



*If she falls,
we both go down.*

SINNERS OF SAINT

RUCKUS

L.J. SHEN

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RUCKUS

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For Kristina Lindsey and Sher Mason.

Soundtrack

Halsey – Hold Me Down

Hey Violet – Guys My Age

Train – Drops of Jupiter

Fall Out Boy – Immortals

Hooverphonic – Mad About You

Breathe Me - Sia

*“Because the birdsong might be pretty,
But it’s not for you they sing,
And if you think my winter is too cold,
You don’t deserve my spring.”
Erin Hanson*

Stars are known for symbolizing the eternal. They've been a fixed constant in the sky since time immemorial. The first inhabitants of earth used to stare at the same sky as we do now. And our children.

And grandchildren.

And *their* grandchildren.

Stars also symbolize the cycle of life, solitude and gravity. They glow in the dark energy that's the majority of space, and remind us that even in the pitch black, there's always something that can shine.

Prologue

Rosie

I SHOULD PROBABLY GET ONE thing out of the way before we begin. My story? It doesn't have a happy ending. It won't. It can't. No matter how tall or handsome or rich and captivating my Prince Charming might be.

And my Prince Charming was all those things. Oh, he was all those things and more.

Only problem was he wasn't really mine. He was my sister's. But there is something you should know before you judge me.

I saw him first. I craved him first. I *loved* him first.

All that didn't matter when Dean 'Ruckus' Cole had his lips on my sister's in front of my eyes the day Vicious broke into her locker.

The thing about these moments is you never quite know whether it's the beginning or the end. The fluidity of life stops, and you're forced to examine your reality. Reality sucks. Trust me, I know firsthand just how hard it does.

Life ain't fair.

Daddy said it right when I hit sixteen and wanted to start dating. His answer was resolute. "Good Lord, no."

"Why not?" My eyelid ticked with annoyance. "Millie dated when she was sixteen." It was true. She went on four dates with our mailman's son, Eric, back in Virginia. Daddy snorted and wagged his index finger at me. *Nice try.*

"You're not your sister."

"What does that mean?"

"You know what it means."

"No, I don't." *I did know.*

"It means you have something she doesn't. It's not fair, but life ain't

fair.”

Another fact I couldn't argue with. Daddy said I was a magnet for the wrong kind of boys, but that was like sugarcoating a ball of dirt and rusty nails. I understood the underlying complaint he had made, I did, especially as I'd always been his little princess. *Rosie-bug*. The apple of his eye.

I was racy. It wasn't intentional. It was even, at times, an inconvenient liability. With thick lashes, cascading caramel hair, long milky legs, and downy lips so full they took over most of my face. Everything else about me was small and ripe—wrapped in a red satin bow with a siren expression that seemed to have been permanently inked on my face, no matter how hard I tried to wipe it off.

I attracted attention. The best kind. The worst kind. Hell, every kind.

There were going to be other boys, I tried to convince myself when Dean and Emilia's lips touched and my heart shriveled in my chest. But there was always going to be one Millie.

Besides, my sister deserved it. Deserved *him*. I had Mama and Daddy's attention, all day, every day. I had plenty of friends at school, and admirers lining up outside our door. All eyes were on me, while no one spared my sister a second glance.

It wasn't my fault, but that didn't make me feel any less guilty. My older sister had become the product of both my illness and popularity. A solitary teenager hiding behind a canvas, obscured behind paint. Quiet all the time, sending her message through her weird, eccentric clothes.

When I think about it, it was really for the best. The first day I noticed Dean Cole in the hallway between trig and English period, I knew that he was more than just a high school crush. If I had him, I wouldn't let go. And that in itself was a dangerous concept I couldn't afford toying with.

See, my clock was ticking faster. I wasn't born like the rest.

I had an illness.

Sometimes I conquered it.

Sometimes it conquered me.

Everyone's favorite Rose was wilting, but no flower wants to die in front of an audience.

Besides, it was better that way, I decided when her lips were on his and his eyes were on mine and reality became a complex, agonizing thing I was desperate to run away from.

And so I watched as my sister and the only guy who made my heart beat

faster fall in love from my front-row seat.

My petals falling one by one.

Because even though I knew my story wouldn't end with a happily ever after, I couldn't help but wonder...could it have a happy ending, even if just momentarily?

Dean

The summer when I turned seventeen was bad, but nothing prepared me for its fucking grand finale.

All arrows pointed to calamity. I couldn't isolate what path would lead me to it, but knowing my life, I braced myself for a sucker punch that'd send me straight to hell.

In the end, it all boiled down to one, reckless, movie-cliché moment. A few Bud Lights and sloppily rolled blunts weeks before our junior year was over.

