Robin is a tiny blue burrito in seconds. Hades picks up the burrito and turns him stomach-down over his left arm, his head cradled in one of Hades’s huge palms, and then he pats at his back, swaying *very* slightly back to his spot near Zeus.

Robin stops crying.

Hades looks up at the rest of us as if to say *what?*

Charlotte leans over and whispers *you have to show me how to do that*.

“I know,” Zeus says. “It’s similar to watching a wolf befriend a duckling.”

Hades ignores him and continues patting Robin’s back.

“Her grandfather’s coming after her,” Jameson says into the silence. “He’s coming after both of us, I think.”

Zeus frowns. “I agree.”

Mason narrows his eyes at him. “What?”

“After you left the jail, the prosecutor came by. He wasn’t discreet. An interested party wants movement on the case.”

Everything about this feels scarily surreal. I don’t realize my lips have gone numb until I go to take a drink of tea and screw it up. I wipe my chin with my sleeve, my heart pounding.

There’s some discussion of legal strategies and next moves.

“—public perception,” Gabriel is saying, when I get myself together enough to listen. “Send the message that we’re not going to let this asshole intimidate us. Or have someone shoot at his own granddaughter, for fuck’s sake.”

Charlotte claps her hands. “Then we know what we have to do.”

Everyone in the room stares at *her*.

“What?” Mason asks.

Her entire face lights up, and in the space of a second she looks so determined it’s almost dangerous.

“We have to throw a wedding.”





This is not how I planned to get married.

I didn't plan to get married at all. That's how *that* was supposed to go. And now I'm back at Mason's, beat to shit and having to painkiller my way through wedding planning.

*Wedding planning.*

Because I'm going to marry Lily.

Mason and Gabriel take over the coffee table in the living room near my couch, which is the only place I can be comfortable for a few minutes at a time. What a full-circle moment, am I right? Gabriel came here after his jump, and now I'm here after a bunch of overzealous cops beat me up.

*Everybody* is here. Nate and Lydia come in and out, offering suggestions for the wedding. *Charlotte*, who should be lying in a chaise lounge and being fed by servants, keeps whisking Lily out of the room to talk about wedding gowns. Elise is losing her mind over the cake in the kitchen. Or maybe just baking cake in the kitchen. I don't know.

Mason wears Robin in a baby carrier and paces around the coffee table, then crouches down next to Gabriel and looks at their battle plans.

"Hey."

They both look at me, eyebrows going up.

"You need something, buddy?" Gabriel says.

“Don’t you think this is overkill? Like, a full wedding? We could just do an announcement.”

They exchange a look.

“Holy fuck, I’m so tired of people *exchanging looks* in front of me. I’m not on my deathbed.”

Gabriel leans over from the love seat and brushes my hair out of my face like a Victorian nurse. “Jameson,” he says gently. “You *look* like you’re on your fucking deathbed. Put your ice pack on your face.”

“That’s not going to make the bruises go away faster.”

“It will help with the swelling,” he says, all imperious, like he knows about swelling.

He does, but not more than anybody else.

“It’s not overkill.” Mason takes out his phone and checks something. “Hades and Zeus were right about the judge.”

That ups my blood pressure. “Did he do something?”

Mason puts his phone away and holds up his hand to tick things off on his fingers. “Missing persons report for Lily. Three strange cars outside the building, rotating on a schedule. Sheriff Dawson is mysteriously out of contact.”

“What? Theme-Park? He didn’t do anything.”

“Sheriff Dawson,” Mason says pointedly, “let you leave with me. So when the prosecutor showed up to check on you—which he’s never done before—”

“*Before?*”

Mason narrows his eyes at me. “When’s the last time you had your drugs?”

“A hundred years ago.”

He and Gabriel exchange another look, and Gabriel hops up from his chair and leaves.

“I said *stop exchanging looks*.”

Mason stares into my eyes. “Now I’m exchanging a look with *you*. Is this better?”

“Not really, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“The prosecutor is a guy who routinely argues cases in the court where Beaufort Hayes is a judge.”

My abs tense up, every individual muscle sore and aching. In the corner of my eye, a wedding ring in a pile of ash glints in a camera flash. Somebody’s screaming, somewhere I can’t see.

“It’s—” My abs hurt. That’s the only real part. I’m in Mason’s living room, next to Mason and his baby, who really does sleep most of the day. “Hard to take him seriously with a name like that.”

“Jameson.”

“Beaufort. Can you imagine getting with him? Do you just have to call him Beau? Or do you just pick a pet name and ride that into the sunset?”

*“Jameson.”*

“Oh, fuck, my ribs.”

They’re all stabbing into my lungs. I didn’t think they were sharpened to knife-points, but I guess I was wrong.

Mason’s at the couch in about a second flat. He puts one hand on Robin’s head and slides the other one underneath me.

“One. Two. Three,” he says, and then he lifts me to a sitting position.

Easier to breathe that way.

Gabriel bustles back into the room. “Uh-oh,” he sings. “Painkillers wear off? Can you swallow?”

“Don’t be vulgar,” I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. I want to snatch the pill out of his hand when he holds it out in his palm, but it wouldn’t be worth it. I take it like a normal person instead, and then he and Mason do teamwork to sit me up on the pillows.

Gabriel resumes his place on the love seat, and Mason does a lap around the living room, bouncing Robin a little bit

in his carrier.

“Anyway,” I say, like I’m in any position to lead this discussion. “You think the judge is an unhinged asshole, too? It’s not just me?”

Gabriel glances at me out of the corner of his eye. “You could’ve texted us about the stuff you found.”

“Why would I have done that when I could just burn his house down?” They start to exchange another look. “*Hey*. I didn’t burn the fucking place down. All I did was get a girlfriend. You should be thrilled.”

“We *are* thrilled,” Mason says. “We’re so happy for you, Jameson.”

“Shut up.”

He ignores me. “It’s not overkill. I think the license would add a certain amount of legitimacy, but you don’t have to stay married.”

“I’ve always wanted a PR wedding.”

Gabriel stops working on his plans—for the venue, I think—and looks at me with a genuinely concerned expression. “I thought this was...” He waves a hand in the air. “Real, for the most part.”

What’s real is that I want to be with Lily every second of the day, and Lily should be finding the fastest way out. I want to marry Lily the way I want to be a successful businessman. For a crime scene, both things are fantasies. I might achieve them temporarily, but never in the long run.

“I didn’t propose.”

“Yes, you did.” Gabriel taps his phone. “By the lake at one of the family properties. You gave her one of mom’s rings.”

“What the *fuck*?”

“We couldn’t announce a fucking wedding without announcing the proposal. So we announced it.”

“There’s always a picture for those things. There aren’t any pictures of us.”

“Well, no. You look like you got into a head-on collision with a fist. We can stage some engagement photos when your face is better and run those in the lifestyle section.”

“You don’t *have* a lifestyle section.”

“Enough people owe me favors that I might as well.” Gabriel grins, pleased with himself. He probably has no idea that every time he smiles like that, it makes me want to spend a little more time not being a fucking criminal. At the same time, it makes me completely sure that even *if* I get put in prison for the rest of my life, he’ll be okay. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks, prick.”

He clicks his tongue disapprovingly and bends his head over his papers.

I close my eyes and wait for the painkiller to kick in.

The numb, high feeling starts in my torso and spreads outward.

Unfortunately, it does nothing for the twisted, horrible feeling in my gut.

I like being at Mason’s with my entire family and occasionally a *second* entire family with an absolutely enormous dog, and I hate it.

I hate it because I keep falling asleep when I don’t mean to and waking up several hours later, disoriented as all fuck. The main upside to the painkillers is that I’m not dreaming. At least, I’m not dreaming in a way that I remember, and nobody’s mentioned anything about any screaming in the middle of the night.

It’s still happening on some level, because I wake up with the same sick panic every time.

I hate it because I can’t go to my cabin, where nobody’s looking.

I hate it because I can’t go *anywhere*, because one, I’m high on painkillers for at least the next few days, and two, people are getting disappeared by the judge.

“How do we know it’s him?” I ask, not opening my eyes.

“How do we know it’s the judge?” Gabriel’s voice comes from the same spot. He hasn’t moved.

“There’s no way to know for sure without a paper trail.” Mason sounds like he’s pacing again. “But I know that particular prosecutor, and I think something happened.”

“Like what?”

“Like a bribe. Like threats. Somebody put pressure on him.”

“You think that because he went to one theme-park jail and didn’t get much done?”

“I think that because usually he comes to me first.”

I open my eyes. Mason’s around by the foot of the couch, one hand on Robin’s back, the other hand on the back of his tiny head. My brother frowns at me, but he’s not really looking at me. He’s looking into the distance. It’s his problem-solving face.

“The prosecutor comes to you first for what?”

Mason looks at me.

I look back at him.

I can’t decide if it’s an upside or a downside that the painkillers slow my brain down. Usually, it’s a fucked-up information superhighway in there. Thoughts just babbling away. When the painkillers start working, I get one thought at a time, like a leaky sink.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

“Oh, right. For me.” I shake my head, want to throw up, and stop shaking my head. “The prosecutor comes to *you*?”

Mason doesn’t look even a little bit ashamed of himself. “Yes. If I’m not first, I’m second after the legal team.”

By *the legal team*, he means the legal team he keeps on staff just to deal with my bullshit. Most of the time, we both pretend he doesn't do that. The Farmhouse Debacle has broken the seal.

"I can't believe you've been bribing a prosecutor for me."

Mason makes a disgusted sound. "I don't bribe the prosecutor. We have frank and productive discussions about whether the charges are worth pursuing."

"He wouldn't have those conversations with you if you didn't have like thirty billion fucking dollars."

"No, probably not."

"Then you're manipulating the legal system."

"Sometimes, I make my wishes known to *one fucking guy* in the legal system." Mason's expression is steely. "And I don't see how it matters if Lily's grandfather *is* the legal system. He's manipulating it, too."

I settle in against the pillows and look at the crown molding instead of directly at Mason.

"Uh-oh," Gabriel sings. "I think he's having an idea."

"Get your pen and paper," I tell him. "You're going to want a record of this."

The general speed of my thoughts is not helping.

"Well?" Gabriel asks, like he's on a soap opera and we're thirty seconds from a commercial break. "What is it?"

"All he did was push paper," I say to the crown molding. "He probably took a bribe from Bettencourt, and Bettencourt probably sent it through an intermediary. Beau-Beau doesn't get his hands dirty."

Gabriel snorts, then bursts out laughing. It's extremely difficult to keep my face stoic when he's laughing like that.

"Oh, Christ," he wheezes, stumbling into view. He's trying to walk it off and failing. "That's someone's—oh, fuck. That's someone's—"



Even Mason has given up by this point and cracked a smile. He has an advantage, because he's better at laughing silently.

"You can't call him Beau-Beau," Gabriel gasps. "He's someone's grandfather."

"Grandpapa."

"*What?*" he shrieks.

Mason shushes him harshly.

"Lily calls him Grandpapa."

Gabriel covers his mouth with folded hands, looking like he's ascended into religious ecstasy. "Okay. Wow. Okay." He closes his eyes. Maybe he *is* going to do a prayer. It wouldn't be the weirdest thing to happen in the last two weeks. "Jameson. Tell us the rest."

I lift my chin. "If you're finished."

"I'm done." His voice shakes.

"This guy's not getting his hands dirty now. That was the rest. There's no way he hired a hitman by himself. I doubt there's a paper trail linking him to the cops."

"Oh, fuck," Mason says softly.

The smile dies off Gabriel's face. "You think he's working with an independent third party?"

"Mason tells his wishes to the prosecutor all the time. What's to say there's not a super-PAC of assholes doing whatever they think the judge's bidding is?"

We're all quiet for a minute.

"They could be anywhere," I point out.

It's not a comforting thought.



It turns out that Charlotte, who told me she was *Mason's wife*, is actually a famous fashion designer. A little bit world-famous, but *really* famous in New York and on the East Coast. I walked past ads for her clothes every day on my way to class at NYU and always thought they were classy and beautiful and probably too fashion to wear for my stint in law school and definitely too fashion for my serious prosecutorial aspirations.

And now she's making my wedding dress.

Like, actually working on it while I stand on a pedestal in her atelier, which is on the floor below the penthouse.

“—her bedroom,” Elise is saying. She's Charlotte's best friend, and is double-famous herself—I've heard people talk about her wedding cakes *and* about her bakery in Brooklyn, Take the Cake. Triple-famous, if you count that she's one of the Bettencourt daughters. I know about the late Bettencourt because he was frequently mentioned in the business pages, and if you're too invested in attending law school, it's very possible that you and your friends will spend their free time talking about mergers and contracts and lawsuits brought by rich men. Elise hovers near Charlotte's chair in a pair of leggings and a crewneck sweatshirt with the name of her bakery on it, waiting to bring Charlotte anything she needs. “As in, sewing in her bedroom, packaging pieces in her bedroom, and sending them off in the mail. And now look at her.”

