

THE HENCHMEN
BOOK TWO

MAYHEM

P. MULHOLLAND

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P. MULHOLLAND

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Trigger Warnings

Dear Reader,

Please note that this Romance is Dark and contains scenes that some readers may find upsetting, including violence, explicit sex scenes, coarse language, and drug use. Proceed with caution.

Many thanks

P. Mulholland xx

1

Emaline



The last and only time I ran this fast was when a Doberman chased me down the end of my street. Once the Doberman caught up with me, it smothered me in kisses, and I distinctly remember how relieved I was. He was only playing, and I interpreted him as a threat.

I doubt the same will happen now as I run away from a fierce bear who just caught me snooping in his sports bag. Naturally, I can't run fast. I'm not running at all; it's a pathetic jog, but I make up for my lack of speed in smarts.

The first door I see, I open, slip inside a classroom block, and then walk briskly down the corridor, the shiny linoleum flooring squeaking under my cheap sneakers. I listen out for heavy footsteps from the pursuing bear and can only hear distant chatter stifled by walls. I think I'm in the Sports Science school, which is utterly foreign to me, with the walls lined with glass cabinets containing trophies, framed certificates, medals, and sports team uniforms – the Addington University colors adorned proudly. It's weird how we don't have cabinets stuffed with awards in the literature school.

I can't hear footsteps behind me, so I assume he didn't bother to follow, or maybe he couldn't leave football practice. Finding a quiet corner to catch my breath, I take out the phone that I stole, no, reclaimed from the bear's bag to check that I wasn't mistaken. I'm just that type of person who checks, then double checks, to ensure I did the right thing.

Scrolling through the contacts, I find my number and press ‘call,’ a moment later, my ringtone sounds out. I swallow back my apprehension as I peer at the name flashing on my screen from the incoming caller.

Bri.

It’s her phone, without a doubt, but why would *he* have it? Why would Aaron Leroux have her phone knowing she has gone missing?

Booming laughter explodes near my ear, men moving closer to where I’m standing, and I put my sister’s phone away in my bag and start walking down the corridor, hoping it’ll lead to an exit. The laughing men follow me, although they’re too caught up in a joke that’s thrown them into hysterics to notice me. Maybe they’re drunk or high. Either way, I need to find a quiet, safe place to figure out what I will do with this information.

Home.

The best place to be right now is home. I need to take a look through my sister’s phone, call the police, and tell Rosie about my discovery, or else I’ll detonate.

I come to glass double doors that lead to a type of gym where people are on exercise cycles wearing oxygen masks while someone monitors their lung capacity results. This is not a way out, so I turn back just as a classroom door opens, and the corridor is flooded with chatty, fit-looking students in sweatpants.

Claustrophobia is coming thick and fast as my heart pounds so hard that I have to take deep breaths forcibly so I don’t flake out. *The bear had my sister’s phone. The bear had my sister’s phone.*

The wave of students is moving in one direction, so I move along with them because moving with the flow is easier than pushing against it. I search for that imposing figure, my newfound enemy - the king.

I’m dragged into a student common room with a pool table and couches and manage to escape the human tide by slipping

into the corner of the room. Five or six students notice me weirdly lingering, but most ignore me as if they can tell I'm not part of their tribe. And they are right. I'd rather listen to Mariah Carey's Merry Christmas song played backward at high speed than listen to them talk about fitness tests and the Krebs cycle.

Once the crowd has settled, I stealthily maneuver out of the common room, back down the corridor, and decide to return the way I came. Avoiding the gaze of those who cross my path while still looking out for the Leroux beast, I spot sunlight streaming through the double glass doors of the exit down the end of the corridor and walk briskly towards it. My heart won't stop pounding, and the palms of my hands are clammy as I clench them into hot fists.

As I approach, a broad figure steps to the double glass doors from outside and blocks out the sunlight, casting a sinister shadow across the floor. My feet freeze on the linoleum as his eyes lock on mine, damp hair pressed against his forehead from his helmet. It's him. The bear.

Without a moment's thought, I turn and run as he calls my name in that husky voice that haunts me now more than ever. He sounded surprised, as if he didn't expect me to be in there, and I wondered if he wasn't chasing me after all. Perhaps the king does not lower himself to hunt but instead gets his minions to do it for him, forcing me to be extra careful with everyone who comes my way.

I briskly walk down a different corridor lined with classroom doors, trying not to attract attention. Again, it's easy for me to go unseen and breathe a sigh of relief when I finally see an exit into a courtyard where students sit on park benches to eat and chat. My escape. I eventually found my escape.

As I swing the glass door open, I briefly turn to ascertain how close he is to me, but I see only strangers' faces. That bearded man who fills the width of the corridor with his remarkable size is missing in action, and I'm not sure if this is a good thing or bad.

The cool air strikes my skin, sending shivers down the back of my neck as I pause to figure out my next move. The courtyard is closed in by buildings with only two exits: the exit I came through and a second exit opposite me. Taking another glance behind to see if the bear has reappeared to find to my reprieve that he hasn't, I walk quickly towards the doors and vanish inside the shadowy corridor.

This seems like an older part of the sport's science school with less glass and more dark corners, and as I come to the end of yet another corridor, I stall to message Rosie.

Me: AL had Bri's phone!!!!

Me: Where are u?

Me: I'm freaking out. Need to talk.

I still feel lost outside, and catching my bearings takes a few moments. The basketball stadium is to my right, and I think that's the correct direction to get back to the Boulevard and then to the main car lot where the van is. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand to find my skin is damp with sweat and ignore the ache in my thighs from all this extra exercise they're not used to.

When I spot the pavement leading back to the Boulevard, I join the steady flow of students while looking out for the bear. Finally, the cobblestones of the Boulevard are in sight, with Mr. Addington standing tall in the center, without his knitting, and I pick my pace to reach the other side.

As I pass the main library steps, my phone beeps, but I don't want to stop to check. I'll look once I'm safely back in my van, but it's probably Rosie. When I see the rusty brown van, I start running, weaving through the lines of vehicles until I finally reach my van door.

Checking behind me again, I see a bearded figure walking my way, and at first glance, I thought it was him, but I'm quick to ascertain that he isn't. Phew. I'm safe-ish.

Once inside my van with the doors locked and safely secured, I check the message on my phone.

Rosie: WTH?! Did I read that correctly?

Me: Where r u?

Rosie: Dante's until 4 pm.

Me: And yes, u did read that correctly.

Damn. I forgot she has a shift. She must be on a break, and by the time I get there, she'll be back to bussing tables again.

The bear had my sister's phone. The bear had my sister's phone.

I need to get out of here. ASAP. I can't think straight. What do I do? "Pull yourself together, Em." Starting the van, I check the rear vision mirror to see if anyone is following again, put the van into gear, and slowly back out of the car park.

2

Austin



“What are you looking for?” Griz asks as he leans over me while I type in *1970s Volkswagen van taillights* into our computer, which is almost as old as Griz himself. The department has offered to upgrade our technology, but Griz declined because he said it was a waste of money. I suspect the real reason is that he is more comfortable with ancient things and treats anything shiny and new with suspicion.

That’s why he wasn’t too keen to take me on, a failing student straight out of prison and on community service. At first, I thought he didn’t want me here because of my past, but it didn’t take long to realize that he’s a loner, an introvert who prefers to work alone than have me hanging around. As it turns out, he and I are one and the same, and I’ve started to enjoy his company along with the skeletons of dead animals.

His breath stinks of cigars, his left eye has a weird tick, and he’s a spitting image of Albert Einstein. Like Einstein, his projects come first, whereas people come a distant second. And I get that.

“Someone smashed a friend’s van, and I’m trying to find replacement taillights for a 1970 Volkswagen van,” I explain.

“I had one of those when I was a fledgling straight out of the nest,” he states and then bustles to the door. I let his words sink in.

“Wait. What?” I catch him just before he leaves our stuffy office that he doesn’t like sharing.

For an old guy, his movements are quick and often clumsy, except when it comes to handling the bones, and he's transformed into an obsessed, exceedingly cautious. There have been many moments when I've caught him staring at a skeleton with his mouth gaping, awe-inspired as if imagining it roaming the lands 10,000 years ago. Before the ice age arrived to ruin it all.

"Back in the days when I once rode the waves," his voice echoes behind him as he walks back into the exhibition area and stops to inspect a speck on the top of the skull of a human-sized extinct giant beaver, using his pinky finger to wipe the speck off gently.

"Are you saying *you* used to surf?" I chuckle as he moves out of my vision range, but I can still hear his footsteps on the polished concrete.

"Now, now," he replies in a distant voice, moving further away from the office, "don't be cynical."

The search engine comes up with zero options here in Addington, which doesn't surprise me because I'm sure I would know about it. But there is a classic car parts dealer in LA who, according to their website, has taillights for this van model and can FedEx them out. So, I sent them a message via their website, asking a couple of questions before I put the order in.

After pressing send, I sit back in the swivel chair, the newest item in this room, and my mind drifts to the stitch girl. I can see why Xavier likes her; she's easy to like with that understated charm and extreme cuteness. The way her glasses sit on that button nose, her full blood-rose lips smirk when she sees me, and her chocolate-colored hair she forgets to brush sometimes. Or maybe she doesn't look in the mirror much, which is a refreshing change compared to the selfie, mirror-loving, pouty-lipped chicks we're used to.

"Are you smiling?" I jolt forward at the sound of Griz's gruff voice and place my elbow on the desk, covering my mouth with my hand.

"No."

He snorts and starts humming a tune I've never heard of before, probably a song from the 1970s.

"If you've finished grinning to yourself, I need some help unpacking the saltwater crocodile," he tells me, as voices interrupt our conversation and Griz's thick silver eyebrows drop low over his eyes. "Is it two PM already?" glancing at the watch on his wrist.

"Yeah," I grunt because I hate the guided tours as much as he does. We hide away when the group of people comes in, but the tour guide always manages to find Griz to ask questions, which he begrudgingly answers. No one can deny his enthusiasm when erecting the exhibits and researching the animals. He's introverted and would rather stay hidden away than be the center of attention. But he's well-known for his eccentricities, and the people come here to see him as much as the skeletons.

"Change of plan," he backtracks. "You unpack the saltwater crocodile, and I'll put on a smile and greet our guests."

"Fine by me," I say as I check my emails to find the classic car parts garage owner has answered my message. The taillights look like the correct model, and I ordered them immediately using my credit card details.

While humming and hawing noises are coming from the tour group, I quickly escape from the office to the far end of the building where the loading bay is. I hadn't the slightest interest in paleontology, zoology, or even dinosaurs, but since I started working here, I get excited whenever a new specimen arrives. In this case, an Australian saltwater crocodile that we'll erect next to another crocodile species from before the ice age is twice the size. That specimen arrives next week.

I chuckle at how much I sound like a geek; maybe Stitch Girl and I are more in synch than we realize. Yeah, I'm smiling again. I can't help myself. My head is a little preoccupied with her, not that I'd ever confess it, but I got hard kissing her the other day because she tastes so sweet. Kind of like cotton candy, yeah, that's what she tastes and smells like, cotton candy. Cotton candy and knitting. Strange combination. I snort

aloud as I open the door into the loading bay, where trucks can back up to drop off the precious cargo. Three wooden crates are unopened, the skull in one crate, the body in another, and the tail in the third.

The crowbar is on the bench, and just as I grab it, my phone vibrates in my back jeans pocket.

Xave: She hates me.

What has he done now? Without asking, I know he's referring to Stitch Girl because my bro is crushing on her big time. I tried hard not to get involved and got involved anyway. Now Aaron is pissed off, and I'm close to breaking the rules myself. How can I resist? Aaron just needs to chill out for a bit. It's not like we're going to hurt her.

Me: What have u done now?

Xave: Dunno.

Me: Whatever.

Xave: Where u at?

Me: Work, bro. Is she still going to tutor u?

Xave: Y

Me: Good. She helped to get your grades up. Don't fuck her off too much.

Xave: I did nothing wrong.

Me: Sure.

The conversation falls quiet, but I know my twin brother so well that I imagine him deliberating on whether or not to tell me the truth. I predict that in approximately twenty seconds, another message will come through from Xave with his confession as to why Stitch Girl is giving him the cold shoulder.

Four...three...two...one.

My phone beeps, and I chuckle when Xave's name flashes on the screen.

Xave: She was mad when Aaron was in bed with her naked.

Me: She seemed ok afterward.

Xave: That's the only reason I can think of.

Me: I need to get back to work.

Several beats go by before another message comes through. My bro is so much more reflective and analytical than me. A deep thinker. When he was younger, we'd catch him pacing back and forth when he's got something on his mind and make fun of him wearing the carpet down.

Xave: And maybe something to do with the fact we're driving her grandparents out of business.

Me: Bingo.

Xave: Might take up ur offer if she's desperate.

Me: The solution to her problems is me.

Xave: Correction. Us.

Me: Whatever.

It doesn't concern me if Stitch Girl pulls away, as I'd hunt her down and reclaim her for my games. Even if she quit school, moved out of state, and changed her name, I'd still find her if I wanted to.

I slide the tip of the crowbar in between the slats of wood and wrench it upwards, hearing the satisfying sound of the slat of wood cracking. Then, step to the other side of the large crate and do the same there. When the lid becomes free, I forget my bruised ribs and reach to remove it, only to receive a pang of pain that penetrates from my ribs to my spine.

It was a good night. I got a little drunk and decided to hit the motocross track in the dark. Stupid, I know, but I enjoyed myself until I misread one of the jumps and fell off my bike. The worst thing that happened was that I bruised my ribs, which is no big deal. As long as my bike is undamaged, then I don't care.

As I remove the layers of protective packaging surrounding the saltwater croc's skull, I reminisce of that evening when I followed Stitch Girl in her van heading out to Demon's Cove. I have no idea why she went out in the depths of the night, as nothing was happening. I doubt she'd voluntarily attend one of our parties, anyway. So, I'm scratching my head, trying to figure out why she went there last Friday. Anyway, it was good that I spotted that old Volkswagen creeping along the road. The sound of that engine is a dead giveaway, even if you can't see the decrepit old thing in the dark.

If it wasn't for me...yeah, I don't know what would've happened.

There's raucous laughter from the gallery, good ol' Griz pulling his best work, jokes that aren't funny, but people laugh anyway because it's the legendary Griz saying them. He spins the same lines every visit, which is twice a day. The tour guide must be getting sick of it.

Once I removed the packaging from the top of the skull, I crouched down to peer cautiously at the jaw lined with ferociously sharp teeth. A killer's teeth. Caught in the death roll of a saltwater crocodile is one of the worst ways to die.

Question: Great White Shark vs. Saltwater Crocodile. Who would win?

Answer: It depends on how deep the water is.

I sense someone moving in my peripheral vision, stepping through the doorway from the gallery. I snatch the crowbar and firmly grip it in my hand. One thing I do not appreciate is being snuck up on.

Rising from the side of the crate with a crowbar firmly gripped in my hand, I get a clear look at who stands at the doorway, narrowed eyes searching the loading bay for me.

"Bro?" I ask curiously because he looks like shit. "You alright?"

Aaron glances behind at the tour group in the gallery, and I can tell something is bothering him. It's not like him to get uptight about anything. He's a chilled dude with an innate

confidence that everything in his life will always fall into place. And 99% of the time, it does. But that's not the vibe he's giving me right now, and it's leaving me cold.

“Something has gone down,” he states seriously, tensing his bulky shoulders.

Emaline



Going home is not an option because I'll be there alone, and they know where I live. So, I drove around for a while and somehow ended up outside the house we used to live in – 5 Hibiscus Crescent in Oaklands. I mean, my sister and I lived in the house with our parents when they were alive. The trees have grown around the property, and our flower garden has been removed and replaced with low-maintenance shrubs. A house that once flourished in laughter and life seems an empty shell now, as if the current owners view this house as just a place to sleep in rather than live in.

Mom and Dad were corporate accountants they met at accountancy school. It seems straightforward. Met at college, fell in love, married, and had two kids. Just like that. A life so simple and problem-free. It's not exactly a storybook romance or exciting, just two good people falling in love. I suppose that's how I thought it would happen to me—a boring yet loyal relationship.

I turn 21 next week. Yep, the ripe old age of 21, and I couldn't think of a worse time to celebrate my birthday. Not that I would celebrate my birthday, and if it slid by quietly without anyone noticing, that would suit me fine.

Dragging my eyes away from the house my sister and I used to run about in, I swipe the screen of her phone with a shaking finger and pause to decide where to go next—her messages.

I clicked the text message app and looked through to find the only messages to me not long after she departed for her fake vacation. The only slightly unusual thing here is that there are

no messages to anyone else, which could be because she prefers to use messenger apps. I checked the recent phone calls; the last call was to me. But who called me using my sister's phone? Was it Aaron or someone else?

The low-battery notification flashes up on the screen, and frustration strikes the pit of my stomach. Taking a deep breath, I click on her Instagram account and scroll through her posts, but I cannot find anything alarming. I search her direct messages, dating back to when she vanished, and most were unanswered. There are messages sent to her from names I recognize and friends I've already spoken to, all of which are messages of concern. *Where are you? Why haven't you answered my message? Have I done something wrong? You must be having a great time if you can't be bothered to reply to my message.*

There is 5% left of battery power, and I quickly click on her Gmail account, but a password is required. Dead end. The battery ran out, so I start my van to head to the Addington Police Station to speak to the officer in charge of our case.

My phone starts ringing as I drive to the end of the street, but it's Xavier's name that flashes up, so I ignore it. Traitor.

"I have learned to hate all traitors, and there is no disease that I spit on more than treachery - Aeschylus. That's right. Reap what you sow, assholes."

My phone beeps, indicating a text message, but I ignore that, too, assuming it's Xavier again. Plan. Drive to the police station and then do what? Aaron knows that I know. Oh man, my head is in a spin. Should I give him the benefit of the doubt? No. Don't do that, Em. Are you mad?

Okay, cool your jets, Em. Stick to the original plan of driving to the police station to hand in the phone. They'll be able to get their forensics team to uncover deleted messages and find out the locations of where the phone was used. Yes, that's the most sensible option, even if I get Aaron Leroux in trouble. Good, I hope I do.

There's only one logical explanation for the bear having my sister's phone, and he must've had something to do with her

disappearance. The police can interrogate him, and hopefully, he'll tell them where my sister is. It's all starting to make sense now. My sister dragged me to that awful party at Demon's Cove, then disappeared. Looking back, it seemed like set up when that guy yelled, "They're coming!" as if he was referring to police, and then, of course, no one turned up.

But then...why? Why stage the whole thing to kidnap my sister? She's not being held for ransom, or else someone would've contacted us by now demanding money in exchange for the safe return of Brielle. Thank goodness for that because my grandparents are broke.

I turn into Addington Great Road, lined with oak trees as their golden leaves cover the road and ominous storm clouds move over the city from the west. An eerie sensation crawls across my skin as I focus on the twenty-minute drive to the police station. Who would've thought the guilty people were right in front of me the whole time?

I turn the radio on, hoping it might work on a day when I need a distraction from my brain, but I'm disappointed to find that nothing but white noise comes out. As I switch it off, a chill snakes along my neck as I catch the sound of a buzzing bee caught in a web. A motocross bike.

Glancing in my rear-vision mirror, I try to spot him, but the vehicles behind me are blocking the view. The traffic flow slows as we come to the lights, and it's a miracle that I can hear the revving engine behind me over the sound of my thudding heart. I'm not cut out for this. I'm not cut out for adventure and danger, being chased by a Leroux on a bike who may want to harm me.

I brake at the red light and obsessively check the rear-view mirror for the motorbike to emerge. I can still hear the revving of that distinctive engine as if he's trying to make a point about what a tough guy he is. Yawn. Talk about attempting to make an impression.

\$30,000 to go on the butcher's block. How insulting. My hands clench the steering wheel in anger as an ache permeates my jaw from teeth grinding.

The light turns green, and the vehicle in front of me moves forward. I follow as the engine grunts, and I quickly remember that my taillights don't work, so I shouldn't be on the road when it gets dark. Even worse, I'll have to be quick, handing my sister's phone to the police in case they spot my smashed taillights and arrest me. Gramps told me not to drive the van, but the only other option was to take several buses until I arrived on campus an hour or so later.

The motocross bike revs its engine, and as the van moves forward, I can finally see the top of a black helmet and three vehicles in the rear-view mirror. For fear that they're going to snatch my sister's phone back, I hastily toss it into the glove compartment and pull my nerves together.

I'll play dumb. I can do that. I'll pretend I have no idea what he's talking about when he asks me about my sister's phone taken from his brother's bag. Wait. I don't need to give a damn reason for taking back my missing sister's phone. What am I thinking? But...then, if they're worried that I'm going to hand it into the police, they might want it back for whatever psychotic reason they had it in the first place.

Stop overthinking, Em.

My speed increases as I drive through the intersection, and the sound of the motocross bike becomes louder as it moves closer. Again, I can't see it properly in my rear-vision mirror because the vehicles in front of him block my view. The white car in front of me slows down when a kid runs in front of me, and I slam on the brakes.

I spot the motocross bike moving closer to my rear, the black helmet catching the light of the dying sun as he weaves in and out of the line of vehicles until he's right behind me. My heart hammers against my chest as the engine noise permeates every inch of my van, vibrating through the seat under me and the steering wheel held tightly in my clutches.

Keeping my eyes on the road but still trying to see what he's doing, I put my foot down on the accelerator to lose him. But...huh, who am I kidding? This van only has one speed, and it's tortoise-slow.

Naturally, the motocross bike speeds up beside the van, and my breath hitches as nerves claim the pit of my stomach. I dare not turn his way and keep my eyes on the road. There's not much I can do anyway but pretend I don't notice him. Alternatively, I could swerve the van towards the bike, forcing it off the road. No, don't do that, Em, the axle can't handle it.

Before I had a chance to devise a better plan, the motorbike overtook me and sped off in front, and I saw for the first time that it was a deep green color and not yellow like Austin's bike.

A flurry of relieved giggles overcomes me when I realize how wound-up I am. I might be out of the woods now, but it won't stay this way.

As the Addington Police Station comes into view, I decipher whether handing the phone in is a good idea. It will surely make the Leroux brothers mad, and bearing the brunt of that family's anger would be like hell on earth.

But I must do the right thing to find my sister and know she is okay.

The Bear



The red sedan is parked down her street as I cruise towards her grandparents' house. The sun is going down, casting a cold shadow across the street. I recognize the car immediately before I'm close enough to read the registration number. I'm a little confused as to why he chose this location to meet his coke buyers, as it couldn't be more middle-class suburbia. I contacted a friend in the police force to do a database check on the sedan's registration number, and it came up registered to a Gainor Legget. His mother must hate him to give him a name like that.

The vehicle hadn't been reported stolen, so it's his, and he's got a history as long as my arm for class B drug dealing, breaking and entering, and minor assault. But my contact said Legget upgraded to selling crack, yet this is hardly the crack neighborhood you'd expect.

I pull up right behind him in my SUV, which is higher than his crappy car, so that I can look down on him. As soon as he notices me falling behind him, he starts his engine and takes off. I have no interest in following a useless crook, but I can't ignore that it makes no sense that he chooses this particular street. He lives on the other side of town, so why doesn't he sell his shit there?

Talk about trash...the van is not here, which means she's not. Xave has been trying to get hold of her for the past few hours, and she's ignoring his calls. I cut the engine and turn the music up while waiting for her arrival. I need to talk to her about the

phone. I think she has the wrong end of the stick, but I understand it doesn't look good.

I might be here for a while, so I grab a protein bar from the console, my favorite flavor, black forest, and munch on the chocolate-coated bar, listening to the music. I can see in the faded light that the houses vanish in the place of woodlands down the end of the street. Maybe that's where Gainor, the crack dealer, goes to peddle his crud.

My phone chimes, and Xavier's name flashes up on the screen. I don't need to read the message to know he's likely asking if I've spoken to Applegate yet. Strange surname. A gate made out of apples.

Me: No. She's not home yet.

Xavier:

Applegate is a good girl, so I'm betting on her arriving home before dark because, according to Austin, her taillights are fucked. A white sedan turns into the street, heading my way slowly, then cruises past while the old dude in the driver's seat gazes at me precariously. Yeah, okay, so maybe I look a little shifty sitting here in this tank of a vehicle upsetting the Neighborhood Watch.

My phone chimes again; this time, it's my teammate and friend Kieran. As I open his message, a hollow, grunting engine piques my interest, and I glance in my rear-view mirror to find that it's the old van waddling towards me like a fat old duck.

I consider how to approach her since she likely assumes I'm guilty of something. She's wrong. As I wait until she's parked up the drive of her grandparents' two-story house, I glance at the message from Keiran to find that he's sent me some porn with the message *Carly Winsor*. He mentioned the other day that Tiger's cheerleader, Carly Winsor, has an OnlyFans account. And since Kieran is a dirty cunt, he'd scale the site to find her and make it go viral because he's a lowlife.

Looking at Carly Winsor naked doing shit with a wine bottle and teddy bear is not exactly my taste, so I swipe out of the

imagery to focus on Applegate. She's climbing out of her van, so I'll take the opportunity to confront her before she sneaks inside the house.

Fear flashes across her face when she sees me approaching, and I slow down and move carefully. The last thing I want is to frighten her.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" I ask her, keeping my voice deliberately quiet.

"There's no point," she snaps at me, pushing her glasses back on her nose, and I'm startled by how cute she is right now. You gotta love a good girl.

"I just want to explain," I say, hoping she'll believe me.

"I dropped it off to the police," she says, reaching for her bag on the passenger seat but keeping those wide, warm eyes behind her glasses on me. She's smart. I wouldn't turn my back on me either. She's small, and I'm a big guy who could easily break her in half with my bare hands. Not that I would hurt her in that way, but she doesn't know that.

"Good," I answer.

This makes her flinch, and worry lines furrow her brow. "Good?" she bites her bottom lip without the slightest notion of how endearing she looks.

"Yeah," now I'm confused. "Why would I be concerned that you handed your sister's phone to the police?" I stall at the sight of her stunned face. What am I missing here?

"Why..." she glances behind her at the front door, and I wonder if she's thinking about making a run for it. I can kick down that door if I need to, but I won't. "Why don't you care? Won't you get in trouble?"

"Ah, I have nothing to hide from the police, and I was going to take it to the APD myself after I informed you," I explain cautiously, as her eyes drop down to the phone clutched in my hand, and a deep frown casts across her pretty face. Curious, I take a look at why she's so entranced by my phone to find that the porno that Kieran sent me is playing, and Applegate just

received a close-up of Carly shoving the neck of a wine bottle up her asshole. Fuck, some people will do anything for money.

The rare emotion of embarrassment burns its way to my cheeks, and I waver to consider what exactly is going on here. It's not like me to be embarrassed about anything because I do not care what anyone thinks. Yet, with Applegate glaring at me repugnantly, I need to set her straight.

"Wait," quickly swiping the porno off again. I must've accidentally opened the vid when I was holding my phone. "I wasn't watching this. I don't watch shit like this."

"That's your prerogative, and I don't want to know about it," she hisses, screwing up her nose in disgust.

"I don't need to watch crap like this."

"Why? Because you can make your own personal adult movie with promiscuous cheerleaders." I suspect she's accusing me of being a manslut. The geek girl has no idea how many offers I turn down on a daily basis.

"Well, it's a little unfair to assume cheerleaders are promiscuous. How many cheerleaders do you know?" I challenge her.

"My sister," her answer brings us back down to earth again—the reason why I am here.

"About your sister—"

"She has a name," Applegate blurts, and again, I'm taken aback at how much fire there is under that bookworm exterior. I bet she's energetic in the bedroom.

"Right." I pause for a sec to try and remember. It's an unusual name, I remember that much, like Applegate's first name.

"Brielle," she answers before I have a chance to.

"It was on the tip of my tongue," I state, realizing it was inappropriate considering that she is missing. Should I apologize? Nah.

"Why did you have my sister's phone?" she snaps heatedly.

“I found it-”

“You found it? Sure, you did. Where is my sister?” Her little finger is pointing angrily at my face, and the urge to slip it in my mouth and suck it hard forces me to falter again. I suspect she’s misinterpreting my hesitation as guilt.

“Wow, you are a little spitfire,” I chuckle and realize it was the wrong thing to say because she’s firing daggers out of her eyeballs at me right now.

“Where’s my sister?” she snarls and I flinch at the hostility coming out of that little thing.

“I don’t know where your sister is,” I’m trying to keep calm.

“Liar!” Still pointing that finger at me. “Why did you have her phone?”

“I already told you I found it,” I repeat, but the look on her face tells me she doesn’t believe me.

“Where?” she demands to know.

I open my mouth to answer, but she’s distracted by an on-coming vehicle and becomes agitated.

“You have to go,” he stresses, watching the vehicle moving closer. I suspect it’s her grandparents.

“I can stay to explain to your grandparents about finding your sister’s phone,” I offer, and she answers me with a gasp and a look of horror. “Maybe not then.”

“No. You can’t be here.”

“Why? I have no problem talking to them,” I turn to greet the Goodmans in their blue sedan as it parks behind her Volkswagen van up the driveway.

“Please go,” she panics. “Now.”

I dither deliberately to make her freak out even more. “Evening,” I call out to the Goodmans as I stroll down the drive.

When I reach the curb, I look back at her as she’s anxiously trying to explain who I am. Her grandfather shoots me a

suspicious scowl, and immediately, my respect grows for him. Yeah, he wouldn't want a Leroux anywhere near his sweet granddaughter, especially since my family is why they can't afford to put food on the table.

As soon as I'm back in the SUV, I message Xavier: **can u give me Applegate's phone no?**

Xavier: Did u talk to her?

Me: Y. She doesn't believe me.

Xavier: sux

Me: Grandparents are looking rough. Need a good feed.

Xavier: Got it.

Deleting Kieran's porn vid to avoid another incident of 'accidental disclosure,' and then I start up the SUV and drive to the end of the street. I'll call Applegate later to give more details about the phone, but I can't ignore how much it annoys me that she thinks I have something to do with her sister's disappearance.

I need to talk to Kieran about Brielle. He has a thing for loud, annoying chicks, and I know they've hooked up on more than one occasion. It never crossed my mind to talk to him about Brielle's disappearance because she's not an important figure in my life. I hadn't noticed her absence until it was pointed out to me, and I only care now because I found her phone.

Applegate and her sister are different, though opposites. Brielle is one of those groupie types who hangs on the edge of our circle, laughing like a screeching hyena for attention.

Apple is someone you don't notice until she's right in front of you, and when you finally see her properly, you can't stop looking at her.

That's how it was for me when I took her home that night after Xavier slept with her. Once, I noticed that button nose, how she fiddles with her glasses nervously, and her scent. Yep, she smells real nice, sweet and fruity, picking wild blackberries on a Summer's day. I snort to myself.

“Picking wild blackberries on a summer’s day? Fuck, I’m going soft. Note to self, bro,” I say to myself as I turn the sounds up. “Do not say that aloud to anyone.”

Emaline



“The battery ran out, so I didn’t get far searching,” I explain to Gramps and Grandma, standing in the kitchen with their mouths open as I relay my day’s venture. “But I couldn’t find any red flags.”

Gramps points his crooked finger towards the front door. “Where is it now?”

“I handed it to Officer Davis. While there, I asked if he had any news, and he shook his head.” I screw my face up in frustration. “I might be mistaken, but I feel that they’re not prioritizing her disappearance and have written it off as ‘another wayward girl running away with her boyfriend’ scenario.”

Grandma tuts disapprovingly. “Don’t assume what you can’t prove. Of course, the police are working their butts off to find Bri, and maybe there are details they can’t divulge yet. Did you ever consider that?”

“I guess not,” I answer dishearteningly, still thinking about the Bear up my drive with his porno playing in his hand. Trying to convince me, unsuccessfully, that he had nothing to do with her disappearance.

Gramps heaves a tired sigh and bends down to pat Roscoe on the head. “Who was that man that you were talking to?”

Damn. I hoped they wouldn’t notice the giant towering over me standing there. Who am I kidding? Another Leroux has found his way to our home, and my grandparents won’t be happy about it. Enemy number one, according to them.

I wave my hand dismissively. “Oh, he’s just a guy from school.” Who had my sister’s phone? I won’t say the second part because the less they know, the better. Besides, if the police don’t get their asses into gear and find my sister, then I will.

“A boyfriend?” Grandma asks hopefully, and I’m a little stunned that she cannot see the obvious. That someone like the Bear in his expensive, shiny SUV and branded sweats would never date a wallflower like me. Apparently, he’s very good at football or something, not that I care. Anyway, he’s guilty of deception.

“No,” I answer swiftly.

“Where did you find the phone?” Gramps asks again. He’d previously asked this question, but I managed to skirt around it by talking about what I found on it, which was nothing.

“Someone found it. A student. They...found it lying in a garden on campus and rang my number from it,” I lie, digging myself into a hole because I know what Gramps will ask next.

“And did you tell the police about them?” Here we go.
“They’d need to interview them as well.”

“Of course.” What a wicked web we weave.

“It sounds suspicious to me,” Gramps adds as the temperature in the room skyrockets. “You’ve been trying to call your sister for the last two weeks, and her phone has been in the garden the whole time?”

“Not necessarily,” I argue. “They could’ve just dumped it there.”

“And you don’t know the person who found it?” he pushes, looking incredibly glum as if the lifeblood has been drained out of him.

“Not really.” I hate lying, but the alternative is to tell my grandparents that the Leroux have something to do with my sister’s disappearance because that will break them. They have enough to worry about. I’ll let the police do their job and interview the Bear, and they can decide where to go from

there. But while APD is trying to find my sister, I'll do my sleuthing.

I pull away from my grandparents to head upstairs to my room, partly because the guilt of lying to my grandparents is suffocating but also because I have people I need to contact about my sister's phone.

Starting with Harley Leonard. Bri's good friend and cheerleading squad member, and more importantly, she's the girl with the cat tattoo who sacrificed herself on the butcher's block. After taking a couple of deep breaths to consider what I would say to her, I swipe her number and place my phone against my ear, waiting for Harley to answer the call.