We were lying by Vicious's kidney-shaped pool, drinking his dad's flat beer, knowing we could get away with it—Christ, with fucking everything—under Baron Spencer Senior's roof. There were girls. They were high. There weren't many things to do in Todos Santos, California, on the verge of summer break. Everything was scorching hot. The air heavy, the sun bloated, the grass yellow, and the youth bored with their problemless, meaningless existence. We were too lazy to chase cheap thrills, so we looked for them while we were leisurely sprawled on pool floats the shape of donuts and flamingos and Italian-imported sunbathing chair lounges.

Vicious's parents weren't home—were they ever?—and everyone was counting on me to supply. Never one to disappoint, I brought over sweet hash and some Molly, which they greedily inhaled without even thanking me, let alone paying me back. They figured I was a rich, stoner bastard who needed more money like Pamela Anderson needed more tits, which was partially true. And I never sweated the small stuff anyway, so I let it slide.

One of the girls, a blondie named Georgia, flaunted her new Polaroid camera, which her dad gave her on their latest Palm Springs vacation. She

took pictures of us boys—Jaime, Vicious, Trent, and myself—flaunting her assets in a little red bikini and clasping the freshly printed pictures between her teeth, handing them to us, mouth-to-mouth. Her tits spilled out of her small bikini top like overflowing toothpaste from a tube. I wanted to rub my dick between them, and knew with certainty that I would, by the end of that day.

“My, my, this one’s going to be goood.” Georgia used an indefinite amount of O’s for the last word for emphasis. “Looking uber-sexy, Cole,” she purred when she caught me on camera pounding the remainder of the beer with a blunt clasped between my fingers and slamming the can on my hard thigh.

Click.

The evidence of my wrongdoing slid out of her camera with a provocative hiss, and she plucked it with her glossy lips, bending down and handing it to me. I bit it and shoved it into my swim trunks. Her eyes followed my hand as I nudged the elastic downwards, revealing a straight line of light hair below my naval that invited her to the rest of the party. She swallowed. Visibly. Our eyes met, silently agreeing on a time and a place. Then someone cannonballed into the pool and splashed her, and she shook her head, chuckling breathlessly before skipping to her next art project, my best friend, Trent Rexroth.

Destroying the picture before I got home was always the plan. I blame the fucking Molly for forgetting. In the end, my mother found it. In the end, my father gave me one of his low-tone lectures that always seemed to eat my insides like arsenic. And in the very, very end? They made me spend my summer vacation with my fucking uncle, the one I really couldn’t stand.

I knew better than to fight them about it. The last thing I needed was to stir shit and jeopardize my Harvard stint a year before I graduated. I’ve worked hard for this future, for this life. It was splayed before me, in all of its rich, entitled, fucked-up, private jets, timeshare, annual Hamptons vacation glory. That’s the thing about life. When something good falls into your hands, you don’t only hang on to the fucker, you clutch it so hard it almost breaks.

Just another lesson that I learned way too late into life.

Anyway, that’s how I ended up flying to Alabama, burning two months on a fucking farm prior to my senior year.

Trent, Jaime, and Vicious spent their summer drinking, smoking, and

fucking girls on their home field. Me, I came back with a shiner, generously gifted to me by Mr. Donald Whittaker, AKA Owl, after the night that had changed who I was forever.

“Life is like justice,” Eli Cole, my lawyer-slash-dad, had said to me before I boarded the plane to Birmingham. “It’s not always fair.”

Wasn’t that the fucking truth.

That summer, I was forced to read the Bible cover to cover. Owl told my parents he was a born-again Christian and big on bible studies. He backed it up by making me read it with him during our lunch breaks. Ham on rye and the Old Testament were his version of not being a dickface, because he was pretty much horrible to me the rest of the time.

Whittaker was a farmhand. When he was sober enough to be anything, that was. He made me his barn boy. I agreed, mainly because I got to finger his neighbor’s daughter at the end of every day.

The neighbor’s daughter thought I was some kind of a celebrity just because I didn’t have a Southern accent and owned a car. I wasn’t one to crush her fantasy, especially as she was eager to be my sex ed student.

I humored Owl when he taught me the Bible, because the alternative was brawling with him in the hay until one of us passed out. I think my folks wanted me to remember that life wasn’t all about expensive cars and ski vacations. Owl and his wife were like *Low Income Life 101*. So, every morning I woke up asking myself what’s two months in comparison to my whole fucking life.

There were a lot of crazy-ass stories in the Bible; incest, foreskin-collection, Jacob wrestling an angel—I swear this book jumped the shark by the second chapter or so—but one story really stuck with me, even before I’d met Rosie LeBlanc.