“Yes, look at me,” Charlotte says, tone wry. “Leaking boobs. Oversized T-shirt. Mason’s sweatpants. I’m the height of fashion.”

“I’m not an expert, but I think you’re totally pulling it off,” I tell her.

She tips her head back and laughs, her hands still holding a pin in place on the voluminous skirt of my wedding dress.

My *wedding* dress.

“Thank you, Lily.”

“We could take a break,” I suggest. “If you’re tired. You, like, just had a baby. There’s no way you want to be making a dress.”

Charlotte’s smile softens. “Actually, it’s nice to have a project like this to work on. I couldn’t do much the last month or so, and I’ve been antsy.”

It’s just such a *kind* thing to say. It makes my chest go hot and embarrassed and weighted. I’m no one to these people. I showed up out of nowhere with a beat-up Jameson and a grandfather who might or might not be out to get us. I’m the one who started our whole fake engagement. I’m the one who kept up the joke until it was real.

“Lily.” Charlotte pats the front of the dress, which has slowly begun to take shape over the last few days. “Are you okay?”

“Are you sure? Because this is a lot to ask of a person. And of, like, a family. I’m sure all of you had other plans before I barged in and monopolized all your lives.”

Charlotte glances up at Elise, and they have a silent conversation at the speed of light.

“Honestly?” Charlotte guides the pin through the length of lace she’s pinning to the white fall of my dress and sits back. “I think you did us a favor.”

I raise my eyebrows at her.

She laughs.

“Look, I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, or share things that people would rather keep to themselves or—”

“I don’t care that much,” Elise puts in. “Mason and Gabriel have been worried about Jameson for a long time. They were beside themselves when he took off after the promotion. They *both* thought he might do something they couldn’t fix.”

“Like kidnap a woman and get fake-engaged to her?”

Elise snorts. “I don’t think they saw *that* coming.”

“Nope,” Charlotte agrees. “That was new.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I wouldn’t want to be the latest in a long line of kidnapped girlfriends.”

“Oh my *God*.” Elise breaks into a fit of giggles. “You’re perfect for him. Oh *God*.” Her face snaps into a horrified expression. “I didn’t mean to make light of the situation. You probably have complicated feelings about it, and I—”

“Actually,” I announce, as grandly as possible. “My feelings about Jameson aren’t that complicated.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows go up. “Really?”

“I’ve tried to make them complicated, believe me. I’ve tried to think he—you know. *Wasn’t* hot. I’ve tried to be furious with him. I’ve tried not to like him. Except—” I’m about to say *I love him*, but despite literally being on a pedestal being fitted for the dress I’m going to wear when I honest-to-parole-reform marry Jameson, I’m not ready to say it. For a *lot* of reasons. “I know none of this is ideal, but I don’t mind the idea of marrying him and figuring the rest out later. Especially if it makes everything else safer. And...”

I glance up at the mirrors in an arc around the pedestal, my eyes catching on myself. It’s hard to look away.

“And this is fun,” I finish. “Having a real wedding with, like, the trappings of a wedding was never in my life plan, so I didn’t think I’d get to do this. I had kind of convinced myself I didn’t want it. Plus, it was never going to be traditional, because my mom—oh, *crap*.”

“Here.” Elise hands me a tissue. I wonder if she knows she always smells faintly sugary and sweet. I bet she does. “Hey. It’s okay. Everybody cries when Charlotte makes them pretty.”

“I’m not making her pretty,” Charlotte says. “Look at her. She’s already gorgeous.”

“Stop,” I choke. “This is a bad time to get emotional.”

“It’s a great time to get emotional,” Elise argues. “We’re in an empty atelier. It will be aesthetic.” She hesitates for a beat. “Is your mom...did she pass away?”

“I don’t know.” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. At least I have lots of practice with composing myself when I need to. I owe Millicent for that. “She left when I was very young. Grandpapa—my grandfather raised me. So I didn’t think that *if* I got married, she’d be—well, she wouldn’t be a part of it. But now that we’re here, I wish—” Neither of Jameson’s parents are going to be part of this. “I just wish.”

“I get it,” Charlotte says. “My dad wasn’t there for our wedding. Elise’s dad won’t be there when she and Gabriel decide on a date. It sucks, even if you think you’re prepared.”

I dab at my eyes with the tissue. “She’d be impressed, though. I just have the feeling she’d think this was really cool. Minus the kidnapping part.”

“She’d be right,” Elise says. “Not everybody gets a Charlotte Hill wedding dress.”

“Not everybody gets a dress like this, period.” Charlotte glances over her work with a proud light in her eyes. “You have cool ideas. Now...let’s get this lace pinned and we can see if you like it, or if we need to try something else.”

It’s quiet for a minute, except for a rap song at low volume. Elise has her phone connected to the atelier’s speakers, and she’s playing her bakery playlist. It’s mostly songs I’d never heard until we started on the dress.

“You know,” Charlotte says, tone thoughtful. “And...you can tell me if I’m going way too far with this. But we might be able to find your mom, if she’s out there.”

My throat closes. My vision gets blurry, but I will my eyes to dry.

“Um.” I sound great. “My grandpapa’s been looking for her for a long time, and he’s never found her, so I’m not sure it would be worth the effort.”

Charlotte glances at Elise. This time, the silent conversation is even shorter.

“Mason and Gabriel—” Charlotte starts.

“And Jameson,” Elise adds.

“And Jameson,” Charlotte agrees. “They might have other methods, or other connections. I’m just saying that if you wanted, I’m sure we’d all be willing to try. If nothing else, we might be able to find an address.”

Maybe they could do it.

I haven’t entertained any hope about finding her in...a long time. But *this* family—these people that came together to throw a wedding with zero advance notice—they might be able to find her.

My stomach does a swooping drop. What would happen if they did? What would happen if I got to talk to her? Would she want to talk to me? Or would she be mad that I’d sent someone to look for her in the first place? If she’s alive and hasn’t come to find me, she probably doesn’t want to talk to me, in which case I should leave her alone.

But...

Someone’s phone buzzes.

It’s Charlotte’s, down on the floor near the foot of her chair.

“Got it.” Elise bends down, picks it up, and hands it to her.

Charlotte frowns at the screen, then taps. “Mason? Yeah. Yeah? Oh—okay.”

She holds the phone away from her face and taps again.

“—me now?” her husband is saying.

“We can all hear you,” she says, worried blue eyes meeting mine.

“First, everything’s fine—security hasn’t let anyone enter the building.”

Elise gives Charlotte big eyes.

“Okay?” Charlotte says.

“Lily.” Mason sounds much calmer than he did at the county jail, but he doesn’t sound happy. “Your grandfather came to the building. He’s still outside. One of my guys is with him.”

The whole room freezes. Or maybe it’s me who’s freezing. I’m chilled to the bone despite the weight of the wedding dress.

“That—” That shouldn’t be happening. “I didn’t tell him I was here. He shouldn’t know—I don’t know how he knows I’m here.”

Someone in the background says something to Mason.

“Sit down,” he says. “None of my people have even confirmed you’re in the building. None of them will, unless you want them to. He must be taking a guess. He’s telling my guy he wants to see you.”

“For what?”

“He says he wants to give you a gift and congratulate you on your engagement.”

I let out a weird, barking laugh. “Really? I mean—*now* he wants to congratulate me? I don’t even know what to say to that. He tried to—he didn’t want me to leave the house. I stopped by there before—the other day. I stopped by because I didn’t want him to worry, and he said I couldn’t leave anymore.”

“Well, that’s fucked up,” Mason says. “I’m guessing you don’t want to see him, but you have options if you do. We can go out with you, or you can go out with some members of my security team. I can have one of my guys hand him a phone, if all you wanted to do was talk.”



He pauses.

I don't say anything.

"Or I can have him removed from the property," Mason says.

"Isn't that—won't that set him off? I don't want him to freak out and do something dangerous. And I don't want to give him proof that I'm here. If he doesn't know for sure, kicking him out is going to prove I'm definitely—"

The far door to the atelier bursts open and Jameson stumbles through it. "I'm here. Don't worry, Lily."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Mason sighs.

"Oh, good, you're here, Jameson!" Charlotte says brightly. "Come have a seat!"

Elise steps smoothly between Jameson and the pedestal, holding her arms out like an air traffic controller. Jameson approaches, his steps a little unsteady, watching Elise with wide eyes.

He points at the couch set on an angle to the pedestal. "That couch? There? I can't tell."

"That's the one!" Elise makes even larger motions.

Jameson puts his hands to his mouth and blows her kisses. He's being ridiculous, and he's obviously high on fresh painkillers. His man-bun is askew on the top of his head. He's *covered* in week-old bruises.

He's still the hottest person I've ever seen.

He *still* makes my chest go all warm.

Jameson reaches the couch and flops down on top of it with a pained *oof*. He shoves one of Charlotte's classy shell-pink throw pillows under his head, shifts himself around on the cushions, and closes his eyes.

"Don't worry, Mase. I'm here to provide security."

"I told you to sit down," Mason says.

“Duty called. Your wife is safe. And your fiancée-in-law. And my about-to-be-wife. I will defend them with my life.”

Mason sighs audibly. “Great.”

“Knew you’d think...”

Jameson trails off.

He doesn’t finish the sentence, because he’s fallen asleep.

“I don’t think he noticed the dress.” Charlotte keeps her voice soft.

“He passed out on the couch, didn’t he?” Mason asks.

Elise leans over the speaker. “How’d you guess?”

“Okay. Lily, we won’t tell him anything and send him on his way.”

If I have a complicated feeling, it’s this—I don’t recognize my grandpapa anymore. The man who took pictures of me on the first day of school and sang *happy birthday* to me and put me to bed at night would never do the things he’s apparently done, and is still doing. He never grounded me when I was an *actual* teenager. I can’t get rid of the nagging idea that I haven’t tried hard enough. That if I could just say the right words to him, he’d change back into the grandfather I’ve known and be appalled at his behavior and do everything he could to make it up to me.

“Does he seem...” I hear myself ask. I don’t want to be asking. The words are happening to me. “Does he seem like he means it? Is this...could he be trying to reconcile?”

“As far as I know, he hasn’t mentioned anything about that. The man who’s with him told me that he’s demanding to be let into the building to see his granddaughter. There’s a dull *tap tap tap*. The direct quote he sent is, *I have the right to a conversation with my granddaughter and I have the right to give her a gift, and you don’t have the standing to stop me.*”

“Okay, well, clearly your security guy does have the standing.” A bizarre argument for Grandpapa to make.

“I’ll tell him we’re not taking visitors. Us, as in the Hills. It’s already public knowledge that we live here, so we’re not telling him anything he doesn’t already know. You won’t come into it.”

“Okay,” I say. Charlotte leans forward and fusses with some of the lace. “Sounds great.”

“Perfect. Sweet thing, I’m bringing the baby down in a few minutes.”

Charlotte lets out a breath. “I was just about to text you and say my boobs are killing me.”

“Don’t let her get killed by her own boobs, Mason,” Elise says.

“I would *never*,” he says. “Bye.”

Charlotte drops her phone with a soft laugh. “We can get this pinned by then. I believe in us.”

On the couch, Jameson breathes deep and even, one hand on his chest, the other arm over his head. The painkillers are good for getting some sleep, at least. He hasn’t seemed to have any nightmares.

I don’t think that’s going to last.

Charlotte pins.

Elise hovers.

I watch us in the mirror.

The premature excited hope I felt when we were talking about finding my mom evaporates.

“I think we should wait.”

“Yeah?” Charlotte’s blue eyes come up to mine.

“If she’s dead, then...that’s sad news.” If she’s dead, she’ll never see my wedding dress, or even a photo of it, and it’s already too late. “And if she’s alive, I don’t want to put her in danger, too.”



“How do you want me to do it?”

This photographer Gabriel knows for some reason cocks his head to the side. He puts his camera down on the picnic table a couple steps away, turns to his brother, and starts signing, his hands flying through the air so fast they almost blur.

His brother signs back.

More signing.

They're twins, I guess. Our photographer's the dark-haired one, and his brother is the sandy blond one, and other than that they're identical, so the hair is helpful. Not that they're wearing matching clothes or anything. The photographer, whose name is August, wears jeans and a black, long-sleeved T-shirt. It's one of those expensive ones with no logo. His brother, who I guess is Julien the Journalist, wears sharp-looking slacks and a white button-down. I wonder if they wingman for each other or what.