It's been a couple of hours since I saw the cheerleading squad practicing on the far side of the field, so I assume she would be finished by now. I have no idea how long it takes to practice their splits and climbing on other's shoulders routines while moving to the beat of an annoying song, but surely, they don't need the entire day.

I swipe off when Harley doesn't answer and text a message for her to call me. Next, I move on to Lauren Humphrey, who responds on the second ring.

"Emaline?" she answers, sounding concerned.

"Are you free to speak?" There's a lot of background noise, and I wonder if she's at her job in the restaurant.

"Ah, hang on one moment. I'll move somewhere quiet." Rustling and banging travels down the line before she breathlessly says, "That's better. Have you found something out about Bri?"

"Yes. I found her phone."

"Oh my gosh!" she cries out. "Where? Did you find anything else? Was there any indication of where she is?"

"Not yet. I handed the phone to police, so hopefully they'll use forensics to break into it and find more information, maybe track down a location of where it has been used," I explain as my heart sinks remembering the expression on the officer's face when I handed the phone into him. He wasn't

enthused or hopeful-looking, but when I mentioned Aaron Leroux's name, his eyebrows shot up slightly out of curiosity. But the distinct impression I got was that he already had plenty of cases to deal with, and a missing college cheerleader was not a priority.

"Oh, at least they have a lead now and..." she sighs, and I can feel her pain. She is a true friend to my sister, even if my sister is not as loyal to her.

"Can I ask you a question?" I press, knowing she'd say yes, but I feel it's polite to ask.

"Of course. Anything to help," she insists.

"Do you know anything about a cat tattoo?" I'm not giving her much to go on, but I'm curious to hear her opinion before I get Harley's. It is always important to compare information to establish who is the liar.

"Cat tattoo? Do you mean like the one your sister got?" she asks, and my stomach twists into a dirty little knot. Another fact I did not know about my sister.

"Er...where did she get this tattoo?" I ask carefully, unsure if I'm ready for the answer.

"Ah, I'm not sure which tattoo store it was-"

"No, I mean, which part of her body?" Again, I'm declaring that my sister tells me nothing.

"Oh, sorry. On the right shoulder blade, if I remember correctly. I've only seen it once, just after she got it. A few of her friends got one of the Debonaire Cat on various parts of their bodies. They asked me to join them, but I had a shift at the restaurant, and," her tone turns distant and sad, "my skin is weird anyway. I'd probably break out in a terrible rash or something."

"Debonaire Cat? I've never heard of it. Is it a significant symbol of something?" I ask hopefully, even though it's becoming blatantly obvious that this cat tattoo means diddly squat.

“It’s an exclusive club,” she answers, still sounding strained and hurt. “That some of the cheerleaders created. They’d have secret meetings at undisclosed locations by placing a sticker of the Debonaire Cat on the outside wall of the chosen location.”

That explains the Taco Bell window sticker next to Dante’s Burgers. That was a chosen location for a special meeting, even though that meeting would’ve occurred after my sister disappeared. Huh. Weird.

“What do they do at these secret exclusive meetings?” I ask.

“I haven’t been because I’m not a member,” she answers glumly. I won’t mention that she contradicted herself when she said she was invited to get a tattoo. “But from what Bri told me, it was just a massive gossip session, although she wouldn’t call it that.”

I scoff. “No surprises there.”

“Do you know who is a member of this exclusive club and how many? I mean, is it only the cheerleaders from Bri’s squad?” I ask as a man’s voice says to Lauren, “We need you for prep.”

“I have to go. But yeah, as far as I’m aware, the members were just from the Tigers’ cheerleading squad. But...you’re best to speak to Harley or someone else in the club to get more information about that.”

“Okay. Thanks, Lauren, for your time,” I say gratefully.

“Anything I can do to help,” she states, ending the call.

There’s a message from Rosie waiting when I finish, so I update her with everything I know. She’s trying to be positive to lift my spirits, but I feel so morose. At least tomorrow, I have a shift at Dante’s to take my mind off things as well as class, and... oh no, how can I forget? Xavier. We have study group in the library, so I’ll have to grit my teeth and bear it.

6

Austin



“So, are you going to tell us?” Xave asks, chucking a pillow at my head to distract me from the motocross site I was looking at online.

“What are you on about?” I ask, playing dumb and glancing at the large screen TV playing some Netflix show that I can’t be arsed watching, even though Xave put it on especially.

Aaron clears his throat in a loud, exaggerated manner, and I glimpse back at him in the kitchen, fixing our dinner of Italian takeaways, which will likely be pasta and more pasta. Fuck, I get sick of their carbohydrate-dense meals for training. Our meals are ten times better outside of football and hockey season.

“About the fucken assault, bro,” Xave shouts as if it should be obvious.

“How am I supposed to know what you were talking about? I’m not a fucking mind reader,” I spit back at him.

“Er, what happened to twin telepathy?” Aaron argues in the background. “You two used to fool Mom all the time with that psychic shit.”

“We weren’t psychic, bro,” I argue, half laughing. “We’d plan a skit to freak her out. Like that time when Xave held up a card, face down, with a shape on it, and I’d have to guess what it was. We planned and practiced it for hours.”

“And you still got one wrong,” Xave adds.

Aaron screws his face up. “Seriously?”

Xave tips his head back and laughs at Aaron. “What, bro, did you believe that?”

Aaron hurls a chicken leg across the room at incredible velocity, and Xave catches it before it smacks him in the head. “Good try, bro,” he laughs, taking a bite.

“What about all those times one of you say the other is going to call, and a second later, they call?” Aaron states, bringing over our meals.

“Oh yeah,” I grunt, “many people have that. Mom always knew when Dad would call her because she said a shiver ran down her spine a few seconds beforehand.”

“Anyway,” Xave bellows, “taking the Italian meal from Aaron’s hands. Getting back to the original question, squire Austin. What the fuck happened when you broke into that man’s house and assaulted him?”

I hesitate.

“The truth, man,” Xave presses, pissing me off. “I want the truth, only the truth, and nothing but the truth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, bro,” I say, placing my hand on my chest, feigning a look of innocence. “I was set up. I’m innocent.”

“Sure, bro,” Aaron snorts. “You were caught on camera breaking into that guy’s house.”

“Talk about caught on camera...Xave and the stitch girl on the Boulevard-”

“Don’t fucking change the subject,” Aaron hits, handing me the plate of Italian food that I’m not in the mood for. Pasta and chicken. More fucking pasta.

“She sure is purrty,” I mock, “especially with that cute woolen hat and big glasses.”

“Hand-knitted hat, might I add,” Xave says, and I crack up at how proud he sounds of the girl who won’t give him the time of day anymore because she found out the truth about what our family is doing to hers. Maybe I should increase my offer to

\$40k on the block. Banging that sweet ass is getting me hot just thinking about it. Cute thing.

“She reminds me of that Scooby Doo chick,” Aaron says as he lands in his armchair, holding his plate of food in the air so he doesn’t spill any.

“What? Do you mean Velma Dinkley?” I ask, chuckling because I hadn’t realized it before.

“Velma Dinkley is fucking hot, man,” Xave croons, swiping his phone to bring up a pic of her.

“Fucking hell, she’s a spitting image of Stitch Girl,” I agree, “apart from the hair length.”

“Total good girl,” Aaron says, peering at the image on Xave’s phone and hacking a deep laugh. “I’d do her.”

“Seriously?” I ask, surprised. Obviously, Xave is hot on her, and so am I, but Aaron? Hell, I never saw that coming.

“I like a good girl,” Aaron educates us. “Trust me, they’re hard to find. Cos’ you’ve got those girls that pretend to be conservative and virginal, but behind the scenes, they’re minxes. But her, you know, she’s genuinely kind and geeky.”

Try and ruin her, though, bro, when she won’t let us near her,” Xave hits, gazing again at Velma Dinkley with a cheesy grin on his face.

“Bro’s getting hard from an animated character,” I tease.

“Yeah, man,” Xave agrees. “The real thing is a hundred times better, though.”

“Just for the record,” Aaron starts, holding up his palm to shut us up. “I don’t want to ruin her. But our criminal brother plans to ruin her by paying to have her on the block.”

“She hasn’t taken up the offer,” I tell them.

“Em’s got class and pride, bro. She’d have to be desperate to be paid for one session in the tomb,” Xave explains as if I didn’t already know. But it gives me a big thrill to lure her into a dangerous situation, pulling her out of her self-imposed safety zone.

“That is prostitution, by the way, sonny,” Aaron puts on his fake disciplinarian tone, sounding like our father when we’re in the shit.

“There’s a line that everyone will cross for the right price,” I tell them. “It’s just a matter of finding out what that price is.”

“They’re hard up,” Aaron says. “So, maybe she’ll crack sooner than you think. Anyway, that’s not my scene. I’d rather woo her with my success and wealth.”

“You’re gonna woo her too?” Xave asks, wearing that lady-killer grin that I wasn’t fortunate enough to be born with. Nothing makes me smile these days except joking around with these fools. And her. Thoughts of Stitch Girl made me smile, especially when I watched her walk into the gallery, and that sweet face was filled with awe, gazing up at the Siberian mammoth.

“Maybe,” he answers, giving little away. “I like a good challenge.” He rubs his unshaven jaw, growing distant. “There is some weird shit going down with her sister, though.”

“True,” Xave agrees, and I nod, thinking about the night when that fucker in a sedan smashed into the back of her. What did she do to deserve that? The Volkswagen van taillights I ordered should be here tomorrow, so I will go there at night to replace them. She’s not stupid; she’ll know it’s me, but it’s another vice to lure her into my windowless lair. Stitch Girl won’t be able to help herself; it’s in her nature to thank someone who did something nice for her. I guess that’s one reason why I like her. That’s one reason why we all like her.

“You’re fucking changing the subject again, cunt,” Xave snarls.

“Who are you calling cunt, cunt?” I hit back, threatening to hurl a marinated chicken leg his way.

“Mom and Dad told me to refrain from asking what happened after you got out of the clink, so I’m breaking their pleas for my selfish curiosity,” Xavier continues to pry. “I repeat...why the fuck did you break into that dude’s house and then assault him.”

“I was going through some shit.” I’m hoping this single statement might be enough to persuade them to lay off my back.

“Yeah, I know Layne Huntsman got his tits in a tangle over that redhead chick, and you two had a fight over it,” Xavier says with a look of confusion on his face. “But what’s it got to do with you breaking into some guy’s house and assaulting him?”

I suppress the internal volcanic eruption, eager to explode fury onto my brothers. I went through anger-management training while in prison, upon request of my parents, and the best way to deal with shit like this is to walk away to cool down.

“Bro, you don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to,” Aaron’s voice is calming, recognizing my rising tension.

My appetite waned, so I dump my untouched plate of food on the seat next to me. “It was this guy, Ryan, that I’d see down at the motocross track. He was acting like a prick, always showing off and cutting people off and shit. One day, he drove this 12-year-old kid right off the track, and he broke his arm and wrecked his bike, and Ryan just laughed about it.”

“So, one night when I got pissed and broke into his house, trashed it, and when he woke up, I beat him up. And for my good deed, he squealed to the cops, and I was arrested the next day.”

My brothers remain silent, staring at me with perplexed expressions.

“Is that it?” Aaron breaks the silence. “That’s *all* you did? Go seek revenge on some lowlife who knocked a kid off his motocross bike?”

“Yeah,” I answer slowly.

“Why the fuck did our parents want to keep *that* a secret?” Xave asks. “Did they think we were going to hunt Ryan down and finish the job off or something?”

“Wait. Are we missing something?” Aaron adds, screwing his hairy face up. “Where’s the rest of the story?”

“Yeah, how drunk were you?” Xave asks.

“It wasn’t so much that I was drunk,” I begin, “but the fact that it was Ryan Hildegarde.”

Aaron’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise as Xave tips his head back and laughs.

“The mayor’s son?” Aaron snorts. “You broke into the house of the mayor’s son and beat him up?”

“Yes. He acts like an entitled cunt doing whatever the fuck he wants because he knows Daddy will buy him out of it,” I explain to my chuckling audience.

“So, that’s why they kept it from the press because our father is friends with the mayor, and his son is a known shithead,” Aaron sums it up nicely.

I nod, glancing at the door, imagining myself escaping this conversation to head to the motocross track. I have a thing for going over that track in the dark and letting my instincts lead the way over every jump and around every bend.

“Gotcha,” Aaron states. “No big deal then. So, what about the 12-year-old kid and his broken bike?”

I hesitate a second. It rubs me up the wrong way to be considered a nice guy, but the truth is that I am a nice guy most of the time. I don’t want anyone to find out about it because hiding behind a reckless asshole façade serves a specific purpose. To keep people at arms’ length.

“I organized to have it fixed for him and paid his hospital bill,” I answer quietly, feeling like a chump.

“Ah, my lil’ bro,” Aaron leaps to his feet and has me in a headlock within seconds. The dude moves fast for a fucking sasquatch while I’m trying to wrestle out of his brotherly hug.

“Fuck off,” I shout as he rubs my head hard with his knuckles. This is about as affectionate as us Leroux brothers get with each other and it’s fine by me. We don’t hug. Instead, we wrestle, punch, or rough each other up.

When my older bro finally releases his hold, and I smooth my hair back over with my fingers, I say to change the subject

once again, “So, what were we saying about Velma Dinkley?”

Xavier



When I turn around the bend in the library, I expect to see that neat package sitting there with her head in a book, nervously flipping pages. This is the usual greeting I receive from Em – bundled up nerves and trembling hands as she scans the Anthropology notes, deciding what we should revise together. It's obvious that I make her nervous, but I don't like her being so wound up that she tenses when I go near her. I need her to be soft, subtle, and receptive.

I'm not going to lie, fucking her was a dream. Nice tight hole, slippery wet, legs spread wide to receive me. I wonder if she'd take my brothers as well, either separately or together. We could teach her some things she'd never forget.

But today is different. I'm the first to arrive, and when I check the time on my phone, I'm two minutes early. This is unusual. She promised we would keep up the tutoring, even though she wanted nothing to do with me personally. I plan to change that.

Another few minutes pass, and Em arrives with her chin high in pride, avoiding my eye as she drags out the chair opposite to sit on.

"Hi," I say, breaking the intense silence, although I am turned on by her anger towards me.

"Let's begin," she says, ignoring my greeting as she hauls her books from her bag.

"I'm glad you turned up because I was wondering if you might abandon our tutoring sessions," I state, watching her as

she adjusts her glasses, looking so damn cute. Velma Dinkley cute.

She glances up at me briefly under her glasses and flares her nostrils in irritation. “Why are you smiling?” she asks.

“Because I like what I am looking at,” I croon, immediately making her feel uncomfortable as she fiddles with the page of the Anthropology textbook.

“Please don’t look at me,” she hisses.

“You’re the nicest thing in this room, though, Em, so...”

“I’m the only thing in this room,” she snaps.

“By room, I meant the entire floor of the library. No, the entire library, maybe the entire university, maybe-”

“Shut up,” she growls, dropping her head down so I can’t see that sweet little smile worming its way across her pretty face, puffing her cheeks up.

“What? No Shakespeare? No poetry? ‘Shut up’ is all you have to say to me,” I argue, pretending to be offended when I’m not.

“No. I am here because I’m getting paid by your mother. Don’t assume that I like you.” Her eyes are low as she’s talking, and I don’t believe a single word.

“I have no control over what my father’s business does with their investments, Em,” I explain, hoping it might make a difference.

Her bottom lip quivers slightly as I wait for a reply to my statement. I’m unsure if that lip quiver is from anger, sadness, or both.

“Page one four six,” she demands, opening her book at that page, still avoiding my eye.

“We also have nothing to do with your sister’s disappearance,” I add, and this time, she clenches her jaw as pure suppressed fury slides across her face. She doesn’t believe me.

“Page one four six,” she repeats in a firmer tone.

“Yes, ma’am,” I salute her, stifling a smile, turning to page 146 and then waiting for her command.

She stares at the page for several moments while her little fingers make dogears out of the paper. Em hates creased pages, yet she does this mindlessly, under a spell of stifled rage. I lean over to grab my bag, where I keep a little surprise for her, and I am about to take out the little surprise when she slams the book shut with a bang. I flinch.

“Is everything ok-”

“No,” she growls, leaning over the table and pointing her finger at my face. Boy, I’ve never seen her like this before. I underestimated what my girl is capable of. “Where did *he* find it?”

“Are we talking about your sister’s phone now?”

“Yes.”

“Just checking because you seem a little uptight right now, Em. Should we go somewhere else to talk?” my hand is resting on the box in my bag, waiting for the right time to reveal it.

“Do you blame me?” she barks, horrified. “Now tell me... where did your brother find my sister’s phone?”

This is not the right time to give her the present, so I take my hand out of my bag and lace my fingers together on the table, keeping calm. Aaron hesitated to tell her where he found the phone for good reason because it would only worsen the situation. And now I’m wondering if telling her the truth will help or hinder the situation.

“He found it in his bag,” I answer truthfully.

“He found it in his bag?” she repeats, stunned with her sweet mouth gaping.

“Is there a parrot in here?” She shoots me a black scowl, and I realize that comment was dumb. There’s nothing like the silent treatment to let a man know that he screwed up. “Yes. In his sports bag.”

“Sure. That’s where I found her phone. In your brother’s sports bag,” she stresses, her hands clenched into angry little fists. “How did it get in there?”

“He doesn’t know. He left his bag in his room at our frat house and went to collect it for practice, and while he was stuffing it with his gear, he found the phone. We don’t stay in the frat house that often, preferring to sleep in the apartment in town, so it was a few days before he returned to retrieve it.”

Her mouth is still gaping in shock, and the color has drained from her already pale face. I wait for her to respond, and after several beats of silence, I continue, “When he scrolled through the contacts, he realized it was Brielle’s phone, found your number, and called you, but you didn’t pick up.”

There’s a fleck of softness in her eyes as she recalls the phone call, except the call would be registered as coming from Brielle’s phone, not from Aaron’s. Aaron said she didn’t pick up, and he planned to call her later after practice.

“Do you want to go for a drive?” I ask, hoping that getting away from here might make her feel better.

“No,” she snaps. I can tell she’s mulling it over in her mind as she stares at a spot on the desk.

“I can take you to Landers Silo, where we can hang out and talk or not talk if you want,” I offer.

Silence. I’m starting to get jealous of that spot on the desk since she’s paying it more attention than me.

“I know things are hard for you right now,” I say softly. I want to tell her that I’m on her side. I need her to know I have her back whatever happens, but I suspect my words will fall like lead balloons if I say it now.

More silence. She’s become so distant and otherworldly that I wonder if she’s forgotten where she is and who is sitting in front of her. I enjoy the bashful geek girl who chuckles shyly, then apologizes in embarrassment whenever she quotes Shakespeare, assuming I don’t want to hear it. Of course, I want to listen to her quote Shakespeare. I hang off every last

word that rolls off her tongue. Where is my Emaline Applegate? I want her back.

The silence is killing me, so I turn to my last resort and open my bag to bring out the white box with a red ribbon and place it in front of her.

Those eyes slowly lift, and it takes a few seconds for them to register what it is. Her eyelashes ruffle behind glasses, and her brow furrows in confusion.

“It’s for you,” I say, stating the obvious, and those eyes lift to read my expression. Still, she’s confused, and I wonder if I have the wrong date.

“Isn’t it your birthday?” I ask, nodding towards the box again. “Happy twenty-first birthday, Em.”

8

Emaline



That's all it took. I am weak. I am easily persuaded. By him. That's all it took to fall to my knees and let him take me in his arms. He remembered my birthday. When everyone else was distracted by my missing sister, Xavier remembered.

As soon as I saw the gift, I crumbled under the weight of emotions. The drive to his frat house is a blur, yet climbing the stairs and him throwing me onto his bed suddenly awakens me out of this mysterious spell.

Our bodies are naked, his warm hardness against my soft, cool curves. He bought me a cupcake with pink butter icing and offered to take me out for dinner. The cupcake has been destroyed, smeared all over my pale breasts as he slowly and painstakingly licks it off. I moan at every delicate touch as the erotic sensation thunders through my body, up and down my inner thighs, circling my breasts, shuddering over my soft belly to stimulate my core, leaving me gasping.

"Wait," he speaks softly with pink icing over his chin. "I have another present."

"No," I cry out as he rolls over, completely naked, penis straight out in front of him. Those ass cheeks move like a dream as he walks to the wooden chest of drawers and opens the top one.

"I wasn't sure how you were going to react since you currently hate me," and shoots me a mischievous grin. "So, I tested the air with the cupcake first to see if you'd destroy it out of anger."

From his drawer, he takes a parcel that looks dangerously like a small book wrapped in gold paper and turns around, pausing to look me over.

“Like what you see?” I ask, imagining that I look terrible with every crease and freckle showing. The thing with being naked is the only thing you can hide is your thoughts. I cover my private areas with my hands, feeling embarrassed. Rosie’s voice echoes in my mind, *“All they want is sex; they’re not fussed about who they get it from.”* Does Xavier like what he sees? Or does he like any naked woman ready to open her legs for him?

A little moan escapes his lips as those eyes twinkle devilishly, and I wonder if I’m mistaken because he seems so genuine. “Definitely,” he croons, biting his bottom lip.

“A book?” I ask as he places a knee on the bed and leans over me, running those eyes all over my body.

“Oh, yeah,” he answers, remembering what’s clutched in his large hand. “A book.”

“Can I see?” reaching out to take it from him.

“No,” he grins, moving his hand away from my reach. “First, you do something for me.”

“What?” I’m distracted by heavy footsteps walking past the room, and I look towards the door to ensure it’s closed. It is, thankfully.

“Touch yourself,” he commands, tilting his hazelnut head to the side as smoldering hunger crawls across his face, awakening an animalistic urge inside me. He brings out the best and worst in me.

Heat rises into my cheeks, even though my skin rarely shows the color pink, and I press the back of my hand against my right scorching cheek to cool it down.

“Where?” I ask bashfully as a battle goes on inside of me between being turned on and wanting to put my clothes back on to escape out the door.

He nods his chin towards the space between my legs as his lips part, and his naughty tongue runs along his bottom lip. He's not touching me, but I long for those arms to embrace me and that mouth to claim me.

"How much do you want this book, Em?" he sneers.

"Depends what book it is?" I challenge him.

His hazelnut eyebrows flick up devilishly, and a quiver of desire travels down my spine. There he is, completely naked with a body most men dream of having and most women dream of loving, and all I want is for him to slide that big cock inside me.

"Well..." he starts, ripping the paper off the book as my mouth waters in excitement to see what he bought me. There's nothing sexier than a man holding a book. Prove me wrong. It's a leather-bound book, and my heart races in excitement. Books are wonderful, but old books are even better.

He holds the front cover up so I can read the title, but it is at arm's reach, so I can't snatch it from his grasp. "Othello," I gasp as my breath is stolen from me. It can't be. Immediately, I search for that name I know so well, and it is carved in leather, *William Shakespeare*.

"Isn't Othello your favorite?" he asks as disappointment washes over his face because he's interpreting my lack of response as rejection.

"How did you know?" I finally ask when I find my voice.

"You mentioned it once," he states, perking up, "the first time you tutored me."

I'm stunned. The first time I peer-tutored him, he was distracted and irritated with poor concentration. He kept looking at his phone impatiently and barely noticed my existence. I remember when he grunted a 'bye' as he was leaving, he glanced back at me, and our eyes connected like a bolt of lightning, and he lingered a little. I immediately brushed it off and packed my bags to leave as he walked away.

I told him I had been to my favorite play, Othello, with Rosie, put on by the Addington Uni Theatre & Dance the night

before. He barely responded when I said it, so I assumed he didn't hear or wasn't interested enough to care.

I want that book so bad that I'd do just about anything. At first, I try to snatch it from him, but he's too quick and moves his hand away with a big grin on his dial.

As if reading my mind, he repeats, "How much do you want this?"

I sigh. "A lot."

"A lot? Good. Now be a good girl and do as you're told," he quips, directing me with his eyes to the sensitive place between my legs.

This is entirely out of nature for me, so I tug on his blankets to slide underneath, but he shakes his finger at me. "No. No. It's no fun for me if I can't see it."

A little embarrassed chortle escapes my lips as I slowly move my hand to the place between my legs, as he watches unflinchingly. I place a finger on either side of my clit as an intense hunger radiates from Xavier. As my fingers move up and down, he rubs his cock with his hand grunting in desire. Tossing the book aside to use both hands, he still refuses to touch me, even though I long for him to.

We're in rhythm, even with our moaning and grunting, as he starts slapping his cock faster. "Put your fingers inside," he demands.

I do as he orders and arch my back, pushing my breasts upwards as my fingers enter my warm, wet canal. He moves closer to me, now standing right over my body as he rakes his eyes from my submerged finger to my hard pink nipples. I can hear murmurs of voices in the next room, which puts me off of my rhythm and impending orgasm.

Noticing my change in demeanor, he whispers, "Close your eyes." I'm nervous about this as I'm putting my trust ultimately in his hands, and I'm not too fond of it. I don't like being this vulnerable, but the urge to orgasm overrides my fears.

I close my eyes and focus on my impending euphoria, almost there, so close. A sigh escapes my lips when I find the g-spot and start working it as I'm serenaded by Xavier's grunting and skin-to-skin rubbing.

"Go harder," he urges, and I gyrate my hips against my fingers, striking a sweet spot. Imagining that it's Xavier's cock that I'm having sex with, even though his cock is much larger than my fingers, I increase my pace, rolling my hips, ramming harder and faster.

"I'm coming," I cry out as the brimming orgasm thunders up and down my thighs.

"Good," his voice is right over the top of me. "Keep going."

The orgasm strikes, and my breath hitches for a few seconds before the sensation explodes inside of me, and I cry out in pleasure, still working my pussy to get every last ounce of orgasm.

Warm fluid dribbles over my breasts and stomach, and I snap my eyes open to see Xavier ejaculating all over my body. This only adds to the pleasure, and I rub his juice all over me as he moans, "Babe, you turn me on so bad."

I smile at him as the high dissipates, pleased with our intimate dance. It's something I've never done before, and as soon as my inhibitions vanished, I loved it.

The floorboards creak, and I follow the sound to find a dark figure standing in the shadows by the door. I gasp in fright and immediately cover my body with the blankets.

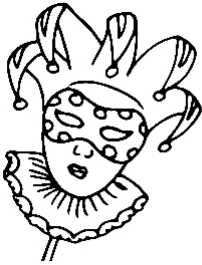
"How long has he been standing there?" I cry out, utterly devastated.

Xavier is so casual and smug as he points his thumb behind him toward his evil twin. "Don't mind him," he croons as Austin's eyes penetrate my soul with sizzling desires.

I pull the blankets up to my chin and scream at him to leave. Moving at a deliberately slow pace to torture me, Austin reaches for the door handle with his narrowed eyes glued onto my face. He opens the door and steps out into the hall, and just

when he's about to shut the door behind him, he says, "Fifty grand?" and slips away from sight.

The Bear



Pumping iron with the boys from the Tigers, pretty boy Royce Huntsman walks in. We'd never be friends because there's too much family baggage behind us, but at least we're courteous enough to get along for the team. Even though we've fought some mighty battles and punched the living shit out of each other, it's like we've hit an age where we can't be arsed with it anymore.

He nods his chin to acknowledge me, and I cock my eyebrows back at him. The non-verbal conversation ends there, not that it's a conversation. He goes off to hang with his bros, and I hang with mine.

"Ready?" Kieran says as he stands over the barbell to spot me. I lie back and wrap my hands tightly around the bar. There's an analytical conversation between two of my teammates about the game last week and I zone out a little to the sound of their voices. Pushing the weighted bar up, the burn travels through my biceps. It feels good. The pain is good. After several pumps, sweating like a fat trucky at a peepshow, Kieran and another teammate, Kody, take the barbell off me and place it on the rest.

"We up for another gig at the tombs?" Kody asks as he starts to remove the weights from the bar.

"Yeah, I'm in," Kieran states.

"You're always in," I sneer, rising to my feet to look at him directly in the eye. "And stop fucking sending me porn shit."

He chuckles. “C’mon, bro, it’s healthy. Besides, Karly with a K was a special breed of entertainment.”

I screw my face up. “Interesting choice of words.”

“She’s here now,” Kody adds, nodding towards the far side of the gym. As I turn my head, someone else catches my eye. The entire west-facing wall is one-way glass where we can see out, and the people outside can’t see in. Emaline Applegate walks with a backpack slung over her shoulder, hugging a thick book, while her eyes are low and distant. There’s not a single flashy thing about her, as if she wants to travel through life without being noticed. But I notice her now and can’t stop looking at her.

“What’s so funny?” Kieran asks, following my gaze and seeing only an understated geek girl with glasses.

“Nothing,” I answer, slightly perplexed as she disappears out of view.

“You’ve got a big grin on your face,” he adds, and I attempt to stifle my annoying grin by rubbing my hairy chin with my hand. I consider stepping out and catching up with her, but I’m not sure she’s ready to have a conversation with me, let alone have a coffee at the local café. Maybe I’ll allow her to go. For now.

I’m about to focus back on the weights when a lanky dude quickly walks by on Applegate’s path, eyes fixed in her direction. I haven’t seen this guy before, and I can’t tell if it’s her he’s watching, but something rubs me up the wrong way about him.

I grab my towel, pat the sweat off my face, and start walking to the exit.

“Bro, where are you going?” Kieran calls after me, “I need you to spot for me.”

“Hang on, I’ll be back,” I yell back, and my feet start jogging as a weird swirl of panic stirs in my gut. I have to get to her before he does. But then the logical side of my brain wonders if I’m overacting because she’s a sweet thing. There is only one way to find out.

Unfortunately, the nearest exit is on the opposite side of the building. Therefore, I'm traveling in the direction that she's going in, so I'll have to run faster to catch up to her. I swing the glass door open, turn around the bend, and jog past the window she just walked past, where Kieran and Kody are probably standing there watching me in confusion.

I come onto the campus gym car lot and immediately spot the lanky guy hot in pursuit of Applegate, heading towards her van. I can see the top of her chocolate head over the rooves of parked vehicles as she stalls and looks back at the lanky guy who ducks behind a sedan.

I increase my pace to grab him just before he snatches her. When I'm only a few away from him, I make a sharp turn left in the opposite direction to Applegate and don't look back at Applegate once. I chuckle in relief but am also surprised at my reaction to seeing her in possible danger and wonder if I'm crushing on her a little. I definitely want to rail her, but crushing on a girl is a different story altogether.

I hesitate to consider if I should approach Applegate, then decide to turn back to the gym. Glancing toward the lanky guy, I notice him pausing at a car to unlock it, then climbing inside.

Hang on. I notice the roof of the sedan is red. I jog closer to get a look at the registration number just as he starts the vehicle up and backs out of the park. I catch sight of the numbers and grit my teeth. It's that crack dealer that's been parking down her street.

The distinctive sound of Applegate's rust-bucket van starts up, and I glance in her direction to see if she's looking this way. But due to the glare on her windscreen from the sun, I can't tell if she notices me or not.

As the red sedan starts backing out of the car park, I rush to the driver's door and open it before he can lock it. The guy's mouth gapes in horror, and I get to see what he looks like close up, and it's not pretty – missing a couple of teeth, gaunt, hollow cheeks, needs a good meal.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snarls at me.

“We need to have a little chat,” I demand. “Get out of the car.”

“Fuck you,” he hits, then puts his foot to the floor, and the car flies backward out of the park, and I’m thrown back against the sedan parked next to him. He swings the car around and slams the door shut, and I run after him as he speeds forward. Luckily, he can’t drive too fast in a parking lot and has to slow down again when he reaches the bend. Applegate is driving towards the exit in the opposite direction, so hopefully, she hasn’t seen us, but I’m running out of options. I don’t have my car keys, so I can’t follow him in the SUV, so I either let him go and risk something happening to Applegate or deal with him now.

Luckily, a car pulls out of a park, forcing him to stop. This gives me the opportunity I need, so I arrive at his passenger door and try the handle, but it’s locked. Smart guy. In my frustration, I punch the window, and it smashes into a thousand pieces all over the passenger seat.

In a panic, he reverses without checking what’s behind him and plows into an oncoming vehicle. His engine stalls, and I can see he’s completely freaking out now, trying to get it started again.

I walk casually to the passenger side, where I’d smashed the window, unlock the door, and let myself in.

“There are two ways you can deal with this. Either we go for a chat, or I make your life hell? Which do you choose?” The guy is avoiding my eye, looking everywhere but at me. His hand is on the door handle, ready to flee as the owner of the vehicle he smashed into approaches the car to talk.

“Fine,” he grunts.

“Good. I’ll buy you a meal because you look like you need one.”

“I’m not insured,” he states unsurprisingly, just the owner of the smashed vehicle taps on his window. “And I can’t go back to prison.”

I heave a sigh as the owner becomes increasingly distressed at the lack of response from Gainor Legget. “I’ll sort it if you tell me why the fuck you’re following Emaline Applegate?”

The owner of the smashed vehicle taps on the window again as someone jumps on the car horn behind us. It’s making Legget jumpy as he tugs at the collar of his hoodie.

“You better tell me, or else she,” pointing to the owner of the smashed car behind, “will call the police.”

His hesitation is frustrating as his eyes dart back and forth as if he’s plotting an escape. But I know this vehicle is registered to him, so they’ll catch him up anyway. “I’ve been hired to follow her,” he finally confesses.

“That wasn’t too hard to admit, was it?” I answer, trying to coax him on some more. I’m not sure if I believe him because if I were going to hire someone to spy on an individual, I wouldn’t hire an unreliable drug addict or crim who drives a red car. “Who hired you and why?”

The owner of the smashed car bangs her fist against Gainor’s window, and he almost flips out.

“Wind your window down,” I instruct him. “We need to get rid of her.”

The lady is older, maybe a staff member, but once the window is down, she goes off on a rant.