Genesis 27. Jacob came to live with Laban, his uncle, and fell in love with Rachel, the younger of Laban’s two daughters. Rachel was hot as fuck, fierce, graceful, and pretty much sex on a stick (as indicated in the Bible, though not in so many words.)

Laban and Jacob struck a deal. Jacob was to work for Laban for seven years—then he could marry his daughter.

Jacob did as he was told—busting his ass under the sun, day in and day out. After those seven years, Laban finally came to Jacob and told him he could marry his daughter.

But here was the catch: it’s not Rachel’s hand he had given him. It was

her older sister's, Leah.

Leah was a good woman. Jacob knew that.

She was nice. Sensible. Charitable. Cute ass and soft eyes (again, paraphrasing here. Other than the eyes part. That shit was actually in the Bible.)

She was no Rachel, though.

She was no Rachel, and he wanted Rachel. It was. Always. Fucking. Rachel.

Jacob argued, fought, and tried to talk some sense into his uncle, but in the end, he'd lost. Life was like justice, even back then. It was anything but fair.

“Seven more years of work,” Laban promised. “And I'd let you marry Rachel, too.”

So, Jacob waited.

And lurked.

And *yearned*.

Which, anyone with half a brain should know, only gratifies your desperation for your subject of obsession.

Years ticked by. Slowly. Painfully. Numbly.

In the meantime, he was with Leah.

He didn't suffer. Not per se. Leah was good to him. A safe bet. She could bear his children—something Rachel, he would later find out—had difficulty doing.

He knew what he wanted, and it may have looked like her, and may have smelled like her, and fuck—maybe even *felt* like her—but it was not her.

It took him fourteen years, but in the end, Jacob won Rachel fair and square.

Rachel might not have been blessed by God. Leah was. But here was the thing.

Rachel didn't need to be blessed.

She was loved.

And unlike justice and life, love *is* fair.

What's more? Eventually, love was enough.

Eventually, it was fucking everything.



Seven weeks into my senior year, another looming calamity had decided to blow up in my face in spectacular fashion. Her name was Rosie LeBlanc, and she had eyes like two frosted-over lakes in an Alaskan winter. *That* kind of blue.

The what-the-fuck moment grabbed me by the balls and twisted hard the second she opened the door to the servants' house on Vicious's lot. Because she wasn't Millie. She looked like Millie—kind of—only smaller, shorter, with fuller lips, higher cheekbones, and the little pointy ears of a mischievous pixie. But she didn't wear anything overtly weird like Emilia. A pair of sea-starred flip-flops on her feet, black skinny jeans cut wide at the knees, and a tattered black hoodie with a name of a band I didn't know plastered in white. Designed to blend in, but, as I'd later find out, destined to shine like a motherfucking lighthouse.

Inferno-red hit her cheeks and crawled down the edge of her collar when our eyes tangled, and that told me everything I needed to know. She was new to me, but *I* was a familiar face. A face she studied, knew and stared at. All the fucking time.

“Are we engaged in a secret staring competition?” Her recovery was immediate. There was something in the rasp of her voice that almost sounded unnatural. Too small. Too hoarse. Too uniquely her. “Because it's been twenty-three seconds since I opened the door and you haven't introduced yourself yet. Also, you blinked twice.”

I originally came there to ask Emilia LeBlanc on a date, cornering her like a frightened animal with nowhere else to go. She wouldn't give me her phone number. A hunter by nature, I was adequately patient to wait until she was close enough for me to pounce on, but it didn't hurt to check on my prey every once in a while. If we were being honest, though, pursuing Emilia wasn't really about Emilia. The thrill of the chase always made my balls tingle, and to me, she provided a challenge other chicks hadn't supplied. She was new meat, and I was an insatiable carnivore. But I wasn't expecting to find *this*.

This changed fucking everything.

I stood there like a mute and flashed my come-hither smirk, taunting the

shit out of *her*, because on some level, she taunted the shit out of *me*. And it occurred to me that at that particular moment, maybe I wasn't the hunter. Maybe, for a split, flashing second, I was Elmer Fudd with an out-of-bullets gun in the woods who just spotted an angry tigress.

"Can it even talk?" The tigress's light eyebrows pulled together, and she leaned forward, poking me in the chest with her little claw. She called me *it*.

Ridiculing me. Undermining me. Fucking with me.

Wearing my best, innocent expression (that shit was hard to begin with. I forgot what innocence was before my umbilical cord was thrown into the trash), I clamped my teeth beneath my lips and shook my head no.