Then August faces us again and keeps signing.

“The important thing to remember is that we're not trying to recreate the original proposal. Neither of you have to look surprised.” Julien speaks, but he's clearly translating for his brother.

I point at my chest. “Why would I look surprised?”

August rolls his eyes, and signs again.

“In the staged ones, a lot of guys forget that they’re the ones proposing, so they make a big—”

Julien pauses. August makes an exaggerated surprised face that makes Gabriel burst out laughing.

“Anyway,” Julien continues for his brother. “We’re not recreating it. These are celebratory photos for an announcement. I suggest doing the boring ones first.”

That makes *me* laugh. “The boring ones?”

August’s hands move. Julien follows them. “The posed ones. I don’t think they should be too bad. Actually...” His hands pause. August looks at me and Lily, standing by a bench in the park that Mason had built for Charlotte, like he’s seeing some kind of augmented-reality grid over us. Who knows? Maybe he is. His hands move again. “The height difference will make these easier if you sit on his lap, Lily.”

Lily wolf-whistles.

Elise cracks up then, which sets Gabriel off, and Nate and Lydia both think that’s incredibly funny. Lily starts laughing at her own joke.

“My middle name is August,” I tell August.

He huffs, which I think is a laugh, and signs.

“My name isn’t really August. It’s a nickname. Don’t be a dick, August,” Julien says.

August shoots him a look, then signs, his hands moving more slowly.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Julien says, his voice wry. “It’s very cool that your middle name is August. Maybe we should hug about it.”

Goddamn it. There I go.

We get a grip on ourselves just in time for Mason and Charlotte to show up with Remy and Robin.

“Sorry!” Charlotte says. “It was a whole thing! Proceed!”

“It’s okay, Sunshine. We were just talking about how I shouldn’t act surprised when Lily proposes.”

“I *already* proposed,” Lily said.

“Neither of you remembered anything important.” Mason strides over to our engagement-photo bench and offers me a little velvet box.

I clasp both hands over his, look down at it, and then look into his eyes. “*Yes*,” I say, in my breathiest voice. A shutter *clicks*.

“That was perfect,” Julien says. August’s signing. “Don’t do it again unless she *really* surprises you.”

It’s all hilarious and great, but then it’s time to put the ring on Lily’s finger, and I discover that I’m freaking the fuck out.

As in, I can’t fucking breathe. And there’s a weight on my chest. And I’m thinking about a wedding ring in a pile of ashes, and crime scene photos, and—

Somebody taps my arm.

It’s August, his camera slung across his chest on a black leather strap, and he doesn’t say anything, because I guess he only communicates through sign, but his face looks different. I don’t think he’s going to drag me for telling him my middle name.

*Sit*, he mouths, bringing both hands down in front of him like I don’t know what sitting means.

Unfortunately, I have to follow his hands to do it.

Once I’m sitting down, I feel less like I might imminently die. August offers Lily his hand and escorts her onto my lap.

Once she’s sitting down, I feel even better.

Until she glances down at the box, and I glance down at it too, and that can’t-breathe-holy-fuck feeling returns in full force.

August looks over his shoulder and beckons. Julien comes to the bench, and then it’s the four of us in a little huddle. Another burst of signing, this one only for Julien, and then

August sort of crouches down to be on our level. He pauses, glancing between both of us, and off his hands go.

“Let’s be real with one another.” Julien’s lowered his voice. “It’s my impression that you had a non-traditional proposal.”

“Oh, *definitely*,” Lily says. She puts her hand over mine—the one clutching the ring box for dear life. “Highly non-traditional.”

“Have you seen the ring?” Julien asks for August.

She shakes her head, her cheeks going pink under her frankly perfect makeup.

“Okay.” Julien again, August’s hands flashing. “You don’t have to act surprised. In fact, neither of you need to say anything at all. Jameson, sit up a little straighter. Like that. What you’re going to do is open the box and show her the ring. And Lily—”

“I’m going to look at it, then look at him instead?”

August beams.

“These are mostly close-up details,” Julien says. “I’m not going to focus much on your faces. Think of these as candid. Pretend I’m not here.”

Then August waves him away and *keeps* waving people away until our family is in a half-circle that’s so far across the stretch of grass that it’s like they’re onlookers who just happened to walk by.

“He’s totally lying,” Lily whispers.

“About what?”

August comes back across the grass, adjusts some camera settings, and takes a few photos, fast enough that they’re probably warm-up shots.

“He’s going to take pictures of our faces. He just wants us to be comfortable.”

“I’m completely at home.”



Lily smiles at me, and for a second this doesn't seem like a bizarre staged engagement session, it just feels like we're into parks.

She's so fucking beautiful. Her hair is swept back from her face like she just walked off the screen in an old movie, and Charlotte dressed her, and I'm lucky to be on this bench with her at all.

Lily rests her hand on my neck and takes a deep breath. "Okay. Show me. I want to see."

I stare into her eyes, resisting the urge to make a dick joke with every single nerve and brain cell in my body.

"I don't mean your dick," she whispers. "I mean the ring."

"I fucking love you."

The entire world goes silent.

Lily's hand is on my neck, and I have one hand on her waist, and my other hand has the ring box in it, and I have no fucking idea when she leaned in, looking so radiant it hurts, but it means I can see every detail of her face lighting up. I can see her eyes going wide and her lips parting and the deep color that goes down her neck and I couldn't look away from her for all the money in the world.

And I can't tell her I didn't mean it.

Fuck.

Do I mean it?

Having a non-traditional engagement is one thing, but there is absolutely no way I'm going to tell Lily that I take it back in front of that guy. I would never live it down.

And I don't want to take it back.

Lily leans in and kisses me.

At some point, her free hand drops onto the ring box, but her lips are on mine, so I don't care if that ruins the photo. I just kiss her back.

She tastes sweet and minty and might actually be an angel.

I'm aware of the camera shutter, kind of, but I forget that my entire family is watching this until a low *holy shit* reaches my ears from all the way across the grass.

Lily tips her head to the side, kisses my neck, and whispers, *it's totally fine. I think you should show me the ring now.*

So I do. I hold the open ring box out to her, and she looks down at it with genuine, lovely surprise on her face.

I know she already knows.

The words come out anyway.

"This was my mom's." I didn't think I was in danger of crying, so it's a shock to feel how rough my voice has gone. "Mason's friend resized it."

"Which friend?" Lily whispers.

"Hades. He's into diamonds."

"Like your sister is into dirt?"

"Exactly." Not exactly, but the principle is the same. Hades sells priceless jewels and other stuff. Remy finds the occasional priceless artifact. Both of them have to get things out of the ground at one point or another.

Lily looks down at the ring, and I look down at it with her.

It's a sparkling diamond in a platinum band.

"Do you like it? For real," I ask. "It's simple."

"It's elegant." Lily smiles even wider. "It's perfect."

I put it on her finger.

And then she's just—

*Smiling* at me, like I've made all her dreams come true, and I smile back at her the same way, and she *laughs* at me, like I'm hilarious and wonderful and not a human crime scene.

Somewhere in there, August appears again and leads us over to another spot in the park. He makes a gesture between the two of us with an expression on his face that I can only describe as *lovesick*, which makes both of us have a laughing

fit. He steps in more often to pose us after that, but it's mostly just different ways I get to touch Lily, and none of it is boring.

Finally, Julien says, "Do you have the shots you need?"

August nods, and waves to the rest of the family.

Time for a group shot.

*That* whole process is about as funny as the engagement photos.

In the middle, my chest starts to hurt.

For a minute, I think it might be a heart attack or something, but then my throat closes up and my eyes burn, so I'm going to live after all.

It's just emotions.

I shove those down and think of non-criminal things, like baking cake and watching *Downton Abbey* and working at a job with a desk and an office and keep looping back around to all the family photos we took before my parents died, because my mom loved lifestyle shoots, and how—

Fuck.

I switch to not thinking about anything at all.

Afterward, we go back to Mason's apartment, where everybody is in high spirits. Gabriel congratulates me on my face no longer looking quite so fucked up. Robin is the cutest baby in the world. Nate and Lydia are surprisingly involved in the wedding planning discussions.

Everyone's happy.

Everyone's fine.

There's still the small issue of Lily's grandfather and his maybe-Super-PAC of hitmen that he doesn't coordinate with, but even that seems like it might not be a big deal after all.

My performance of being happy and fine is a tour de force.

Eventually, Gabriel and Elise take the teenagers back to his brownstone, and I settle in with Mason and Charlotte and Remy and Lily and Robin to watch a romantic comedy.

The couple falls in love.

Lily and I go to my bedroom, which might be the weirdest part of the setup. I never thought I'd bring anyone home to Mason's penthouse. I never thought that if I *did*, the woman in question would want to stay more than one night.

I *never* thought that if it happened, the woman in question would want to fuck.

It's the first time since I got the shit kicked out of me, and it's slow and gentle with Lily on top and doing most of the work, and I could almost fall asleep afterward.

Almost.

*She* falls asleep, curled against my side.

I stare at the ceiling.

Without the drag of the painkillers, I can feel everything. All the energy that builds up throughout a day of pretending that I'm a normal, non-criminal guy. All the curdled anger that won't go the fuck away, no matter how much I trespass and vandalize and sabotage.

I can't lie here with it.

I ease myself out from under Lily, cover her with the blankets, and wash up in the bathroom with the lights off.

Getting dressed doesn't wake her up.

I take my phone and head out through the lobby, nodding at the doormen as I go. They'll assume I was going somewhere with zero intention of committing a crime since I let them see me.

In Mason's parking garage, I pick one of his most nondescript black SUVs, get behind the wheel, and find an inoffensive radio station.

I drive out through the gate and slow to a stop to check for oncoming cars.

Somebody taps on the passenger-side window.

It's *Lily*.

I roll it down, my heart losing its mind. “What are you doing out here?”

She’s dressed in black, the same outfit she wore when we went to the farmhouse, and she looks *hot*. Lily holds her hand up and wriggles her fingers. Her engagement ring glints in the light from the parking garage. “We’re partners in crime, remember? Unlock the doors. I’m getting in.”



**J**ameson drives us away from his brother's building, and I settle into the passenger seat to pretend my heart isn't beating out of my chest.

For a second there, I thought he might leave without me. For a second, I thought I might let him. I was *so* tired. So deeply, massively tired.

I didn't let that stop me.

Jameson was *planning* to leave without me, obviously. He was quiet, but he couldn't disguise the sounds of someone being too quiet in an attempt to sneak out. It's very possible that I don't have any right to follow him when he sneaks out. Our sort-of-real engagement is going to be a real wedding, but that doesn't mean my claim on him is real.

I don't know. There are varying levels of reality and unreality and we're living right between about seven of them.

The radio plays hits from the eighties. I recognize a few of them, and the general vibe of the era, but it's nice when the announcer comes on and confirms that he is indeed playing ninety commercial-free minutes of hits from the eighties.

After a few songs in a silence that feels more energized than awkward, my heart settles down.

Jameson takes a breath shortly after. "I'm surprised you didn't bring Snowball."

"Time was of the essence." Oh—maybe he meant something else. "Are you worried?"

“No, he’ll be okay at Mason’s.”

We stop at a red light, and Jameson waits for it to change before he rolls around the corner.

“Isn’t it your house, too?”

“What?”

“You called it *Mason’s*. Isn’t it your house, too? You have a bedroom there.”

“Technically, it’s a penthouse.”

“Isn’t it your penthouse, too?”

Jameson’s taking us north through the city. I *really* don’t think he should be heading out on a mission for justice, or anything close to approaching anything that could be considered a crime, but I don’t think pushing him will change anything.

“It’s a place I have a bedroom,” he says finally. “It’s not mine.”

“Hmm.”

He waits a beat. “That’s all you’re going to say? *Hmm?*”

“I don’t know. Did you want me to say more?”

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

I watch his hands on the wheel. He has nice hands, and none of the cops in the woods hurt his hands. They punched his face and kicked him in the torso, but none of them went for Jameson’s hands.

I refuse to be grateful to people like that.

I’m just glad his hands don’t hurt.

“It’s not what I picture in my head,” he says.

“What isn’t?”

“Mason’s penthouse. It’s not what I picture in my head when I talk about my house. So it feels wrong to call it mine. I know he’s tried to make it a home. He’s tried—” Jameson’s



voice breaks, and he clears his throat. “He’s tried really fucking hard to make it a home. Don’t think I don’t feel like an asshole. I do.”

“I don’t think you’re an asshole.”

“Really, Angel?” A smile flashes in the dark. “That’s a new development.”

“I don’t think you’re an asshole for *that* at least.”

“Come on,” he says, voice dropping. “You don’t think I’m much of an asshole at all.”