“Alright,” I try to calm her down. “I’ll give you my details and pay for the damages.” She immediately calms down, and I reluctantly give her my name and number, and she adds them to her phone.

“Leroux?” She takes a closer look at me. “From the Tigers?”

“Yeah.” I’m not in the mood to talk about the team and playoffs.

“So, I know you can afford to pay,” she says. “I’ll email you the invoice once I’ve taken it to the garage.”

“That’s fine,” Gainor stares at me with that toothless mouth gaping.

Once she's gone, Gainor says, "You're a Leroux?"

I flick my hand dismissively. "Forget it. Now tell me who hired you and why?"

"I don't want to get anyone in trouble," he stutters, tugging his collar again like it's choking him.

"That's honorable of you," I say sarcastically, knowing he's thinking more about himself getting hit for snitching on his boss. "Now tell me who hired you."

He hesitates, tugging on his collar and scratching at his forearm.

"Speak," I blurt. "What company?"

"AA Security," he mumbles.

"What?" I didn't expect him to say that. "A security firm hired you to watch Applegate?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. They told me to follow her discreetly and take notes, so I do."

"Hang on." None of this makes sense, but "Did you say AA Security?"

"Yes," he snaps impatiently.

I'm almost 100% sure Robert Huntsman owns AA Security as part of his increasingly extensive portfolio. Maybe I'll ask Royce to do a little digging for me for a price because he won't do it for free, not for me anyway.

"So, you have no idea why you're hired to follow Applegate?" I persist.

"They just said, look out for something weird, like someone following her or something," he rattles off under a haze of slurs and mumbles.

"Following her? What? Do you mean to tell me you've been hired to protect her?" I'm stunned.

“Well,” he waves his hand about, “sort of. Not like physically, but make sure no one bad is about.”

“Have you seen any shifty behavior around that family?” I ask.

“Yeah, a couple of times, but I reported it to AA, and they did something about it.”

“What did you see?” I inquire inquisitively. She can’t have that many enemies.

He clears his throat. “A white van pulled up, and some guys got out and peered through the windows of her house. They did this on two separate occasions. I took the registration number and rang AA.”

“Did they break in?” I ask, rubbing my beard with my fist to calm my frustration. I’m not frustrated at Gainor, but the entire situation stinks.

He replies, “No. And no one was home, so even if they did break in, no one would get hurt. But another time, the same van was parked outside Goodman Hardware store. They were there for two or three hours.”

“Right. And you have no idea who is after Applegate and her grandparents?”

He shakes his head.

“And you don’t know who hired AA to watch over Applegate?”

He shakes his head. “I’m not given any details. But, you know, it has to be someone who cares, right?”

“I guess,” I answer, but if I were going to hire security to protect a loved one, I’d want the best, not a crack dealer.

“Alright. Thanks.” I reach into my pocket and realize I’ve left my wallet in the gym. “I have to get my money to pay for a meal.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he sniffs, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “But it looks like I’ll need a new car now.”

I roll my eyes and resign. “Fine.” It was partly my fault that his car is now a write-off.

Emaline



Sleep came eventually after lying awake for hours thinking about my sister, her phone in The Bear's bag, and then... Xavier. Let's say he caught me at a weak moment when everyone forgot my birthday, except Rosie, who bought a chocolate fudge cake her mother made that we pigged out on until we were sick.

My grandparents forgot, and even though my birthday has passed, I haven't got it in my heart to remind them. Who cares? It's only one birthday missed, and plenty more birthdays will come in my incoming years as an adult.

Brushing my hair as I stand in front of the mirror in my bedroom, I look my body over, my plain features, glasses, and hair that need brushing constantly, or else it forms a bird's nest. There is no redeeming feature here to attract one Leroux, let alone two or maybe three.

Immediately, the evil twin's smug face appeared in my mind as he watched me masturbate on Xavier's bed. How long was he there for? And why did Xavier think it was okay for him to be there? I let myself go, releasing my inhibitions because I felt I was in an intimate setting between me and Xavier.

I drop my face into my hands and rub my eyes underneath my glasses. The embarrassment is still fresh, but I cannot deny the heat and desire in his eyes. Does he want me so much that he's prepared to pay for it?

"What the hell am I saying?" I scold my reflection in the mirror. "That's prostitution, dipshit. Don't romanticize over

that offer, Em.”

Reality slides back in, bringing me down to earth, and I check my phone to see if the police have contacted me since dropping off my sister’s phone to be analyzed. And unsurprisingly, there’s no message from them so far.

I grab Dante’s polo-neck shirt that’s draped on my bed to put on, and naturally, I glance out the window to see if the red sedan is there. It’s not, and I’m relieved. I thought I saw it when leaving the uni parking lot yesterday, but I couldn’t catch the registration number. Unfortunately, every red sedan looks like the guilty one.

My eye travels over the small leatherbound Othello book on my bedside table, and my fingers run over each letter of Shakespeare’s name. There couldn’t be a more perfect gift for me, and he knew what would make me smile. He knew. I thought he hadn’t noticed those things about me, the little things, or maybe they are big things, but it certainly has changed my perspective of Xavier Leroux. He’s a tricky devil to dislike.

“Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.”

I roll my eyes at my nauseating soppiness, sinking quickly into a place of romance in my heart. “Who said anything about love? I’m sure Xavier is not capable of love. Let alone his brothers.”

Slipping on my Dante top, I throw a sweater on, drape my buttoned jacket over my shoulders, and then go downstairs to an empty kitchen and living room. My grandparents have already left for Goodman’s Hardware store, and I’m greeted with a silence that I’d typically be perfectly happy with, except today. Today, the emptiness and stillness sit heavily in my heart, dragging me down. I’ll be happier once I get to work and see my bestie. I’ll be far too busy serving and waiting tables to stew over my agonizing plights, which will be a relief I welcome.

Two slices of toasted bread are on the table and the kitchen smells of fresh coffee. We’re almost at the end of the grocery

box the Bear gave us, so I might have to take more money out of my savings account to buy some healthy, decent food. It was nice while it lasted, but I won't accept any more charity from that family.

I butter one piece of toast and take a bite, tasting nothing and forcing an appetite, but I understand my body enough to know that I must keep my energy levels up for my shift at work.

After three bites of the toast, I toss it down, unable to stomach it anymore. The embarrassment of Austin seeing me stretched out on the bed, plus my missing sister and my grandparents' money problems, has my stomach in knots. Pouring a mug of coffee, I take a sip and spit it out, finding it utterly repugnant. I usually crave coffee, but not today. Today is the beginning of the end of my ability to enjoy life.

I'm about to head back into the living room when a spot of red in the trash can catches my eye. It's virtually empty, apart from a couple of balls of screwed-up paper, and one of the balls is a white envelope. I take it out of the bin and flatten it on the table to find it stamped with red ink URGENT.

The logo and company name is Bauer, a German brand specializing in power tools. This is another of Goodman's Hardware store suppliers, and I'll bet all my adult teeth that this envelope contained an overdue invoice. Those are two suppliers that I'm aware of that my grandparents owe money to.

Curiosity pulls me to the second ball of screwed-up paper to find a grocery list meticulously itemized in my grandmother's handwriting with the cost of each item listed next to it. I count 14 items on the list, and almost half have been crossed out. I can only assume that she doesn't have enough money to buy all 14 items.

This puts me in a predicament because Grandma hates it when I acknowledge a money shortage by paying for food. She's a very proud woman, my grandmother, and the last thing in the world she will admit is that they're struggling financially.

I fold the grocery list and slide it into my jeans pocket as I go into the garage to see if I can find a stray overdue invoice. Walking along the narrow path through piles of boxes and old furniture, I come to Gramps' old toolbox, drag open the top drawer, and then slip my hand inside the narrow space to feel for paper.

There's nothing in the top drawer, so I close it and move on to the next drawer. The toolbox is old metal, dented, and smells of grease, so the drawers aren't easy to pull open. The wind picks up as I slip my hand into the next drawer, and the garage creaks, sending my heart into a temporary shock. Once my heart rate has calmed, I chuckle at how jumpy I am these days. I was never cool, calm, and collected - the antithesis of an easy-going person, but I was never this uptight until the red sedan started appearing, and then my sister vanished.

There is nothing in drawer two, so I move to drawer three with the sense that I will not find anything. The overdue invoice I discovered here was likely shoved in to hide it from me when lingering about. That's my guess, anyway. The best place to look would be in their office outside the Goodman's Hardware store.

After several more minutes of searching and finding nothing of interest, I head back inside to grab my jacket, wallet, and van keys. As I walk to the doors to check that they're locked, I look at my phone for messages to find two left by Gramps. Because there are *two* messages from him, I smile as I imagine that he and Grandma just realized they forgot my birthday and filled my inbox with guilt-ridden apologies. Sadly, I am wrong.

Gramps: How much did it cost to get them done? Where did you find them?"

Gramps: I'll pay half. No excuses.

"What is he talking about? Did he read my mind when I took the grocery list to buy the food? Even though he's several blocks away." Slipping my phone back into my jacket pocket, I open the front door and cautiously check to see if the red

sedan has turned up again, and luckily, it hasn't. Then I close the door behind me and walk to the van.

My feet stop dead when a strange shiver runs down my spine. Perhaps it's instincts or me being paranoid, but something doesn't seem right with the van, yet I can't identify it. In my rational mind, the van looks normal, yet I can tell it's been tampered with, and that's before I open it.

I peer through the window into the front seat and can't spot anything out of place. Then, I step back from the van to take a more comprehensive view of the side and start strolling around it, returning to the driver's side again. Unlocking the door and opening it, I immediately smell a faint scent of cigarettes that forces me to pause.

"Hang on a second," as it dawns on me what has changed, and I walk to the back of the van again—the taillights. The taillights aren't smashed anymore. No, I mean...they've been replaced with new ones. How?

I climb into the driver's seat and grab my phone to re-read Gramps' messages.

Gramps: How much did it cost to get them done? Where did you find them?"

Gramps: I'll pay half. No excuses.

Me: R u talking about the van's taillights? No need to pay half.

I bet it was the evil twin once again, breaking into my van to do nice things for me. Damn him. I don't have time to hunt him down to scold him for his unnecessary act of kindness, so I put the van into gear and back out of the driveway to head to Dante's for my shift.

Parking in my usual spot out the back of an abandoned clothing store, which has been recently sold and will likely be converted into another franchise restaurant, killing the unique vibe of the street. Only three or four restaurants are local creations now; the rest are popular brands bringing processed food. For all my boss' shortcomings and grumpiness, at least he's got a great product.

Boss is there to greet me at the door, and before I have a chance to say “hello,” he blurts, “I need you in the suit,” and I groan a reply.

“Yeah, yeah. I don’t pay you for your bad moods,” he calls after me as I walk through the restaurant to the hall that leads to the staffroom.

Rosie is drinking water out of a bottle when I walk in and bump fists with her. “You’ll never guess what happened with my taillights?”

“Don’t tell me...they were miraculously healed,” she says after swallowing.

“How do you know?” I ask curiously.

She shrugs her narrow shoulders. “What else could it be?” Jeremy, the cook, walks in looking worse for wear than usual, eyes sunken in and hair greasy.

“You look bad,” I tell him.

He grunts as he cracks open an energy drink can. “Didn’t Shakespeare say, Die young and leave a pretty corpse or something?”

“No,” Rosie and I answer together.

“Okay, so maybe a rockstar or someone said that. But anyway, that’s how you live,” he slurs in between sips of his caffeine-rich energy drink.

“No,” I argue, “that’s how you die. It’s not how you live. You are actively and deliberately accelerating your death.”

Rosie shoots me a cautious frown. “Bit over the top, Em.”

“Oh. Really?” I pull back and bite my tongue to stop myself from saying more. Perhaps I’m being too harsh and judgmental and hardly a saint anymore—no thanks to the Leroux’s. I enjoyed my sainthood while I had it.

“You’re projecting again,” Jeremy states as if my words barely touched the sides. “Just because you never let go and have any fun.”

“Yes, I do. I often have fun. I had fun recently when Xav-”

“Get to work!” Boss bellows from the hall, and I immediately grab Dante the Dinosaur’s giant body costume and start pulling it on.

Austin



Aaron: Pick up some burgers from Dante's for dinner.

Me: What about the training diet?

Aaron: No worries.

“Is Velma at work today?” I shout out to Xavier as he’s shooting hoops. It’s fucken cold, and sleet is falling, but it’s better to be outside in the fresh air than be inside in a crowded room. One of his mischievous grins stretches across his dial, and I roll my eyes. He doesn’t even know he’s doing it. Fuck, it’s sickening the way he crushes on her.

“Dunno,” he answers. “I don’t know her schedule. Why?”

“The bro wants some burgers for dinner,” I tell him, and he perks up.

“Only one way to find out,” he says, bouncing the ball on the wet court, and the banging sound echoes through the empty spaces.

“I’ll let you do the honors of ordering the food at the counter so you can get your rocks off,” I tease. Even though the thought of a warm burger and fries served by a cute geek girl is a turn-on, I won’t tell my brother that. Burgers and geek girls go hand-in-hand.

That grin widens even more, and I want to vomit on my shoes. “Where is The Ron,” Xavier asks, screwing his face up.

“Buying a car,” I answer.

“The fuck? Why does he need another car?”

I shrug my shoulders. “He never went into great detail but said he had an altercation with a guy who doesn’t have insurance.”

“Whose fault was it?” he asks, just before he makes a jump shot and misses.

“Aaron’s, I guess, since he’s buying the car,” I assume. I have no idea. “Are you done? My arse is getting cold sitting here.” I’m getting a ride home with him since my only transport is my motorbike. The off-road tread is not the best on slippery surfaces such as icy roads.

Ignoring my question, “How long will you work for that old guy in the gallery?”

“Until the end of the year,” I answer dejectedly. I enjoy that job and would love to stay on even without pay. I’ve been told by a couple of people that I’m the first person Griz can handle working with since he’s a recluse. It’s because I know how the man operates. He has a strange sense of humor that some may find offensive, but I enjoy it, and he smells weird sometimes, among other things. But I appreciate his eccentricities while giving him loads of space to think and plot out his plans and make decisions, only for him to change his mind five thousand times later.

Xave hurls the ball my way, and I catch it with one hand and feel a crick in my ribs, suppressing a cringe in pain. My ribs aren’t 100% healed yet, still bruised and tender, and sometimes I’d forget and accidentally wrench them, causing pain. I’ll survive. I always do.

“Let’s go, dude,” I shout to Xave as I throw the ball back at him, and he catches it, swings around, and tosses it into the hoop.

“Score,” he bellows grinning, as I start walking away from him towards the car lot. The sleet burns my face as we step into it, and I pull my hood over my head to shield my eyes from the cold. These days, we spend most nights in the apartment in town because the frat house is too rowdy and stinks a little.

“You know it was her birthday yesterday?” Xave says as he catches up to me, and I know exactly who he’s talking about since he doesn’t talk about any other girl. So, it has to be Velma.

“Really? Did you get her anything?” I ask, reminiscing about that moment when I watched her finger fuck herself until she blew into a thousand pieces on Xave’s bed.

The scent of her, the look of her. Fuck, she’s one sweet thing that I want to get on my cock. I made her an offer that she’s yet to take up, but I know she will. There will be a point when she has no choice because the money has run out, and the only place she has left to go is me. I’ll be waiting.

“Yeah,” he answers in a tone as if it should be obvious, and I cringe.

“What? All you got her was a turn in your bed?” I mock. “That’s screwed, cheapskate.”

“Nah, bro,” he says, whacking my arm, “I got her something special and a cupcake-”

I grunt a reply smugly. “Is that the one smeared all over her?”

“Yeah,” he chuckles, “we made good use of that. Nah, I mean, I hunted down a collector’s edition of a book.”

I pat him on the back, feeling proud of my bro. “Geek girl loves books.”

“Yeah, but this was a Shakespeare play, worth a fucking bomb, but she’s worth it,” he states, saying the last part behind his hand as if he surprised himself by admitting it aloud.

It crossed my mind that maybe I should get her something, but I’m not as close to her as Xave is. Not yet, anyway. And I wouldn’t know what to give her anyway. “Did she like the book?”

“Fuck yeah. She was aching for it. That’s why I made her play a game before she got it,” he chuckles, and I roll my eyes.

“You mean...bribe her?” I cackle as we walk through the vehicles in the car lot as heavy gray clouds darken the day.

“It was a simple case of finding the boundaries to see how far she’d go. She took the bait, even though I would give her the book anyway, whether she played the game or not,” he explains unabashedly.

“You’re a star, bro,” I laugh sarcastically, thinking I’m not much better than him. I’m bribing Stitch Girl, too, in my sordid way. When she’s desperate, she’ll come crawling to Papa.

We arrive at Xave’s vehicle, and just as he unlocks the car, he makes a face when something catches his eye over my shoulder. “Who is he talking to?”

I follow his gaze, squinting in the sleet to find big boy Aaron talking to some skinny guy, hugging himself in the cold because he’s not wearing enough clothing. “Dunno,” I answer. I can’t get a look at him, but by how he dressed and built, I’d say he’s not one of Aaron’s regular gym or football buddies.

I’m not interested in who Aaron is talking to since he’s an adult; he can look after himself. I’m more interested in getting inside to the warmth and wrapping my hands around a mug of hot chocolate. Hopefully, I’ll pick one up at Dante’s, served by Stitch Girl.

Xave sends a message to Aaron, asking what he wants from Dante’s before he starts his car up, then slowly drives out of the car lot.

“I offered to take her to a nice restaurant for dinner,” Xave says after several moments of silence, driving steadily along the road from campus to Addington City Center.

“Let me guess you’re talking about Velma again,” I mock, even though I don’t mind. She’s a good topic of discussion, probably because she’s so different from the girls we usually associate with. Velma lacks the try-hard pick-me nature that has grown increasingly tiring, a one-trick pony narrative with these girls. They hang on to our circle because they gain something from it: popularity or contacts. I’m bored with it.

“Yeah, of course,” he states, and I crack up laughing. “Dinkley the cutey.”

“Dude, you’ve got it bad. Kinda making me a little nauseous,” I joke, rubbing my stomach. “Don’t know if I can stomach a burger after all.”

“Harden up, dude. That’s what women do to you sometimes,” he croons. “They make you happy. One day, you’ll know.”

“She’s not even talking to you because you’re a Leroux who’s actively destroying her grandparents’ business.” I bring him back down to earth. “She has said on more than one occasion that she wants nothing to do with us. It seems like she changed her mind yesterday when you gave her that Shakespeare special edition. And today, she might hate us again.”

“Probably,” he scoffs. “But then I’ll just use my charm, compliment her knitting or something.”

“Compliment her knitting. Never thought I’d hear the day when you say ‘compliment’ and ‘knitting’ in the same sentence, bro.”

“Me neither,” he says, quite innocently with his brow furrowed.

The sleet had cleared when we arrived at Dante’s, but it’s still damp and cold. Outside, the giant green dinosaur is dancing with a little kid wrapped tightly in winter clothes, and I pause for a second to take the sight in. That dinosaur is a beacon for tricksters and shitheads to poke fun at, but whoever is hiding inside of that thing seems to take it in their stride.

I smile to myself as the little kid is screeching in joy, playing with the lofty, clumsy dinosaur as the second kid, slightly older, grabs hold of the dinosaur’s tail. It looks like a disaster waiting to happen.

We step inside the warm restaurant, and the scent of fries and grilled burgers greets us. Naturally, I search for Stitch Girl. Quickly realizing that she’s not here, I step up to the counter and glance back at Xave, who’s casting his eye along the seated area, looking for her as well. He seems disappointed.

“Can I take your order?” the girl behind the counter says. I think that’s Stitch Girl’s geek friend. Not sure what her name is.

“Rosie?” Xave asks carefully.

“Yeah,” she answers coldly, then glances up at me nervously. I don’t mean to make her nervous, but I think when word got around about me being released from prison, people started treating me differently. In a way, it did me a favor since I’m not a naturally friendly guy. If they keep their distance, we’re good.

“Is Em here?” Xave asks hopefully.

“Yeah,” Rosie answers and points her finger to the window. We both swivel around, expecting to see her, only to find a restaurant full of diners and that giant hairy dinosaur outside.

“Is it her turn today?” Xave asks as I still search the restaurant for her.

Rosie nods as her cheeks turn pink. “I don’t think she wants me to tell you she’s in it. It’s a sensitive point for us both.”

“Okay,” Xavier answers as if he completely understands while I’m still in the dark about what they’re discussing.

“Can I take your order?” Rosie repeats as her boss hovers nearby and gives her a sharp look. Xave gives her our orders, and then I interrupt and ask for a hot chocolate.

We find a seat by the window, but Xave doesn’t sit down. Instead, he heads outside in the cold. I observe him carefully, curious to see where he’s going, first sidestepping a group of students running inside the restaurant to escape the weather. A wide, goofy smile stretches across his face as he stops in front of the dinosaur and peers inside the mouth, and it suddenly occurs to me where Stitch Girl is hiding. She’s hiding in plain sight. Genius.

I can’t help but chuckle at the sight of my twin bro chatting to the big plush dinosaur, so I take out my phone to snap a shot just before he pulls away from her.

“Dude,” he says as he approaches the table, “she wants to talk to you about something.”

“What?” I ask, even though I can guess her latest problem with me.

He shrugs his broad shoulders and takes the seat opposite me. “Didn’t say.”

I fake a groan while smiling internally. I’ll have it out with a giant green dinosaur in the middle of a busy street. I pull my hood over my head before stepping back into the cold and make a beeline towards the beast, stifling a smirk because it’s just so fucking funny.

“Nice hat,” I tell her when I arrive at her big feet. “Matches your tie.”

“Did you replace the taillights on the van?” she exclaims, cutting to the chase, pointing her big green hand at me.

I cup my ear, trying so hard not to crack up laughing, “Sorry, I didn’t quite catch what you said.”

“Liar,” she growls.

“Speak up,” I insist, even though I can hear her perfectly.

“The taillights,” she shouts, and I glance behind me to see if anyone else heard because she was so loud.

“Yeah?” I cover my smiling mouth with my hand so she can’t see how much I’m enjoying this.

“Did you replace them?” she asks again.

“I like this look,” I answer, wiggling my finger at her, “it suits you.”

“The van,” she shouts again, followed by a frustrated growl. “The taillights have been replaced. Did you do that?”

I slide my hands into my sweatpants pockets. “Now, why would I do that for?”

“Because you fixed the dents,” her voice trails off as doubt seeps in, and that’s because I haven’t admitted to any of it. She’s just guessing.

“Nice try,” I hit. “I’m too busy to do shit like that. But I’m glad they’ve been replaced because driving around without them is dangerous. Especially at night.”

“How much did it cost?” she asks, refusing to buy my lie.

“I have no idea,” I croon convincingly. “I mean... to find taillights for a van of that age and model wouldn’t be easy. It’s not my style to go to that amount of effort for someone I barely know.”

She falls silent and slightly turns that plump body away from me, and I wonder if I hurt her feelings. I didn’t mean to. I don’t want a big deal made from it.

Xavier appears next to me with the brown paper bag of food as Em steps a few feet away from us as if she is sending the message loud and clear that she wants me to go.

As we’re walking back to Xave’s car, he says, “Why didn’t you tell her the truth?”

“What truth?”

“That you ordered the fucking taillights from a specialized classic car parts dealer, then went to her house in the middle of the night to fit them on the fucking van,” he says in a scolding tone.

“You got proof of that?” I state.

“Fuck you,” he spits.

Xavier



Aaron takes an enormous bite of his burger as we wait for him to finish his sentence about the crack dealer being hired to watch Em and her grandparents.

“Hurry up, dude,” Austin barks, tossing a fry at Aaron’s hairy head.

“Thought you didn’t care?” I argue with him.

“I don’t,” he snaps unconvincingly. “Just to clarify, I don’t want anything bad to happen to her, but she’s just a girl.”

“Fuck you, man,” I bellow at him. “Stop faking.”

“What the fuck are you two going on about?” Aaron barks after swallowing his mouthful of burger.

“Forget about it,” Austin hits in a grumpy mood. He’s been in a grump since Em wanted to speak to him about the taillights. Why does he have to act all tough and cold and shit? “Just finish saying what you were saying about the crack dealer.”

Aaron flicks me a knowing look but doesn’t say anything. Austin is in a foul mood again and prefers to take it out on us instead of talking about it. This is nothing new. Some guys are like this. Forcing the topic won’t help, and neither would kicking him in the shins. Trust me. I’ve tried. How are he and I not only related but fucking twins. I came out only 24 minutes after him.

“AA Security hires him to case the Goodman’s joint,” Aaron finishes.

“Bullshit,” I hiss. “Why aren’t AA Security staff doing it rather than hiring a crack dealer?”

Aaron begins, “That’s what I can’t-”

Austin cuts in and asks, “Why? Why are they watching the Goodman house?” He can’t hide the expression on his face as he’s talking. This is not a man who is unfeeling and couldn’t give a rat’s ass about anybody else. This is a man who is genuinely concerned.

“Don’t know yet,” Aaron answers, as he gazes off to the side. “The crackhead said he identified a van that’s been hanging around a few times at the Goodman’s house and their hardware store.”

“Did he get a rego?” I ask, and Aaron cocks his eyebrows. “Yeah, I’ll message it to ya so you have it on standby.”

“Hang on,” Austin exclaims, “don’t forget the stolen sedan that rammed the back of her van a couple of weeks ago. I mean, what the fuck was that all about?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron answers sharply. “If you care so much, do some investigating.”

Austin falls deadly quiet because he’s been caught having feelings for someone who’s not himself. I have hope for my bro yet.

“Anyway,” Aaron adds, “I’ll talk to Royce Huntsman for more information.”

“Why?” I bark in surprise because we never talk to the Huntsmans about anything unless forced. I’m compelled to speak to Daz in the Flames, but that’s where it ends. I’ll swallow my pride for the team’s sake but not for anything else.

“The Huntsman’s own AA Security,” he educates us.

Austin scoffs. “Yeah, right, bro, like he’ll go out of his way for you.”

“Are you catching feelings as well, bro?” I tease my older brother, and he shoots one of his warning looks as he rubs his bristly chin with his hand.

“Nah, dunno,” he answers, contradicting himself. “I feel bad about the phone.”

“Have you figured out how it ended up in your bag?” I ask, knowing that he would’ve already told me if he found out, but he’s possibly got a couple of hunches.

“Nah,” he answers, taking another bite of his burger. “There’s not many people game enough to go near my bag unless they want their face caved in with my fist.”

“I reckon it’s mistaken identity,” I suggest, ignoring the twist of doubt in my gut as I say it. “They thought your bag belonged to someone else.”

“Yeah, but...how many people go into my bedroom?” he answers while chewing on his food.

“Has to be one of the boys then,” Austin adds sharply, “trying to set you up.”

“List your enemies, bro,” I say to him. “How many have you got?”

He shrugs his broad shoulders. “The Huntsman’s. That’s it. Even then, the hate is not the same as it used to be.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Almost forgotten why we hated them in the first place.”

“Family shit,” Austin reminds us. “Our father versus their father.”

“Oh yeah, I still hate them for that,” I chuckle because I barely remember the story, and I was more interested in the revenge than the reason we were revenging. It was before Dad met our mom and something to do with money and Robert stealing Dad’s ex-wife. “Anyway, do the Huntsman’s know that Brielle is missing?”

Aaron smacks his lips, a mindless act that has always annoyed me since we were kids. It’s not as bad as pen clicking, though. “I doubt it. That’s why I don’t think it’s them.”

“Not smart to eliminate them as suspects, though,” Austin cautions. He has more reason than us to hate them, namely

Layne, after they fought in the food hall over their stepsister. I doubt the Huntsmans are involved, although I won't say it aloud if I'm mistaken.

Naturally, my hand seizes my phone to message Em since we're talking about her, which is getting me hard. My mind immediately goes back to when I fucked her in my bed here in the apartment, and her tight hole wrapped around my cock is what dreams are made of.

My finger hovers over her number, and I pull away, deciding that the better option is to turn up unannounced in the depths of the night as I have done before. She'll let me in her window like she always does, and then there's an awkward moment where she becomes intimidated by my presence in her bedroom.

I don't want to hurt her, and I hope she knows that. I never want to hurt her, but now that I've had a taste of that sweet, dimpled body, I want more. It's too early to go to her place now because she'll be on her way home from work after working all day in that sweaty costume.

A fry smacks my face, and I shake my head back into the present. "What was that for?" I growl at Austin since it was his direction that it came from.

"You've got that goofy grin on your face again," he snaps, tossing another fry at my face that I manage to catch in my mouth.

"Score," I reply, patting myself on the back for catching the fry in my mouth. "And I can't see my face, can I?"

Austin cracks up laughing. It's good to see him chilling out. Hopefully, he's put the past mistakes behind him and is getting on with life.

I wake with a start and reach down to my cock, which is hard as a rock and rub it while thinking about her lying in bed alone. Her soft, cool skin, shy smile, and curious eyes behind her glasses are a massive turn-on. Fuck, why didn't I notice her a year ago?

It doesn't take long to cum, and I wipe my hand on the bed sheet before checking the time on my phone. 11.16 PM. Perfect.

Rolling out of bed, I pull on my dark blue hooded sweatshirt, slip on my trainers, and grab my car key and phone. Initially, I was going to leave quietly, but just for fun, I loudly kick my twin bro's bedroom door a few times, to wake him up.

"Fuck off," a muffled voice moans as I walk down the hall to the living room and then out the front door, shutting it behind me where it locks automatically. The dim glow of the corridor light leads my way to the elevator, where I press the button, and moments later, it pings, and the door slides open.

A shiver runs down my spine when the elevator opens to the underground parking—that weird feeling like someone is watching me. The security lights are on, so I pause to scan the area over the top of the rooves of vehicles to see if I can catch anyone. It's eerily still and quiet, so I'm unsure why I have this strange feeling that I'm not alone. Maybe it's because we discussed someone following Em and her family. Paranoia is contagious and only makes me worry for Em even more. Luckily, my brothers are just as concerned as me, even when one of my brothers pretends he isn't.

Yet, as I walk to my car, the back of my neck prickles, and I examine every vehicle as I pass to see if anyone is sitting in them. Every single vehicle is empty. I'm relieved when I reach my car and climb quickly inside, start her up, and drive out onto the main road in the inner city.

Em lives in a suburb on the edge of town, only a few streets from where the country begins. The road to Demon's Cove runs past her suburb, the old part of town. The streets are glistening from the wet, even though I don't remember it raining and the glow of the orange streetlights reflecting off the surface. I look forward to being in a warm bed with Em, listening to her breathe and sigh as she sleeps. Yep, I'm smiling again.

In the rear vision mirror, I scrutinize the white van following me for the last few blocks. He could be going in the same

direction as me, but there's only one way to be sure. If he's a shifty fucker, I don't want to lead him to Em's house, so I take a sharp turn in the opposite direction to her suburb to see if the van will follow.

This is an industrial area of factories and storage companies, and I'm unsure where this road leads since I have never come down this part of town. But as the road curves around a bend, I check the rear vision mirror to find that the van has stopped following. I think I lost it when I turned down here if it was following me at all.

Realizing that this road is taking me deeper in the wrong direction, I slow down to make a U-turn and speed towards the main road I'd just come from. There are not many vehicles about, particularly around this area, and the street lighting is not great. Once out onto the main road, the traffic is heavier, and there's more lighting, and I make a beeline towards my girl's house.

My girl?

I caught myself. Do I want Em to be my girl? Yeah, I'm pretty sure I do. I see no other girl. I think of no other girl but her. I always liked her company, even when she was too geeky. But when I reflect on our tutoring sessions in the library, I'd always look forward to them because I got to spend one-on-one time with my geek girl. Initially, I only saw her as a friend or an acquaintance and didn't think I'd ever view her as someone I'd like to sleep with, let alone...fall for.

Finally, I arrive on the road where Em's street is off and feel excited as I get closer to her house. When I'm about to turn down into her street, the white van appears again but drives past me towards the edge of the city leading out of town. Was that even the same van? There are a lot of white commercial vans around.

I slow my speed as I approach her grandparents' two-story cottage and envision my childhood if I grew up in a house like this with Em's loving parents and grandparents. We didn't see our parents much growing up and were raised mainly by a

German nanny with ruddy cheeks and huge breasts. It's weird how I remember her breasts the most.

I pull up across the road from her house and climb out of my car. Glaring headlights shine down the road, and behind the haze, I can tell it's a white van coming this way. I duck behind my car to see where it goes, and it drives right past Em's house to the end of the road. I take my chance, run across the street, and hide behind Em's old van as the white turns around and returns this way.

As it comes closer, it stops in the middle of the road while the engine is still running. It's dark inside the van, so I can't see what they're doing, and I consider approaching them. Aaron said that the crack dealer mentioned a van parked outside their house and hardware store, and I wonder if this is the one.

I can't see the registration number from this angle, but as I attempt to change my position to get a better look, the van drives off to the end of the road and turns right toward town. Assessing the scene after the van is gone, I wonder if the van was noting the number plate of my car.

With the van gone, I climb up the trellis at the front of the house, clamber onto the roof, and shuffle over to her window. I've done this so many times now that I could do it with my closed.

I tap on her window gently and press my ear against the glass to listen for sound. When there is no response, I tap again. And then a third time. Moments later, the blind wobbles, and her frowning face appears at the window, pretending to be angry that I'm here.

"It's late," she whisper-shouts, and I shoot her a devilish grin. She always says that and then opens the window anyway.

There is a more prolonged hesitation tonight than expected, but as usual, she comes through for me and opens the window, and I climb into her lair.

"Will these be regular visits?" she whispers in a tone as I knock over her colored pencils, and they roll onto the floor. I

make out her frame in the dark, standing in the far corner with her arms folded across her small chest. She's nervous. Even though I've fucked her and sucked her, wanked over her, she still gets uptight when I'm in her presence. Maybe I need to work harder at teaching her to relax.

"Yep," I answer swiftly. "You're my drug."

A little scoffing sigh is her only response, followed by an intense silence.

I turn to close the blind and secure the window when the white van cruises slowly and then parks on the opposite side of the street, several feet in front of my car.