"You can't talk?" She folded her arms and leaned against her doorframe, arching a skeptical brow.

I nodded yes, biting down a huge smile.

"That's bullshit. I saw you at school. Dean Cole. They call you Ruckus. Not only can you talk, but most of the time, you can't seem to shut up."

Fuck yeah, little pixie. Bottle that rage and save it for when I roll you between my sheets.

To understand my level of surprise, you first have to know that no girl has ever talked to me like this before. Not even Millie, and Millie seemed to be the only female student who was immune to my all-American, hot-jock, tear-your-panties-with-my-teeth charm. Hell, that's why I noticed her in the first place.

But as I said, plans change. It's not like we'd dated yet. I sniffed Millie's tail around school for a few weeks, debating whether she was worth pursuing, but now that I saw what I'd missed—this little firecracker—it was time to find warmth in her crazy flames.

I unleashed another dirty smirk. This particular one landed me the nickname Ruckus in All Saints's hallways two years ago. Because I was. I was fucking chaos, brewing anarchy everywhere I went. Everyone knew that. Teachers, students, Principal Followhill, and even the local sheriff.

When you needed drugs—you came to me. When you needed a good party—you came to me. When you needed an amazing fuck, you came to me—and *on me*. And this was what my smirk—the one I'd been practicing since I was fucking five—said to the world.

If it's corrupted and dirty and fun—I'm all over it.

And this girl? She looked like a whole lotta fun to corrupt.

Her eyes traced my lips. Heavy. Wanting. Drunk. It was easy to read

them. High school girls. Though this particular one didn't smile as wide as the rest. She didn't offer a silent invitation for flirtation either.

"You speak," she coughed her words accusingly. I sucked my lower lip and released it. Slow. Calculated. Teasing.

"Maybe I do know a few words after all." I got in her face on a hiss. "Wanna hear the interesting ones?" My eyes begged for me to slide down her body, but my brain told me to wait it out. I decided to listen to the latter.

I was relaxed.

I was cunning.

But for the first time in years, I had no idea what the fuck I was doing.

She gave me a lopsided grin that rendered me speechless. Shoving so many words into one, single expression. Telling me that my attempt to butter her up left her sorely unimpressed. That she liked me—yes—and noticed me—sure—but that I was going to have to do better than casual, half-assed flirting to get there. Wherever it was, I was ready for the journey.

"Do I really?" She dallied, not even noticing as she did. I dipped my chin down, leaning forward. I was big, commanding, and confident. And I was trouble. She probably heard all about it, but if not, she was about to find that out.

"I think you do," I said.

Two minutes ago, I was determined to ask her sister out—older sister, I bet, this chick looked younger and besides, I would have known if she was a senior—and lookie here, fate made her open the door and change my plans.

Baby LeBlanc sent me an odd look, challenging me to continue. Just as I opened my mouth, Millie galloped into my vision, sprinting toward the door from the small, stuffy living room like she was fleeing a war zone. She was clutching a textbook to her chest, her eyes puffy and red. She was staring straight at me, and for a second, I thought she was going to smack me across the face with the five-pound textbook.

In retrospect, I wish she had. It would have been far better than what she actually did.

Millie pushed the little pixie aside without even realizing that she was there, threw herself onto my chest—uncharacteristically affectionate—and pressed her lips to mine like a possessed demon.

Fuck.

This was bad.

Not the kiss. The kiss was fine, I guess. I didn't have time to process it,

because my eyes widened, darting to the spear-eared elf who looked horrified, her cornflower-blues staring, processing, and boxing the three of us into something I wasn't ready to accept.

What the hell was Millie doing? A few hours ago she was still pretending not to notice me in the hallway, buying time, seeking space, faking indifference. Now she was all over me like a rash after a dodgy one-night stand.

Gently, I pulled away from Millie and cupped her cheeks so she wouldn't feel rejected, still making sure we had enough space to fit the little pixie between us. Emilia's proximity was unwelcome, and that was a fucking first when it came to a hot chick.

"Hey," I said. The body of my voice lost its usual playful tilt, even to my own ears. This wasn't like Millie. Something happened, and I had a general idea who caused this little scene. My blood boiled. I breathed through my nostrils, determined not to lose my shit. "What's up, Mil?"

The emptiness in her eyes made me nauseous. I could almost hear the sound of her heart cracking inside her fucking chest. I chanced another glance at Baby LeBlanc, wondering how the hell I was supposed to walk out of this one. She took a step back, her eyes lingering on the hot mess express that was still trying to hug me. Millie was distraught. I couldn't deny her. Not then.

"Vicious," the older sister said through a loud sniff. "Vicious happened."