“Surprisingly, no,” I admit. “Also, I had fun today.”

Jameson’s hands tighten on the wheel. “Did you?”

The temperature in the SUV skyrockets, though Jameson hasn’t touched any of the controls. I have the same feeling I get at the height of my routine, when it’s time to let go of the hoop and trust that it will be there, when the entire audience holds their breath and waits to see if I’ll fall.

And I never do.

I never fall.

“Yeah. You looked hot.”

He exhales. “You looked hot, too. I wonder how the photos turned out.”

“I bet they’re going to be the best photos we’ve ever seen of ourselves.”

“You think August was that good?”

“I know he was.”

“Oh?” We’re slowly, inevitably heading for the highway. “Do you know him from somewhere?”

“No. Gabriel got his name from Hades.”

Jameson shakes his head and peers at me for a second, then looks back at the road. “Was I high for that conversation?”

“Probably, if you don’t remember it.”

“I don’t.”

“Too bad. It was cute. Mason got really disgruntled about Gabriel asking Hades for a recommendation.”

Jameson laughs out loud, a new wave of warmth moving through the SUV. “He would. He’s a possessive bastard. Probably thought Gabriel was stepping on his toes.”

“He’s taken their family pictures before. Apparently, he’s one of the best natural light photographers in the state.”

He scoffs. “If that’s where Gabriel got the recommendation from, he’s the best natural light photographer in the country. Or the world.”

“I’ve heard...” The highway entrance appears up ahead, and Jameson puts on his blinker and merges onto it. “I’ve heard that natural light is trendy for photographers.”

“That’s because you can get much better photos in natural light.”

“Did you learn that in your photography degree?”

He laughs again, quieter this time. “No, I learned it on the Internet. And Nate and Lydia go to an arts-focused high school, so they’re constantly coming around with art facts.”

“That’s cool.”

“Art facts?”

“An arts high school. Maybe if I’d gone to one of those, maybe I’d have...I don’t know. Maybe I’d have taken a different life path.”

Jameson shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe not. People go to law school with all kinds of backgrounds. You might have decided to become a lawyer even if you were also really good at charcoal sketches.”

“No, I wouldn’t have.” That weird excited-hope feeling is back, though nothing’s happened to give me a burst of excited hope. If anything, I should be sad. Is that all it would have taken to change everything? “I would’ve done something else. I could *still* do something else.”

The feeling crashes down.

“But that would mean throwing away everything else I’ve done. All of that would have been for nothing.”

Jameson reaches across the console and takes my hand, his touch gentle, like he wants to console me.

*I know, he’ll say. I completely understand.*

“That’s bullshit,” Jameson says.

My laugh is over half snort. “Is it?”

“Whatever you did before today isn’t nothing. It taught you—” He waves our joined hands in the air. “Something. So it wasn’t a waste, even if you get really into charcoal sketches.”

“Same to you.”

A glance across at me. “What?”

“Your life was worth it, too.”

Jameson doesn’t say anything.

“And I think you know that, because I already told you.”

He merges to the left lane, passes a white pickup truck, and comes back to the right. “Did you?”

“Yeah. You were chopping wood and trying to convince me that your family didn’t want you at the hospital, and obviously they did. And even if they didn’t want you at the hospital for some reason, they all came to your engagement photo session and had family photos taken after, so if they’re faking how much they love you, they’re *really* committed.”

This time, the silence lasts four songs.

“Was something not right? About the photos, I mean. It seemed like we were having a good time, but then...” Then Jameson had blurted out that he loves me, and I know he didn’t mean it as a grand confession. I know he didn’t mean to say it at all. “I wasn’t upset about...the thing.”

“The part where I told you I love you? That thing?”

“That’s the one.”

“You didn’t seem upset about it.”

“I know you didn’t actually mean to say it.” He gives me a skeptical look. “I know you meant, like, *I fucking love you*. Like, *you’re pretty cool and hilarious for making a dick joke even though you’re an uptight law school dropout.*”

“I’ve never thought you were uptight. And you can’t be a dropout unless you actually go.”

“Jameson.”

“You *are* cool.”

His hand is warm on mine. I don’t think he knows he’s tightened his grip. I don’t plan on mentioning it.

“Is that what got to you, then?”

“Why do you think something got to me?” He accelerates until he’s going five over the speed limit. In the dark, it feels faster.

“Because of your face.”

He puts on a deeply offended expression. “Are you suggesting that my face became less hot over the course of our photo session?”

“I’m suggesting that by the end, you were barely even there. It was like you were possessed by a method actor who was going to play you in a movie.”

“That’s elaborate,” Jameson says, almost to himself.

We listen to another two songs. A commercial comes on. I guess the ninety commercial-free minutes are over.

“I was happy.” Jameson starts off strong and determined. “I was—I *should* have been happy. And I was. Happy. I was happy.”

“I have to tell you—this isn’t very convincing.”

“I should have been happy, and I was, but I also fucking hated it.”

By the end of his sentence, Jameson’s voice has gone dark and slightly raw, and I feel it in the air—emotion that you

could mistake as hatred, if you wanted.

“All I could think about is that my parents weren’t there. They weren’t there to meet Robin after he was born, and they’re not coming to the wedding, and they’re never going to meet you.”

Now I’m the one holding *his* hand in a tight grip, because I don’t know what else to do.

“I’m sorry.” It’s not enough. It’s not enough by a long shot, and I wish, weirdly, that I could make him a charcoal sketch to show him I understand. Or—maybe not that I understand *exactly* how he feels, but I want to understand it, and then I want to make him feel better. “I’m really sorry, Jameson.”

“It’s not like I don’t know.” He takes a harsh breath and lets it out. “I already fucking know. I’ve known since they died. And then we get together to do some completely innocuous thing, and it’s like it just happened.”

“It’s not the same, but I—I get it. How things keep coming back. I knew my mom was never going to come to my wedding, but it didn’t hit me until Charlotte started working on my dress.”

We’re equally squeezing each other’s hands now.

“We could try to find her,” Jameson offers. “My brothers —”

“Charlotte said the same thing, and I said we should wait.”

“She did?”

“We talked about the wedding, and how not everybody was going to get to be there. She’s, like, *really* sweet. I can see why you call her Sunshine.”

“I call her that because of her hair.”

“Well, her hair is the same as her personality. But I told her that it wouldn’t be a good idea.” My throat feels weird and hot, and I swallow a few times to get it to go away. “I might just find out that she’s dead, and that would be...I don’t know how I’d react to it. I could be a weeping mess for the

ceremony, and everyone would think I didn't want to marry you."

"Oh my God. You want to marry me? Why didn't you say?"

I pull my hand out of his and brandish my ring at him. "I *did* say, and don't you forget it."

I like when he laughs.

*A lot.*

I put my hand back in Jameson's. "And my grandfather is out of line."

"Woah."

"What?"

"Your *grandfather*? Not Grandpapa?"

My face gets so hot that I can see myself turning red even in the dim reflection. "He's not acting like a Grandpapa right now. Showing up at the building and making demands like he didn't take my car keys and *ground* me."

"Not Grandpapa behavior at all. I agree."

"So, if you—or someone—did manage to find my mom, and she was alive, and she knew about the wedding, she might come."

"And you *don't* want that?"

"My grandfather's been looking for her for as long as I can remember. I always thought it would be a good thing if he found her, because I thought it was a bad thing that he couldn't." The commercials on the radio end, and it switches back to more hits from the eighties. "Now I don't want her anywhere he can reach."

Jameson makes a soft sound. I'm pretty sure it's agreement.

We hold hands for another mile, both of us looking out the windshield at the dark road. If my mom was in this situation,

maybe she'd tell Jameson to keep driving. It feels safer with the sun down, like we're hidden.

I wonder how hard it is to *stay* hidden.

I wonder if Jameson would ever want that.

I don't think so, actually. For as much as he thinks his siblings don't want him, he's never managed to leave.

He tried when he got arrested, but I ruined that for him, and I know he was relieved.

Or maybe he *is* driving us off into the dark, never to be seen again.

"Where are we going?" I ask. "Or is it a secret?"

Jameson shifts in his seat with a sigh. "I have to get something from my cabin."





JAMESON

**T**he cabin is untouched.

I'm more relieved about that than I want to let on. It wouldn't surprise me if Lily's grandfather knew where it was and hinted to one of his lackeys that he wanted it burned to the ground.

I direct my thoughts away from burning buildings and piles of ashes and wedding rings, and Lily and I go inside.

There's a duffel bag in my bedroom closet. She hovers in the doorway while I throw things into it, then stop in the bathroom for one more item I don't want to leave here unprotected.

"Clothes?" she asks, as I guide her back to the kitchen with my palm on the small of her back. "Are they your favorite?"

"There's no way Mason's going to let me disappear again now that his Protective Dad Mode has been activated, so I figure it'll be better to have this stuff at his place."

Lily doesn't comment on me calling the penthouse Mason's. She looks calm and beautiful, with her hair neatly tucked into the twist Elise put it in for the photos.

"But I don't care that much about the clothes," I admit, stopping by the sink. My stomach twists, pain spreading across my chest like another heart attack. This time, I don't try to stop the horror show. I let the images happen. The ring in the ash. The hospital hallway. Gabriel's face in the dark. I hold my

breath until they're done, and it must happen fast, because I haven't suffocated when it stops. "I came for this."

The teacup is almost weightless in my hand. It's cool to the touch, the curves the same as they always were, and the polished surface still smooth and perfect, like it's supposed to be.

Lily puts her arm around my waist. "I'd really like to know about this teacup," she says solemnly. "I've wondered about it since we came here that first night."

"It stands out, since nothing like this belongs here."

"It belongs here if you want it here."

"The things I want—" Have nothing to do with what I deserve, or what belongs, or anything else. You can dress me in a fancy suit or polish me up for a photo session, but I'll still be a fucking crime scene on the inside. "This was my mom's. It was part of her china set."

Lily leans closer to me, looking at the cup like it's as precious as her ring. More precious.

It is, I guess. I didn't want to think of it as priceless, or important, because if it ever got lost or broken, I'd have to contend with the fact that I'd lost something that meant something to me, and I can't do that again.

Or maybe I've never stopped losing all of them. My parents. Mason, the way he was. Gabriel, the way he was. Remy, the way she could have been, if she'd grown up with the life she was supposed to have instead of with her most fucked-up brother providing overnight childcare.

I don't want to tell Lily any of this. I don't want to go back to our house again, with Mason out of his mind and Gabriel rushing around, his face pale and tears in his eyes that he wouldn't let fall.

"I told you we had to leave my parents' house." I don't want to tell her, and I'm going to tell her eventually. We're stuck with each other.

“You said the contents had mostly been seized to pay off the debts, I think.”

“Yeah. So we had a couple hours to get our personal items. I don’t think Mason took anything that would’ve counted as his. Mostly photo albums, stuff like that. Gabriel took...a pair of Dad’s cuff links, I think. He was too busy packing Mason’s clothes, and Remy’s.”

Lily’s hand moves up and down over my back. She waits next to me, breathing, somehow radiating patience even though she got up out of bed to come with me for this and probably thinks I’m a fool for leaving Mason’s at all.

“I wasn’t any help, because I was in the kitchen, breaking every piece of china I could find.”

“Mmm,” Lily says. It’s not a word, just a sound, and it’s filled with compassion. For me. The human crime scene who kidnapped her and got himself arrested and then got arrested *again*. I don’t know how she does it.

“I couldn’t stand the thought of anyone else touching it. I hated smashing it. God, I fucking hated it. It felt like shit. But I didn’t have any other options. If I didn’t turn it into garbage, they’d take it, and some motherfucker who had no idea how she liked—”

Another barrage of images rush through my head. They have nothing to do with fire and ash, but they hurt just as much. My mom getting out this fancy, expensive china for pizza and Eggo waffles and fries from the drive-through that she bought on the way back from Mason’s track meets. My parents sitting at the table eating leftovers on valuable antiques. Opening the dishwasher to get a plate and pulling out one of the set like it was Corelle.

“She used it all the time.” I can’t tell how long it took to finish that thought, but Lily doesn’t seem to care. “She used it for everything. She’d drink coffee out of this in the morning, or tea or whatever, just because she liked it. This was *hers*. This was *ours*.”

The teacup trembles lightly in my palm, but I don't squeeze it. If I do, I'll crack it into pieces, and then it'll be garbage like its brethren in the set and like my entire fucking life.

“This was the only piece I kept. I wrapped it in some of my clothes at the last minute because we were getting kicked out of our house. It probably shouldn't have survived all the moves we made after that, but it did, and when I got this place, I brought it out here. Sometimes I think—”

Lily waits again, her hand still going up and down, up and down, up and down. I want to look her in the eye and demand to know why she'd do this to herself. I want her to tell me why she hasn't skipped town, skipped the state, skipped to *anywhere* that doesn't have me in it. I'm the common denominator. Terrible shit happens wherever I go. Anyone who wants a fighting chance should stay away from me.