"What are you looking at?" she asks suspiciously.

I don't want to frighten her, so I close the blinds and pretend everything is okay. "So," I say to take the attention away from the window, "Earlier, I masturbated thinking of you."

"That's so romantic," she breathes.

"Really?" I ask, unsure how to read her tone.

"No, I was being sarcastic," she snaps.

Emaline



His body moves in the dark closer to me. My grandparents are in the next room, and I don't want them to hear his deep voice. It's ridiculous that I'm an adult, yet I still like to convey a state of innocence for my grandparents' benefit. Most of all, I don't want them to know that I associate with the Leroux brothers on a personal level. Yet, it has gotten extremely personal in more than one way.

His unique scent of sweet cologne and salty sweat intoxicates and hypnotizes me, and my feet refuse to move. Before I know it, he's over me, caging me against the wall, and my breath hitches and my skin prickles.

"My grandparents are in the next room," I say quietly.

"I'll be as quiet as a mouse," he croons as a finger finds my cheek and draws a circle on my skin that burns like ice.

"Wouldn't it be better to go for a drive like we normally do?" I ask and immediately hate myself for the desperate tone in my voice. Why does he do this to me? I sound like a weak woman who finds it impossible to say no to men.

"Not tonight," he says confidently. "I've been dreaming about fucking you in your bed for weeks."

"Weeks?" is all I can say because I'm tongue-tied.

"Yes, weeks. Since the first time I lay in it, which was the first time I entered your room," he says steadily in his deep masculine voice, weakening my resistance with every word.

I take deep breaths to contain myself and raise my chin proudly. “If you remember correctly, I sent you a message a few days ago saying that I don’t want anything to do with you on a personal level. We should continue with peer tutoring, but anything outside of that is inappropriate.” I’m proud that I kept my voice steady the entire time I spoke, but not being able to see the features in his beautiful face helps.

“And how’s that going for you?” he asks jovially.

“I’m sorry. What do you mean?”

“You failed,” he adds, and I’m still confused.

“Failed at what? I don’t fail at anything,” I argue, feeling insulted.

“Shush,” he hits, “you’ll wake your grandparents. I’d prefer they were deep asleep when I fuck you in your bed. We wouldn’t want ol’ Gramps walking in while I’m sucking his granddaughter’s tit.”

“That’s disgusting,” I blast quietly, trying to suppress how wet and turned on I am.

“And you failed your ‘keep Xavier at arm’s length’ plan on your birthday when I was the only one who remembered,” his warm breath grazes my cheek as a large hand claims the small of my back. “You failed. You became putty in my hands.” he leans in and presses his soft lips against my ear. “You are mine.”

“You want me to be yours?” Why ask that? Why? Don’t be so weak, Em. Take it back. “My grandparents would hate me associating with the family that wrecked us.”

I sense him faltering as if he doesn’t know how to reply, and the armor wall crumbles. “We didn’t wreck you,” he states sternly. “You have options.”

“Options?” I ask, confused. “What options?”

“Sometimes life doesn’t go the way you want,” he adds.

“Especially when there’s a wealthy family involved,” I hit back. “David and Goliath.”

He steps back from me and a swirl of cool air permeates his body heat. “Do you want me to take that Othello book back?” He turns away from me to scan my room in the dark. “Where is it?”

“No,” I answer quietly.

“No? I hunted around for weeks to find that book of your favorite Shakespeare play. Then when I managed to find a copy, I paid three times the price, so the prick would sell it to me over some fucking collector who got there first.” He moves closer to the window as an inferno of guilt burns in my gut.

“I didn’t realize-” I begin, only for Xavier’s anger and disappointment to cut in.

“I don’t go to that amount of effort for just anyone, Emaline,” his voice is so full of hurt that I can feel his pain.

As he reaches for the window to open it, I call, “Stop.” His broad shoulders freeze, and he slowly turns to face me. “I’m confused and conflicted between doing what I think is right and doing what...”

“You want,” he finishes for me. “You’re conflicted because you think you’re being selfish towards your grandparents.”

“Yes,” I breathe. “I feel so bad about it, Xavier. The right thing to do is to hate you and your brothers. But no matter how much I try, I just can’t. And then there is the issue with my sister’s phone in your brother’s bag. He came over to explain, and I instinctively believed him, but I don’t know if I’m easily fooled or...” I growl in frustration. “I don’t know what to believe.”

“I don’t know if this helps,” he starts calmly, “but Aaron has hunted down that guy in the red sedan. He wants to talk to you about it. I can tell you right now, and I don’t expect you to believe me, but he’s put a lot of effort into helping you. Now, that doesn’t sound like the actions of a man who has something to do with your sister’s disappearance.”

“He has?” I ask in a stupid, small voice. I’m a wallflower, a plain girl draped in beige. No one of their notoriety goes to

this amount of effort for a girl like me. Yet, here we are.

“Why?”

“I dunno, maybe it’s because we like you,” he says as if it should be obvious.

“You do?” again, pathetic small voice, and it’s utterly irritating, but I can’t help it.

A breathy chuckle sails through the night air as his head tilts to the side, and even though I can’t see his eyes clearly, I know he’s looking at me. “C’mon, Em.” His voice croons, mixed with hunger and disappointment.

I stand directly opposite him, only a few feet away, and feel his desire and heat overcome me. He seems to be waiting for me to do or say something, but I have no words left, so I take action instead. Boldly and entirely out of nature for me, I grip the bottom of my pajama top with my hands and pull it up over my head, where I’m naked from the waist up.

There’s a low groan from across the room as my shyness creeps in, and I cover my breasts with my hands. “Don’t you dare,” he states in a simmering voice.

I drop my hands away, unsure how much he can see in the dark, but still, the inhibition evades me. “Why are you staring at me?” I ask, aching for him to come to me and take me in his arms, but he doesn’t. Instead, he stands a few feet away and stares at me.

“Because I like what I see,” he replies. “Now, take the rest off.”

“You can see in the dark?” I ask curiously.

“I can see enough,” desire falling from his lips. “Take the rest off.”

Thoughts of my sleeping grandparents in the next room inhibit me slightly, but the heat burning between my legs and every cell in my body on fire, I need to do this. I drop my pajama bottoms down and then slide my panties down, too. I’m sure my strip looked completely unsexy and not a tease at all, but going by the second groan from Xavier, I’d say that he approved.

His sweatshirt is pulled off over his head, and he stands there half-naked in front of my naked body. I long to run my hands over his smooth skin and hard lines.

“You better be ready to spread those legs, Em,” he warns as he drops his sweatpants to reveal an erection. “I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to walk for days.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I argue, as fear floods my body and my muscles tighten. “I need to walk to class.”

“I’ll carry you,” he states, stepping towards me, then stopping. “Come to me.”

I step right up to him, standing only a few inches away, and feel his cock prod my stomach. Gazing up to his face in the dark, I take his hard cock in my small hand and start rubbing up and down along the silky shaft.

A heated rumble expels from the back of his throat. “That’s it,” he directs quietly. “Keep going.”

The ache between my legs is getting too much, and a high-pitched moan laced with desperation escapes my lips. “Xavier.” I reach out to him to be embraced, but he refuses to comply.

“Get down on your knees,” he insists, and I do as he asks and drop to my knees, knowing where this is about to go. “Lick the head.”

I glide my tongue over the tip of his penis and swirl it in circles as I can feel the weight of his eyes upon me.

“That’s so good, Em,” he groans as I take the head in my mouth and flick my tongue over the tip. “Take it all, Em. Take it all.”

I’m not sure what he means, so I hesitate, only for his big hand to rest gently on the back of my head to push my mouth over his cock. I relinquish control and let him guide me as his cock hits the back of my throat, and my entire mouth is filled with him. His salty taste only adds to the high that I’m on, but the size of his cock feels constrictive, and I panic, grabbing his arms.

“It’s alright,” he says softly, “I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

His hips roll slightly, pulling his cock out of my mouth a little before ramming it back in. I’m unsure if I like this and dig my fingers into his forearm in fear.

“Relax,” he says, pulling out slightly again before pushing back in. “Just relax, Em. It feels so fucking good.”

His big hand moves my head in rhythm with his cock, and I sink into his beat as his smooth, hard rod keeps goading the back of my throat in a violating yet teasing manner. Xavier’s pace picks up as he starts ramming me harder, and even though I struggle to enjoy it, my body is increasingly tender and hungry to satisfy Xavier.

Surprisingly, the surge of an orgasm thunders up and down my thighs, torturing me. I hurt so bad that despair descends on me at his callousness and deliberate aloofness. Why won’t he touch me? I need him to touch me.

He pulls out suddenly, and I gasp for air, relieved my mouth is free of his organ. We’re not finished, and I’ve barely started, so I’m unsure what he has planned for me next.

“Get on the bed,” he demands. “All fours.”

Again, I’m unsure what he means, and I lie back on my soft mattress with my knees bent.

“No,” he chuckles at my naivety. “On your hands and knees. I said I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk.”

“I seriously don’t think that’s a good idea,” I say, believing him. I hate that I’m too inexperienced to know if he’s telling the truth. It’s easy for a man to hurt a woman. A single punch to the head can end a woman’s life. This is not something to take lightly.

“I’m exaggerating, Em,” he asserts. “It’s dirty talk.”

“I’m not sure that it works on me,” I tell him as I prop myself onto my hands and knees.

“I think that’s one of many reasons why I like you,” he says, as his fingers find my clit, and I exhale in a rush.

“I’m close,” I cry out. “Oh my, Xavier,...I’m so close. Who would’ve thought that your big dick in my mouth would turn me on.”

“Shush,” he giggles. “Don’t wake your grandparents.”

“Penetrate me, Xavier,” I beg. “Please.”

“Your wish is my command,” his voice is like silk, as he pushes his entire length inside me in one go while playing with my clit with his fingers. “Fuck, you’re so wet, sweet girl.”

“Not sweet now,” I answer in between elated gasps. My walls expand to take him in, and he fills me up in a deliciously satisfying way. “Not sweet. Dirty.”

“You can be sweet and dirty,” he says as he starts pounding me, and it feels so good. “Sweet, dirty girl.”

“You ruined me,” I scold him as he grunts with every thrust, and my juice runs down my thighs.

“Good,” he answers proudly, rolling his hips and pounding hard. “I’m glad to step up and take on the job of ruining you.”

“Not a job.”

I feel a slap against my butt cheek which stings in an arousing way. “Push your ass against me, Em.”

I push my buttocks against his cock, and we drive into a beautiful tempo as he grunts and gasps, and I moan and sigh.

I feel it brimming so close, on the edge, aching my thighs, swelling my clit. My entire body scolds like I’ve been blistered by the sun, yet that rolling orgasm comes at great speed.

“I’m coming,” I cry out, then slap my hand over my mouth when I remember my grandparents are only on the other side of the wall.

“Not yet,” he growls as he keeps ramming me at great speed, making loud slapping sounds as our skin meets briefly.

“I can’t wait,” I gasp.

“Hang on. Wait until I say,” Xavier snarls, still keeping up the pace, and I try to hold back the surge of erotica storming through my body by clenching down hard on his cock and groans. “Okay. Now.”

I unclench, and the shutters go down behind my eyes as if I blacked out for a second, and immediately, the orgasm takes hold, engulfing me, killing me softly, as Xavier continues to pound hard.

One last gasp, the arousal ripples through my body, and I grab my bedsheets tightly in my fist to stop me from sinking into the mattress. Warm fluid spurts out inside of me, and for a moment, I enjoy the sensation until reality hits, and I’m thrown into a panic.

“I’m not on a conceptive, Xavier,” I exhale, alarmed, as he pulls out.

The Bear



Xavier spent the night at Velma Dinkley's house, and I'm irritated by it. I woke up in a good mood, but when Austin told me that Xave stalked out to her house at night, my good mood turned sour. Fuck him. Fuck her.

My entire drive to campus, my thoughts were on her being fucked by my little brother and then lying together, tangled legs, bare skin. By the time I arrived on campus, I'd replaced him with me, and it was me fucking her, not him. I crept into bed with her that night, and her little dimpled naked body was a fucking dream. I wanted to fuck her then. I tried to wake her up and fuck her hard, but she was Xavier's guest, and I didn't want to scare her, so I let her sleep. Eventually, I fell asleep to the sounds of her breathing and cute sighs rising into the night air.

She's not my type. She's not any of our types, but we've become obsessed with those big glasses over inquiring eyes, tidy body, clear skin, and full rose lips. Velma may be shy, but I bet she doesn't miss a beat because she's one of those girls who prefers to watch life from the sideline rather than throwing herself into an adventure to see what comes from it. Yep, not a risk taker, our sweet Velma Dinkley.

But what the fuck am I going to do with this lousy mood that I'm in? I need a fuck. That's the problem. I need a big fuck to take my mind off her. It's been a while since I had sex, and I'm feeling it. Coach recommends that we refrain from having sex as much as possible, but I need relief. Now.

Scrolling through my contacts, I stop at Emma's number, a girl I've had several one-night stands with over the last couple of years. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel in frustration because her name is too similar to Emaline's, and I'm unlikely to think of anyone but the geek girl when I'm supposed to be fucking Emaline...I mean, Emma. *Fuck.*

I scroll on to the next name I've had the odd liaison with, Harley Leonard, a sexy chick in the Tigers' cheerleading squad. Forcing through the hesitation, I message her for a hook-up.

Me: Are you nearby? I'm parked outside our frat house.

A sharp thud on the side of my SUV makes me startle, and I turn in the direction to give the fucker a piece of my mind. Luckily, it's Kieran because I would've decked them if it were anyone else.

"Bro, what's up?" he calls out cheerfully, probably up to no good, as per usual.

I zap the window to answer, "Alright," and bump fists with him.

"Meeting Kody at the gym. Are you coming?" he asks.

"Do you ever go to class?" I chuckle because those two boys spend their entire days in the gym, sitting on benches and talking smack.

"Sometimes," he grins. "When I feel like it."

"How are you even passing your grades, dude?" I challenge him, knowing he hires a geek to help him cheat. But he still has to go to class sometimes.

"Yeah, man, of course. I got it all covered. What are you doing now?" I notice the quick subject change.

"Hopefully, hooking up with Harley," I can be brutally honest with my bro.

A slimy grin worms across his face. "Nice. Hey, man, are we still on for tomorrow night at Demon's Grove?"

“Yep,” I answer confidently. If I don’t get some action today, I’ll get some on Friday night with an anonymous, faceless chick who believes lying on the butcher’s block will bring her some love. I don’t hit the butcher’s block often. In fact, I haven’t used it for months, but Velma Dinkley is getting on my nerves, so I owe myself some therapy.

“Alright, bro, I’ll sort the intel and let everyone know that it’s confirmed,” he says, just as my phone beeps and his eyebrows cock, mischievously assuming that it’s Harley.

“See ya later, man,” I say impatiently, eager to check my phone.

“Yep, dude,” he shoots as he walks away.

HL: I’ll be there in ten. xx

I assume she knows what I’m suggesting since the only times I contact her are for hookups. Yeah, it might make me a woman-user, but it’s her choice. She wouldn’t answer my calls if she didn’t want it either.

A smug-looking Xavier pulls up behind me just as I exit my SUV. “You alright, bro?” I call out to him, and he nods a reply, distracted by his phone.

When he finally clambers out of his car with messy hair and tired eyes, I know he’s had a good night with her. However, on a second glance, he seems a little distant and bothered by something.

“I think you’re right, bro,” he says when he catches with me inside our frat house.

“About what?” I ask impatiently because I’m eager to get upstairs and prepare for Harley.

“Em. There was a white van following me last night, and then I saw it again parked down her street,” he sighs. “It was gone by the morning, but it doesn’t fill me with confidence that a crack dealer has been hired to watch over her.”

I grunt. I’m not keen to get into this conversation about her. Not now, anyway.

“Anyway, I told Em that you want to fill her in about the stuff that’s been going on,” he speaks dejectedly, so it must be getting to him.

I don’t want to hear this. Now, she’s invaded my head and filled my thoughts. I need to focus on Harley’s body. “Okay. Did you notice the plate number of the van?”

“Nah, I couldn’t see it. Too dark,” he mumbles as we run up the stairs together.

I glance at my little bro’s face to read his expression, and I can tell that something else is on his mind. The white van is bad enough, but there’s something else. I don’t want to ask him what his problem is because I’ve got other things to do, and I don’t like to be distracted by trivial things. But I’m his big brother, and duty calls, so I resign myself to asking him the question.

“Are you alright, Xave?” I ask softly, patting him on his back.

He exhales, and his shoulders relax a little, and I immediately wish I didn’t ask because whatever he’s about to say will affect my ability to fuck the cheerleader.

“It’s just Em,” he says, completely desolate.

“Is she being annoying and demanding?” I hope to put me off my current distraction with her. “You gotta watch demanding chicks.”

“Nah, she’s not demanding. She’s great. She’s just freaking out because I came in her,” he states, and I snort, trying not to laugh. Not because it’s funny, because it’s not, but the way he said it.

“Fuck, dude, weren’t you careful?” I scold him as reality hits me.

“In the throes of the moment. You know what it’s like,” he drones.

“Nah, Xave. I’m always careful,” I bark because it’s true. I don’t want to knock up some random chick. “Anyway, most of the time, it doesn’t strike. The window of conception is small.”

“Yeah, I know, but she’s the one freaking out. She already sent me three messages on what we will do if she’s pregnant.”

“What would you do?” I’m unsure if I want to know the answer, but I’m asking anyway. Jealousy is a fucking nasty killer.

“Do the right thing,” he answers as he arrives at his bedroom door, placing his hand on the door handle. “But seriously, we need to find out what’s happening with that white van.”

Quick footsteps come up the wooden stairs behind us, and Xavier looks past me to who it is and frowns. I follow his stare to find Harley has arrived with a big smile on her gorgeous face, long blond hair pulled back into a bouncy ponytail. She’s fucking hot.

Xave disappears into his room as I guide Harley into mine. I’d never take a chick like her home to our apartment, so having a frat house comes in handy to separate my personal life from my campus life.

“I’m so glad you called,” she says in a sexy voice, immediately removing her pink cardigan and pulling her hair out, letting it fall like a waterfall down her back.

“I’m glad you answered,” I reply, shutting the door behind us, then step to my chest of drawers to grab a couple of condoms. “At least I think before I act.”

“Huh?” she grumbles in confusion, and I realize I just said that aloud.

“Nothing,” I grunt, tossing the condom packet onto my bed, and she follows by crawling on her hands and knees into the middle of the bed, showing me her great-toned ass. Yet, I’m not feeling it.

She turns around on the bed and lies back, slides her hand down the front of her jeans, running her tongue along that plump bottom lip. There’s a twinge in my sweatpants, but it’s not enough. What the fuck is the matter with me? The possibility that my little bro had impregnated Velma Dinkley should be enough to put me off her. But it doesn’t. It only makes me want to fuck Emaline Applegate even more.

I can't deny the jealousy. I feel that it's not my cock sliding inside of her but my brother's. I don't want to take his place. I don't want to steal her away from him. I desire a little taste.

Sweeping thoughts of Emaline Applegate aside, I refocus on the girl before me as she pleasures herself to get me going. I pull off my sweatshirt as she starts to unbutton her blouse, slowly in a teasing manner. And all I can think about is Velma fucking Dinkley.

She squeezes her tits from her bra as I reach for my soft cock to try to rub it hard. This is not working.

"Are you okay, Aaron?" Harley asks precariously as disappointment drapes her face.

I sigh. "Sorry, I can't," I mumble.

"Oh? Can't you get hard? That's understandable if you're under stress. It happens to the best of men," she says, sliding towards my crotch and reaching for my cock tucked away. "Let me help."

"No. It's not that," I growl in irritation, and hurt casts across her face. "Sorry, it's not you. I like someone else and shouldn't be doing this."

"Okay," she sounds embarrassed now as she scrambles to put her clothes back on. "Lucky girl."

"Well...she's with someone else," I state, biting my lip angrily at saying that aloud. That's the second time I let my mouth go off in the last ten minutes. I usually have more control than this. I'm slipping.

"I better go," she says, saving face and slumping onto my bed as she leaves. "And by the way," she pauses by the door and looks at me, "you better do something about that girl before she's gone for good."

When Harley shuts the door behind her, it's safe to say aloud so no one can hear, "She's not going anywhere. She's with my brother. And hates me because she thinks I had something to do with her sister's disappearance."

And now my crotch finally becomes full, pressing against my sweatpants. Harley is gone, and I'm free to think about Velma. My mind travels to the day I visited her grandparents' house to explain about her sister's phone.

I yank my sweatpants down, my hard cock flings out, and I rub hard, imagining that I'm inside her warm wet hole. Ramming her hard, fingering her anus, making that sweet girl scream. I cum into my hand and find a Kleenex to wipe it on.

That was good, but not as good as the real thing. Maybe if I just had one taste, my appetite would wane.

There's only one way to find out.

Austin



It's a cold but clear day today. I cut class, headed to the track, and rode a few rounds. When I had my fill, I came to Landers Silo to gaze up at the sky, smoke, and guzzle Jack Daniels straight from the bottle.

I'm failing school anyway, so it doesn't matter if I attend because I'm far behind. I was supposed to do schoolwork in prison, but it was half-hearted, and most of the time, I mucked around. My parents are disappointed in me, and I don't blame them.

Mom has been trying to get hold of me for the last couple of days, and I've ignored her calls and messages. I can only ignore her for long. And I know why she's trying to make contact: because of my poor grades and lack of attendance.

She tried to organize private tutoring, but I promised to work harder to compensate for the lost time. I failed. Since my parents are paying for our schooling, naturally, they're expecting the degree at the end of the journey. And then what? I can't see beyond tomorrow, and I have no career aspirations that my parents approve of, but I do have dreams.

I lie back and gaze up at the bright blue sky, watching the fluffy clouds slowly thin and disintegrate into nothing. I take a foil of green from my pocket and roll a blunt on my chest, licking the paper to seal it.

Larks fly over the top of me while the distant sound of traffic hums softly, almost hypnotically. When a vehicle slows to make a turn down the end of the country road, I hesitate to see

if they will cruise down here. Most don't. Most turn down the main road back into town or towards the next city, so I'm here for some solitude.

My ears prick when the sound of a vehicle doesn't slow to turn. Instead, it comes this way. I look up in curiosity because the engine sound is distinctive, hollow, and rattly, indicating an old engine.

The vehicle comes into view, and I sit up in surprise and confusion. "What's she doing here?"

The old Volkswagen van turns off the road onto the undulating grassy field, bumping and swaying as it goes. That classic beast is not built for this type of terrain, but I'm entertained by her stubbornness while waiting for her old van to stall from the pressure.

Halfway across the field, the van stalls, just like I knew it would, and I chuckle. Stitch Girl starts the van up again, revs the engine a few times, then tries to drive forward. Only for the van to bounce around and stall again. I wait for her to start it up again for another try, but instead, the driver's door opens, and she spills out.

She adjusts her glasses, brushes her jeans down with her hand, and gazes in my direction to see if I am watching her. I give her a quick wave, then place my blunt between my lips, grab my box of matches from my other pocket, and strike one. By the time my joint was lit and I'd taken a good pull, she'd arrived at the bottom rung of the ladder.

"I wasn't expecting any visitors today," I mock as she places a sneaker on the bottom rung.

"I came to talk to you," she calls up to me.

"How did you know I was here?" I ask curiously.

"Xavier said if you weren't in the bone gallery or class, you'd be at the motocross track. So, I went there, but the track was empty, and I thought I'd try here as a last resort. Xavier said you brothers often came here when you were kids."

"We did. Xave and I still do sometimes," I shout down at her. "So, what do you want to talk to me about?"

“Well...it’ll be easier if you came down so I can speak in a civilized manner,” she shrills up at me, stroking her long brown hair caught by the breeze and flowing behind her. Beautiful.

“Nope,” I answer bluntly. “I’m not coming down.”

She clears her throat. Or is she growling? Not sure. “Um,” she growls or clears her throat again, “I guess I’ll have to come up then.”

I cackle quietly at how cute she is. “I guess you will.” I rest my arms on my bent knees to get comfortable because I know I’ll be here for a while

She mumbles something I don’t catch, followed by, “I’ve only been up once, so I’m sure I can do it again.”

“Champion,” I mock, taking a pull of the blunt and blowing the smoke out in ringlets.

“Are you drunk?” she yells. “I can see smoke.”

“Drunk?” I mutter to myself. “She sees smoke and thinks smoking is the same as drinking alcohol.”

“Hello? Are you still alive?” she calls, and I cock my head to get a better view of where she’s positioned on the ladder to find that she’s only two rungs up. This is going to take forever.

“Yeah,” I answer. “I’m here, and I’m a little drunk and a little high.”

“Oh,” she sounds disappointed, and I’m not obliged to feel bad. She came here uninvited, and I owe her nothing. “Well, maybe it’s better if we talk another day. Tomorrow, say?”

“Er...I’m likely to be a little bit drunk and a little bit high tomorrow, too,” I lie. “So, we may as well get this over and done with today.”

There’s an elongated sigh before she mumbles something, followed by the rattling sound of the ladder shaking. I lean over the side to find that she’s slowly and shakily climbing step by precarious step. She’s not the bravest soul in the world, but she’s experienced some action lately – the stolen sedan that rammed the back of her van, among other things. Not to

mention Xavier awakening her sexual appetite. I bet she's a little firecracker in bed. They say shy, inhibited girls are the best in bed once you've stirred the beast within them. It's like they have to make up for lost time and go hard.

"This better be worth it," I tease, "making me wait so long for you to get up here."

"I'm not good at things like this," she pants. "Scared of heights."

I ignore the guilt in my gut, yelling at me to help her. I also ignore the sense of pleasure that I have, knowing that she's going out of her way for me. That's something special—a girl conquering her fears for a simple conversation with me.

"Scared of most things, actually," she adds.

I take another pull of my joint and stub out the end, then shuffle the side of the roof of the silo and look down at her trembling on the rails. "Do you need a hand?"

"No, I'm fine," she answers between breathy gasps. "I can't look up, and I can't look down in case it disturbs my balance."

"Okay," I answer smoothly, strategizing in my mind how to go down the ladder while she's coming up without upsetting her balance.

"Just so you know that I'm not being rude," she adds, and I smile at how polite and sweet she is. Just a genuinely nice girl and a damn great catch.

Stitch Girl finally reaches the top and peers over the side of the roof at me, and I cock my eyebrows at her. "Well done," I congratulate her as she takes another step up until she can place her foot on the roof. I reach out and grab her hand, and she flops down on the roof next to me, exhausted.

"Going down is worse. Why didn't I think of that before?" she groans, adjusting her glasses on that button nose.

"Drink?" I ask, offering her the Jack Daniels bottle.

"Ah, no thanks," she states as her chest heaves up and down, trying to catch her breath.

“Smoke?” I offer that stubbed-out joint.

“No, thanks,” she says, waving her hand at me to keep it away.

“Have you tried?” I ask curiously. “It’s a great way to help you chill out and relax a little.”

“I’m not here for a social visit,” she states flatly, brushing her jeans down with her hand and I find that I can’t stop looking at her. She’s a marvel on eyes, but not in an overtly sexy or beautiful way. She’s got her own style and quirks, yet seems utterly unaware that she has style and quirks.

“Take your time,” I instruct, lying back on the roof, hoping she’d lie beside me. Instead, she hugs her knees with her arms, creating a self-imposed cage. Guarded body language that tells me loud and clear to stay away. I may or may not comply.

“So...” she begins, turning her head in my direction only to find that she’s face to face with my crotch, so she turns away again. She’s more than welcome to face-plant my crotch, but she probably won’t.

To feed the fire even more, I place my hands behind my head, and my sweatshirt rises, showing my stomach. She notices this, too, but pretends she doesn’t and keeps her eyes straight ahead.

“You were saying,” I encourage her to continue speaking after stalling when she discovers my bulge is dangerously close to her face.

“Um,” she exhales and fiddles nervously with the sleeve of her sweater. “The taillights. Please tell me how much they were so I can repay you?”

“What?” I scoff. “You came all the way up here to ask how much the taillights were on your van. You’re barking up the wrong tree...or should I say silo. I can’t tell you because it wasn’t me.”

“Who else would do it? I think of anyone. Gramps said it wasn’t him and knew it wouldn’t be him anyway because...” She bites her bottom lip to stop her from saying the

unavoidable. It wouldn't be her gramps because he can't afford to pay for replacement taillights.

"I don't know," I lie, unscrewing the cap of the Jack and taking a swig.

She falls silent, dropping that head down sadly, and I reach out to brush the hair from her face but pull back before I make contact. "I can help you, you know," she says so quietly that something in her tone stirs unwanted rage in me.

"Help me? With what?" I spit, sharper than I intended, but I won't apologize.

"Schooling. Life."

"Did Xave say something to you?" I snarl, screwing the lid back on the Jack because I've suddenly lost the taste for it.

"No," she says with conviction, and I almost believe her, although it's hard to tell when she's not facing me.

"I don't need help with either," I snap at her.

"Stubborn," she quips quietly.

I argue, "Look who's talking. You can't even receive a gift of taillights without having to feel the need to repay it. Stubborn."

"So, it was you who installed the taillights. I knew it," she turns back to look at me for a couple of beats and I like what I see.

"That was not a confession, Stitch Girl," I argue enthusiastically. "It was an example of your innate stubbornness. Little Miss Goody."

"Oh my, you are drunk," she hisses.

"Maybe you could join me," I suggest, enjoying this interaction now. "We can have fun drunk on the roof. Like that old movie with Paul Newman."

"Cat On the Hot Tin Roof," she corrects me irately. "Not drunk people on the roof."

“That’s a stupid name for a movie,” I chuckle, finding my blunt in my pocket to relight it.

“We don’t have to tell anyone,” Stitch Girl states so sweetly.

“That we’re making out on the hot tin roof?” I finish her sentence.

This makes her swing around to glare at me. “No. I mean, schooling. I can help tutor you like I do, Xavier.”

“And is the extra curriculum included in the price? I’ll put an order in to get what Xavier gets when you tutor him.” Yeah, I’m totally flirting now. “Tit for tat.”

“I’m being serious,” she growls, wiggling on her backside, and I have the urge to grab a hunk of her butt cheek in my hand. Then I’d suck it until I’ve left my mark, and when the bruise has faded, I’ll suck it again harder. I’m getting hard thinking about it.

“So am I,” I assure her, lighting my blunt as she stews on my words, probably horrified. I sense her body tensing up as if conflicted about what to do. I take a pull and am about to blow the smoke out when an impulse comes over me.

In one swift move, I sit up, cup her chin with a hand, tip her head back, and claim her mouth with mine, breathing the dope smoke into her.

I pull away quickly as her flailing arms fight me off, coughing and spluttering out the smoke.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” I say evenly as she folds over to hack a cough.

“That tastes horrible,” she wheezes, patting her chest. “You’re a vile person.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I hit back, but the guilt is eating away at my conscience. “Are you chilling out yet?”

Cough “I don’t want to” *cough* “chill out with someone” *splutter* “as disgusting as you. Disregard my offer.”

“I didn’t accept your offer anyway,” I argue, as the guilt is becoming unbearable. I can’t sit here and do nothing while

she's coughing up a storm. Gently, I place my hand on her back to start rubbing as she tries to shirk me away, unsuccessfully. There's nowhere to go on this roof except down if she wants to escape me.

"Deep breaths." I keep my voice calm and reassuring as I continue to rub her back, and eventually, the coughing dies down.

She takes two big deep breaths, still gazing across the horizon to avoid my eye, and says coldly, "I have to go." Pulling away from my touch, she starts her slog back down the ladder.

"Can I help you down?" I offer, perhaps I could cage her as she's going down, in case she slips.

"I don't want your help," she bites, and her words and tone sting far too much for a man who's been drinking and smoking into a state where nothing should hurt me.

I let her go, but I'm not happy about it. I kept my eyes on her as she stepped down each rung to ensure she was okay. Then, I watched as she returned to her van in the middle of the field. I kept my eyes on her as the van drove away out of sight.

The entire time, a voice inside me was yelling to chase her, take her in my arms, and apologize. But, yeah, like she said, I'm stubborn, and the view is better from up here.

Emaline



“Did it work?” Rosie asks as I bustle into the library after being out at Lander’s Silo with the evil twin who tried to kill me with his poisonous tongue.

The back of my throat is still dry and raspy from him blowing the smoke in my mouth, so I clear my throat several times before answering, “To my disappointment, I’m getting nowhere.”

“You need to be careful, Em as you don’t know what these brothers are capable of.” Rosie slides her drink bottle across the table so I can take a sip. “If they find out what you’re doing, they might seek revenge.”

“I know, but I have to find my sister, and each day goes by, the police come up with nothing. The Leroux brothers know something about her disappearance; I know it.”

“But...” Rosie drops the volume of her voice when two students descend on our table, then hover by the 18th-century literature shelves. “Didn’t you-know-who say that he was helping you?”

I’m not sure if ‘you-know-who’ is Xavier or The Bear, but because the students are too close to us, I refrain from asking Rosie for a name. “Yes, but is it wise to believe them completely?”

“No. But give me a ratio,” she says, chewing on the end of her pencil. “What percentage do you trust the brothers, separately and individually?”

I ponder for a moment. “The evil twin zero percent. The good twin fifty percent-”

“Ah,” Rosie gasps, “the evil twin projecting evilness. How surprising. But the good twin, because he’s nice to you, you trust him more. What if that is their ruse? What if the evil twin is really the good twin and vice versa?” She taps her pencil against her temple and does that ‘we’re on the edge of a breakthrough’ expression. “Evil twin did buy and install your taillights. That does not sound like an evil thing to do.”

“Ever thought about being a Private Eye?” I ask her seriously and not so seriously at the same time.

“All the time,” she states. “I envision myself in a Deerstalker tweed hat while smoking a tobacco pipe constantly.”

“One must keep up the appearances,” I tease.