Except Lily never *does* stay away, so that would just be an invitation for her to be a sage angel who somehow knows more about me than I do.

Which...

Doesn't sound like the worst thing, but doesn't necessarily sound fun.

Obviously, I snuck out of Mason's to have a good time.

“Sometimes I think I should've left it and just done what Mason did for her jewelry. He made it his life's mission to get all of it back.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah. Everything.”

Lily takes a little breath. “Is my ring—”

“Yep.”

“Wow.”

The light falls on the teacup. It's just the light over the sink, not the morning light that my mom loved, but it's enough to make it shine.

“I think you were right,” Lily says. “I think it’s okay that you didn’t do the same thing as your brother.”

“Now I can never get it back again. It’s gone forever.”

“It’s not anybody else’s, though. Nobody can stop you from buying it back, or pretend it wasn’t yours, or anything else. And nobody’s spent all that time touching it when they had no idea what it meant.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Some rich asshole’s grubby hands all over my mom’s china? No fucking way. I’m the only rich asshole who can put his grubby hands on it now.”

“Your hands are actually very clean,” Lily points out in a gentle tone.

“They are,” I agree. “I’m sure I can figure out a way to dirty them up.”

We head back toward the city, the teacup wrapped in one of my T-shirts and tucked into the duffel bag. It reminds me of the way I carried it out of the house the first time, except I’m not being kicked out of anywhere, and everybody who’s in the car with me is okay.

“Listen,” I say.

“No.” Lily watches the road with a thoughtful expression. “No crimes.”

“I just want to check something.”

“That’s what you said last time, and you ended up in the hospital.”

“Everyone gained a heartwarming memory that night. It was a whole reunion, remember?”

“No.”

I wait a few minutes.

“Listen.”

“Jameson, I swear to the Supreme Court, if you try—”

“I’m just going to *see* something. I won’t touch anything. I won’t do anything. I’ll just look. And not to be an asshole, but

—”

“But I can’t stop you, because you’re the one driving the car?”

“Bingo.”

“Bingo to you, too.” Lily lets out an aggrieved sigh. “Tell me where you want to go, at least.”

“Place in TriBeCa.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Do you have a feud with TriBeCa?”

“No, I just happen to know that a lot of people with money live there, and if you’re going after somebody who has a lot of money—”

“Angel, I *only* go after people with a lot of money. That’s kind of my thing. I’m on the side of the common folk.”

“Even though you and your family are *not* the common folk?”

“We were, for a while. You, on the other hand, were always part of the elite.”

Lily snorts. “I was not.”

“The gorgeousness elite.”

“Stop trying to flirt with me as a distraction.”

“Angel, I *only* flirt with—”

“Do you *swear* you’re not going to do anything to get yourself hurt or arrested?” I can feel her watching me. “Because I do *not* want to have to call your brother and have him come bail you out.”

“You wouldn’t bail me out?”

“I left my purse in your room.”

“Major oversight.”

She sits up in her seat and pats at her hair. “It was not an oversight, because I knew I wouldn’t need it. Because I have

faith that you will not get hurt or arrested. Not today of all days.”

“You don’t want me to get arrested on our engagement session day? Because it’s after midnight. In this time zone, that happened—”

“It was in the last twenty-four hours, which I’m counting as the same day.” Lily makes a good argument.

“Fine.”

“Fine, you promise?”

“Fine. I promise.”

It takes forever to get to TriBeCa. The closer we get, the more Lily is on edge.

“Who is this guy, anyway?” she asks as I double-check the address in a public lot.

“A council member who likes to pretend he’s working-class while he lives in a luxury townhouse and takes bribes from business owners to vote against policies that make it easier for people who don’t have a billion dollars in their bank accounts to live in the city.”

Lily frowns at me. “If you already have his address, what more do you need to know?”

“I’m interested in the parking situation. Let’s do this.”

I hop out of the SUV, and she jogs around to meet me. “We’re already in a lot. What do you mean, parking situation?”

“I want to know where he keeps *his* car.”

“So you can...do some crime on it?”

“No comment.”

“I take that as a *yes*.”

“Unfair. You can’t take my *no comments* as anything but a lack of comment.”

“I could make out with you,” she says, just loud enough for me to hear. “Then we could find out how much you care

about this so-called parking situation.”

It’s late enough that traffic isn’t congested, but there’s still traffic. Headlights bounce off Lily’s face and reflect in her hair. A couple of drivers go past in a hurry.

“Couple of blocks up ahead,” I tell her. “We’re just walking by, which is a totally legal act, just so you—”

Brakes scream off to the right, followed immediately by a muffled *thump*, and a pissed-off somebody lays on the horn.

“Oh, fuck.”

There’s a shape in the road, its soft outline hazy in the headlights, and I just go.

Lily shouts *Jameson*, but I’m already across the first lane of traffic by then. Another set of brakes screeches. The car that stopped—the car that hit the shape in the road—lurches forward, and then *that* asshole’s honking, too.

“Wait a fucking second,” I shout at the windshield. I can’t see the driver through the reflection.

It’s a cat. A little black cat, and it’s still breathing.

I scoop it up off the ground and take it back across the traffic, then sit down on the curb. The cat is shivering, and it’s still trying to look around, and its tiny chest moves up and down too fast.

“It’s okay,” I tell it. “Just let me—”

I get my shirt over my head with one hand and wrap the cat in it, then hold it like—

Like a baby. I don’t know how else to do it.

The cat shudders in my shirt.

“No, I know. It’s okay.” I don’t know anything, and it’s not okay, but an image comes to mind. A green field with trees in the distance. Tiny daisies dotting the grass. A river running through. A path? “You follow the stone path to the trees.” I don’t know what I’m talking about, but the cat watches me, and it’s not shivering as hard. “You’ll know when you’re there, because it’s warm, and there’s—” Another image—a pair of



big hands that seem familiar, but I don't know why, and in those palms is a toy meant to look like a ball of yarn in a deep red color with orange-gold tendrils. "There's somebody there. With a ball you can play with. And no cars. There aren't any cars."

One last rise of its lungs, one last exhale, and the light in the cat's eyes goes out.

"Just look for the path." I swear to fuck, I can feel it looking. Leaving. "You'll see it any second."

The cars in the road speed up again. Brakes screech and release. Lily touches my shoulder.

"We should go," she says. "We should take—"

"Yeah." I get to my feet and abandon the idea of the rich asshole's parking situation. "I need a new shirt."



LILY

**J**ameson isn't a veterinarian, but he knows one that's open after-hours that can take the cat to be buried.

I'm not surprised.

Not after Snowball, and not after watching him run into moving traffic to make sure a cat he's never seen before wasn't alone in its last moments.

I'm not *surprised*, but I am slightly shaken.

Because the things he *said* to the cat seemed—

They seemed real. And I've never heard him talk about an afterlife like that. He seems to think of God as an uncaring, almost malicious deity, so his sudden certainty about a path made of stones leading to a place he could describe in some detail with a *person* waiting for a cat...

I don't think it's weird, though it is objectively weird in the context of all the conversations we've had before.

I can't actually name the feeling I have.

It's sort of warm and awestricken and lucky.

It's...like I'm in love with him.

Like, for real.

After he's handed over the bundle wrapped in his shirt so carefully he almost seems reluctant to let it go, he drives back to his brother's parking garage.

We park.

“I don’t want to go in yet,” he says. “Walk to the park with me?”

It’s a warm night, and Central Park is just across the street. Jameson waits for the walk signal and holds my arm as we go across. I play the situation cool until he turns onto the deserted running path.

I don’t know what we should talk about, but the farther we walk, the less I can keep it in.

“Are you Jesus?”

Jameson barks a laugh. “What?”

“You ran into traffic to—to take care of that cat. I know you’re the kind of person who would do that, generally, but seeing it in person is something else.”

He gives me a lopsided smile. One of the lamps along the path shines light down in his hair, and I can’t help but think it looks like a halo.

“Is this because I’m a vegetarian?”

“I didn’t *know* you were a vegetarian.” I flip through all my memories of Jameson eating. There are lots of them for how little time we’ve known each other. Jameson eating oatmeal in his cabin. Jameson eating pancakes at Mason’s penthouse. Jameson eating pudding on the couch in front of an episode of *Downton Abbey*.

“It means I don’t eat meat.”

“I know what it means. I just—I didn’t think about it. I didn’t notice.”

“You were too distracted by my hotness.”

“Yes.” A night breeze skims across the back of my neck. “*No*. Yeah? Obviously, your...physical attractiveness is hard to ignore, but...” He bumps my elbow with his. “*Fine. Fine*. I was distracted by how hot you are. And by being kidnapped. And it’s not like you took out a billboard.”

“I should take out a billboard.” Jameson sticks his hands in his pockets. “Just me, smiling with a big thumbs-up. *Jameson*

*Hill is a vegetarian. He might be Jesus.*”

A giggle takes me off-guard. “Stop.”

“It was your idea.”

“I never said you should take out a billboard. What would you even be advertising? You don’t need a girlfriend.”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s a PR campaign to get the cops to leave me alone.”

“They don’t leave you alone because you’re always breaking the law.”

“And because they’re part of a corrupt institution whose main purpose is reinforcing the status quo.”

We walk along the path. Soft footsteps come up behind us. A voice calls *on your left*, and Jameson moves into my space to get out of the way.

The runner goes past, his neon shirt disappearing into the shadows up ahead. Jameson watches him go.

“Mason used to run track,” Jameson mentions. “When he was in school.”

“Before he fell?”

“Yeah. He was pretty good at it. Not fast enough to get a scholarship or anything. He just loved running. He’d drive into the city to run here.”

“In Central Park?”

“He likes the path. He couldn’t run for a long time after his knee was destroyed, but after he met Charlotte, he hired a coach to help him figure out how to do it again. You should see it sometime.”

“I should...watch him run?”

“You should. He’s not that good at it anymore.”

“Okay, then—”

“But he grins the whole time. This giant, goofy grin, like he’s having the time of his fucking life.”

“I *would* like to see that.” In the short amount of time I’ve spent with Jameson’s family, his oldest brother has looked like a loving dad to his baby and an intense, over-the-top asshole who’s willing to threaten a sheriff for daring to put his younger brother in a holding cell. I’ve seen him laugh at Downton Abbey and tease his wife and get into heated discussions about wedding venues with Gabriel, who’s basically Mason’s opposite. He always seems playful and flirty and sings a good quarter of the things he says to his family. “I can’t quite picture it.”

“I know, right? Not when he has it out for somebody.”

“That’s really good for him, though.”

“It is.”

The path goes around a curve, and we follow it. This is the kind of warm summer night Central Park was made for. You could walk for hours listening to the crickets. It seems farther from the traffic and the stores and the apartments than it is. The trees are probably a good buffer for city sounds.

“Anyway,” Jameson says. “As far as I know, I’m not Jesus Christ. If I was, I’d have probably been able to fix Mason’s knee, and Gabriel—” He cuts himself off. “I’d have been able to heal the cat, not just...accompany it.”

“Accompany it *where*?”

His smile fades. It doesn’t turn into a frown, exactly, but I can tell he’s remembering, and there’s an emotion other than joy attached to that memory.

“Are you talking about all that stuff I said?”

“Yes. I am talking about all that stuff. Do you—” There’s the strangest feeling in my throat. “Do you actually think that’s where people—or animals—go when they die, or were you just guessing?”

“I saw what it looked like. In my head.”

“Like a vision?”

“Like a picture? I don’t know.” He shrugs. “It seemed like the right thing to say. There were hands, though, and for some

reason...” Jameson narrows his eyes, as if he’s peering into his memories. “These hands looked bizarrely familiar.”

“Just disembodied hands?”

“They were attached to arms.”

“Just hands, though? That’s weird.”

“No, he was holding a cat toy shaped like a ball of yarn.”

“He?”

Jameson lifts both hands and readjusts his man-bun. “Uh, they seemed like guy hands. I’m making an assumption.”

“Why a toy shaped like a ball of yarn and not a ball of yarn?”

“Because balls of yarn are dangerous for cats. Sometimes they accidentally eat pieces of the yarn, and it gets into their stomachs. Don’t listen to the cartoons.”

“Okay, I won’t. I’m not planning to have a cat, but—” How are these conversations always so weird, and so normal at the same time? “Have *you* ever had a cat?”

“Nope.”

“Just a bird.”

“Just Snowball. All right.” Jameson checks in all directions around us. “Let’s head back.”

We begin our trip back along the running path.

I open my mouth to say, *so, about the thing where we’re getting married in a week*, and a shadow splits off from one of the trees and rushes us.

“Fuck,” Jameson says, and tries to shove me behind him.

A knife flashes in the path-light, and I am *not* letting Jameson get stabbed after he just got beat up protecting me from some rogue cops. I slip in front of him.

“Lily, what the *fuck*.”

Jameson’s arms come down, and he picks me up off the ground.

I think his goal is to turn around and take a knife in the back to protect me, but the man—I'm pretty sure it's a man—is closing fast, and we don't have time.

It's like being on the hoop. Conscious thought would only drag me down. Jameson's grip is tight enough that I have the leverage to kick my legs up into the air and swing one around the guy's arm.

He's not expecting that.

I twist my body the other direction, twisting his arm along with me, and he swears out loud and drops the knife.

Jameson bends down to get it with me still in his arms, so I use the opportunity to get my feet back on the ground. The guy clutches his elbow. He darts in like he's going to get to the knife *first*, but Jameson rises to his full height brandishing it.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He stabs it toward the guy, who backs up a step. “What the fuck kind of amateur murder attempt is this? A *knife*? Get out of here.”

The guy turns and runs like a scolded dog.

Jameson throws his arm around me and hustles us toward the park exit, murmuring *what the fuck, what the fuck* under his breath.

We get inside to the lobby, and Jameson storms through. He tosses the knife at the reception desk with a clatter. “Derek, my man,” he says. The doorman is already out from behind the desk, looking at the knife with wide eyes. “Some guy tried to stab us in Central Park. Bag that up, would you? And don't call the cops. I can't talk to them right now. Just—you know.”

“Got it,” Derek answers, though from the look on his face, he does not, in fact, got it.

Jameson throws us both into his brother's elevator, and it's only when he hits the button and leans against the wall that I realize he's shaking.

His eyes are *huge*.

So I put my arms around his waist and go in for a hug.



He drags me off my feet and up his body until my legs are around his waist instead. Then his hands go to my hair, and my face, and I've never seen his eyes this green, or this—

“Are you okay? He didn't stab you, did he?”

“No, he didn't stab me. Because you broke his arm with your legs.”

“I think I just twisted it.”

His mouth is *very* close to mine. I lean in for a tiny kiss, and Jameson returns it with a deep, hot one. It's almost impossible to break out of it, even for a second, but I do.

“Are you okay, though?”

“You *saved* me,” he says, and at first I think he's kidding. At first I think his voice is rough like that because he's making light of the situation. But then the elevator lights catch his eyes, and there are *tears* there. “I've always wanted—”

He kisses me again instead of finishing the sentence. I don't need him to finish it. My heart is in big, glowing pieces and still whole at the same time.

Jameson kisses me all the way through his brother's apartment and into his bedroom.

He kisses me while he strips off my clothes.

He kisses me while he puts me on my stomach on his bed and hitches my hips up. He kisses at least half of my spine and keeps going lower until his mouth meets all the softest, warmest parts of me, and then he buries his face between my legs and eats me like he'll die without it while I bury my face in a pillow and try to keep my gasps and moans to a reasonable volume.

Just when my vision is going white and I'm heading at full speed into what must be my fourth orgasm—or is it my fifth? I can't tell, because they all keep running into one another under his tongue—Jameson peels me off the pillow and arranges my hands on the headboard. His body is hot and hard behind mine. All of him, hot and hard. He nudges between my legs and covers one of my hands with his and drops his face to my

shoulder to kiss the curve. It's a wet, sloppy kiss on account of how he's been eating me out.

"Mmm." That's as far as I can go. If I open my mouth, I'll scream.

Then Jameson thrusts inside me.

"Jesus," I whisper. Okay. New plan. I'll just whisper, because he feels huge. He feels tall and strong and *huge* inside me, and I've never felt anything this good in my life.

"No," he whispers back. "It's Jameson."

I repay him for his Jesus joke by pushing my hips back to take his cock faster.

He makes a hot *ung* sound in the back of his throat, and then his free hand moves around to my front. He circles each of my nipples, giving them a little pinch as if to remind me how much I *like* having my nipples pinched, and then his fingertips find my clit.

I can't do it.

I can't come again, but I can't *not* come. I have to. It's bright pleasure between my legs, almost like a flame, and Jameson's so deep inside me that I can hardly move.

Except I want to move, so I find a way to fuck him back. It's not coordinated, and not very expert, but I can feel his cock jump and his abs flex and his fingers move faster on my clit.

The orgasm comes on fast.

Jameson takes his hand off of mine and covers my mouth with a light touch, almost gentlemanly, so I can make as much noise as I want into his hand.

And then I really can't move, because he's pinned me to his body. All I can do is let him fuck into me and feel every last bit of his heat as he comes.

Jameson shivers while he comes down, bracing one hand against the headboard to keep himself from falling over.

I stay where I am.

His breathing slows.

“Lily,” he whispers, then kisses the curve of my shoulder again.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve always wanted someone to save me. But I’d still think you were hot and perfect even if you didn’t.”

“I’d still think you were hot and perfect, too.”

“I know it’s probably too soon.” Another kiss on my shoulder, this one softer. “But there’s something I wanted to ask.”

I still haven’t caught *my* breath. “What?”

“Will you marry me?”

My brain stops for a full heartbeat.

And then I burst out laughing. So does Jameson. I laugh so hard it hurts, and he has to take me down to the pillows and cover my mouth.

He’s still laughing, his eyes bright, when he whispers, “I mean it.”

I’m still laughing when I say *yes*.



JAMESON

Mason barges into my room in the guest apartment he keeps in his building, where I've been sequestered for some fucking reason involving tradition and whatever-the-hell else since last night. "Get up. It's your wedding day."

It's my wedding day.

That's a sentence I never thought I'd *pretend* was happening, and here it is.

"It's dawn."

"It's not dawn, and the ceremony is at eleven. Get *up*."

"Did you already shower?"

Mason looks sharp as hell, and he's not even getting married today. He looks at me like I've recently arrived from another planet.

"Of course I've already showered. I got up and worked out. If I go upstairs to get Robin, will you get yourself into the shower?"

"Yes. Jesus. And *please* go get Robin. The best man shouldn't miss all of this—whatever this is."

Gabriel sticks his head in the door. "I thought I was your best man."

"Fuck off," Mason pushes past him. "I'm the best man."

Gabriel puts his hand to his throat, his fingers splayed, his eyes huge and pathetic.

“You’re both the best man.” I roll my eyes like I’m annoyed as hell with both of them. They don’t need to know that having them fight over being my best man for a wedding that’s partially for PR and safety purposes feels like winning the lottery. “Now fuck off. I have to take a shower, otherwise I might be late for a ceremony that starts in—” I check my phone. “Four entire hours.”

“Did you find out if you were the best man?” Nate pushes in next to Gabriel, his hair sticking up on one side of his head. “Because I thought *I* was the best man.”

I point at Nate. “Why are you in here harassing me when *this* guy isn’t ready, either?”

Nate pats at his chest. It’s a very Gabriel move. “I’m not ready?”

“You’re not the best man, either,” I tell him.

He makes a crying face.

“Get out.”

“I’m timing you,” Gabriel says over his shoulder and steers Nate away from my guest-apartment-bedroom door. “What are you doing? Get in the shower.”

“There might not be enough hot water,” Nate says.

“Are you serious? Nate. This is a luxury apartment building. I shouldn’t have to tell you that—oh my God. Are you fucking with me again? Not today. There is a wedding today. Jameson’s wedding. That means—”

“Okay, Big Guy, Jesus! I was just kidding.”

I get into the shower.

When I get out, I still feel good. Even excited. Yeah, a good fifty percent of my chest is empty and sad because my dad will never, ever be here to bother me about being on time to my wedding. My mom will never, ever dance with me at the reception. I don’t think they’d be that upset about all the security arrangements we’ve had to make. I bet they’d chuckle gently and say it was *classic Jameson*.

They'd say that if I was still as much of a criminal as I am now.

I probably still would be. My mom would see my point of view, at least.

The rest of me is excited. Because I'm getting married today to the hottest girl I've ever seen in my entire fucking life. And Mason didn't die falling out of a building. And Gabriel didn't die jumping out of a building. And Remy didn't die from having her three train-wreck brothers raise her. And Charlotte and Elise are here, too. And they're going to dress Robin in a miniature tux.

So.

A lot of this is going to turn out okay.

When I go to find Gabriel, showered and wearing the outfit he chose for me today—*casual, but not embarrassing, so that if you're photographed on the way to the cathedral, people can't say I wasn't involved*—he's helping Nate fuck with his hair.

“Okay. That was twenty minutes. I don't think I had to get up this early.”

“Yeah, you did.” Gabriel meets my eyes in the mirror. “There's a breakfast.”

“*What* breakfast?”

“A *breakfast*,” he says, which doesn't explain anything. “Put your shoes on.”

“Okay, weirdo.”

We leave the guest apartment five minutes later.

Mason wears Robin in his carrier down to the first floor, a look on his face like he's a cat that just caught a mouse and is proud as hell of himself.

The *breakfast* is in the restaurant and bar on the first floor of Mason's building. It's a nice place. Usually, the Middlegame feels too classy for my criminal tastes. It has a lot of dark wood paneling and low lights and people in evening

wear. But for this breakfast, they've taken out all the tables that are usually between the bar and the fancy booths and replaced them with one big table.

Because my brothers have invited friends.

“Oh my *fuck*,” I say as we step into the restaurant. “Is this a bachelor party? Are we going to get drunk and look at strippers? Because I'm not looking at a *single* stripper.”

Hades, who is standing at the other end of the table with a toddler in his arms and his dog sitting perfectly still at his feet, gives me an assessing look. “Is he having a breakdown?”

“It's breakfast.” Mason puts his hand on my shoulder and pulls out a chair at the big table. “There are no strippers.”

“Wait.” Hades's *other* brother, a guy named Poseidon who unsurprisingly always looks sort of windblown, like he just stepped off the deck of a ship, glares at Zeus, who *also* has a toddler in his arms. Unlike Hades's toddler, who is holding tightly to a small, black kitten—I think of the cat in the road, but only for a second, a *second*—and looking around the restaurant with a serious expression—Zeus's toddler is out cold on his shoulder. “You invited me to a bachelor party with no strippers?”

Zeus gives him an incredulous look. “How did you arrive at the conclusion that I *invited* you?”

“You didn't throw me out of the car when I got in.”

“Shut up,” Hades tells his brothers, then takes a seat at the table.

“Do we need introductions for anyone?” Gabriel asks. “You've all met Nate.”

“I haven't met anyone,” Poseidon says jovially, and sits down next to Hades.

“And yet you still thought you were invited,” Zeus says. “You are a wonder of the world.”

Just then, Dev Madden comes into the restaurant with Jacob Chambers.



“No way!” I give up on my plan to sit down in the chair and go to shake hands with Dev and Jacob. “You can survive outside the office? You can survive outside of England?”

“We’ll see,” Jacob says, and he’s the kind of handsome, smooth guy who fucking *loves* introducing himself, so he ends up introducing everyone to each other, even though he definitely didn’t plan this *breakfast*.

Dev takes a seat on my other side. “For an hour,” he says in a low voice.

“What?”

“I can only survive outside the office for an hour at a time.”

“Oh, so you’re not coming to the *wedding*?”

He raises his eyebrows in faux-offense. “Of course I’m coming to the wedding. Why would I skip the wedding?”

“According to you, you’re such a workaholic that you can only survive outside the office for an hour at a time.”

“I’ll go back before the ceremony.”

“You’re so full of shit. You leave the country for weeks every year.”

“For *Mason*.” Dev gives me a meaningful look. “That still counts.”

“Where do you live?” I ask. “Is it...in your office? What neighborhood? And what was your last girlfriend or boyfriend’s name?”

“Good try,” he says, then turns and strikes up a conversation with Poseidon.

We have breakfast.

Mason sits on my left, with Robin passed out on his chest the entire time. He’s still roughly the size and shape of a potato, his legs all curled up to his chest. Robin, I mean. Not Mason.

About halfway through breakfast, I put down my mimosa—I can tell they’re pouring it light on purpose—and survey the room. Nobody is paying attention to me. They’re all very involved in conversations with each other. It’s a nice touch, because when too many people look at me at once, I can only assume they’ve discovered that I’m a crime scene and are waiting around until they have to intervene.

“Are the lights different in here?” I ask Mason.

“Yes.”

He doesn’t elaborate, but it reminds me of his penthouse.

“Are the lights different at your place?”

“Different from what?”

“From how they used to be when we moved in.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because some people can’t tolerate the light from regular bulbs,” he says, as if it should be obvious.