“One must. Anyway, where does The Bear sit in your Trust Chart?” she asks quietly as one of the lingering students moves closer to our table. Rude. Can’t they see that we’re having a private conversation?

“About twenty percent trust. Maybe less. I don’t know him that well,” as his hairy face appears in my mind, the day he turned up at my house trying to explain why he discovered the phone in his bag. He’s an exceptionally impressive man, more manly than his brothers, who are tall, lean, and pretty. He gives the impression that he owns the world, and everyone moves out of the way for him when he walks by. The power. The glory.

“Wait,” Rosie points her pencil at me and narrows her eyes. I suspect I’m about to be scrutinized by the PI. “You give Evil Twin zero, but The Bear twenty percent? It was The Bear’s bag you found your sister’s phone in. Now, why is that? Why does The Bear rate higher than the evil twin; he was caught red-handed?”

“Well...and great line of questioning, by the way-” I start.

“Thanks. And complimenting me does not relieve you from answering the question, Em,” her assertiveness is impressive for a usually reserved girl. If only she’d let the world know

how wonderfully funny she is rather than hiding behind shyness.

“Because,” I pause to think and realize what I’m about to say is completely and utterly lame. “Xavier explained that The Bear has been working hard to hunt down the guy in the red sedan...”

“Okay,” she doesn’t sound massively convinced, and I’m unsure if it’s my answer or something else. “And you believe Xavieeer?”

“Er...my belief in Xavier is around fifty percent as per Trust Chart stated earlier,” I reply, doing my best to convince my dissecting friend because she doesn’t sound convinced.

“But why is the evil twin so low? I mean, zero percent is scum on the bottom of my shoe status,” she pries.

“Because he forced marijuana smoke down my throat and says deliberately inflammatory and hurtful things.” I’m proud of myself for admitting this. That the evil twin hurts my feelings when his tongue is sharp moves, and that smoldering voice blurts out words without consequences.

“Do you now see the obvious flaw in your theory?” she asks as she curls several strands of her hair around her pencil.

“No.” What is she talking about?

“Man says mean things, and you don’t trust them. Man says nice things and you do trust them. It shows that you are naïve and all a man has to do to build trust with you is be nice,” she exclaims. “It makes you an easy pray. We are better off returning to how we were pre-Leroux invasion, where we treated everyone with great suspicion.

The lingering students have moved away, so I lean in and say extremely dryly, “Xavier put his finger up my anus. Is that included as doing nice things?”

She gasps in horror as her cheeks burn red and those sharp eyes scan the area to see if anyone was nearby and heard. “What did it feel like?”

I wiggle in my seat, still feeling Xavier's penis moving inside of me. I loved it. I loved his body heat, alluring scent, and hot skin against mine. Being engulfed in his hard lines and smooth contours, the anal thing was different. It pushed me into a territory I hadn't been to before, and I'm still undecided about whether I like it.

"It wasn't awful," I tell her honestly. "It stimulated my bits..." I point my finger downward to the space between my legs as Rosie hangs off my every word.

"It didn't hurt?" she asks with a smirk and eyes wider than the sun in awe.

"No. It was nice but strange, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah," she says quietly as she drops down to the table, and I wish from the bottom of my heart that she was experiencing what I am with a nice, loving man. Not that Xavier is loving, although he's not hating either, he's...maybe he is loving. The book. How he remembered my birthday. Helping me knit bomb Mr. Addington on the boulevard.

"That's an interesting smile," Rosie joshers, "it's almost like someone is falling in love."

"I wouldn't be so foolish," I state boldly as every cell in my body laughs at my invention.

"I wasn't talking about you," she cocks her eyebrows mischievously. "Although it's obvious that you are falling for him...them."

"Them?" I say with a deliberately dismayed expression. "Hark. Who do you mean by stating 'them' pray tell."

"Pray tell, sister, the evil twin has crawled under your skin and built a bonfire," she chuckles.

"Not."

"Yes, by infinity. You can't go higher than that."

I snort in laughter as my phone beeps, but I ignore it.

"But seriously," she leans in again, lowering the volume of her voice and, with eyes twinkling in curiosity, asks, "Would

you, you know?”

I frown in confusion. “What?”

“Let Xavier put more into your you-know-what than just a finger?” Her eyes are gaping in anticipation as to what my answer is.

I flinch a little when I feel a twinge between my legs, and my panties dampen as my mind imagines what it feels like to have Xavier put all of his length inside of me. But then I recoil when I see not Xavier’s face but the evil twin in my mind. I wring my hands together from when our hands touched as he helped me up on the roof of Lander’s Silo. And then the way he rubbed my back as I coughed breathlessly because of stupid actions, shoving marijuana smoke into my mouth. My stomach turns thinking about it. Brushing tender moments aside, he really is a horrible person.

“I’m not sure,” I answer, shaking the chiseled image of Austin from my mind. “As long as it doesn’t hurt.” A shadow casts over my mind, and the joy I felt having a lighthearted debate with my bestie a few seconds ago vanished into the darkness.

She notices this and sighs, “Bestie, we’ll find your sister soon. I know it.”

“It’s not just that,” I tell her. “But I...” I wiggle my finger, hoping she’ll understand just by my body language. “Did something stupid. No, it was beyond stupid.”

“Oh? What did you do?” The pencil slips from her hand as if she’s thinking the worst thing ever. And it could be the worst thing ever...or the best.

“Um, so I didn’t...when Xavier and I, you know, he wasn’t wearing protection,” I exhale hastily as a massive weight falls from my shoulders. Out of concern, I badgered Xavier a few times, and he seemed relaxed about it. But then, some men run from a woman, shirking responsibility and leaving the woman alone and broken. I don’t want that for me.

“Em,” her tone was scolding, unsympathetic when I hoped for the opposite. “This is irresponsible of you. You said that

you trust him only fifty percent, yet you let this happen. Buy a packet of condoms and have them with you all the time, and make sure you don't have sex until they slip one on."

"They?" I question.

"Yes, they. It looks like you're heading down that road of sleeping with the evil twin as well," she says flatly, and I'm surprised at how much her words annoy me.

"Do you think I am weak? Weak for the Leroux's?" I ask, irritated by my whiny, pathetic tone. What have I become?

"No," she sighs, picking up her pencil and prodding the lead into the top of her finger. "I think you're having fun finding yourself while finding your sister."

Her words hit me hard. "I kind of am having fun, but I'm too ashamed to admit it because I'd feel guilty while my sister is going through hell."

"I don't want to be the one to say something grossly cliched, but you can't put your life on hold because you don't know how long it'll take to find her. And when they do find her, will she..." Rosie shrugs her shoulders. She doesn't need to finish the sentence, as I know what she's saying without having to declare it aloud. Brielle, my sister, might not still be alive. Dead. That's so final. No, that's a thought I can't bear to have.

"I have to focus on my schoolwork and finding Bri," I sigh.

"That's not what I said," she speaks softly. "Have fun sleeping with the Leroux brothers, but remember to keep an eye out for clues."

I nod as this conversation brings me back down to earth with a massive thud.

Rosie clears her throat to add. "And if it's just a once-off, you know, having unprotected sex, you'll probably be okay. Just make sure you don't go unprotected again."

"Yeah, you're right," I agree, reaching across the table to hold hers in a gesture of comfort for both of us.

"Anyway," she smiles, the heaviness immediately gone, "that was likely Xavier or maybe one of the other Leroux's

messaging you now.”

“Oh yeah,” I gasp, releasing her hand to check my phone. I forgot I heard it beep. Gone are the days when my phone lay silent for days because the only people who messaged me were Rosie and my grandparents. Brielle would message me once in a blue moon when she wanted something. Money, mostly because she was too proud to ask my grandparents.

I reflect on my thoughts before scrolling through my message. It’s still weird how she asked me, of all people, to drive her to Demon’s Cove. She has so many other friends. Why me? It’s out of character for her, and as I sit here today looking at it from a slightly less charitable angle, that whole night feels like a setup.

But who was it setting up? And why?

Checking the message, I’m surprised to find that it’s from someone I least expected, replying to a message I sent over a week ago.

Harley Leonard: Sorry for the delay. I’ve been busy. Has there been any new news on Bri? Anyway, I’m free to meet tomorrow at lunchtime, if that suits you.

I’d almost forgotten about Harley. I’d wanted to ask her about the Debonair Cat tattoo she and my sister got together. And I’m sure it was Harley who lay on the butcher’s block in the tomb the night my sister disappeared.

My mind has hardened as my romantic and poetic view of the world crumbles about me. I now see life differently, not through a kaleidoscope of bright hues that change with each season, but of the light and the dark when the shadows suffocate the glow as the sun falls.

Me: Great. Is 12.15 pm at the Boulevard Library okay? I’ll meet you in the foyer.

Harley Leonard: No prob. I’ll see you then.

The Bear



I'm about to head home to the apartment since I hate sleeping in the frat house these days when I notice the straight-back posture and black hair of pretty boy Royce Huntsman walking into the gym with Beau. That smug expression is set hard on his face, and when I was younger, I'd want nothing more than to punch it off. Now that I'm older, I rise above my natural violent urges. I don't like the guy, though.

He looks up at me, and I make eye contact and nod my chin. "Man," I say, walking closer to him, "does your father still own AA Security?"

"Why?" he asks suspiciously, and Kody, who's a couple of feet away, flicks him a warning grimace.

"I need a favor," I say, beckoning him to move away from Beau for a private chat.

He reluctantly agrees with a black scowl and fists clenched in preparation. "If you want to hire security, contact reception. I have nothing to do with the operation of my father's companies. That's why he hires managers."

"Nah, that's not it. I need to find out who hired a crack dealer that's been harassing my... a friend. A female friend. It's shaken her up."

I hoped that if he had no interest in helping me, he might help a girl going through a tough time. But who knows where this guy's head is at?

"Who's the girl?" he asks bluntly with no warmth in his tone.

“Emaline Applegate. Her sister went missing a while back, Brielle, cheerleader-”

He nods slightly, and I just can't read the guy's face. Am I winning or losing here? I hate wasting my fucking time on pricks like this. “Blond?” he asks, and several faces of blond cheerleaders shuffle through my mind, so I have no idea if we're talking about the same chick.

“Yeah,” I answer. Short, sharp convos with the Huntsman. “Naturally, I'll pay you for your effort.”

He screws his face up as if he just smelt something rotten. I think I insulted him. “I don't need money. But we can make a deal. Keep your brothers away from Charlotte.”

“Who?” I cock my head.

“My stepsister, Charlotte Grant.”

“The redhead.”

“Promise to keep them away from Charlotte, and I'll find out who hired your crack dealer,” he croons, glancing back at Beau, who's watching with great interest.

“Deal,” I agree and hold my hand for him to shake, and he hesitates before sealing the deal. “His name is Gainor Legget.”

His scowl irons out into a smirk. “Gainor Legget? His mother must hate him, giving him a name like that.”

“Possibly.” That's precisely what I said when I discovered his name—poor guy. I actually feel sorry for him. Although he's happy with the new car I bought him, a newer model than the red sedan he was driving.

“Alright, I'll see what I can do,” he says, and I am about to walk away when he turns back and warns, “Don't forget to keep your brothers away from Charlotte.”

My brothers have no interest in his scarred stepsister, but it's obvious that he's hung up on her. Or else he wouldn't be so fiercely protective. Huh, interesting. It's not for me to judge if stepsiblings get it on, and it's not like they're blood-related. Besides, I'm more interested in another damaged soul.

“What was that all about?” With arms folded across his chest, Kody glares at Royce as he walks over to the punching bag with Beau.

“He’s chasing up something for me to do with Emaline Applegate,” I tell him, and his face remains blank until I add, “Brielle’s sister.”

“True? Is Royce getting her number for you because Kieran probably has it in his contacts?” Kody is a pretty naïve. If I want Emaline’s number, I will ask her for it. Or...ask Xavier.

“No, I didn’t ask Royce Huntsman to get her number for me,” I roll my eyes, but a thought occurs to me. “Have you seen Emaline hang around the Huntsman’s?”

“I don’t know who she is, but I assumed that’s why you were asking Royce,” he mumbles as he pulls his lifting gloves on.

“Emaline is the chick with glasses who works at Dante’s,” I explain, and I can see his mind ticking over trying to remember her. Not that it matters.

“Ah, yeah,” he grunts, completely losing interest. “I had more to do with the other one.”

“Brielle?”

“Yeah,” he answers unenthusiased, picking up a dumbbell to start pumping.

It’s getting dark outside, and I grab my bag to head for home, but the jealousy clawing away in my stomach is getting too hard to ignore. I resign to swallowing my pride to ask Kody, “Why would Kieran have Emaline’s number?”

I’m making it obvious that I have a thing for Emaline when this is the second time in five seconds that I’ve questioned why another man would have her number. Fuck, I’ve got it bad.

“I don’t know. He had Brielle’s number and might also have the sister’s number. Had a thing for her.” I already knew Kieran and Brielle hooked up sometimes, but now that I understand Kody’s logic, I can leave in peace. But Kody keeps

talking. “It’s concerning about Brielle. I wonder what happened to her.”

“Dunno,” I answer dryly, thinking about dropping by Emaline’s house on the way home, even though her house is on the other side of town. My excuse to see her is to update her on the crack dealer following her so she knows that I’m looking out for her and not part of her sister’s disappearance. “Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yep,” he grunts as he curls his weights. “It was strange that night.” Kody seems to want to keep talking, and usually, I would ignore him and keep going, but I need answers to get me off the hook so Velma Dinkley will trust me.

“What was strange about it?” I ask him. I was on the edge of the party, and from my perspective, no activity was stranger or different from usual. Everyone wore masks, giving people a sense of freedom to do things they wouldn’t normally do.

“Her going missing,” he blows out air as he speaks.

“I was unaware at the time,” I tell him, “but do you know something about it?”

He drops the dumbbells down with a gush and flexes his arm. “Nah, but Kieran said she asked him to call out.”

“Call out what?”

“You know when we were in the tomb and someone yelled, ‘The police are coming.’ Or maybe it was, ‘the police are here’ or something.”

“No. I wasn’t down there. I was still in the church,” this is getting interesting.

“So, when the group of us were in the tomb doing the ritual, someone yelled ‘The police are coming,’ and everyone freaked out and ran.”

“Did the police turn up?”

“No. It was a ploy to get everyone to run,” he explains, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his tee shirt. “There was no police.”

“Why did Brielle ask Kieran to do this?” I ask, grabbing my phone from my bag to call Kieran.

He shrugs his shoulders. “You need to ask Kieran that because he’s the one that yelled, ‘The police are coming.’ For her.”

“For *her*?”

“Yeah, Brielle asked him to do it,” he says flatly as if it hasn’t hit him how relevant this is.

“Did he tell the police?” I ask.

“Why would he tell the police?”

“Because Brielle hasn’t been seen since that night, so I’d say that it’s vitally important that police know about it,” I feel like my words are falling on deaf ears. Or maybe I’ll sort it out myself.

Once outside, I call Kieran and then message him to contact me ASAP when there’s no answer. I need to hear the story straight from his mouth before making judgments.

I arrived at her house. It’s as if I went into a trance and let my innate instincts take over. Her van is here, so hopefully, that means she’s here too. Climbing out of my SUV, I had already decided what to tell her: the reason for my visit. The red sedan, the crack dealer, and then I’ll ask her questions about that night, playing the caring protector willing to solve her dilemma. And then, hopefully, she’d let me fuck her because I’m hanging out for it.

The doorbell rings, and there are several beats before I can hear quick footsteps. The door opens a crack, and Velma Dinkley peers at me precariously behind glasses.

“Hey,” I say, “Can I have a word?”

Her eyes drop to the phone in my hand. I know she’s thinking about the porn clip she saw on here the last time I was here. She’ll never let me forget it.

“It’s about the guy that’s been following you,” I tell her.

She bites her bottom lip, and I have to use every ounce of strength in my body not to grab her and bend her over. “Xavier told me that you confronted him,” she says shyly, and that only adds to the swelling going on in my crotch, pressing hard against my briefs.

“Yeah, but I found out...look, can you step out for a sec. Or maybe I can take you out for dinner, a burger or a pizza? Your choice.”

She hesitates when her grandmother calls deep inside, “Who’s at the door?”

“Um, no one,” Velma answers. Fuck, I’ve got to stop comparing her to that Scooby Doo animation. She turns back to look at me and I clench my fists to hold back the frustration that she’s about to reject me. “Okay, I can’t stay long.”

I’m surprised at how thrilled I am that she said yes, and I have to check myself. Who am I? This is out of character, dude. “Cool,” I answer in a chilled tone to show that I’m not bothered either way, which is a lie.

“I’ll just go upstairs to change my clothes first,” she says, then falters before closing the door behind her. “Maybe I have some questions for you too.”

“Great. I look forward to being grilled by you,” I flirt, and she frowns, running her eyes over my chest, dropping for a mini-second to my crotch before shutting the door.

She reemerges ten minutes later with hair freshly brushed and wearing black jeans that show off her cute butt and thighs and a multicolored knitted sweater with a bright red scarf that clashes with her sweater. Cute.

“I spent some time with your brother today,” she says as I beckon her to follow me to my SUV across the road, but she stalls dead at the roadside.

I glance back at her once I realize she’s not following, and the fear on her face tells me everything I need to know. Am I that scary? “My driving is not that bad,” I joke, trying to chill her out. “You’ve been in my car before, so you know I don’t bite.” I do want to bite all over that dimpled little body, but

I'm not going to be stupid enough to say that out loud and frighten her even more.

She bows her head and turns subtly to the right, pointing her finger in the same direction. Following her gesture, I gaze down the road to find a white van with tinted windows parked there. Xavier didn't get the van registration number that was following him last night, so I don't know if it was the same one. But there's only one way to find out.

Holding my palm to signal her to stay put, I precariously start striding in the van's direction. I'm not armed, and I've never had a reason to be armed. But right now, I think it might be wise to head to the gun store tomorrow.

The sound of a vehicle approaching from behind begs me to glimpse back to check that Emaline is okay. The vehicle approaching is a pale blue sedan, and a quick look at the number plate tells me it's Gainor's new ride.

When he sees me there, he brakes in the middle of the road, and I point to the van. The driver's door opens, Gainor climbs out, and I call out, "Park it across the road to block it."

As I approach the van, the engine starts, and the tires start spinning, immediately making its presence suspicious. Just as I'm a car-length away, the van takes off with a screech, driving fast to the end of the road. Beyond that is a thick forest, so there's no way it can escape through there. The only way out is to come back down this way.

"Get back, Emaline," I bellow at her horrified face as Gainor starts maneuvering his car into position.

"What about the car, man?" he cries out the driver's window to me. "I don't want to lose that car too."

"I'll buy you another one," I assure him as he kills the engine and quickly climbs out to run over to my side.

"But I like this one, man," he whines, then steps back from the road as the white van does a U-turn.

"What's going on out here?" I swing around to find Emaline's grandparents have filed out onto the front lawn to see what all the fuss is about.

“Go back inside,” I assert and signal to Emaline to usher them back.

The white van starts approaching us and brakes when it’s about four car lengths away. Emaline’s grandparents are back in the house but are watching from the window while Emaline stands on the doorstep. Gainor is a couple of feet away from me, tugging at his sweatshirt collar, edgy as fuck.

The van starts revving its engine to warn us that it will plow into Gainor’s car, blocking the road. “Can you tell if that’s the same van you’ve seen before?” I ask him.

“Sure, looks like it, man,” he states in a trembling voice, “but like I said, I didn’t get the plate number, so I can’t be hundred percent sure.”

“Well...” I point my thumb at the van, still revving, “Proof is in the behavior. Try and memorize the plate num-”

Gainor’s eyes bulge as the van screeches into gear toward us. I check for Emaline across the road to ensure she’s out of harm’s way and still in the same place, wringing her hands together.

At top speed, the van comes roaring toward us, and I suspect they assume we’ll surrender and move Gainor’s sedan, but sadly, that isn’t going to happen.

Emaline



“I didn’t expect that,” I sigh as we sit opposite each other in an Italian pizzeria. According to The Bear, Italian pizza is the best. The white van screamed up to Gainor’s pale blue sedan and swerved left, driving up onto the curb, over our front lawn, and then drove off like a bat out of hell. I’m glad it ended that way rather than the van crashing into Gainor’s car, but we still don’t know who they are and why they’re watching me.

He rubs his beard thoughtfully with his big hand while running his eyes from my lips to my glasses, making me self-conscious. I don’t know why. I’ve worn glasses since I was ten years old, and they’re practically molded onto my face and every bit a part of me.

“Neither did, but at least Gainor is happy that his car didn’t get smashed,” he says in that deep voice. “We have the van’s number plate to pass it on to the police. Have you heard any more from them?”

“No. They seem to be treating it as a simple missing person, where the person has probably run off with her older boyfriend, even though nobody can identify who this older boyfriend is.” I sigh. A brick sits in my chest, putting pressure on my lungs and forcing me to take deep breaths. It’s purely stress-induced, not just because of the white van but because of the imposing man sitting opposite me.

In Rosie’s wise words, have my fun, but don’t forget to keep searching for my sister. That is why I accepted his invitation

for dinner: to probe and investigate. Hopefully, he'll let a piece of information slip, and I'll run with it.

"I didn't have much to do with your sister, so I can't help you. But my mate, Kieran, is her friend, so I'll ask him," he tells me, glancing at his phone as if expecting a call or message.

"So, tell me what you know," I say, folding the paper napkin to curve the nausea scratching the inside of my stomach.

His brow furrows, and he rubs that beard again with his hand, and the bristly sound sends a prickly sensation down my thighs. I told Rosie I trust The Bear only twenty percent, so whatever he says, I will seek a second opinion before I believe him.

"I caught the crack dealer following you in the campus parking lot, so I approached him," he starts, just as the waiter comes over with our pizzas. Unsurprisingly, The Bear ordered the Meat Supreme, and I ordered Three Cheeses because I'd rather die than not eat cheese. His choice of beverage is a beer, and mine is a Coke. So far, this is pretty normal, even though he is Aaron Leroux, a football star, and I'm a nobody. I'm perfectly happy being a nobody. After all, striving for brilliance is overrated anyway.

The Bear continues, "He told me he works for AA Security to watch over you."

My heart is doing backflips in my chest as he talks so casually in the tone as when he ordered his pizza. "Why? Why are they following me?" my appetite quickly wanes. Coming here and trying to eat when my stomach is tied in knots was a stupid idea.

"He wasn't given that information. But I know a guy whose father partially owns it, so he's going find out who hired him," The Bear states, taking a slice of meaty pizza and taking a bite.

How can he eat at a time like this? It's not him that's being followed by an anonymous person for an undisclosed reason, and even if it were, he probably wouldn't be wound up tightly like I am. The Bear seems to take everything in his stride as if

he confidently knows everything will be okay. I wish I were like that.

“You’re not hungry?” he asks, pointing his big manly finger at my untouched plate.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little uptight about everything. That van could’ve killed us, you know,” I stutter slightly as I speak, and when I glance at his bearded face, he’s frowning in amusement.

“Not really,” he argues calmly. “We were miles away. Your imagination is running away with you.”

“That is true,” I agree, as the tone of his voice and realistic viewpoint grounds me. A string of cheese is caught up in his beard, and I’m tempted to reach across the table to remove it, but I refrain. “There’s,” I start, pointing to his beard, “cheese. Unless you’re keeping that for a midnight snack.”

He smiles and wipes it away with the back of his hand. “Poached eggs are the worst, especially the yolk.”

A chuckle erupts from my mouth, surprising me as much as him. I’m the first to admit that I don’t know much about men, but I have noticed that they get a thrill from making women laugh.

“You have a pretty smile,” he says, holding his gaze. I’m close to falling off my chair. Is he flirting with me? I’m too stupid to know. Maybe I should ask.

“Are you...” I start, then chicken out and change my line of inquiry, “Sure that he’s speaking the truth?”

“Yeah, I’m fairly certain Gainor is being honest, but I’ll know for sure once I hear back from AA Security.” He takes another bite of his pizza, and I do the same to avoid being rude. He paid for it, so the decent thing to do is to eat it.

His penetrating gaze is on me the entire time as I bite and chew, winding a string of cheese around my finger. I can’t remember the last time I was this self-conscious while eating, and to avoid inadvertent ejections from my mouth, I place my hand over my mouth while chewing. Gosh, spraying my food all over The Bear would be beyond embarrassing.

“Anyway, there’s one piece of the puzzle I want to ask you about,” he says, then takes a sip of his beer and wipes the froth from his beard.

“Sure,” I exclaim while chewing, “this pizza is good, by the way.”

“Good. Best pizza place in town,” he repeats. “So, apparently, that night of the party while you down in the tomb-”

“Oh, yeah,” I interrupt, “with the girl on the butcher’s block. That’s so gross. You’d never catch me on there.”

“You’ll be surprised how many women will disregard their morals and lower standards for men who don’t deserve it,” he says bluntly, and I’m unsure how I feel about it.

“They go on the butcher’s block by choice?” I ask to clarify.

He nods. “Always. And there are a hundred variations of the same reason why they go on the block,” he tells me, picking up his pizza slice again. I suspect he doesn’t normally eat slowly.

“A hundred?” I question.

“They go on the block because they want something,” he fills me in. “Whether it’s money, attention, admiration, or maybe they’re just in the mood to be seduced.”

“But it’s in front of everyone. They’re on display while men leer at them. I can’t imagine-”

“They’re masked. No one knows who they are. Or, at least, we pretend we don’t know who they are. Sometimes it’s obvious. And some women like to be watched,” he explains, and I feel my cheeks burn as an image of the evil twin watching me masturbate on Xavier’s bed. Did I like him watching me? Once the initial shock passed, I think I did enjoy it. But the difference was that I was not masked, and Austin Leroux knew precisely who he was watching.

“But it must be dehumanizing,” I add.

“It’s their choice. Anyway, that’s not the direction I want this conversation to go in,” he snarls a little, and I imagine him

being a dad to little kids, snarling at them when they pour raspberry juice all over the carpet.

“But. Wait. You said money is one reason a girl would get on the block?” Austin’s offer for sex in return for thousands of dollars, lifesaving money, and it burns that I’m not the only one that’s been offered this. Yet, it annoys me that I’m thinking this way.

“Sometimes, a guy would offer a girl money to get on the block for various reasons. She might be a virgin or already in a relationship, so it’s done on the sly or…” he grins, “a staff member.”

“What?” I gasp.

“Yeah, there’s been a few uni lecturers, professors, admin staff who’ve been fucked by students on that block,” he rattles off proudly while my mouth gapes.

“For money?”

“Some are offered money. The ones that are harder to convince for whatever reason. Others are just in for the ride.” He chuckles deeply, grunty, and I wonder why he finds this so funny. Perhaps he thinks I’m a prude. Well, I am a proud prude. One must retain my high standards. “Then there are those who will offer money to see if they’ll break the girl.”

I shoot that smirky bearded face my best scowl. “You’re talking about your brother, the evil twin.”

He snorts. “Evil twin? Is that what you call Austin? What do you call me?”

I press my lips tightly together to stop myself from saying as I pick off bits of salty feta cheese from the pizza. “Nothing.”

He waves his hand dismissively. “Back to that night, your sister went missing. Do you remember a guy calling out ‘the police are coming’ or something similar?”

“Yes, I do,” I answer as my heart rate increases with anticipation that The Bear knows something about it. I always suspected there was something odd about calling that the

police are here, then finding that there are no police at all, and it's all a silly prank.

“So, I might know the guy who yelled it out,” The Bear says.

“You might know?” I question. Of course, he knows. The entire shindig was organized and operated by the Leroux brothers. Piece by piece, the puzzle will be completed.

“I need it confirmed first. But *who* it was is less important than *who* asked him to yell it out,” he rumbles flatly as my heart thuds loudly in my chest.

“Who?” I ask in anticipation.

“Your sister,” he answers. “Do you have any idea why?”

“My sister asked that man to call the ‘police is coming’?” I query suspiciously. “There were no police.”

“I wasn't there when this happened. I think I was in the church. So, I'm waiting to hear back from the guy. He's actually a friend, as to why she asked him to do that.” He wipes his hands on his paper napkin and then takes another sip of beer while waiting for me to respond.

“A distraction, maybe. To distract the rest of us while she escaped,” I try to rationalize it, but it doesn't make sense.

“Why, though?” he asks. “She could escape anytime. Why go to the party and make a scene?”

“Because that's what she's like,” I answer. Anyone who knew Brielle Applegate well knows precisely what I mean. But by the confused frown on The Bear's face, he's not catching on. Which means he doesn't know her that well. I add, “She's an attention-seeking drama queen.”

“I'm not buying that,” he hits bluntly.

“She is,” I stress. “I've known her all my life, obviously.”

He shakes his head. “No, I'm not convinced she made a scene that night because she's an attention seeker. It doesn't add up unless she's a little deranged or a narcissist, and this entire performance is to gather attention.”

I point my finger at him. “She's done this before.”

“She has?” he seems stunned. “You’ve solved your problem then, and we can go home and forget about her. She’ll reappear when we’ve lost interest.”

“No, I mean,” I sigh, “she was only nine years old when she faked her disappearance, so we’d all worry about her and ran about the place looking for her. The entire time, she was hiding in a cupboard in the garage.

He gives me a scathing look. Again, I see him as a father to kids. “Hardly the same. And it doesn’t explain Gainor being hired to watch over you and the lingering white van.” He picks up his phone. “That reminds me, I’ll message my contact in the police force to find out who the van is registered to.”

As his fingers scroll and thumbs tap away on the screen, I feel a sense of warmth and fondness come over me. “It pays to have good contacts, right?”

He lifts his eyes under his lowered brow to meet mine, and I smile as desire and fear shudder through my body. “It does.”

“Thank you for all your effort,” I say shyly, still smiling. His gaze lingers for a lengthened time as if he’s undressing me with his eyes. No, surely not. I must be misreading his expression. “And why are you going to all this effort anyway?”

“To get me off the hook,” his answer is brutal, immediately bursting my bubble of delusion that I had of him seconds ago.

“Oh,” I answer flatly, as my heart sinks. “To get you off the hook over my sister’s phone so you don’t get in trouble with the police?”

“Sort of. I have nothing to hide from the police, but I don’t get their attention while pursuing my football career. But mostly, to get off the hook with you since you hold me under a scope of great suspicion.” He shrugs his broad, meaty shoulders. “I don’t blame you since you found your sister’s phone in my bag. But once the truth is free, you’ll finally trust me.”

“And you need me to trust you?” The question falls from my lips.

“No,” he answers swiftly. “I *want* you to trust me.”

The Bear



“Do you want me to drop you off at home?” I ask her as we climb into my SUV after dinner, and I hope she says no.

Emaline bites her bottom lip and sighs, and her sound gets me going, unfortunately. I should do the mature thing and keep my hands off her, but something about her awakens the dead within me.

“No,” she finally answers, and I grin satisfactorily.

“Okay. Where would you like to go?” I let her decide. Wherever she wants me to go, I’ll take her. I’ll be her driver, slave, and shoulder to cry on. Whatever she needs, I’ll give it.

Several beats of silence pass as she gazes out the window at the nightlife, bright lights, and laughing couple walking arm and arm, laughing at their own jokes. “Memorial Park,” she says quietly. That’s not quite what I had in mind, but whatever Velma Dinkley wants, Velma Dinkley gets.

“You know it’s dark, right?” I state the obvious while starting the SUV and await her reply.

“I have eyes,” she snaps, still distant, and I wonder if telling her about her sister asking Kieran to call, ‘the police are coming,’ has upset her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound rude.”

“Hey, these shoulders can handle anything. But why do you want to go to Memorial Park in the middle of the night when it’s cold and you won’t see anything?”

“My parents are there, and I haven’t seen them for a while,” she says softly, and I’m immediately confused.

“Your parents are in the park? It’s not a trailer park, so why are they in there?” now I’m really curious. She’s such an angelic creature who has moments where she seems to grow distant, as if she’s landing on another planet in her mind.

“No,” she chuckles, and it’s so cute. “We planted a tree for them, and I visited for a while.”

“Sure. I guess all this talk about your sister is evoking bad memories. How did your parents die?” I ask as I drive out of the pizzeria parking lot and turn left to head out of the city center.

“They’re not dead,” she answers, yet again, I am utterly puzzled. “They went missing several years ago while in Johannesburg on holiday, and police still haven’t found their bodies, so they’re not officially dead, but still missing.”

“Weird coincidence. Far too similar to your sister,” I say, rubbing my beard as I ponder this strange mystery. “You don’t think your sister’s disappearance is related?”

“I have no idea. The police in Johannesburg believe it was random because they were spotted on CCTV in a shopping mall the day they disappeared. The hotel they stayed in said they didn’t return to the room that night.”

“And they were in Johannesburg for a holiday, and that’s all?” I inquire because it seems odd to me. Surely, there’d be witnesses, but I don’t ask anymore because I don’t want to upset the sweet girl beside me.

“Yes. They’re both corporate accountants. Mom worked part-time at home while looking after us.” A little scoff comes out of her lips. “I’m talking as if they’re still alive,” she adds.

“Finding bodies would finalize things, won’t it?” I say carefully, hoping I don’t make it worse by saying something so confronting.

“Yes,” she exhales, digging her fingers into her forearm. “So, we planted an oak tree about five years ago, and I haven’t

visited since I started college. I just got too busy working at Dante's and class. It's been too long, and now I feel guilty."

"Okay. Let's stave off your guilt. Do you want to pick up some flowers on the way or something?"

"No, it's okay," her voice shaky and nervous. I worry that I'm losing her to morbid thoughts of her family lost into an abyss.

She doesn't speak much for the entire journey to Memorial Park. As to be expected, the place is steeped in darkness. It's a green space for dog walkers and runners, with paths that weave through bushes, small woods, and maintained lawns.

"So, why did you decide to plant your oak tree here instead of the forest down the end of your street?"

"Purely sentimental. We came down here as kids, flew kites, rode our tricycles, and swam in the pool before they turned it into a duck pond," her voice is thawing out, becoming cheerful as she relives the good days.