“What people? Charlotte?”

Mason gives me yet another look like I’ve been beamed in from a neighboring solar system. “Who do you *think*?”

“I don’t know?”

“Take a guess.”

Most of the people I’ve seen in Mason’s apartment aside from us are at the table. But what the hell kind of outward sign would anyone have that they have a vendetta with regular lightbulbs?

As I’m casually glancing around the table, Hades’s daughter, who is a tiny copy of him with fine blonde hair in a ponytail on top of her head and her tiny stuffed cat pressed to her nose so she can continuously breathe it in, makes direct eye contact with me.

She’s also got his black eyes.

“Okay. Yep. You could’ve told me.”

Mason pats Robin's head, his hand looking gigantic. "How would I have brought that up?"

"I don't know. A causal aside. It's nice to know you have a friend, though."

"I have *lots* of friends, prick."

"Not friends that you'd change your lightbulbs for."

"*You* should get a friend you'd change your lightbulbs for," he says.

"I'd change my lightbulbs for you."

For a split second, Mason looks stunned. In the grand scheme of things, it hasn't been that long since we had a fight over pancakes at the first family brunch he had at his penthouse. I wanted to crime-scene my way out the window. He wanted me to let him *fix it*. There was no way to explain that what's wrong with me isn't fixable, and I didn't want him to spend more of his hard-earned time trying.

I still don't necessarily believe that this wedding is going to fix anything. I always go off the rails, sooner or later. If I could stop, I would have done it already.

But it's the spirit of the thing.

Mason clears his throat. Robin snuffles in his carrier and makes a soft baby noise, his fist coming up to his mouth. He doesn't wake up.

"You don't have any lightbulbs," he says.

"Yes, I do. In my cabin."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been to your cabin. I don't know where it is."

His face has turned slightly red, making his eyes look greener.

The cabin is the only secret place I have, and I've kept the address a secret because I've never wanted my brothers to be able to come after me. I've spent a long time thinking they *wouldn't* come after me, so not telling them the address

doesn't make much sense. Right now, at this breakfast table in a fancy bar, it doesn't make any sense at all.

“Oh, well, it's north of the city on the shore of this lake.” I give him the address. It won't mean anything to him until he looks it up on a map, but his eyes light up when I rattle it off. Mason pretends to be occupied with making sure Robin is properly positioned in his carrier so I don't see, but I notice anyway.

After that, Dev nudges me with his elbow and asks me about a group of properties he and Zeus are discussing.

Mason leans over to Gabriel and tells him something in a voice too soft to hear while I'm giving my opinion on the probable market value of a row of historical townhouses in five years versus ten years.

That's about the time I realize that August and Julien have both shown up without drawing any attention to themselves, and August is getting candid of the breakfast.

“This brunch is so weird,” Nate says to me from across the table. “It's all old people and kids. I mean—I know you're all, like the same age, but—”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Poseidon raise his eyebrows at Zeus, who swats him across the back of the head.

I don't know why he has anything against being called old by a teenager. The three of them are thirty-ish, same as I am.

I think.

“You could go upstairs, you know,” Gabriel says. “They're having breakfast, too. There's just hair and makeup interspersed.”

Nate purses his lips. I bet that sly little punk is trying to decide whether Lydia would find him hotter in some mascara.

Then Zeus's daughter, who is also a copy of *him*—all gold and cute, but a toddler and not a tall billionaire—appears at Nate's side and pretends to shoot him with an arrow.

He pretends to shoot her back.

Then he's fully embroiled in an imaginary archery battle with *both* toddlers and never goes upstairs to have his hair and makeup done.

Gabriel watches him with a fond expression, like a proud dad.

I don't think of how proud *our* dad would be at a time like this. It's my fucking wedding day. I'm allowed to think of Lily and not lose my shit for once.

The end of breakfast comes out of nowhere. I know it's been two hours, but it feels like less when Mason stands up and announces it's time for all of us to go to the cathedral, and his driver strolls in with Robin's car seat, and everyone leaves in a big, mimosa-buzzed group.

They *all* come to the cathedral. I can't figure out the reason for that until it's time for Mason to get ready and Robin freaks out the moment he's out of his carrier. A supremely unperturbed Hades makes Robin into a burrito and takes him away to Charlotte, who's with Lily in the sacred bride's room or whatever it is. When he returns, he's dressed for the wedding, and so is Robin, in his miniature tux. He's passed out over Hades's arm, and Zeus has *both* their daughters playing some clapping game while Conor looks on.

It's heartwarming.

I mean that.

There's a black, classy-looking box waiting on the table in our huge dressing room. I open it between doing my tie and putting my shoes on.

It has a photo album inside.

A little one. Like one you might keep on your desk or the bookshelf in the bedroom. It looks...personal, somehow.

I flip open the cover and a note falls out.

I don't pick it up at first, because the photos have made it impossible to breathe.

They're from our engagement section, mounted on thick, expensive paper, and they—

They're fucking beautiful. All the colors are bright but soft, somehow, the background faded into a blur. Lily and I are the focus. Mostly Lily. But I'm there, too, staring into her eyes and brushing my knuckles over her cheek and *laughing into her mouth*.

That's right after she told the dick joke.

And the way she's touching me in the photos is like—

Like I never kidnapped her at all. It's like we met that night on the street because we were fated to meet that night in the street, and she's so relieved it happened.

These are the kinds of photos that people call *timeless*. That you look back on when you're a hundred years old so you can reminisce about how gorgeous everything was.

In one of them, I'm holding her face in my hand, my thumb on her cheekbone and my fingers wrapping gently around her nape, and I'm looking into her eyes like she's an angel, and she's smiling this beautiful, private smile at me.

And she has one hand curled around my wrist.

And my mother's ring is on her finger.

Okay. August *was* good.

I pick the note up off the floor and unfold it.

*Jameson—*

*I thought you might like to see these pre-ceremony, so here they are. The rest of the shoot is in your inbox. Just click the link, and the photos will download. My personal favorite is the special moment with your brother. Exquisite work. A piece of advice: when you're at the altar today, look at her like you did in these photos. I'll do the rest.*

*Sincere congratulations,*

*August*

*P.S. It's Augustine. If you tell anyone else, I'll know it was you.*

I look up from the note to find August—because holy shit—and realize he and Julien aren't there.

“Photos of Lily putting on her dress.” Gabriel straightens my tie. I'm wearing a fucking tie, and it doesn't look bad. “It's almost time for us to head out.”

“Head out to where?”

“The altar,” he says. “So you can get married.”





**W** hew. I am *nervous*.

It's not a cold-feet situation at all. I feel like running down the aisle and marrying Jameson as quickly as possible. The priest can skip all his remarks about the meaning of love and marriage and go straight to the vows.

But there's no way to rush a wedding that's supposed to be as visible as possible without having people notice that you're rushing it, so this is the real deal.

The morning I spent at Mason and Charlotte's has left behind a warm, vaguely sparkling feeling, like I had several mimosas and they're starting to wear off.

In reality, I haven't had *any* mimosas.

Because I woke up in the middle of the night thinking—

Well. Thinking thoughts. And Charlotte didn't have any mimosas, either, so it felt like someone should also decline them out of solidarity.

Anyway, I feel good, if anxious to *do this* so I can steal a few minutes to myself, when Elise knocks on the door to the bathroom in the bridal suite.

“What can I do for you?” She's good to walk down the aisle as one of my bridesmaids, since she changed into her dress half an hour ago, and all of us spent the morning relaxing in silk robes and having our nails and hair and makeup done in an atmosphere of an upscale spa. Elise's dark hair tumbles over her shoulders, and her pink dress brings out her eyes. If

Gabriel doesn't try to make this a double wedding, I'll be shocked. "Another cupcake? Some chicken nuggets from McDonald's? A shot?"

I giggle around my toothbrush. This is the second-to-last item on my getting-ready list aside from being dressed by a group of women, a final check of my hair and makeup, and a few minutes of bridal portraits.

"I don't need a shot. And I think it's too early for chicken nuggets."

"It's never too early for a bride's request." Her voice is serious, but her eyes are twinkling. "Seriously. Anything you want."

I spit out my toothpaste in the sink, rinse it away, and think of sushi. I like this very particular roll with imitation crab and avocado, wrapped in soy paper and deep fried. There was a place right near NYU that sold it. I can taste it now. It would be so good, and I could eat an entire tray of it. I could eat another tray of rice. I could drink a gallon of miso soup.

Wait—not the soup. Just the rest.

I want it so much that there's a light pressure at my temples, as if *remembering* it is making my brain go into overdrive.

"Is there time—you know what? Afterward."

Elise raises her eyebrows. "Did you think of something?"

"This certain sushi. They don't open until eleven, and I'm going to be busy then, so I'll just have to wait until I'm married."

"I admire your dedication," Elise says. "Want to come get your dress on?"

"Let's do it."

We go out into the main room of the bridal suite, where my Charlotte Hill wedding dress is hung up by the window. August is in the center of the room, taking photos of the dress. Julien stands off to his side.

“Just another minute for the details!” Persephone, another one of my last-minute bridesmaids, floats over to us with a box in her hands. She, like every woman in the room, is stunning. Her hair reminds me of a shiny penny, the curls in a well-contained riot down her back, and she has silver eyes. “August wanted you to have this before the ceremony.”

“August the Photographer?”

“August the Photographer,” she confirms with a lovely, warm smile.

I take the box, my heart beating faster. “Crap. I’m supposed to be the one sending gifts today. At least for Jameson.”

“I’m sure he’ll forgive you.”

Persephone hovers, obviously wanting to see what August gave me, and that brings the other women to our huddle. We all agreed that an enormous wedding party would make a statement, so I have seven bridesmaids and Jameson has, like, eight groomsmen, something like that.

It’s great. I would never have imposed on all these people on my own, but I’m thrilled to go along with their plan, because it means I’ve spent most of today so far with hilarious, determined women, three of whom do not seem to care at all that they’re meeting me for the first time today. It already feels like I’ve known them longer. One of the first things Persephone said when she and Brigit and Ashley came into the apartment bearing gifts of pastries and the most incredible matching jewelry for my dress was *they thought they were going to leave us at home! Can you believe that?*

So now Persephone—Hades’s wife—and Brigit—Zeus’s wife—and Ashley—Poseidon’s wife—are all going to be in the wedding. And both of Elise’s sisters.

I open the box from August.

A note rests on the folded black cloth covering whatever it is he’s given me.

*Lily—*

*I thought you might like to see this pre-ceremony, so here it is. The rest of the shoot is in your inbox. Just click the link, and it will download. These are two of my favorite moments from the session, and I think you'll see why.*

*Sincere congratulations,*

*August*

*P.S. My full name is Augustine. I'm telling you so that when Jameson inevitably betrays me and reveals this secret to you, you can tell him you already know.*

“Ooh,” Charlotte says softly. She’s cradling Robin to her chest in his impossibly tiny tux. She made her own dress to have easy access for nursing, so she’s only had to displace one of the shoulders. “Is this from August? I totally want to see the photos if you don’t mind showing them to us.”

“Oh my God, *yes*, show us!” Brigit’s eyes sparkle. “He’s so good.”

I tuck the note into the bottom of the box, since it contains information that might actually be a secret. “Okay. Here we go.”

The cloth is soft and slightly slippery between my fingers and folds back like a dream to reveal two framed photos separated by a thin layer of tissue paper.

Everyone leans in.

Elise gasps. “*Wow.*”

The photo on top is one of the family photos, with all of us arranged in an open space in a way that’s both natural and sort of artful, but it’s not one of the ones where we’re all smiling at the camera.

Almost nobody is looking at the camera.

I’m looking over my shoulder at Charlotte, a giant, happy grin on my face. At my side, Jameson is looking down at me.

And the expression on his face is like...

Like I'm not a terrifying angel at all. Like I'm a soft, wonderful thing. Like he can't believe he's touching me.

And his *brothers*, arranged on either side of him, have been caught in mid-glance. Mason has a not-quite smile on his face, and it looks like there might be tears in his eyes. He's so obviously relieved that my heart squeezes. Gabriel's looking back at him with one hand on his chest, and everything in him says *we made it*.

Even Remy's looking across at Jameson, her smile so bright that her nose is crinkled, and Nate and Lydia have both noticed Remy's smile, and Elise is looking up at Gabriel and noticing *his* smile, and there I am in the middle of it.

I'm right there in the center.

I always knew I was lucky to have what I had growing up. I always knew that I should be grateful to my grandfather for raising me, and that lots of people grow up without any parents at all.

But of course I had my fantasies. Of course I daydreamed about what it would be like to be part of a big family. Of course I wondered and wished about get-togethers and family pictures and everybody in each other's way and bickering and getting over it and being happy.