I park the SUV under a dim streetlight, quickly noting that two other vehicles are parked here in the dark, the owners probably up to no good. "So, I don't have a flashlight," I say.

"That's okay, I know the way by heart," she tells me as she opens the door. "You don't have to come with me."

"Are you kidding? I'm not letting you walk in there alone. Are you warm enough? I'm certain I have a blanket in the back seat," I exclaim, switching the light to look for it to find it gone. *Xavier*.

"Yes, I'm fine," she says, climbing out of the SUV, and I quickly follow her. This is not what I had in mind when imagining spending the night with her earlier.

I follow behind her under the orange glow of the streetlamp that quickly dilutes as we move further into the park. There was a lot of talk of fencing this park off and locking it up at night because it attracted drug dealers and prostitutes. But Addington Council hasn't gotten around to building all those high fences. Even more lighting would help.

“It’s this way,” she instructs, adding, “I’m sure.”

“You’re sure?” I question as we walk across a lawn that looks like a black swamp in the dark, heading towards a cluster of trees and bushes.

“Um, I think so. The foliage has grown a lot, and it’s dark, and I haven’t been here for a while.” She hesitates when a twig cracks, followed by the rustling of leaves, and then turns in a slightly different direction.

I’m slightly unnerved by the sound, too, and when it falls dead immediately, the quiet seems worse than the noise. I’ll keep on guard, searching the area as we walk, checking for movement and sound.

“We can always come back tomorrow,” I suggest, “you’ll be able to see better.”

She stops and places her hand on her forehead as I stand over her. “I’m a little disorientated,” she sighs.

“Alright, let’s go back to the vehicle, and I’ll bring you back here tomorrow-”

Unfortunately, she’s barely listening and walks towards the cluster of trees she initially started walking towards before the cracked twig sound puts her off.

“You know, we weren’t allowed to plant trees in here. It’s protected. So, we did it secretly one evening when the sun was going down. The four of us, five, counting Roscoe, Gramps, Grandma, Bri, and me.” A cute little chuckle from her stirs a sensation in my lower abdomen. “We planted the twin trees at home and my grandparents’ place. One for Dad. One for Mom.”

I don’t say anything because I’m too focused on scanning the surrounding bushes and trees as much as possible. Coming here at night is stupid, but she’s better off with me than alone.

She stops dead in front of a tall tree with a lingering scent of pine, and I slam into the back of her. With my weight and size being twice hers, she catapults forward, and I latch onto her arm just before she hits the ground.

There's a moment of stillness where we say nothing. She doesn't resist my touch. Instead, she leans back into me as she catches her breath. I lower my head to breathe in the scent of her hair as my hands capture her waist, pulling her harder into me. With her toned little butt pressed against my crotch, I grow hard quickly.

A little sigh draws from her lips as I start grinding against her, and little hands start pawing at my sweatpants.

"Do you want this, little girl?" I breathe into her ear.

She arches her back and wiggles her backside against my cock, pulling a short grunt of pleasure out of me. For an inexperienced girl, she sure knows what buttons to push.

"Answer me," I demand, lowering my tone to a growl. "Do you want this, little girl?"

"Yes," she sighs, crumbling in my arms, and I run my hands down the front of her jeans and cup her little pussy. I've been wanting to fuck her for days, and finally, my wish is coming true. A soft moan escapes her lips when I touch her pussy as she grabs my boner caged in my sweatpants, and starts rubbing.

"That's it," I tell her, "Good girl. Keep doing that." I think I'm going to explode, so I have to fuck her quickly.

I pull my sweats down, flip my boner out, then run my hand to the front of her jeans to unzip them, only to find that she already has.

"Are you wet, sweet girl?" I whisper in her ear.

"Yes," she moans.

"Wet for me?" I ask, knowing the answer from how she gazed at me over her glass of Coke in the pizzeria.

"Yeah," she moans, and I just about ejaculate at the sound of hunger and desperation. This girl is so hot for it.

It's impossible to hold back any longer, so I yank her jeans right down, lift her in my arms, and press her against the trunk of the nearest tree. Her little legs wrap tightly around my waist

as I plunge my entire length inside of her in one go, forcing a gasp from her throat.

“Atta girl,” I croon as I start pounding her hard. She’s as light as a feather, so there’s no problem holding her in mid-air, but I need to go deeper. “You’re all good?”

“Yes,” she cries out, as her body jolts against the trunk, and the sound of my balls slapping her body with the slipping and sliding sounds of my cock going hard only add to my hunger.

I’m close to coming already, but I need to penetrate to make her scream. I lift her right leg over my shoulder, still keeping her body entirely off the ground, and drive in deep and hard. A sharp sigh exudes from her lips, and I know I’ve hit a place no man has been to before.

Placing my forearm on the trunk so I’m right over her, I roll my hips, slowly digging down, where she yelps with every thrust.

“You like that?” I ask.

“Yes,” she moans and gives her a good deep shove, harder than before, and another cry draws from her lips.

“I want you to swallow my cum,” I tell her. That was a demand, not a request.

“Don’t come inside me. Please,” she begs, hitting her heights as I keep ramming her.

“By the time I’m done, they’ll be an imprint of your butt cheek in the wood,” I exclaim, giving her two more massive thrusts and her body clenches over my cock to indicate that she is coming.

Hastily, I pull my cock from her soaked pussy, and let her slide to the ground onto her feet.

“Kneel,” I demand, and she drops to her knees. “If you don’t want me to cum inside you, then you must swallow my cum.” That wasn’t a question. It was an order. And my good, sweet girl obeys.

I can barely see her in the dark, so I feel for her face, running my fingers over her cheeks and lips until I find her soft mouth.

“Open,” I instruct, and she opens her mouth, and two of my fingers slide inside. I fuck her mouth with my fingers while rubbing my cock, and just when I’m about to ejaculate, I pull out my fingers and plow my cock in her mouth.

I roll my hips and thrust brutally twice, and then I ejaculate into her mouth. “Swallow,” I demand as I pull my half-limp cock out. “Swallow. Taste me.”

There’s a little gulp and then a gasp as her hand raises to wipe my mouth of my juice. “Did you like that, little girl?”

“Yes,” she answers breathlessly.

“Really?” I question. “I was cruel to you, and you still come back for more.”

Xavier



Em didn't reply to the message I sent as I was leaving the rink after hockey practice, so instead of heading to her grandparents' place to sneak into her window, I went straight home to the apartment. It's not like her not to reply, and I'm starting to get worried, considering what has happened lately. Aaron left a message to fill me in on what happened with the white van, so I wonder if Em hasn't answered because she's with him.

Em is hardly his type, but then, up until recently, she's not mine either. Although, the cute girl with glasses has become my favorite style, especially if that pretty girl with glasses takes my cock.

The living room is empty, but the hall light is on, so I assume one of the boys is home. I saunter into the kitchen and open the fridge to search for some grub when I hear a ringtone coming down the hall, and then Aaron's deep voice answers.

Eager to talk to him about the white van incident at Em's house, I walk down the hall to his bedroom to find his door open a crack. Pushing it wider, I stall when I find him sitting on the edge of the bed, completely naked as a dark-haired girl, also naked, kneeling before him, sucking his big cock.

He turns to look at me as he's talking on the phone while guiding the girl's head up and down over his cock. The girl's hair had fallen over her face, and I was not paying her much attention until something on the bedside table caught my eye. Glasses. I examine the pale, soft skin, perky buttocks, and chocolate-colored hair.

“Is that you, Em?” I ask, and she turns her head to the side to look up at me and answers a muffled, “Uh hum.”

Aaron swipes off his call and uses his now free phone hand to place behind Em’s head to keep it steady when he gives his cock a big push inside her.

“That was Kieran,” he said to me, “getting back to me about what happened the night Emaline’s sister went missing.”

“Yeah?” Em says with her mouth full of his cock.

She stalls, moving her mouth over his cock as her attention is pulled into a different direction. “Keep going,” he tells her and addresses me. “Brielle asked him to call ‘the police are coming.’ He said,” jamming his cock a little harder into her mouth, and I adjust my cock in my sweats because this is making me fucking hard. “He said Brielle didn’t give a reason why. Just said it’ll be a fun prank.”

My older brother reaches for something on his bed and tosses it my way, and when I catch it, I realize it’s a tube of lubricant. He nods to Em, “Take her ass. She said she wants to know what it feels like but won’t let me near it.”

“You want me to fuck your ass, Em?” I ask to clarify.

“Uh ha,” is her stifled answer.

“She said she wants you to be the first because she trusts you fifty percent. Whatever the fuck that means,” Aaron explains.

“Fifty percent?” I say, disappointed. “That’s not high.”

“It’s higher than me, bro. Trusts me, only twenty percent,” he chuckles, still guiding my girl’s head over his selfish cock.

“She trusts you enough to be in this apartment alone to suck your cock,” I point out the obvious.

“True, bro, true. But we did other shit earlier. But I’ve got a thing for,” he makes a face and thrusts upwards into her mouth, and I know he’s just come, “when cute, sweet girls swallow my cum. Second time tonight,” he states, pulling his shiny wet cock out and kissing her gently on her forehead. He then lies back on his bed, still fucking naked, and places his head on the pillow.

“Didn’t realize you were this hairy, bro,” I say, pointing to his lower body that he’s not bothered hiding. I knew he had a hairy chest, but I didn’t think he was a fucking gorilla on the bottom half.

“Yep,” he says proudly, reaching for his balls and scratching them as Em is self-conscious and hugs her body.

I kneel and hug her cool, naked body, pressing my lips against her ear. “Are you sure you want me to stick my cock in your asshole?”

She licks her lips and nods enthusiastically. “I just want to know what it feels like, so be gentle. When I say stop, you must stop.”

“Alright. Fair enough.” I’m eager, and she’s keen, so I grab my cock in my sweats and rub it a little as Aaron reaches for some papers and green and starts rolling a joint.

“Lie her tits on my chest,” he recommends, “so I can keep an eye on her as you’re railing her little asshole.” He flicks Em a warm look. “You still sure you want to do this?”

“Yep,” she says boldly. “But just go slowly.”

“Okay, babe, get to your feet and bend over, resting your chest on Aaron,” I tell her, and she precariously does this, adjusting her position a couple of times so her little ass is sticking out while her top half is lying on the hairy ape. “There’s that nice tight hole.”

As Aaron strokes her hair, whispering in a calming voice, I flip my hard as fuck cock out and plaster lubricant all over it. Then I squirt out some more lubricant onto my finger, warm it up between my finger and thumb, then gently apply it to her tight hole.

She’s completely silent as I slip my finger inside her anus but gasps when I push it all the way in and move it about. “How does that feel, Em?”

“Interesting,” she answers, and I grin, exchanging glances with Aaron, who continues to stroke her hair and run his hand down her bare back.

I pull my finger out, plunge two fingers in, and start moving them about. “You like that, Em?”

“Yeah,” she gasps. “Is that the whole thing? It’s not so bad.”

I chuckle. “No. I’m warming you up with my fingers. I haven’t put my cock in you yet.”

“Oh,” she replies so innocently. “Go slowly.”

“I will. I promise,” I tell her honestly.

“Don’t come inside her, bro,” Aaron says, placing a fat joint between his hairy lips, “she’ll be leaking cum for days.”

“What?” Em exclaims in horror.

“Don’t worry, Em, I won’t do that,” I assure her as I prod my cock against her tight hole and start worming it in slowly while Aaron continues to comfort her. She is in good hands even though she doesn’t trust us much. “Feels fucking good, Em,” as I push slowly inside.

She moans, “It feels okay.”

“I’m almost all inside,” I state, rolling my hips, getting off on the tautness and warmth gripping my cock. I move my hips forward one last time so my entire length is inside her and grab her butt cheeks to squeeze them. “I’m all in. You still good?”

“Yep,” she answers non-committedly, and I’m unsure if she likes it or is pretending to like it.

“Don’t hesitate to tell me if you don’t like it. Okay?”

“Okay,” she states, as her breathing becomes hitched. “It’s feels full.”

“Alright,” I say, grabbing her wrists to pull her arms back to use as reins to steady me as I fuck her. I start moving in and out, gently at first, then my animalistic urges take over, and I increase my pace. “Feels so fucking good, Em.”

Her body jolts on Aaron’s chest, and her breasts squashed hard against him as I inadvertently notice Aaron getting hard again, clasping a hand around his cock. I need to stop looking downward, and why doesn’t he put some fucking pants on.

Aaron's free hand moves down Em's thigh and starts playing with her clit as I keep pummeling her tight hole, which feels like I've discovered a wonderland. It's so good. She gasps as Aaron starts massaging her clit, and keeps crying out with every smack against her butt cheek.

Just as I'm about to cum, I pull out and squirt all over her back as she sighs in orgasmic pleasure.

"Get on, sweetheart," Aaron states, pointing to his erect cock.

"Condom first," she stresses and Aaron snarls a little, then rolls over to his bedside and opens the top drawer. Quickly, he opens the packet, slides a condom on, and then gestures for her to get on.

Like a good girl, she climbs onto the bed and kneels over his ejection, her pussy lightly brushing the tip of his cock. His big hands grab her hips to ease her down onto his cock, disappearing inside her. Jealousy rises inside of me, so I seize her nearest nipple in my mouth and start sucking.

We're giving this girl a hell of a ride. She'll be bruised and sore tomorrow, but at least she'll be satisfied and contented.

"Up and down," he instructs her, "roll those hips." We can see the anguish and utter pleasure on her face while her juice dribbles onto Aaron.

"This is so good," she cries out, tipping her head back while rolling over Aaron's cock.

"That's it," he encourages her, using his strength to guide her body to the correct pace. "Now, start pounding me."

"Huh?" she drops her head down to look at him, unsure what he means.

"Bounce up and down. Fuck me hard, naughty girl. Let me see those tits bounce," he directs her, pushing his body up into her, and she gasps in delight.

"Okay, I'll try," she says sweetly and starts bouncing on him. Tits slapping as her voice grows higher pitched, and the entire

bed is jolting as the two of them, bound together as one, dance hypnotically.

I can't control this jealousy rolling about in my chest, and my cock hardens again, seeing her soaked in titillating pleasure. That shy, geeky girl has peeled away the inhibition and is free and enjoying her body.

As Em's breathing becomes faster and her sighing and moaning more desperate, Aaron rolls her over, positions himself between her legs, and pounds her hard until they both come.

The room falls silent as I stand there with my second boner in twenty minutes, rubbing up and down. Aaron is lying on top of her, her small body consumed under his size, and she turns her head my way, watching me masturbate, biting her lip as her nostrils flare.

"You want me too?" she whispers.

"Yes," I grunt, rubbing faster.

"Again?" she teases.

"Yes," I exclaim, watching those rose lips move.

"Get on then," she beckons.

"Bro, get off her. It's my turn again."

"Fine," he resigns, rolling off the bed to put some clothes on. Thank fuck. I've had enough of seeing that boy naked. "Take her into your room. I'm done."

We're barely in my bedroom before I'm on her fucking that body raw, and she is screaming, digging her fingers into my butt cheeks.

"I won't be able to walk tomorrow," she cries out as I hit her hard, the headboard banging against the wall and the bed creaking.

"Look what you're doing to me, Em. You're making me fucking crazy for you," I pant as sweat pours from my brow, and my thighs burn like hell.

“Good,” she states, squeezing her thighs around my torso.
“You take the bad thoughts away.”

“I do?”

“When I’m with you and when we do stuff like this,” her voice trembles from my quick movements inside her.

“You take my bad thoughts away too,” I express truthfully, and she smiles just as I ejaculate inside her again.

Damn, that was stupid.

Austin



I was asked to stay behind to help Griz guide a private group through the gallery. Griz leads the tour group while I stand back, out of sight, and on standby if he needs help. He doesn't need help most of the time, which suits me fine.

"Sinatra," Griz mutters as he picks up a used Kleenex that someone from the last group had dropped off the floor. Precariously holding it at arm's length, he walks to the nearest trashcan and drops it in, immediately reaching for the hand sanitation. "The name of the group is Sinatra. That's the name I was given, and I'm unsure if it is a first name or surname."

"Got to be fake," I grunt, uninterested as I sit at the old computer and type up an assignment that I've put little effort into, but I've done enough to pass. I was born with brains, and Xavier was born with a likable personality. Let's face it: he's prettier than me, too, but that never mattered.

"They're late," Griz blurts as he rushes by the office door, and I check the time on my phone. 8.37 PM and roll my eyes.

"Only by seven minutes," I call after him, even though he's long gone, probably at the other end of the gallery by now. He's a fast walker for an old dude. There's a message from Aaron, and I open it up to discover he's had a run-in with the white van and added the plate number.

Just as I'm about to reply, the sound of the door opening, followed by footsteps tapping on the polished concrete, grabs my attention. Griz is out there somewhere, so I'll let him deal with them. Without looking, I can tell it's a small group of

men in dress shoes by the sound of the clicking the length of the stride. When I don't hear Griz's voice greeting them in his anxious, bustling way, I poke my head out the door to see if I can spot him between the exhibits.

It's far too silent for my liking, and begrudgingly, I step out of the office to see if I can find Griz because the visitors will be expecting attention.

I can't see or hear him anywhere, and it's common to hear him before I see him since he often chats to himself as he bustles about the gallery with squeaky shoes.

Stepping out of the windowless office, I scan the expanse of the gallery in between skeletal exhibitions, sure that he is headed toward the loading bay. Rather than tend to the tour group, I step toward the loading bay at the gallery's far end because being courteous is not my forte. But the tour group catches my eye by the mammoth skeleton, and my feet freeze dead.

Five men in tailored suits and shiny black dress shoes are lingering, yet their eyes are searching, hunting the place for someone or something. I know they could be waiting for their guide, but this is not typical of the tour groups here. Alarm bells go off in my head, especially with Griz mysteriously absent.

I step into the gallery from my office and head towards the suits, who glance at the exhibitions curiously, but honestly, they don't seem that invested. So, why are they here?

"Can I help you?" I ask, assuming they're lost, or there's been some misunderstanding.

All five men turn in my direction, and a shiver runs down my spine because something seems off about them. There are only two types of men who wear tailored suits like this: wealthy businessmen and rich businessmen who deal in illegal shit and need to keep a clean image.

A guy chewing on gum with sleek black hair gave me the once-over before answering, "Sinatra is the name. We booked a tour of this place."

“Yeah?” I reply, not buying their crap at all. “You like extinct beasts?”

“Well...we thought we’d get an education,” he answers, as the other four stare me down, and I know they’re shifty as fuck. What has Griz done? That is my initial thought. I thought the guy was straight as a die, apart from being a little eccentric, but if he’s doing business with heavies, then I question his intelligence.

“Do you work here?” a second heavy asks, looking me up and down. I’m wearing black jeans and a black hoodie, so I don’t look the part of a tour guide, but me being seen was never the intention.

“Yeah, behind the scenes, mostly,” I answer with an urge to look again for Griz, but I think it’s unwise to leave these guys alone.

“So, are you going to show us around or what?” the gum chewer asks.

“That’s not my job,” I tell him as the dude with a pink tie rubs his jaw with his knuckles. I notice the rings on his fingers, and my stomach stirs. I bet that ringed fist has fucked up a lot of faces.

“You’re the only one here,” he states, opening his jacket and reaching inside. I take a glance at the scene, looking for a place to dive for cover if he reveals a gun. Unfortunately, I’m in a room of skeletons, and there’s nothing solid to hide behind for several feet.

Luckily, it’s a packet of gum he produces, and I breathe in relief. I saw enough of these types in prison. They are real smartasses that get a kick out of intimidating weaker people. Jeez, Griz has fucked up here. Now I know why he conveniently disappeared. He took one look at the visitors and ran, leaving me to deal with the assholes.

“Sure,” I resign as I plot how to get rid of them.

My phone’s ringtone goes off, echoing through the empty gallery from my office.

“I just need to get that,” I tell them, stepping away. “I won’t be a sec.”

“Sure. Whatever,” the ringed guy says, slightly irritated. “We’ve got all day.” That was sarcasm. He wasn’t happy about it, but I’m not giving them a choice.

I run to the office just as the ringtone stops. Griz’s name flashes up on the screen, so I call him, and he picks up immediately.

“Austin, I locked myself in the loading bay,” he says breathlessly. This is not unusual since the door self-locks when it closes, so we must remember to either take a key or deactivate it when entering.

“Be there in a sec,” I inform him, swipe off, and sense a dark shadow descending over me. The gum-chewer has followed me and is leaning against the door frame, gazing casually at the old newspaper articles on the wall.

“This is a staff-only area,” I say dubiously. Who am I kidding? The dude doesn’t give a rat’s ass about boundaries and staff-only areas.

“Your name’s Austin Leroux?” he asks, as an icy sensation clasps the base of my spine.

“Who’s asking?” I hit back.

He grunts condescendingly as if he’s aware that the power is in his hands and I’m nothing but mincemeat. “Let’s not fuck around the bush,” he starts. He means ‘beat around the bush,’ but now is not the right time to correct him, especially when four other clones are outside. “You’re a Leroux, right?” Before I can answer, he adds, “Don’t matter. I know who you are.”

Why did the prick ask, then? I quickly scan the office to search for a weapon, and the only item that comes close to being lethal is a stapler. That won’t work.

“What do you want?” let’s cut to the chase. If he’s here for me, then it’ll have something to do with my time in prison. Or at least who I associated with in prison. Sometimes, just associating with the wrong man can get you killed.

“We got a problem,” he tells me, still chewing his fresh strip of gum.

“Yeah?” Two names cross my mind as to why these heavies are likely here. I met both men in prison. They mixed with gang culture, hence why they ended up in there, and now, a couple of months later, I’m about to be punished for sharing a cell with one.

“Applegate,” he says, and I thought I misheard.

“What?”

“You know the name Applegate?” He flicks his hand dismissively. “Forget it. I know you do. You’ve been hanging around her grandparents’ house. Her father did some work for us a few years back.”

He’s got me confused with Xavier. I’ve never been to Em’s house, and I’m not stupid enough to correct him. Protecting my brother and Em is my priority at my cost. If he mangles my face or pops a bullet in my head, that’s fine. As long as my brothers and Em remain unharmed.

I stay silent, unsure of where he’s going with this. My phone’s ringtone goes off again, and I startle as Griz’s name flashes on the screen. He’s likely wondering why I haven’t turned up yet.

“Don’t answer that,” the gum chewer orders stiffly. Staying silent is the best option here, and Griz is safer locked in the loading bay. Movement catches my eye past this guy’s shoulder, likely his clones on standby waiting to beat me to a pulp. They’d have to catch me first.

Gum chewer continues, “We’re looking for Brielle Applegate. Do you know where she is?”

This time, I choose to speak. “You and fifty others. She’s been missing for a few weeks without a trace. No leads. Police have been informed.”

He grunts in that condescending way again, and I stifle an urge to slug him in the nose to bloody up that smug face.

He reaches into his jacket pocket, and I tense at what he might produce this time. Sticks of gum are in his inner breast pocket, but this pocket his hand is slipping into is not bulging as if he is holding a weapon.

He reveals a business card, and I exhale a little in relief. “Contact me the moment you hear something.”

“Why?” I ask as something at the back of my mind about Em’s father rings a bell. Wasn’t he a lawyer or something? “Why are you so keen to find Brielle?”

He grunts again in that smug tone. Fuck that sound is annoying. “That’s not your concern. However, if I find out that you know where she’s been this whole time, then...he smacks his lips and glances behind him at the clone, “We’ll be paying you another visit. And let’s say it won’t be pretty.”

He lingers a few beats to intimidate me before turning his back to leave the office causally. Immediately, I rush to the office doorway and watch them slowly walk towards the exit. Once the five clones were gone from my sight, I headed down to the loading bay door at the opposite end of the gallery to open it for Griz.

“Thank god,” he pants with one hand on his chest and the other on my shoulder. “I forgot my key.”

“Maybe you should have it tied around your neck,” I tell him since carrying it in his pocket doesn’t work when he changes his trousers on laundry day and forgets to transfer the key from one pair to the other.

He peers at the time on his watch and screws his face up, looking like a deflated soccer ball. “Still no tour group?”

“No,” I answer, reading the business card still in my hand. *Sinatra* with a mobile number. It has to be a fake name. “A no-show.”

Emaline



I'm so sore, I can barely move. I overestimated what my body could handle, and now I'm dying. Although if this were my last breath on earth, I'd be dying happy after my night with the Leroux brothers.

Xavier dropped me off early this morning, and I crawled into bed and slept solidly for hours, only waking up when my phone's ringtone broke my slumber. My boss at Dante's was wondering why I hadn't turned up for work, while Rosie left messages asking the same question.

This is entirely out of character for me, but I made the excuse that I was seriously ill, and Boss believed me. Well... it's not far from the truth since my insides feel like they've been ripped to shreds, and my bladder is very unhappy. It hurts to pee. I've never experienced bladder discomfort before, but it's similar to peeing out scorching coals. Honestly, I'd be happy if I never see another penis again.

The house is quiet. My grandparents have gone to work, and all I can hear are the starlings squawking outside on the roof and the distant sounds of traffic. On my bedside table is a tall glass of water and two slices of cold toast coated in butter that wasn't there before. We must've run out of peanut butter, and there was not enough money to buy more.

A vague memory waves into my mind, or is it my imagination, of Grandma coming into my room and whispering, "This is not like you," while stroking my forehead gently with the back of her hand and checking my temperature.

A thousand images of what had occurred over the past few days dashed through my mind, and the thought of Gainor being hired to watch over me was prominent. The whole time he was parked on my street in that red sedan, he was there not to watch me but to watch over me. Hired by who? And where does the white van fit in?

Curiously, I drag my aching body out of my cozy bed to check to see if he's there. When I sit up, I feel a pang in my lower back from the anal experimentation with Xavier, and my lower abdomen feels full and tender. I did too much.

Resting my hands on my bedside table as a crutch to help me up, I slot my glasses on and stagger to the window to find the pale blue sedan parked outside. It's interesting how perceptions change. Now, seeing that vehicle makes me feel safer, being I'm alone in this house. Last week, he was a threat. This week, he's a paid ally.

Flopping back into bed, I remove my glasses, pull the comforter to my chin, and close my eyes tight. All I want to do is block out life and sleep for the day away.

As sleep captures me and my body relaxes into the mattress, I hear the creak of someone walking up the stairs. It's a distinctive squeak, the second to last step before reaching the landing, and my eyes snap open. I haven't heard any noise within the house up to this point, so they must be deliberately walking lightly on their tiptoes.

I grab my glasses, thinking of a way to escape their grasp if they open the door. Gainor is parked on the street just outside, so how did he not notice? I'm tempted to open the window and shout to Gainor that I need help. But then I'll give myself away—stupid move.

Instead, I stay as quiet as a mouse, hoping they might be drawn into another direction, down the hall to my sister's or grandparents' rooms. Or better still, they see nothing here worth stealing and leaving.

The floorboards creak again just outside my door, and I suck in my breath as my heart pounds in my chest. When the doorknob twists, I race out of bed, adrenaline pouring through

me so that I don't notice my pain. I pull up the window as the door opens with a squeak, and a calm, soothing voice says, "Em, love."

"Grandma?" I catch my breath. "Thank goodness. I didn't know you were home."

Her narrowed eyes peer at me with great concern, then travel to the untouched glass of water and plate of toast. "I decided to stay home from work to ensure you were okay."

"Really? I'm fine. Really, I'm fine, Grandma," I try to convince her, but she's not swayed.

"You look pale," she states, "and you haven't touched your food."

"I have a stomach bug," I tell her, which is not a lie since my abdomen is tender.

She nods slowly and sits on the edge of the bed, beckoning me to climb back under the covers. "Why were you opening the window on a cold day like today?"

"Oh," I pause to consider an excuse and decide to tell the truth. "I thought you were an intruder and was about to escape out the window."

"Ah," she gasps breathlessly as I climb back into bed, and she covers my aching body with the warm blankets. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

I giggle as I remove my glasses and place them on the bedside table. "I didn't expect you to be home."

Her eyes grow distant as she clasps her hands together, and I can tell something is on her mind. "Gramps said he'll call me if he needs help at the store. Would you like me to make you a hot coffee or chocolate?"

"Sure," I answer, noticing vacillation in her body language. There's more she needs to say, and there's no time like the present. "How is everything down at the store?"

"Well," she sighs, "we had to let Robbie go last week. He knew it was coming. And your gramps will be speaking to Neil today."

“Oh, Grandma, I’m so sorry,” I cry out.

“Can’t be helped, can it,” she states. “The damage is done by that family, so there’s no going back now.”

Guilt scours my stomach. I spent the night with not one, but two Leroux, and I feel so bad about it, but she doesn’t know them like I do. Especially Xavier, who is so sweet.

“Grandma, I need to tell you some things, and you may not like what I have to say,” I confess.

She lowers her head and drops eye contact. “I’ll brace myself.”

“I have a lot of this to say, actually. Things I have discovered about Bri,” I explain, and she makes a growling noise.

“I’m not sure I want to hear anything too personal about you and Bri. But,” she sighs and meets my eye again, “you haven’t been yourself lately, Em. And I am worried about you.”

“Worried about me?” I’m horrified. I’m the last person on earth my grandparents need to worry about.

“Your boss rang me today to see where you were because you hadn’t turned up for work, and he couldn’t get hold of you. It’s not like you to be so irresponsible. You cannot afford to lose your job.”

“I’m ill,” is my excuse.

“You were out all night on a weekday,” she scolds me, and I feel annoyed by it. She never questioned Bri like this when she was living at home and would stay out all night.

“I’m an adult,” I argue, “I can do whatever I want.”

“There is always a consequence to your actions. You are better than this, Emaline. Are your grades suffering, too?”

“No,” I answer honestly. However, I have missed more classes this term than ever since my sister vanished. But I decided to refrain from telling her that.

“Now, tell me what you need to say,” she proudly says.

I stall to decide where to start, even though I'm still fuming with being told off. "Tell me honestly," I begin, "how bad are things financially between you and Gramps?"

"I already told you that we've laid off almost all the staff, so the future doesn't look bright for Goodman Hardware," she explains.

"I didn't mean for the store. I meant here at home. How much money are you bringing home to live on?" Her nostrils flare, and her mouth gapes open, horrified at my cheek. But before she has a chance to respond, I add, "Do you think I don't notice the bare cupboards and empty fridge? And I found an overdue invoice of several thousand dollars. How much do you owe?"

"None of your business," she hisses.

"I'm no accountant, but if you're constantly paying off debt, then it doesn't leave much money behind for buying food and paying the electric bill," the words gush out of my mouth. I've been holding this topic of discussion in for such a long time, and it's almost like a therapeutic release.

"I don't want you to worry about it," she barks, and I can tell I've offended her and bruised her pride, but I don't care. We need to get this stuff out in the open once and for all.

"I do worry about it. I worry about it a lot, and you can't stop me from worrying about it. Will my aging grandparents be destitute? Will you still be able to live here, or will you be thrown out onto the street?" The words are falling so effortlessly now. I have opened the floodgates, and weight lifts off my shoulders with every word.

She clenches her jaw and clasps her hands even tighter as the strain is evident on her face. "There's nothing you can do."

In a soft voice, "How bad is it, Grandma? Tell me the truth."

She sighs again, her eyes landing on my Othello book on my bedside table. "We owe a lot of money, and the only option to get out of this is to sell the house and downsize to a small apartment in the city. The house is rundown and needs work, so I'm unsure how much we'd get for it."

“Can you give me a figure? How much specifically do you owe?” I ask, hoping it’s not too high.

“You know how proud I am,’ she states. “So, you know I don’t find it easy to admit my failings, but combined debt, which includes what we owe suppliers, our landlord, and finance companies...” my heart belts in my chest. I hadn’t realized they borrowed money from private loaners. “Around a hundred thousand.”

“Oh,” I’m stunned. Silence falls between us – my shock and her grief and I struggle to know what to say. What is the appropriate thing to say at a time like this? “Maybe I could-”

She scoffs. “There’s nothing you can do, Em.” Her eyes latch onto the Othello book again, and in a desperate need to change the subject, she says, “Your favorite play.”

“Yes,” I breathe as she rises onto her feet and reaches for the book, and I don’t stop her. When she opens the cover, she’ll find a Postit from Xavier with a little handwritten note reading: *Happy birthday, Em. Love Xavier xx.*

The color runs from her face as a gasp escapes her mouth. “Your birthday?” She slaps a hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry, we forgot your birthday, Em. I feel terrible. How could we be so awful.”

“Don’t worry about it, Grandma. I don’t care, anyway,” I tell her. “Anyway, you’ve had enough to worry about with Bri and the hardware store.”

Her eyebrows drop low over her puffy eyes as reality hits. “Xavier?” her voice scornful. “Xavier Leroux?”

“Yes,” I answer boldly and quickly to justify spending time with their enemies, “They’re helping me to try and find Bri.”

She scoffs again. I don’t think she believes me, and I can hardly blame her. “Aaron found Bri’s phone and gave it to me to hand to the police.” This is a lie. I found it in his bag, and he says he has no idea how it got there, and I sort of believe him. “He also found out about the man hired to watch over us.”

A deep frown creases into her ruddy face. “Watch over us? What exactly do you mean?”

I point to the window. “There’s a pale blue sedan outside on the street. His name is Gainor. He’s been hired to watch over us.”

Grandma rises to her feet, ambles apprehensively to the window, and peers out. “By who?”

“We don’t know yet. Aaron is finding out. He knows a guy who owns the security company,” I explain.

“Is Gainor the same man in the red sedan that we used to see often?” she asks, gazing out the window.

“Also, we found out something strange about the night went missing,” I add. “She asked a guy to create a diversion by shouting the ‘the police are coming,’ and everyone fled while Bri vanished into mid-air.”

“Why did she do that?” Grandma asks as that frown deepens even more, as she drags herself away from the window and sits back down on the bed.

“We don’t know yet? We’re piecing it together bit by bit. But I couldn’t do it without them,” I tell her honestly. “The Leroux brothers have contacts, people on the inside.”