Not one person in this photo is looking at me like they're wary of me, or like I don't belong with them, or like they wish I was somewhere else.

I'm just part of it.

"Wow," I whisper. "That's, like, the best family picture I've ever seen."

I lift it out of the box and hand it to Elise, who starts passing it around the circle so that everyone can get a look.

The second photo, under the tissue paper, takes my breath away.

It looks like something out of a magazine. That's how perfect it is. The colors, the framing...everything.

But it's Jameson's face that makes me so light-headed I almost have to sit down.

I'm on his lap, and the ring box is in his hand, and I've already reached out and put my right hand to his neck. He's already reached for me to rest his hand on my waist.

He's smiling.

His mouth is slightly open.

Because he's about to say *I fucking love you*.

And in this moment, the one right as the words came out of his mouth and before he realized what he'd done, his whole face glows with it, all lit up, almost incandescent. I'm thrilled with myself about the joke, flushed and laughing, and it honestly looks like I'm reflecting his *I fucking love you* back at him.

I look up from the box and past Brigit's shoulder.

August is watching, his camera in his hand. He shrugs in a clear *what can I say? I am the best*.

"Yeah," I say out loud. "Yeah."

I stare at the photo for a few more beats, then make the most free-spirit decision of my entire life.

"Could you—" Persephone puts her hands out like she could read my mind, and I tip the box into them. "I just—I have to pee."

"Go!" Elise pats my shoulder on my way past.

My hands shake so badly that I can't twist the lock on the bathroom door. Whatever. I'll forge ahead without it.

This won't take long.

I stashed the pregnancy test in my purse after I borrowed it from the guest bathroom at Mason's penthouse. There was a glass jar with a bunch of tests in there, along with other glass jars with tampons and pads and single servings of Advil. I didn't question it. Maybe they're a family who likes to be prepared for anything a guest might want.

It's one of the fancy kinds that says I'll have results in words in three minutes.

The one thing I didn't plan for was a strategy to kill three minutes while I wait.

By the time I'm done washing my hands, there are two out of five boxes blinking at the bottom of the screen.

It seems like an hour later when it ticks over to three.

"Lily?" Elise knocks gently on the door. "Are you okay? We're still on schedule to get photos of you in your dress, if you're ready."

What am I supposed to say? *Hang on a sec while I find out if I'm pregnant?* I fully believe that each of the women in my bridal party would go through the whole ceremony with a straight face and never reveal what I had said, but that doesn't feel right.

If anybody should know I've taken a pregnancy test, it's Jameson.

There's no way to tell him without throwing off the entire day. Anybody would need time to come to terms with that news.

I shove the test into my purse. I can look post-dress. It'll be *fine*.

"No, I'm good!"

In the main room, I'm swept into a patch of gorgeous light from the window, and everybody except Julien helps lift the dress over my head and tug it down into position. My bridal party takes turns putting my jewelry on. August takes photos all through the process. Elise flutters around, making sure my hair and makeup remain flawless, and then it's time for bridal portraits.

August steps in, gently settles a section of my skirt into another position, and shows me the right angle for the portrait with his fingertips on my upper arm.

It puts me in line with a full-length mirror.

His shutter clicks, these sound barely noticeable in the background. He might be the only one who can see what I look like, seeing myself in my dress on my wedding day for the first time, because I can't look away from the dress to see my face.

It doesn't matter that I was in the room when Charlotte was working on it.

I'm *stunned*.

I look like a princess, with a full skirt and a neckline that reminds me of my favorite, dearly departed leotard. It doesn't go up to my neck, but it has the same vibe.

And the *lace*.

Black lace sleeves bleed into the black lace neckline, and it sweeps down into the ivory fall of my dress like wings.

Like I might take flight.

"This way, Lily," Julien says.

He's a half-step to August's right, so when I turn toward his voice, I end up looking at the camera instead.

August manages to take a *lot* of different photos in the space of a few minutes. With my bouquet. Without my bouquet. My hands on my bouquet. With my bridesmaids. Alone again.

"It's time," Ashley says, just as August lowers his camera and nods at Julien. They go out ahead of the rest of us.

I follow the procession out into the hall, my heart *pounding*. I need an excuse. *Any* excuse.

"Five seconds." I hand my bouquet to Elise and gesture at the bridal suite.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"I won't be gone that long."

I gather up all my skirts in my arms and rush back through the suite and into the bathroom. All I can think is *oh, God, oh, God, oh, God*.



The results are there on the screen.

I read them, know them, and shove them into the back of my mind.

Not now.

It's time to get married.

I drop the test back into my purse and rush back out. "See?" I call to Elise. "I'm right—"

"Here," someone says.

A *man* says.

He's standing in front of the entrance to the bridal suite, the door closed behind him.

I've never seen him before, but I *don't* like him. I don't like the rough look of his face. I don't like his cold gray eyes. And I *don't* like the way he's grinning at me, like he's won some game I didn't know we were playing.

"Excuse me." I pull myself up to my full height. "You need to let me through."

"Not yet." His grin gets wider. "I brought you a gift from your grandfather."



**T**here are way too many people at my wedding.

I figured the wedding party would be most of it, and we are *not*. There are eight guys up here with me, and we're all in a row, looking out at a *packed* cathedral.

"How did you find this many people to come?" I ask Mason over the ebb and flow of the chatter, which is louder than the string quartet. "I don't even know this many people."

"*We* know this many people." He stands next to me, pulling off his outfit better than I must be, Robin curled up on his chest. The baby carrier did weird things to the line of his jacket, so he's going without it. Hades and Zeus don't have their kids. They're sitting in the front row with a woman who has soft gray hair. At first, I thought she might be elderly, but she's not. Her forties, maybe? I don't know. There's a guy next to her with a scar on his face who's pretending to make Daisy's cat talk to her, and Conor lies on the floor, watching Daisy.

"How do *we* know this many people?"

"Because I invited anyone I could find who had some connection to Mom and Dad. Everyone who has a *good* connection with Phoenix. At least a hundred people are here because Zeus knows them."

"What does it matter if Zeus knows them?"

"They're gossips," Mason says, looking pleased with himself.

“Well, fuck. How many people are here because Gabriel knows them, then?”

“Two hundred,” Gabriel says from behind Mason.

“If the point is to get the word out, I guess there’s no chance we fail at that.” I’m busy looking through the pews for familiar faces. There are a few people here from my programs at NYU. A few people who squint at their programs like they don’t know why they’re here. About halfway through the guests, it occurs to me that I’m hoping to find two people who will never be here and stop looking.

The string quartet switches to some stuff that sounds like they’re warming up again, and the crowd gathered to watch me marry Lily shifts around in anticipation.

“Do you have the ring?” I ask Mason.

“Yes. Do you want to bail?”

I stare at him.

He stares back.

“No.” I enunciate every word so I’m sure he hears me. “I do not want to bail. Did *you* want to bail when you married Charlotte.”

“I did not,” he allows. “I did think I was going to have to cancel the ceremony.”

“What? Why?”

“Because my knee hurt.”

“Like...a lot?” It would’ve had to be excruciating for him to consider canceling the ceremony. He was relentlessly excited about his wedding.

“I could barely walk on it.”

“Why didn’t you say something? You looked fine when you came upstairs.”

“I *was* fine when I came upstairs.” Mason pats Robin’s back in a soft, steady rhythm.

“What fixed it?”

He narrows his eyes. “Hades came down and gave me a pep talk.”

“A *pep* talk? What the actual fuck?”

“I heard that,” Hades says from Gabriel’s other side.

“Oh, come on. I expressed mild disbelief,” I say back.

“You should have more faith,” he answers.

I give Mason big eyes. “What was the miracle pep talk about?”

He waves his free hand in the air. “How I should stop thinking about how I was undeserving of her.”

“You *are* undeserving of her.”

“Thank you, Jameson. That means a lot. That was the point of the pep talk, actually. That everyone is undeserving of a person like Charlotte. I just had to get over myself.”

“I concede. That’s a good pep talk.”

We look out at the cathedral again. Most of the guests must be inside already, because there aren’t too many people at the doors. A woman in a dark suit—one of the wedding coordinators, I think—walks across the lobby. Narthex. Whatever it’s called in places like this. She looks like she’s talking to someone, which has to be a good sign.

I give the cathedral itself another once-over. It’s nice, in a traditional way. It looks like *a wedding* is about to happen here. The light pours in through the windows on these perfect fairy-tale angles, making everybody in the pews glow a little bit with our special day.

I mean to think about it at a cynical distance, but I can’t.

It *is* a special day. I don’t see how it matters if we’re doing this to tell the world in general and Lily’s grandfather in particular that they can fuck off and leave us alone. Not the guests, I mean. They can come to the reception. Lily’s grandfather can fuck off.

The reason doesn’t matter. That’s my point. My point is that when I finally did propose, Lily said yes. I was balls-deep

in her at the time, so there's some small possibility that she was swayed by my prowess with my dick, but I don't think that's what got me over the finish line.

I think she's into me.

I think she might *love* me.

And I think I fucking love her.

I might even plain love her.

It doesn't feel very plain. It feels like sunbeams at fairytale angles through cathedrals and Lily's red hair shining in that same light and all of my siblings laughing at the same time. It feels like waking up in my old bedroom at the house I lived in with my mom and dad and knowing that everything was going to be okay. It feels like seeing an angel and realizing that the terror is part of the beauty, because when you witness something that beautiful, you're never going to be the same.

When you witness *someone* that beautiful, you're right to be terrified. Because the old you doesn't exist anymore. The old you has gone on to somewhere else.

Maybe somewhere with a green field dotted with daisies and trees in the distance and a river sparkling under the sky.

I don't know.

The string quartet goes back to the music they were playing before. I'm pretty sure that's not what they're supposed to be playing.

"Where are they?" I ask Mason, though he's standing up here without his phone in his hand, same as I am.

"I don't know." His forehead creases. "I thought they'd come in while I was telling you about my knee."

"Should we send somebody to look? Maybe Lily's knee hurts."

"It might be something with the dress. Or the makeup. I don't know," he says. "Sometimes the person wearing the dress needs more time than they think."

“I left buffer time in the schedule,” Gabriel says. “They should have had more than enough time to get her into her dress and take photos. There was even time for her hair to be completely ruined and re-done.”

“Nice,” I tell him.

“Thanks,” he says.

If Gabriel’s trying to hide the concern in his voice, he’s not doing a very good job.

“If they don’t show up in three minutes, I’m going to pretend to have a nervous breakdown,” I announce.

“That’ll be believable,” Gabriel sings.

I’m about to tell him to fuck off, but I don’t, because Remy comes sprinting through the cathedral doors, her bridesmaids dress hitched up to her shins. She’s not wearing her shoes.

People gasp as she goes by, and I hear one person—I don’t know who, and I don’t see which pew they’re in—say *Is that Natalie?* Someone else shushes them.

The string quartet stops playing. Maybe I am having a nervous breakdown, because I can hear the silence rising from where they are and going up to the ceiling of the cathedral. A pocket of empty space where sound should have been.

Remy has a piece of paper clutched in her fist. She’s shock-white, except for two red spots in her cheeks, and every second she runs toward us stops my entire heart because I haven’t seen an expression like that on her face for a long time. So long that her face flickers back into her younger self every other step. She’s seven, and then it’s now. Seven. Now.

As she’s scrambling up the stairs to us, footsteps *click* on my left.

“Hades, what the fuck?” Poseidon says.

He doesn’t answer. A door opens, then closes.

I can’t take my eyes off Remy.

She stops one step below me.

“She’s—gone.” My sister has *sprinted* here, and she’s out of breath. “Elise thought she locked the door from the inside, but when we got someone to open it, she wasn’t there. She’s *gone*.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Remy shoves the paper into my hand, and I uncrumple it.

“Lily’s gone. This was in the bridal suite.”

I can feel her staring at me, but all I can do is smooth out the paper in my hand.

*Jameson—*

*I’m sorry. I don’t want to do this. I changed my mind and I won’t marry you. I won’t be part of your coldhearted criminal life. I’ve always hated Snowballs, and I know where I belong now. Please do not come looking for me.*

*Lilith*

“Somebody took her,” I say, mostly to the letter.

“What?” It’s Mason and Gabriel at the same time.

By the time I hear the question, they’re already behind me, and I’m not turning around for anything.

I’m running to find Lily, as fast as I can go.

I’m running for my life.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Amelia Wilde** is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author of steamy contemporary romance and loves it a little *too* much. She lives in Michigan with her husband and daughters. She spends most of her time typing furiously on an iPad and appreciating the natural splendor of her home state from where she likes it best: inside.

For more books by Amelia Wilde, visit her online at  
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