She sneers, not in disbelief, but at their tarnished reputation. ‘People on the inside’ means criminals to her. “Are you romantically involved with one of the brothers?” There is no eye contact when she asks this. Instead, she keeps her locked on the Othello book on my bedside table.

“Um...yes,” I answer, giving little away.

She sighs but chooses to remain diplomatic. She’d rather tell me to stop seeing them, but at what cost? “Make sure that you’re careful,” she says carefully, and I know that she does not just mean safety but protective sex as well. Immediately, my mind went to last night, and the sex with Xavier was unprotected. Again. Why am I being so stupid and irresponsible? Why is *he* being so irresponsible also?

“I’m always careful. You know that, Grandma,” I try to convince her, even though it’s a white lie. White lies are handy when you don’t want someone you love to worry.

“Okay,” she breathes, patting me on the leg that is covered in blankets. “Let me know if you want me to make you a sandwich or something.”

“I’m fine,” I answer. “I’m too ill in my stomach to eat.”

Her podgy finger points to the water. “Make sure you keep hydrated.”

“Yep, I will,” I promise as she walks over to my side and kisses my forehead. Emotion comes over me, and I throw the covers back to hug her tightly. Her body shakes as I hold her, and when she sniffs, I know her tough armor has cracked, and tears are falling. This is good. It’s better to be out in the open than to hide problems and grievances.

In her stubbornness and pride, when she pulls away from the hug, she turns her head so I can’t see her tears. That’s okay. I understand.

The sound of a roaring motorbike engine becomes a convenient distraction, and she steps to the window to spy while discreetly wiping her watery eyes with the back of her hand. I can tell by the engine’s sound that it’s not you-know-who, the evil twin on this motocross bike. No, that engine belongs to the man down the road who rides his Harley now and again.

Harley.

“Oh no!” I gasp and Grandma swivels back to look at me. “I completely forgot to meet a friend of Bri’s to talk to her about everything that’s been happening. How could I forget something so important?”

“Contact her to apologize profusely,” Grandma suggests before leaving my room as I frantically grab my glasses and phone to message Harley.

Grandma is right. I haven’t been myself lately, and being rude and neglectful is definitely not part of my character.

The Bear



“Are we still on for the Cove tonight?” Kieran asks as he approaches me in the locker room as we prep for practice.

“What have you been up to, dude?” I answered his question with a question since I hadn’t seen him much for the last couple of days. I need to talk to him in person about the night Brielle Applegate disappeared. So far, we’ve had one terse conversation, and it occurred on the phone while Velma Dinkley was giving me a nice blowjob.

“Had to go home and help my Dad out in the family business,” he explains. “Did I miss anything?”

“Nah, not really,” I answer truthfully, wondering why he hadn’t told me about going home. Maybe he did, and I forgot.

“You know it’s pissing down outside?” he states, dumping his sports bag on the bench and then unzipping it.

“Why are you afraid of a little water?” I tease.

“Nah, for the Cove tonight. No one wants to be out there when it’s fucking pissing down.”

“True,” I answer, not really in the mood for this conversation. “Anyway, tell me again what happened that night when Brielle went missing.”

“Ah yeah, right,” he mumbles, sitting on the bench and dragging out his shoulder pads. “She came up to me the week before...” Something catches his eye over my shoulder, and I follow his stare to find Royce Huntsman heading our way. He

doesn't say anything and gives Kieran a sharp look before handing me a folded leaf of paper.

Opening it immediately under Kieran's curious gaze, I read the name of the person that hired AA Security to watch over Emaline before screwing it up and throwing it in my bag. "You were saying?" I encourage him to continue.

"What was that all about?" Kieran asks, pointing to Royce, who's retreated to the other side of the locker room.

"He gave me the name of a contact to help me with something," I lie. "Do you have any idea who put Brielle Applegate's phone in my bag?"

"Nah," he says, shaking his head, and I'm unsure if I believe him. Whoever did was trying to set me up, and I'm fucking pissed off about it. I don't push it any further since it's better to have your friends close and your enemies closer.

"Carry on," asking him again to continue.

"Yeah, so Brielle approached me at Dante's the week before she disappeared and asked me to help her with a prank she wanted to perform on her sister."

I cringe, feeling a touch of sympathy for Emaline. "Fuck, Brielle's a shitty sister. Why did you decide to do it?"

He makes a face that tells me everything I need to know. Sex. He did it for sex.

"Did Brielle say why she wanted to prank her sister?" I ask, hoping he knows more.

"She said something about Emma..."

"-Line."

"Emaline is a geek that never leaves the house, and Brielle wanted to show her a good time. Get her blood pumping, I think she said," he explains, but it doesn't sit right.

"Like pranking her? It doesn't make sense," I argue. It's looking more and more like a setup but by Brielle, not a kidnapper. Unless she had gone to meet someone whom she

trusted, and then they kidnapped her. No, that doesn't sit right, either.

"I guess not because it was a prank on every one since most of you ran for the hills when I said the cops were coming," he laughs.

"I wasn't there," I tell him. I was still in the church.

"Anyway, are we still on for tonight at the Cove? Kody and I have sent word, but we can always cancel it."

I pause for a few beats to think it over. It'll allow me to watch over Kieran to see if he's up to no good. Even when he's wearing a mask, I'll know which one he is and watch him like a hawk. "Yeah," I resign. "The tomb is dry, so we can take the party down there if it's still raining."

Coach shouts at us to get out on the field to warm up, and just as I'm about to follow his orders, my phone beeps. Taking a quick look before I head out, I see it's Austin.

Austin: Where u? I have interesting news.

Me: Practice. How interesting?

Austin: About Velma.

I'm keen to hear what he has to say, but I don't have time.

Me: Talk to me tonight at home.

Austin: Y

Only Xave is home when I arrive at our apartment after practice, and I ask him to stay while Austin and I compare notes. "I have my suspicions that it was Kieran who put Brielle's phone in my bag," I tell Xavier as he scrolls on his phone.

"Nah," he grunts without looking up. My little brother often gives convicted serial killers the benefit of the doubt. How does he manage to get out of bed in the morning? "I'm messaging Em."

“Nice,” I say, reliving in my mind the blowjob she gave me last night, plus I fucked her twice. I can’t remember the last time I performed like that, getting hard three times within an hour and emptying each time. It has to be the girl. The sweet face, cute nose, those big eyes filled with fear and curiosity behind glasses. She was eager to make me feel good and satisfy my desires, and I like a girl who is willing to obey.

But my conscience is stopping me from being as cruel and flippant to her as I might be with other girls. There’s something about her that I can’t describe. I needed to taste her and get my fix, hoping that I would cure my hunger and curiosity. Instead, I wanted her again. But not yet. Xavier will have to share his girl with me until I’m done with her.

“I think we went too far,” Xavier says, tossing his phone onto the couch cushion beside him.

“How and who?” I’m not sure what he’s talking about since I went off onto my little fantasy while he muttered away.

“Em,” he answers, giving me a sharp look as if he’s blaming me for something without saying it out loud. “She’s sick and sore from us.”

“You’re the one who fucked her up the ass. That’s where the damage was probably done. That girl was tight in all the holes until... we came along. How far do you think she’d let us go?”

“I don’t know. But you didn’t need to fuck her after I just fucked her up the ass,” he argues, just as Austin saunters in, carrying his uni bag over his shoulder, a black scowl on his face.

“Did you go to class today?” I ask hopefully.

“Yep,” he grunts, dumping his bag on the couch and looking us over precariously. “Whose ass did you fuck?”

“Velma’s,” I tell him, nodding toward Xavier. “He did. I just fucked her normal.”

“Bro, you cunts are going to ruin her,” the vitriol rolling off his tongue surprises me. I didn’t think he was fussed about her.

“Are you jealous, bro?” I ask.

“No. But she’s hardly...used to being porked by you cunts, or by any cunt for that matter, from every direction. I hope you went gently on her,” the last sentence was in a warning tone.

“Nah, she’s ill all over,” Xavier states, and I signal to him out of Austin’s eyeshot to stop talking.

“Bro, I’m proud of you for going to class,” I say to Austin to change the subject because he seems pissed about our workout session with Velma last night. The less he knows, the better.

“Whatever,” he grumbles, sauntering to the kitchen to grab something to eat. “Waste of fucking time.”

“Bad day?” I ask.

“Every day is a fucking bad day,” he hisses, opening the fridge door to grab a can of beer.

Xave sniggers in the background. Austin’s bad moods are always so damn entertaining.

“Party at the Cove tonight, bro? Are you coming?” I inform him.

He shrugs, unenthused, and cracks open his beer. “Are we going to talk about the thing?”

I reach into my pocket and toss him the screwed-up leaf of paper with the name of the person who hired AA Security to watch over Emaline.

“What’s this?” he asks, catching it in one hand.

“Open it,” I tell him.

He places the beer on the kitchen bench and irons out the paper leaf with his hand. He takes one look at the name and scowls in confusion. “And? Is this a riddle?”

“That’s the name of the person who hired AA Security to watch over Emaline Applegate,” I explain, and Xave’s ears prick up.

“Who?” Xavier snaps.

Austin holds the wrinkled leaf of paper between two fingers and cocks his eyebrows. “That’s weird.”

“What name is it?” Xave yells out.

“So, when I received some strange visitors at work last night,” Austins starts as Xave strides over, grabs the wrinkled leaf of paper from Austin’s fingers, and immediately reads it, and his mouth drops open.

“What the fuck? Have you spoken to Em?” Xave asks, perplexed.

“Not yet,” I answer, then address Austin. “Who were the visitors?”

“Five suits,” he swallows another sip of the beer. “Threatened me to contact them if I hear where Brielle is.”

“Why would *you* know where she is?” Xave enquires, staring at the name again as if he can’t believe it.

“Because they got me confused with you,” Austin says. “They witnessed you visiting Emaline’s house several times and assumed you have inside information. Then approached me at the gallery to let me know who’s boss.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Xavier argues, still looking at the name on the paper, although his frown has smoothed out a little.

“There’s more...” Austin says, taking another sip of beer, swallowing, then burping. “According to them, Emaline’s father was their accountant.”

“Seriously?” I question. “Got a name?”

He curls his top lip. “I was given a business card with the name *Sinatra* and a mobile number. Fake name, obviously.”

“So, Em’s father was an accountant for illegal deals, drugs, firearms, money laundering?” Xavier taps his fingers on the bench.

Austin nods. “That’s what it looks like, and it would also explain Emaline’s missing parents. Because I think these guys are real heavies, like mafia-type shit or something so that they might’ve turned them into fish food.”

“They were over in South Africa when they disappeared,” Xavier informs us.

“The perfect scenario,” Austin says. “They’re half a world away in a foreign land, and maybe the cops aren’t as good as here or easily bribed. Who knows? It’s easy to make two people disappear.”

“Yeah, but,” I start, “what the fuck does it have to do with us? I can’t have someone else’s drama in my life when I’ve got to think about the team.”

“Forget it, then. Just concentrate on football, and don’t worry about this shit,” Xavier snarls.

“But I’m involved whether I like it or not because someone chose my fucking bag to put Brielle’s phone into. Now the police have it. Whoever did it was trying to set me up,” I argue my point as Austin rolls his eyes in annoyance.

“So, who did you piss off recently, bro?” Austin asks with a twinkle in his eye and a smirk on his face.

“No one,” I answer, feigning innocence, placing a hand on my chest. “They have to be more concerned about pissing me off than the other way around.”

“That’s your problem, bro,” Austin states, grinning for the first time since he walked in, “you think you’re untouchable.”

“Yeah, bro,” Xavier adds, “maybe you should think back over the last couple of years to see if there was something you did, a girl you rejected, or a team player you fucked over.”

“Nah,” I answer without thinking. “I don’t have time for that shit.”

Xavier snorts. “You’ve rejected a shitload of girls, though, bro.”

“Yeah, but,” I wave my hand dismissively, trying not to turn it into a big deal, “I rejected them nicely.”

“No, you didn’t,” Xave laughs, pointing at my hand. “You flicked them away with your hand just like that. As if to say, ‘I’m bored with you now. You’re dismissed. Like you think you’re the King of Siam or something.’”

“Well...” I agree, “I’m not too far away from kingly status. All that’s missing is a palace.”

My younger brothers jeer and laugh as I brush their insults aside like usual. I don’t let on that I had the same thought. A girl I pissed off or a jealous teammate or classmate I screwed over. If this was the case, then they must know where Brielle is.

And until we find Brielle, whether alive or dead, I can breathe a sigh of relief and get on with my life.

Xavier



“Where are you going?” Austin barks at me from the passenger seat as I turn left instead of right.

“Em’s. I already said I want to stop there on the way to the Cove.”

“And I already said that’s a dumb idea. Leave it until tomorrow. She’ll be asleep, dude. It’s after ten PM.”

“I need to tell her who hired the security company to watch over her,” I argue.

Austin snorts scathingly. “You could message her.”

“I want to see her in person,” I say smoothly, “just to ensure she’s okay.”

“Sure, dude.” Then he sniffs a couple of times and buzzes the window down to let in fresh air.

“What the fuck are you doing, man? It’s freezing,” I yell at my brother.

“What’s that smell? It stinks in here. Have you purchased some new cologne or something?”

“No,” I hit back sharply.

“What the fuck is it?” he states, holding his nose and twisting around to search the back seat.

“Just drop it, okay. Quit sniffing around my stuff,” I shout, pulling up to a red light as Austin discovers where the smell is coming from.

“Dude, did you buy flowers?”

“Yes, I did. For Em. As I stated five thousand times, she’s not feeling well, so I bought her daffodils to cheer her up.”

“Daffodils?” he questions, pulling his sweatshirt over his mouth and nose. “Are they spring flowers?”

“Come on, they’re not that bad. And yes, they’re spring flowers, but these are glasshouse flowers,” I explain, realizing I’m sounding like a loser. “I didn’t know you were an expert on flowers, Austin.”

“Yeah, well, I bought a girl I liked a few years ago a bunch of daffodils once,” he says quietly.

“Really? I didn’t take you for a sentimental guy. What happened?”

“I have them to her,” he says gruffly.

“Then what happened?” I enquire, encouraging him to open up. Austin has always been the quiet, secretive one out of the two of us and rarely talks about his feelings, made worse by his being arrested and imprisoned. So, this is progress that he is willing to speak about a delicate subject such as dating and gifting flowers.

“She took them,” he answers simply.

“So...did you go on a date together or something?” I’m dragging this out, hoping this is the beginning of more dialogue from him.

“Nah, she gave me a blowjob in the back of my car while I fingered her. It was alright. I’ve had better.”

I snort at his blunt, honesty. “Dude, it’s time to settle down.”

“What?” he sounds horrified.

“Find a girl. Let yourself fall in love.” It’s easier to say this in the dark, where I can’t see his scathing facial expressions.

“Are you saying you’re in love with the geek girl?” he asks bitterly, and I’m wondering what the fuck his problem is.

“It’s heading that way.”

“Ball and chains,” he smirks and then out of left field,
“Would you marry her?”

“Maybe,” I answer. “I hadn’t thought that far into the future. But I don’t see any other girl by my side when I envision my future.”

“And what about Aaron? Would you still let him fuck her?”

“That’s up to her,” I say and then turn to him in the dark, gazing out the window as the streetlights drape his scornful face in yellow. “Do you want to?”

“What?”

“Fuck her. Do you want to spend the night with Emaline?”

“No,” he answers, and I don’t believe him.

“Why did you offer her the money to go on the block?”

“Because she needs it.”

“No, she’s got me...and Aaron to fuck her,” I hit back. We’re making a mark like no other.

“No, I mean she needs the money.”

“Oh, so you’re being a nice guy and helping her out,” I mock in disbelief.

I turn down Em’s street, pleased to see her van parked up the drive, and take note of the hatchback parked outside. It’s not a vehicle I’ve seen before and may not have anything to do with Em and her Grandparents.

“Yeah,” Austin answers as he exhales when I stop outside her house.

“Just admit you’re crushing on her,” I tease as I kill the engine and open the door. “I’ll be ten minutes at the most.”

“Make it five minutes,” he snaps back and grins as I shut the door on my grumpy twin. It’ll take me a couple of minutes to climb up to her window.

Once on her side of the road, I peer inside the hatchback to find it empty of life, but there’s a book on the passenger seat and a packet of M&M’s.

“Bro!” Austin hisses at me from the car.

“What?” I snap back.

“You forgot your stinky flowers,” he states, holding them out the window.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” I say, grabbing them from his grasp and heading to her window.

The light is on in her room, and I make my way up the trellis fence with the bouquet in one hand. The light is switched off, and I wonder if she crawled into bed. Once at her window, I tap on the glass, and a few seconds later, a cute face wearing glasses appears.

“I need to talk to you about something important,” I tell her.

She opens the window with a crack. “Can it wait until tomorrow? I’m feeling so unwell.”

“Em, did we do that to you? Are you sick because of us? Did we go too far?” I’m sounding like a chump, but I’m worried I’ve caused too much damage.

“I’m just not used to it,” she says softly. She’s a little nervous, which is typical for her, but I feel like there’s something else. Like she doesn’t want me to be here. This is different from her pretending not to like me there, being difficult and hard to get. The way she’s acting now is as if she doesn’t want me to be here, and my heart sinks a little, although I try not to show it.

“Let me in. I’ve got to talk to you about something we found out,” I tell her, hoping this will change her mind.

She sighs and then resigns to open the window further as I climb through her window into her room, steeped in darkness but smelling sweetly of her. Even in the dark, I notice that she’s on edge and prickly.

“We’re on our way to Demon Cove. I would ask you to come with us, but you’re sick, so...”

“I’m definitely not in the mood for that place,” she states honestly.

“It’s cold out, although the rain has stopped,” I partake in small talk, hoping she’ll relax a little. “Anyway, I bought these for you. Um, daffodils. I hope you like them.”

She steps cautiously towards me to take the flowers and immediately retreats to the furthest point away from me, against her bedroom door.

“What do you want to talk to me about?” she asks, burying her nose into the flowers. She’s dressed in a tightly bound robe, covering her pajamas. Her body language and the way she’s dressed indicate that she doesn’t want me anywhere near her. But I ignore her signals and step up to her, pressing my lips against her cool forehead, then moving down to her lips. She doesn’t respond to my touch at first, but as my lips linger on hers, she succumbs and kisses me back, which feels good.

I pull away first, and she places her fingers on her lips as I take her other hand to lead her to the bed.

“I don’t want anything,” she tells me, digging her feet into the floor.

“That’s okay, I’m not going to hurt. I just want to talk,” I convince her. “Besides, Austin is waiting in the car so I won’t take long.”

The comment about Austin relaxes her, and she follows me to the bed, parking her sweet ass next to mine.

“So, we found out who the person was that hired the security company to watch over you,” I start.

“Who?” she asks, suddenly animated.

I open my mouth to answer when a creak and a bang come from the closet. “Have you got rats here?”

“No, it’s an old house,” she answers. “Tell me who hired the security company. Xavier, tell me.”

I take a deep breath because I’m unsure how she will handle this. “Um, it was your sister.”

“Bri?” she sounded shocked, although I couldn’t see her face well in the dark.

“Do you have another sister?” I joke and realize it was the wrong thing to say.

“No, of course not. But why...where did she get the money to hire someone?” her voice trembling as she speaks as a scratching sound comes from the closet.

“That’s what we need to find out. You seriously need to get pest control in,” I suggest. “We also found out that your father worked for dubious people.”

“He did not,” she snaps, and I flinch in surprise at her reaction. “My father wouldn’t be so foolish.”

“Well...he was their accountant, so maybe he didn’t know they were shifty until-”

“He discovered it in their accounts,” she cuts in. “Oh my,” she stands up and starts pacing. “Now, it’s making sense. If he uncovered something in their accounts, they silenced my father...”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Em.” This is what we were also assuming, but we won’t know until we find solid evidence of it

“How did you find that out about the dubious people?”

The less Em knows, the better to protect her. “Ah, something Aaron discovered when he enquired about the security company. We don’t know the details yet,” I lie.

My phone beeps. **Austin: Hurry the fuck up.**

I stand to leave. “I have to go, Em. Anyway, you keep safe.” I press my lips against her forehead and brush her cool cheek with the back of my knuckle. I’m about to express how much I like her, but she’s so distracted by the information I gave her about her sister and father that I refrain. Now is not the time.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she says politely. “I love them.”

Her saying she loves the flowers makes my day. “I’ll talk to you properly tomorrow,” I say as I climb out of the window onto the ledge. “When you’re feeling better.”

“Okay,” she says dimly.

As soon as I’m outside, the window is shut behind me, and I make my way, like a monkey, back down onto solid ground to my grumpy brother in the car.

“All good?” he asks when I slide into the driver’s seat next to him.

“I don’t know,” taking a moment to reflect. “She seemed a bit strange, but maybe that’s because she was feeling unwell.”

“Or maybe it’s because you just told her that her sister, who has disappeared without a trace, is paying for her security. It’ll be scary for her. She’s probably wondering if she is at risk of disappearing as well,” he states in a measured way.

I start up the engine and glance at my brother. “Since when have you been an expert in how women think?”

“I’m not,” he chuckles. “They’re still a fucking mystery to me, bro.”

“True that,” I laugh with him as we drive to the end of the street and turn left toward the Cove.

Emaline



I wait at the window until they're gone before flicking the light on and swinging open the closet door. "They're gone," I say breathlessly to Rosie, hiding inside.

"Oh my gosh, Em. I overheard everything he said," she says in a gush, then points to the flowers still clutched tightly in my hands. "Nice flowers, by the way."

I'm still slightly dumbfounded. "Yes, they are. I wasn't expecting that," I say breathlessly, placing the flowers on my bed to deal with later. I untie my robe and fling it onto my bed, too. Underneath are my clothes that I threw on 20 minutes ago when Rosie and I decided over a phone call to sneak into Demon's Cove undercover to take notes and pics. We still have our masks from the last time we visited the DC and found them empty. Rosie will wear my mask, and I'll wear my sister's from the night she disappeared.

"Your sister...." She starts and trails off as she's struggling to find the words.

"I can't think straight," I say as my mind whirls about in my head.

"Em, you're pacing," she points out to me, and I immediately stop.

"I hadn't noticed," I say in awe. My head is pounding, and a dull cramp invades my lower back, and I recoil and flinch.

"You need painkillers," Rosie instructs, grabbing the glass of water and bottle of painkillers from my bedside table. "Are

you sure you want to do this, Em? We could wait until the next party.”

“We don’t know when that will be, though,” I say, turning my palm over so Rosie can empty two painkillers into my hand.

“What the hell did they do to you last night?” she murmurs, handing me the glass of water.

“Sex stuff. I swear I enjoyed it, Rosie, I really did,” I say honestly. “But my body is not accustomed to that sort of thing.” I deliberately don’t go into detail and try to downplay it. I still harbor the sensation of their penises in my body and the fullness that it brings. It’s quite satisfying, almost like eating a large meal after being hungry all day. My opinion of my experience is more favorable now than it was earlier today when I didn’t want to look at another penis, carrot, or cucumber ever again. But I still need another two days of recovery before I open the door to another invasion into my body.

I swallow the painkillers with the water and step to my closet to grab my warm brown coat and knitted scarf.

“Don’t wear anything that will attract their attention,” Rosie wiggles her finger at my brightly colored scarf. “Has Xavier seen you wear this scarf before?”

“Ah, yes,” I answer, unwinding it from around my neck and throwing it onto the bed with my robe and flowers. “But he’s seen this coat before, too.”

“That’s fine, though, because it’s dowdy color and easy to miss,” she explains.

“Dowdy?” I mock horror at her comment as I button my drab coat up.

“I’m already getting nervous about this party,” her voice trembling as she speaks.

“Don’t forget you’ll be masked so no one will recognize you,” I remind her.

“Recognize me?” she says, pointing to her pretty face. “They wouldn’t recognize me without a mask. Gosh, I miss the days when no one cared about us, and we moved about like ghosts. Even when people saw us, they didn’t find us interesting enough to raise an eyebrow. What changed?”

Me. I changed. There’s no point saying it aloud, and the way her eyes glaze over slightly, I know she’s thinking the same thing. How often do girls neglect their friends when a man features in their life? Well, I have only one friend, and she’s been by my side since our freshman year in high school. It’ll be utter madness to abandon her over a couple of handsome, rich men.

“And I’ll be by your side the whole time,” I promise. “We must not separate while we’re there. The place was packed with people the night I went there with Bri, so I expect the same tonight. And our number one priority and purpose of going is to spy on the men and women who claim to know nothing about my sister’s disappearance.”

“Got it,” Rosie replies with two thumbs up, looking like a total geek, and I love her for it. “Which reminds me, have you heard back from Harley Leonard?”

I sigh. “No. I feel so bad about that. I sent two apology messages and left one on her phone, but she hasn’t returned my call. I can’t believe how careless I was.”

“Never mind Em. She was difficult to contact in the first place. Remember. It took her days to return your call. She must be extremely busy with whatever she does,” Rosie says, mocking a cheerleader pose with invisible pompoms.

I tip my head back and laugh for the first time in a day and wince when a cut of pain shudders through my lower abdomen. It’s been a draining day, not just because of my adventure last night with the Leroux men, but my conversation with Grandma torments my mind, not to mention the bomb Xavier dropped.

My sister is paying for my security. Where did she get the money from, and why?

“Shall we go?” I suggest.

Rosie takes a deep breath to curb her nerves and holds up her mask. “Got your mask?”

“Check,” I answer, grabbing it from my desk.

“Phone?” she asks. “For taking pics and checking the time since you said we’re only going to be there for an hour.”

I open my mouth to protest, and she points her finger scoldingly at me. “It might take longer depending on what time people arrive.”

“You promised an hour,” she groans, screwing up her face. “I don’t know if I can handle socializing with popular jocks.”

“You know Xavier and I have never talked about football ever,” I tell her. “We have more interesting things to talk about than sports. Maybe you should give jocks a chance. Hashtag *beindtopoordefenselessjocks*.”

“I can’t believe you just said that,” she teases, mocking horror. “I felt so betrayed when we practically created the hashtag *wehatejocksforever*. Besides, doesn’t Xavier play hockey?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. See, we never talk about sports.”

“Anyway, back to the checklist,” she states, holding up her phone. “Phone?”

“Check,” I reply, seizing my phone from my bedside table and sliding it into my pocket. I have my credit card slotted inside of my phone cover.

As we pad down the stairs to avoid waking my grandparents, Rosie whispers, “Do you remember when that crazy man chased us when we were coming back from Demon’s Cove and Auston turned up out of nowhere?”

My stomach turns at the thought of it. If it’s on the back of her mind, then she worries for her safety. Police haven’t been particularly attentive when it comes to our problems: a missing sister and a crazy man who tried to drive us off the road and kill us.

“He still won’t admit to saving us, though,” I tell her, moving the focus away from the crazy man in the stolen car to the other crazy man on a motorbike who bunny-hopped on the car’s roof.

“Maybe you could get him drunk and bribe him to confess tonight?” she suggests.

“What a fabulous idea,” I chuckle quietly as I open the front door, pat my coat pocket for my key, and then shut the door behind us. “Incognito as a mysterious woman.”

Once we’re inside Rosie’s car that she borrowed from her mom, she says, “Are you going to do that?”

“No way!” I exclaim. “I won’t be socializing with any of them. Spies need to keep distance, Rosie, stealthily blending in with the background.”

Fewer cars are parked outside the graveyard than last time, but it’s still early for partygoers, only 11.06 PM. At the same time, I’d rather be in bed. We decided to take Rosie’s mom’s car because the Volkswagen van might be recognized since it’s unique and the engine is loud.

“Mask,” I remind Rosie as she opens the car door, forgetting her mask.

“Oh gosh,” she gasps and slips it on, exhaling away her nerves as she does it.

Walking closer to the graveyard, we can see the fairy lights twinkling in the dark, laughter and thumping music, and anxiety stirs in my belly.

The entire graveyard is fenced in by stone walls in some areas and high hedges in others, so it isn’t until we arrive at the iron gates that we see beyond the walls. But we can smell the sweet, yeasty scent of alcohol and the smoky stench of cigarettes and marijuana.

Unwelcome fear comes over me when an image of Xavier kissing another girl appears in my mind. The only thing stopping him from being intimate with another girl is loyalty

toward me. And why would he be loyal to me when we haven't been together long? Are we together at all? I shouldn't assume that we are a couple, and there has been no mention of being exclusive, so I have no right to feel this way.

We descend on the iron gate, which opens, and as we walk through, a man in a Scream mask steps in front of us. "Codes," he demands.

"Pardon?" I ask.

"You can't enter unless you show me the text code," he states, towering over us.

"We didn't receive any codes," I tell him.

"Then you can't enter. Only those sent a code were invited, so ..." he waves his hand dismissively at the gate. "Turn around and go back."

We turn back, but even though Rosie is happy about it, I'm not because I need to retrace my sister's steps. "I think we should make a run for it," I tell her. "When he's distracted."

"Let's give up and go home," she argues.

"Wait," I grab Rosie's arm as five people pass us toward the gate. "We'll join that group."

"No, look, he's still checking for the text code as they go on," Rosie points out. "This is hopeless. We should go."

"Quickly," I say, ignoring her angst as I drag her behind me. We duck behind the group of students gathering at the gate and slip through it as he checks their codes.

"Stop. Grab them," Screams yells at us, just as a strong hand seizes my arm, and I'm face to face with a grotesque version of Mickey Mouse.

"Lookie here," Mickey Mouse laughs. "Trying to crash a private party?"

"No," Rosie pants, "we were just leaving."

"You're going in the wrong direction. The gate is that way." He turns us around and shoves us toward the gate, and Rosie trips over something in the dark and falls onto her knees.

As I help her to her feet, another man comes striding towards us, although I don't look at his face. "What's going on?"

"Gate crashers," Mickey Mouse tells him.

"Just let them in," he orders in a strained tone, and I tense at the sound of his voice. That sounded dangerously like a Leroux, although I can't be 100% sure because masks muffle people's voices. "They seem harmless enough."

"Fine," Mickey Mouse resigns, irritated as the scent of cigarettes lingers nearby. "Go in."

"Thank you," I say with my head down and arm around Rosie's waist, hoping he hasn't recognized me; if it is the Leroux, I think it is. Walking toward the broken church, I glance back to see if we're being watched. The only person paying us any attention is a man in a Greek mask who slowly lifts it to take a pull from a cigarette. Once on the church step, about to head inside, I look back for a second time, and his attention is diverted to the gate, watching a group of scantily clad women enter.

Austin



None of us brothers are enjoying this party. I can tell. Xavier is standing in the corner of the church talking to one of his teammates, while Aaron is hanging with the DJ set up on the altar. More people are pouring through the gate, even though the weather is crap, and I can't stop looking at the time on my phone, hoping for this night to end.

I'd rather be anywhere but here, and if I came on my motorbike, I would've escaped by now. Hit the road, maybe rode out to Lander's Silo with whiskey and green as my company.

Instead, Xavier convinced me to go with him in his car, so I'm stuck here until this gig is over, or at least until my bro is ready.

A soft rain shower starts to fall, and I'm mesmerized by millions of raindrops sparkling under the lights draped over the church and surrounding trees. The rain is so soft that it barely feels wet when I pat my sweater with my hand.

There are plenty of thoughts to consume me as I stand here on the stone path that runs from the gates to the church. The five heavies that turned up at work constantly plague my mind and the geek girl and how she looks at me. Seething hate or fiery desire? Sometimes, it's both because one feeds the other. There are several images of her tattooed on my brain. The image of her legs spread on Xavier's bed while she finger fucked herself is tattooed on my mind. Sweet girl turned dirty. Also, that day, I kissed her in my office at the gallery. The way touched her moist lips while her eyes were wide with horror,

as if she couldn't believe what just happened. She liked it, even though she pretended not to.

But the image of her that I like the most is the day she sat next to me on Lander's Silo. I don't know why I hold that moment closest to me or why when I'm in a black mood, that is where I go in my mind. With her on Lander's Silo. We don't have to touch each other or speak. Instead, sitting in silence to watch the sun go down is enough. Or watching the larks flying over the wheat fields or listening to the distant drone of the traffic.

In my mind, she's a perfect angel, untouched by man, but the reality is a different story. I don't know how I feel about Aaron getting into her as well; who'll toss her aside when he's bored for a girl who makes him look good when he's out in public? He cares only for his football career, and nothing will stop him from going pro. Not even Velma Dinkley, his latest fascination.

A dribble of water travels down my forehead into my eye. While I was a million miles away, it started raining harder, and I hadn't noticed. I follow behind a group of people running toward the church for cover, but since only half of the roof is missing due to an electric fire, it'll be wet there, too.

There are three girls on the dance floor swaying seductively as the rain falls on them while guys stand around watching. I spot Aaron wearing a Greek mask like mine, grabbing a can of beer from the barrel of ice near the altar where the DJ is cranking out his sick beats.

I can't see where Xavier is, but he'll be around somewhere. We wear specific black and gold Greek masks to identify each other, whereas the other boys wear anything but. It's always been this way since we claimed the church and graveyard to put on these parties. We've been doing this for years, but I know it's not just me who gets bored with it.

I guess this happens when you grow up: you shed the unimportant stuff in favor of the good stuff that will stay with you forever.

“Bro,” I say to Aaron as I grab a beer from the barrel.
“Enjoying yourself?”

“Nah,” he answers quickly.

“Have you seen Xave?”

He looks past my shoulder to the dance floor. “He was over there a second ago. Maybe he’s gone down into the tomb.”

My shoulders tense. “He wouldn’t take a girl on the block?”

He snorts. “Unless that girl was Velma Dinkley, then no. He’s got it bad for her.”

“Sounds like he’s not the only one,” I dig to see how he’ll react.

“Yeah, well, she’s a nice girl. And nice girls are easy to like.”

“Easy to throw away, too,” I add to test his response.

He shrugs his broad shoulders, giving nothing away as I crack open the beer. There are several moments of silence where we’re facing the dance floor, watching the girls sway their hips, and I’m feeling absolutely nothing for them. Not a single twinge of sexual desire for those girls.

“Do you think much about your future, bro?” Aaron says out of the blue, and I groan.

“Have you been speaking to Mom?” I bark at him.

He snorts in laughter. “No. Well, yeah, but not about you. That’s not true. She does worry about you and the schooling that our parents paid for. But I’m talking about what you will do when we leave college. I have a clear plan. I know where I’m going and how to get there, whereas you seem lost, bro. You have no ambition, no dreams to pursue.”

“Yeah, I do,” I argue, annoyed by him.

“Swanning about the place riding your motorbike is not ambition, bro.”

“Since when did you care about anyone outside of your fucking football shit?” I blast. “Not everyone is like you, bro.”

Not everyone views life in black and white and expects the red carpet rolled out for them every time they go somewhere.”

“No one rolled out the red carpet here for me. I’m offended,” he jokes, but I’m not in the mood to laugh. The thing is, I do have a plan. However, it’s not what is expected of someone born into a family like the Lerouxes.

It’s a good thing they have a Plan B with Xavier. If it doesn’t work out with me, it’ll always work out with him. I guess I view Xavier as my get-of-jail-free card because he’ll do whatever our parents ask of him. Including being forced to improve his grades with the help of a peer tutor, which was how he met Stitch Girl. Not that it matters whether he has terrible or good grades because the plan was always for him to work for our father. Xavier seems to like someone else deciding his fate. The dude goes along with the flow on permanent cruise control.

“I need some fresh air,” I tell him, even though half the church is missing, letting in all the fresh air and rain. “I’m gonna look for Xave.”

Aaron doesn’t say a thing as I leave. It’s not like him to try and console someone upset or cool the jets of an angry person. He accepts that everyone functions in their own gear as long as they stay out of his lane. You don’t want to get in Aaron’s lane when he’s charging like a wounded bull towards his objective.

I guzzle down my beer and crush it in my hand before tossing it in the trashcan next to the ice barrel. If Xave is not here, he’s possibly in the tomb since it’s drier and warmer if the candles are lit.

Lighting a cigarette and I head outside, lifting my stupid fucking mask to blow the smoke into the damp, cool air. Once away from the bright lights that drape the church and due to the low cloud that suffocates the moon, I’m steeped in complete darkness, unable to see much further than a foot. No lingering partygoers are out here due to the rain, so I’m very much alone. Usually, I don’t care, but there’s a weird vibe about tonight. Maybe it’s the weather. Maybe it’s everything

that's been going on lately since Emaline's sister vanished. Or maybe it's just the shitty mood that I'm in.

The stone graves are hard to see in the dark, so I slow down to feel for every hazard while using the dim light from the tomb as my guide. The tall trees beyond the graveyard walls sway about in the wind as the thumping music from the church waves in and out.

At the foot of the crypt, I place a hand on the door and force it open further. The grating sound it makes as it rubs against the stone floor puts me on edge even more. Fuck, I need to pull my shit together.

Usually, Kieran or someone guards the tomb door, especially if the deviant activity is happening inside. Still, no one is here tonight, making me think it's probably empty below. It's certainly quiet. Typically, you'll hear women screaming as they're being fucked and guys jeering them on.

I have to bend right over to avoid smacking my head on the stone ceiling as I'm treading down the stairs, and just as my foot reaches solid ground, I look back to see if anyone is watching me. I'm getting paranoid. I've been down here countless times over the years, and I've never been creeped out as I am tonight.

Walking precariously down the narrow corridor, I loom closer to the open area where we perform the rituals and notice some of the candles either haven't been lit or have been extinguished, making it darker down here than usual. It smells like old dusty bones and dirty stone, as it usually does, but tonight, that scent turns my stomach. I know it is because I'm on high alert, so my senses work overtime.

The entire tomb area and the butcher's block are empty, but there is a lingering sensation as if someone was here only moments ago.

I return to the stairs leading up to the door when I hear a sound resembling a sharp intake of breath. I step back into the tomb area and peer between the pillars surrounding the crypt, where it's pitch dark. I can't see anything and assume it's the wind echoing outside.

Turning on my heels, I walk back down the narrow corridor to the stairs, bent over to avoid smacking my head against the ceiling. I haul the thick heavy door open and suck in fresh cool air into my lungs.

A notification comes through on my phone.

Xave: Where r u?

It's unclear when he sent this message because the tomb doesn't have reception, so he could've sent it when I was down there.

Me: By the tomb. Where are u?

Instead of sending a text message, he calls me. "What's up?"

"Bro, the white van's here," he says, cutting to the chase. "I recognize the rego."

"Fuck. Are they still in it? Let's ambush them."

"Nah, I checked. I went out to grab my jacket from my car, saw the van parked further down the road, and went down to look. I reckon they're in here. Have you seen anyone shifty hanging about?"

I clench my jaw as the memory of the five heavies turning up at work comes in. Those five men could do a lot of damage.

"Bro, everyone looks shifty in their fucking masks."

"I never thought of that. I thought they wouldn't be wearing masks," he says.

It's not what I meant, but he's made an important point. "If they are wearing masks, then they must've planned to come tonight, which means someone told them about it."

He grunts. "Yeah, intel travels fast in our part of the world."

The sounds of footsteps coming from within the tomb force me to stall, and I fall deadly quiet on the line. I swore there was no one in there. Even though I did hear a quiet noise, I couldn't see anyone.

"Bro? Are you still there?" Xave says down the line.

“Hang on,” I whisper. My initial thought is that someone was hiding for privacy while in the throes of banging a girl, and there’s nothing unusual about that. But with my senses on high alert, especially with the appearance of the white, I crouch down behind a tall headstone with a cross.

“Bro. Tell me what’s going on,” his voice is strained. “I’m coming now to the tomb. Stay where you are.”

“Wait. It might be nothing,” I whisper.

“What? Speak up. I can’t hear you.” He’s breathless from running, I assume, from the gates.

“Shut the fuck up, dude,” I hiss, just as the thick door opens and a man steps out with a flashlight. I can’t see his face, and it takes a couple of seconds for me to realize that he’s wearing a balaclava. He stands at the foot of the entrance and shines the flashlight about, and I suspect he’s looking for me.

Once satisfied that the coast is clear, he pokes his head back into the tomb and flicks his light on and off several times to signal that it’s okay to come up. A second man with a stout nose and prominent plump cheeks appears, and I recoil at the sight of it until I realize that it’s not his face but a hideous mask.

He’s walking strangely, favoring his right side, until I see what’s happening. He has his arm around a second person who’s smaller in stature, and their head is covered over with a sweatshirt or blanket. This looks ominous as shit.

A third man appears from the tomb to support the second man as he moves this secret person through the dark. He, too, is wearing a mask, but worse of all, I can make out the shape of a gun in his hand when the light from the flashlight catches the metal.

Once they vanish into the mirk, I address Xave again. “Bro, stay where you are. They’re coming your way with either a hostage or... I don’t know what. Anyway, they’re armed.”

“Bro, I’m at the graveyard and almost at the tomb. What the fuck. A hostage?” he states in surprise. “Are you sure?”

“Watch your step, Xave, they’re armed,” I repeat so he takes my warning seriously.

My brother has lived a sheltered life, so what I’m saying may not immediately sink in. I met the men that day at the gallery, and they fucking mean business. I swear I know a dangerous crim when I see one after spending time in prison.

Xave makes an anguished grunt like someone punched him in the guts, and I panic. “Bro, are you alright?”

The line is active, but all I can hear is sharp breathing.

“Bro,” I speak a little louder. “Xavier.”

The line falls dead just as a hand clamps down on my shoulder, and I freeze dead.

Emaline



“I think that’s Aaron,” I whisper into Rosie’s ear, “by the DJ turntable.”

She gulps and clutches my arm, digging her fingers into my flesh inadvertently. “He looks even more enormous under this light and with that mask on.”

“Yes,” I agree. And he is enormous in other places, too, not that I would dare say that aloud.

“Calling him The Bear fits his burliness,” she says under her breath as I pull her to the far corner of the church behind a group of people wearing the same Porky Pig mask. Everyone wearing masks makes me uneasy enough, but five people wearing the same mask is just wrong. Rosie makes an ‘ick’ noise when she notices all the Porky Pigs, especially when two pigs turn to look at us.

The music is deafening, and the thumping beat vibrates through every inch of me, reverberating through the solid surfaces. This is why I could never be a partygoer because I dislike loud noises and people, plus I don’t stomach alcohol that well. A bundle of fun, that’s me.

There are people on the dancefloor, hypnotized by the music and whatever else they consumed, as I keep my eye out for anything or anyone suspicious. But who am I kidding? Everyone in this place looks suspicious, including us.

“Try and look for a cat tattoo on the ankle of a blond woman,” I tell Rosie.

“Are you serious?” she barks. “It’s too cold to expose one’s ankles.”

I laugh when I realize we’re the only females in the room dressed in warm, sensible clothing, covered head to toe. Yet, again, we look like the outliers even when we try desperately to fit in. However, that could be my imagination because we haven’t caught anyone’s attention, which is good.

One of the Porky Pigs next to me lifts his mask slightly to place a stick of gum in his mouth, and I notice his face is old. I mean, I didn’t see all of his face, but the mouth and chin appear to be that of a 40-year-old man. He has old hands, too. They’re probably here at this college party to hook up with younger girls. Losers.

Rosie’s elbow digs into my ribs, and I drag my eyes away from the gum-chewing Porky Pig to find a couple beside her kissing hard to the point that their masks slide off their faces. His hands glide all over her small dress, then grab her buttocks to pull her in closer to him. Honestly, I don’t think they could get closer if they tried. I wonder if Xavier and I looked that gloriously passionate when we kissed or even when The Bear kissed me at Memorial Park.

“I’m not a fan of this sandwich,” Rosie growls and moves closer to me to get out of the way of the kissers. We’re stuck between the Porky Pigs and the Porking Kids, becoming extremely uncomfortable.

We move out of the heat, closer to the entrance, and find a spot to lean against the wall. The man with the grotesque Mickey Mouse mask walks in, and we shirk away behind a group of women discussing football so he doesn’t see us. These women are wearing short skirts revealing their slim, shapely legs, so I take the opportunity to check their ankles out for cat tattoos.

“Have you seen Xavier Leroux?” One asks another, and my body tense while Rosie squeezes my arm to check that I heard it. Here’s our opportunity to find out crucial information, but also, I might find out things I’d rather not know.

“No,” a girl in a gold cabaret mask answers. “Aaron is over there if you’re looking for some action.” They giggle while I cringe behind my mask.

“Do you think Xavier is really dating that grandma?” the blue cabaret mask girl asks, and Rosie tugs on my arm as my heart thuds in my chest.

“Come on, let’s go,” Rosie suggests, but I want to stay and listen to the grandma story.

“He’s dating someone’s grandma?” I whisper. No, that can’t be right. Maybe I heard wrong.

“I think I saw someone with a cat tattoo over there,” Rosie says, pulling me forward. “Let’s go.”

I can’t concentrate on cat tattoos on ankles now. I need to hear about who this person Xavier is dating while also sleeping with me. How could I be so stupid? Of course, he’s dating someone else. He couldn’t possibly fall for a girl like me. But, grandma? What the heck? They’re being sarcastic, although I’m not great at picking sarcasm. Maybe I’m wrong.

“Did you know that he was dating another woman?” I breathe into Rosie’s ear since she wants to keep me away from the firing line where I might get hurt. Too late, I’m already hurt.

“What?” she seems stunned.

“Grandma. They said Xavier is dating a grandma?” I ask her because she seems to know more than she’s letting on. I didn’t think my bestie kept secrets from me, but I’m learning a lot tonight.

“Oh my god,” Gold Mask snarks, “the nerdy knitter.”

“The nerdy knitter?” I gasp. “He’s dating a knitter? I thought he was too cool for school.”

“Em,” Rosie still seems flabbergasted, “they’re talking about you.”

“Me?” I press my hand against my chest in shock. “A nerdy knitter. Grandma?”

“Well...” Rosie begins, “You are a nerd, and you knit.”

“True,” I resign, suddenly feeling satisfied that these women gossip about me dating Xavier. “Have you heard them refer to me as grandma before?”

“Yeah,” Rosie answers slowly. “I haven’t told you because I thought it might upset you.”

“Huh,” I chuckle. “Not really. I don’t mind being called grandma, weirdly.”

“Besides,” Rosie says, hugging my arm, “sounds like they’re jealous.”

“Really? Wow, I’ve never had anyone jealous...” A tall blond walks into the church wearing a short, slinky silver dress and a Debonair cat tattoo on her ankle. “That’s her. I’m pretty sure that’s Harley. Don’t take your eyes off her.”

“Wait.” Rosie holds up her palm to stop me from moving forward. “Is Harley enemy number one now? I think I missed a few chapters in this mystery.”

“No,” I answer, then reconsider. “Also, yes. Just because her behavior has always been odd.”

“But she was one of the first to go to the police about Brielle’s disappearance,” Rosie argues as we follow Harley, adorned in an elegant silver mask and silver glitter pumps to go with her elegant silver dress. Matchy-matchy is not my style. I prefer colorful chaos.

She had arrived alone, and her masked face searched for someone in the crowd. A hand touches her shoulder, and she jumps in fright and swings around to face him. The hand belongs to the grotesque Mickey Mouse, and they lean in close as if they’re well acquainted.

Immediately, I suspected she was associating with him because he was unkind to us at the front gate. “Move in closer so we can listen to their conversation,” I whisper to Rosie, although it’s almost impossible to hear the closer we get to the large speakers at the front of the church.

We move through dancers to get near Harley as the odd body or hand smacks into us. It's a tough job being a snoop. Mickey Mouse's hands are around Harley's waist, whispering too quietly for us to hear. Now and again, Harley would giggle flirtatiously, and I assume they're talking dirty. That's not what we want to listen to, but if we linger long enough, they might move to another subject, like where Harley has hidden my sister. Okay, that's a bit farfetched. She's probably not guilty of my sister's disappearance, but she's not telling me everything about that night and the weeks leading up to it.

While we dawdled pretending to party, my eyes roamed to where The Bear was by the DJ. He's talking to a guy in a Scream mask, and I wonder if it's the same guy from the front gate. And if he's not manning the gate, who is? They're both guzzling beer thirstily as a third man joins their private discussion, and my heart sings. This man is tall and lean and wears a Greek mask, and I know it's one of the twins, most likely Xavier.

Naturally, I turn to see if the girls in the cabaret masks who called me grandma are watching his every move. I bet they'd steal him off me at any given chance.

"What are you doing here?" a stern voice growls, and I swivel around to find Mickey Mouse in my face. "Back off."

"Why? We're just dancing," Rosie argues and starts swaying weirdly because she, like me, has no inner rhythm.

"You two weren't invited," he adds, flicking his hand at us. "Piss off back to where you belong in Dullsville."

"Dullsville?" Rosie scoffs. "There's no such place."

"That's my point, smartass," he snarls, wiggling his finger up and down at us. "Dull and boring."

"Boring?" I fake a gasp in horror and turn to Rosie. "I told you I should've worn that multi-colored scarf."

Harley tries to calm Mickey Mouse down by gently rubbing his chest. "Just leave it."

He relaxes from her touch and steps away from us, but something catches his attention on the other side of the church.

That freaky horror version of Mickey Mouse with fangs and bloodshot eyes gazes intensely in one direction. I follow his stare to find that he's either watching the group of girls who called me grandma or the Porky Pigs. He nods towards them and whispers something to Harley, and her masked face fixes in that direction. They seem distressed by their presence, although it's hard to be 100% sure when I can't see the expressions on their faces.

They move away from us and disappear from view into the crowd, and I glance back at the Porky Pigs and the Grandma Girls to see if anyone is behaving strangely, but they're standing around watching everyone else as we are.

"Should we follow them?" Rosie asks, nodding in the direction Mickey and Harley went.

I hesitate when I notice two of the Porky Pigs staring in our direction, although it's difficult to tell who exactly they're looking at.

"Let's go," I decide and weave through the crowd arm and arm, never to lose sight of each other in this madness.

"I think he went outside into the graveyard," Rosie states and cautiously steps through the hole in the side of the building into the cool rain. Underneath the awning, two couples are kissing, but neither of the women is Harley. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I can see two or maybe three people walking through the graveyard towards a slit of light coming from the crypt.

I shudder as I relive that night my sister disappeared in my mind. I never want to go down there again, but something tells me that's where we need to go.

"Ready for an adventure?" I ask Rosie.

"Never in a million years do I want an adventure," she answers, folding her arm across her chest.

"Me neither, but I think the place we need to go is there," pointing towards the graveyard. I'm deliberately withholding information from her because if I said we should go down into a dark old crypt where dead people lay, she'd freak out.

“No way,” she protests. “I’m not in the mood to awaken the dead.”

“We’ll walk a short way,” I promise, tugging on her arm. “Besides, ghosts aren’t going to come out with all these partygoers here.”

“How do you know the partygoers aren’t the dead people? You’ve seen the movie *Sixth Sense*, right?” she argues as I guide her.

“Anything is possible,” I say as we walk cautiously through the headstones, using the crypt light to guide me as we’re quickly draped in absolute darkness.

We can hear whispering voices but can’t see who or where they’re coming from. Rosie tenses next to me as her cold hand grips my forearm.

“I can hear someone calling your name,” Rosie whispers as we crunch on the grass.

“I think you’re imagining it,” I tell her because all I can hear is the thumping music behind us. “Stop freaking yourself out.”

“No, I’m sure it was your name being called in a whisper-shouty voice,” she argues in a severe tone.

“*Emaline*,” a voice calls, and I stop dead to swivel around.

“See. You heard that, didn’t you?” she says as we scan the area, searching for the caller.

“I can’t see a thing,” I breathe just as my name is called again. “*Emaline*.”

Fast-moving footsteps pound the earth, looming closer as we hug each other in a panic. A figure looms before us, traveling at a speedy pace, but I still can’t see where they’re coming from. Is someone playing tricks on us?

“Stop it,” I scream, shaking.

“*Emaline*,” they hiss.

“We need to get out of here,” Rosie panics, pulling me back toward the church. “Let’s go home. I’m done with this place.”

“*Emaline*,” echoing through the night as the footsteps come closer. Still, we cannot see who is running towards us.

The distant thumping music, laughter from the church, and footsteps seem to bounce about the open space, disorienting me.

Out of the blue, someone grabs me from behind, and I scream out in terror, reaching for Rosie. Rosie screams my name as we’re forcibly pulled apart. Fabric covers my head, and everything turns black.

Xavier



His solid punch strikes my cheek, and I stumble backward, clenching my fists, ready to sock him one in return. “Dude, it’s me.”

He falls silent as if coming to his senses and relaxes. “Xave, I’m sorry,” he exhales. “Your phone cut out, and I thought they got you.”

“Yeah, I tripped up on something hard, and I assume it was grave. Anyway, did you see where they went?” I tell him. I can’t be sure what it was because I was too busy running, and it’s so fucking dark.

“I think they’ve gone back to the van with the hostage,” my twin states, rising to full height from crouching to gaze across the graveyard. It’s futile, though, because only the area that can be seen clearly is near the lit-up church. He starts walking towards the church, and I follow him, unsure of his intentions. His body language tells me he’s ready to bale someone up, maybe knock them over the head. Anything is possible with my brother.

“I think we should grab Aaron,” I suggest, and he agrees.

“Hurry up,” he orders as we weave through the darkened graveyard, trying not to break our ankles when we stumble over graves.

The church is packed with drunk chicks and dudes trying to stay upright. We spot Aaron by the beer barrel and grab his attention.

“We’ve got trouble, bro,” I tell him as Austin disappears into the night.

“What’s happened?” he asks, stepping away from the DJ and following me outside.

“The white van is here, and Austin said he saw them transport a hostage or something,” I tell him, barely believing my own words. It’s possible he was mistaken.

“A hostage? What have you been smoking, bro?” Aaron questions but still follows behind us to the gate.

“Nothing,” I answer, “although I might need something after tonight.”

I spot Austin walking through the gates onto the road, and we run to catch up with him. “Look,” he points down the road to a group of people moving quickly on foot, but it’s so dark that it’s hard to tell how many there are exactly.

Austin starts running toward them, but Aaron hisses at him to stop. “Bro, you’re gonna get yourself killed. You said they’re armed.”

“Get in the fucking car,” Austin snarls back at us. “We need to follow them.”

I stoop low behind parked cars as Aaron mumbles, “This is fucking nuts,” while he runs behind me.

A car door slams and an engine starts as we lose sight of Austin. Blindingly bright headlights beam out from the opposite side of the road, and the car pulls out and, with tires screeching, speeds off.

“Fuck, don’t tell me Austin just stole a fucking car,” Aaron snarls under his breath. “That’s a one-way ticket back to prison.”

“Only if he gets caught,” I add as the sound of a van’s sliding door opens and then closes, followed by the slamming of passenger doors. They’ve reached their target, so we need to get moving if we’re going to keep up with them. My car is parked a few feet ahead of us in front of Aaron’s teammate, Kieran’s yellow-colored sportscar.

“Pssst. Xave!” Austin calls quietly, slicing through the dark, although I can’t see where exactly he is.

“So, it wasn’t him who stole the car,” I say smugly back to Aaron.

“Throw me the car key,” Austin hisses.

“Where the fuck are you?” I ask, reaching my hand into my pocket for my key.

“Here,” he answers, and I detect movement. Austin is waving his hand to catch my attention. He’s crouching by the driver’s side of my car, and I toss my key to him. There’s a clanging sound as the key lands on the road, and I hope Austin can see it. My car beeps and lights up as the alarm system is deactivated. The car door opens and

Aaron and I run to my car and climb inside just as the white van pulls out and speeds toward town.

“Go easy there, bro,” I warn my wayward and sometimes careless brother as he revs the beast up in hot pursuit of the van.

“Are you absolutely sure you saw a hostage?” Aaron asks from the passenger seat as I cramp up with my long legs in the back.

“Yes,” Austin hits back.

“Why is it our business?” he argues.

“For fuck sake, man,” Austin seethes as he trails at a safe distance behind the van. “If you don’t give a shit, then jump out of the car.”

“Bro, why are you so spun up on this?” Aaron questions his motivation.

“Because they came to my work to threaten me over...” he turns a corner.

“Emaline,” I finish for him as a surge of panic storms my body. I take my phone from my pocket and swipe for Em’s number. “She’s not here. She’s safe at her home.”

“I know,” Austin answers, “but it looked like a woman of her size. I might be wrong, and I never saw her face, so I’m probably wrong.” He lowers his voice. “I hope I’m wrong.”

“They’ve been after her for a while,” Aaron states sternly. “That van has been hanging around her house for weeks. But why bring her here to the Cove?”

I press my phone against my ear as Austin takes another sharp turn and puts his foot on the accelerator. It’s after 11.30 PM so that she might be asleep. No, she’ll definitely be asleep. After several rings, it switches to voicemail, and I leave a message for her to call me urgently. Then I start typing a text.

“They’ve caught sight of us,” Aaron says flatly, and I look up to see the van speeding ahead of us, becoming smaller.

“There’s no way that piece of shit van can go as fast as my car, though, bro,” I tell him as I press send on Em’s message, then I swipe for her number again to call her. This time, it goes straight to answerphone, and suspicions prick down my spine. She turned her phone off. This means she is awake and doesn’t want to talk to me or someone else has her phone.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” I state the obvious.

“You think?” Austin snaps, and I realize how stupid that sounds while we’re pursuing armed kidnappers who might have Em. It couldn’t get any worse than this.

“I can’t get hold of Em,” I tell them gravely.

“She’s probably asleep,” Aaron hopes.

“No. Something is not right. Her phone rang several times, and when I rang again, it went straight to voicemail. If it’s her in that van, they might have her phone,” I explain tentatively.

We fall deadly quiet as Austin swerves something on the road, and with the velocity, I slam against the door. We’re all fond of Em and don’t want anything to happen to her. When Austin said the five men who visited him at the gallery meant business, I believed him.

“We’ve got company,” Austin says grimly, “coming up behind us.”

“I peer out the back window at the sedan hot on our tail. “I think that’s the same car left just before the van.”

“Fuck, I bet it’s the same cunt that tried to kill Emaline and rammed her bumper,” his voice grates angrily, and I know he’s catching some serious feelings for her. Since when did Austin care about women? “He’s driving the same fucking way.”

The pursuing car can’t catch us due to the speed Austin is driving at, so I’m not concerned about it. But I am worried about Em in that van.

“Yeah, and you pretended not to care,” I snigger. “And fixed her van and bought her new taillights in secret. What a hell of a guy.”

“The taillights weren’t new. They were from the same model,” Austin corrects me as if that makes any difference.

“New, old, who cares. You went to all that effort for a girl you pretend to have no affection for,” I argue back.

“Shut the fuck up,” Aaron booms. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re in the middle of a car chase. This is not a time to have an argument.”

“It’s not an argument,” I clarify, just as the van turns around a bend at high speed, almost tipping over. “Fuck, that was close. I hope she’s all right.”

“Ever considered what we will do once we catch up with them?” Aaron, the boring, mature brother, asks. “They’re armed, and I don’t fancy bullet holes in my head.”

“You’ll be dead,” I inform him.

“I know, Einstein,” Aaron snaps back. “Who made you-”

“Fuck, this ain’t good,” Austin cuts in, and I hone into the van swaying about strangely on the road, reducing speed.

“They’ve fucked the engine,” Aaron hits, just as the van veers off the road onto a field.

I glance back at the pursuing car, moving closer as our speed is reduced.

“Fuck!” Austin and Aaron roar, jolting my attention back to the van to watch it strike something in the field and roll over onto its side, where it lays still.

To be continued...

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1

He’d drawn a smiley face in the blood. A comical calling card in a stretch of dripping scarlet about three feet wide, streaming down from the hook where the body was hung and butchered. I try not to overthink about what or who was here twenty minutes before, and thankfully, we’re never given a back story. But by the amount of blood splattered across the walls, I’d say this target underestimated Smiler. Either they couldn’t pay their debts, or they couldn’t keep their mouth shut.

A single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling swings back and forth as if someone had knocked it only moments ago and cast elongated moving shadows along walls. There’s a slight breeze coming through the windows, which are narrow slits above ground that have been boarded over. I’m thankful for the fresh air sneaking through the cracks in the boards and circulating, making it less stuffy and unbearable.

“Bloody hell,” Zara gasps as she clammers, unenthused, down the basement steps, wearing a vintage black tee shirt that reads *Disco is Dead*. She combs her fingers through her short blue-black spikey hair and uses her tongue to play with the ring piercing in her lip. “Whoa. It’s a Jackson Pollack.”

We don't know Smiler's real name, and we've never met him, or at least, if we have encountered him, he didn't make it obvious. Our job is not to ask questions but to come down to the given location and scrub their mess free of fingerprints, stray articles, and bits of gray matter. We're shown one hour to clean the scene spotlessly, or we won't get paid. \$1500 for each job, and we split the earnings 50/50. That's the deal. Often, it's on short notice and in the middle of the night, and it's Zara who receives the text message from a lackey with the coded title of 906.

In the corner is the trolley containing our hospital-grade cleaning chemicals that I dragged down the stairs when I arrived. I step over a pool of blood to grab the bucket to fill with water.

"Are you feeling alright, Rae?" she asks, probably wondering why I'm so quiet.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Is the smell getting to you?"

"A little." This is my fifth time on the job since returning to the island after two years away. Zara asked me to help when her previous co-worker couldn't make it to the locations on short notice. I thought I'd never get used to the vile metallic scent of blood. Yet, I have. The last job barely raised a swell of nausea. However, this job is different altogether. Still, I'm doing okay and wonder if I've hardened enough to hunt down my targets. At least I'd know how to remove every inch of evidence as if it never happened.

I carry the bucket upstairs of this abandoned house on the edge of Torres Island, not an actual island in the sea, but a large piece of land between a wide river and a large curved lake. We've been here four times before, so I know my way around and I know the rules - no lights, noise, or fuss.

The closest neighbor, a hermit, is several yards down the road in a rotting house submerged in overgrown bushes and trees. Even if he heard gunshots in the depths of the night, he wouldn't dare squeal. No one would dare utter a word.

I feel for my penlight in my pocket and shine it against the beige floral 1970s wallpaper peeling from the hall walls. I pause to grab a leaf, rip a strip, and let it fall onto the dirty, flea-ridden green carpet, feeling strangely satisfied.

As I turn into the kitchen, my phone beeps, frightening me, and I pat my chest to calm my heart, which almost bursts out of my chest. I forgot to turn the sound off. Stupid.

Ignoring my phone, I step to the kitchen sink, place the bucket underneath the faucet, and then turn the water on. There's a momentary noise of pipes clanging before the water arrives with a loud whistle. We're supposed to be quiet as mice, but I can't control the noise of running water and clanging pipes. At least, the hermit down the road will be asleep.

Once filled with water, I place the penlight between my teeth and lug the heavy bucket out of the sink with both hands. Unsteadily, I start walking towards the hallway, carrying the load, but catch a flash of red under the small light. I didn't see what it was, only that it was sitting on the square wooden table shoved in the corner.

Placing the bucket on the floor, I take the penlight from my teeth and shine it evenly on the table. A single red rose stem. No note. No box. Just a single red rose. This tiny piece of nature that's so pristine and perfect is entirely out of place in this dirty hovel of malevolence.

It seems odd, and I don't touch it because I don't know who it's for, but I assume someone left it behind accidentally. Maybe they cut it from one of the unruly rose bushes on this property? Or maybe Smiler had a romantic interlude before he hacked the limbs off the man who crossed him. I never thought of Smiler as having romantic inclinations, not that I've ever met him, but I guess I prefer to view him as an invisible devil who pays well. And I imagine his targets to be the worst type of humans to roam the earth. Worse than him even.

"Someone left a rose stem on the table upstairs," I tell Zara as I carefully step down the wooden steps to the basement floor.

“Huh,” she grunts. “Wasn’t me. It’ll be gone by the morning, eaten by the rats.”

“Oh. Maybe we should take it with us?” I suggest dumping the bucket down a little harder than I meant to, and some of the water splashes out onto the concrete floor.

“Are you nuts? This here...” she snorts, holding up her right hand. “I’d rather keep this, thanks.”

“What? You honestly think Smiler would chop your hand off for taking a stray red rose?” I challenge her. “It doesn’t have a name on it.”

“How hard did you look in the dark?” she chuckles, seizing a bottle of hospital-grade disinfectant and pouring some into the bucket of water.

“I refused to touch it. In case it’s a thorned boobie trap,” I joke.

It’s not a joke. I don’t want to touch anything that belongs to Smiler, including this house, but I have to for now, at least, until I find another job to go with my current part-time job working in the university gardens. A gardening job that fits perfectly with my plant biology studies at Keele Uni here on Torres Island.

But this blood cleaning job is irregular. We might be called out once a fortnight or twice a week. Who knows? The less, the better because it means he’s killing fewer people.

Before setting to work, we put our full-body protection gear on, including goggles, to avoid blood splashing in our eyes. We have limited time, and since the blood is fresh and the wall and floor are smooth, hard surfaces, we should be done within the hour.

We don’t ever see the victim because he’s taken away when they leave, and we’re not told where they dump the body. 906 inspects our work after we go, then transfers the money. There’s never been a time when he was dissatisfied and withheld the funds. That is to Zara’s credit because she knows Smiler and the gang have exceedingly high standards.

I'd never say it aloud, but cleaning the wall of blood is somewhat satisfying. Every brush of the mop waters down the scarlet, where it goes from violent red to pink, then to clear.

After we've cleaned every surface, Zara sweeps an ultra-violet ray machine over the area to check for invisible fingerprints and other marks that might contain DNA. Then, use chemicals to clean them off.

Once done, we take our cleaning trolley, switch the light off and head out to Zara's white van. As we drive to the empty intersection, a black SUV turns down the street. We've seen this vehicle before, appearing as we're leaving, and assume it's 906 or maybe Smiler. Either way, we pretend we don't notice it and go on our way.

"Oh," I exclaim when I remember that a message came through while I was in the house. I can't imagine who would be texting me in the wee hours of the morning and assume before I read it that it was the wrong number.

Them: I hear you're looking for some hardware – Blake T.

I turn to Zara, "Do you know a Blake T?"

"Oh yeah, that's the guy I told you about who can supply you with a handgun," she answers so matter-of-factly that it makes me chuckle a little.

"A night owl?"

"Well...he's probably working," she says the quiet part out loud—her contact, the thief, stalking the streets in the undercover of the darkness.

Me: Yes. How much and when can you supply?

Blake T: \$200. Meet me tomorrow at 1 pm at Rockford Park, on the seat that overlooks the jetty.

Me: Deal.

Blake T: Bring cash. No fucking about.

"Tell him the gun must be clean," Zara states with a warning tone. "No clean gun. No deal."

“Clean?” I ask curiously.

“Yeah, without fingerprints, unregistered, and never been used in a crime,” she rattles off like a professional. Thank goodness for Zara. Details like this would never have crossed my mind.

Me: Gun must be clean. No deal if not.

Blake T: U been talking to Z. She knows my stuff is always clean.

I read out his reply, and Zara snorts. “Yeah, that’s true. He’s always been a good supplier, but you have to watch him ‘cos he can be a little mischievous.”

She drives past Great Torres Lake, which is nothing but a sea of black with surrounding black shapes of trees and houses that seem incredibly eerie in the dark. It’s deadly still and quiet. Too quiet.

“I told him you need to protect yourself,” Zara says after several moments of silence. “That is why you’re requesting a gun, isn’t it?”

“That’s true,” I answer, gazing out the window to avoid her eye, even though it’s dark.

A growly sound comes from the back of her throat, and I know she’s not entirely convinced. Zara won’t ask any more questions. Instead, she’ll let me tell her when I’m ready.

There is more to the story. Two years of planning. Two years of restoring my courage to tackle my objective. Two years of imagining them dying before me. Let’s call it justice—the sweet symphony of revenge.

You see, I have a list with four names on it, and my single-minded goal is to wipe them clean from the planet.

Starting with...

The Lion.

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