Then she pointed at the calculus textbook like it was evidence.

Reluctantly, my gaze drifted back to Emilia 'Millie' LeBlanc.

"What'd the asshole do?" I snatched it from her hand and thumbed through the pages, looking for nasty comments or offensive drawings.

"He broke into my locker and stole it," she snuffled again. "Before stuffing said locker with condom wrappers and garbage." She wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve.

Jesus fucking Christ with this idiot. That was the other reason why I wanted to date Millie. The need to protect the strays burned in me from a young age. A soft spot and all that bullshit. I wasn't *all* bad, like Vicious, neither was I *all* good, like Jaime. I had my own moral code, and bullying was a long, red line, drawn in blood.

See, as far as strays go, Millie was the perfect, shivering-in-the-rain fleabag in need of shelter. Terrorized at school and haunted by one of my best friends. I needed to do the right thing. I *needed* to, but fuck if I *wanted* to.

"I'll take care of him." I tried not to snap. "Go back inside."

And leave me with your sister.

“You don’t need to, really. I’m just glad you’re here.”

I stole a glimpse at the girl who was destined to be the Rachel to my Jacob, this time longingly, because I knew I stood no chance with her the minute her sister kissed me to get back at fucking Vicious.

“I thought about it.” Millie blinked fast, too caught up in her own mess to realize I had barely spared her a glance since she appeared at the door. Too busy to notice her sister was right fucking there beside us. “And I decided—why not? I’d love to date you, actually.”

No, she wouldn’t. What she wanted was for me to be her shield.

Millie needed saving.

And I needed to smoke a fucking blunt.

I sighed, pulling the older sister into a hug, cupping the back of her head, the light-brown wisps of hair entwining between my fingers. My eyes still zoomed at Baby LeBlanc. At my little Rachel.

I’m going to make it right, my gaze promised her. It was clearly more optimistic than I was.

“You don’t have to date me. I can make life easier for you, as your friend. Say the word and I’ll kick his ass,” I whispered into Millie’s perfectly curved ear, my pupils honing in on her sister.

She shook her head, burying it deeper into my shoulder. “No, Dean. I want to date you. You’re nice and fun and compassionate.”

And completely in awe of your sister.

“Doubt it, Millie. You’ve been shutting me down for weeks. This is about Vic, and we both know it. Drink a glass of water. Rethink. I’ll talk to him tomorrow morning at practice.”

“Please, Dean.” Her wobbly voice steadied as she balled the fabric of my designer tee in her fists, pulling me closer to her and away from my new, shiny fantasy at the same time. “I’m a big girl. I know what I’m doing. Let’s go right now.”

“Yeah. Go.” I heard Baby LeBlanc rasp, waving her hand in our direction. “I need to study anyway, and you guys are a distraction. I’ll drown Vicious’s ass if I see him in the pool, Millie,” she joked, pretending to flex her skinny arms.

Baby LeBlanc was a shitty student, with C minuses for miles, but I didn’t know it back then. She didn’t want to study. She wanted her sister to be saved.

I took Millie for an ice cream, this time not looking back.

I took Millie when I should have taken Rosie.

I took Millie, and I was going to kill Vicious.

Chapter One

Rosie

Present

What makes you feel alive?

Condensation. For it reminds me that I still breathe.

I MEAN, I GUESS THIS is classified as talking to myself, but I'd always been this way.

The voice that always asked the elusive question seemed to have been implanted in my brain, and it wasn't me. It was a man's voice. No one familiar, I don't think. He always made me remember that I still breathed, which wasn't necessarily something I took for granted. This time, my answer floated in my head like a bubble that was about to burst. I pressed my nose to the mirror in the elevator of the glitzy skyscraper that I lived in and blew air from my mouth, creating a thick cloud of white mist. I pulled away, staring at my doings.

The fact that I was still breathing was a huge screw-you to my illness.

Cystic Fibrosis. I always tried to get all the details out of the way when someone asked. All people needed to know was that I was diagnosed with it at the age of three when my sister, Millie, licked my face and said I tasted "really salty." It was a red flag, so my parents had me checked. The results came back positive. It's a lung disease. Yes, it is treatable. No, there's no cure for it. Yes, it affects my life immensely. I'm constantly on pills, have three physiotherapy sessions a week, an indefinite amount of nebulizers, and I will probably die in the next fifteen years. No, I don't need your pity, so don't give me that look.

Still clad in my green scrubs, my hair a tangled mess, and my eyes glassy with lack of sleep, I inwardly prayed that the elevator would finally close and carry me to my apartment on the tenth floor. I wanted to undress, dip into a hot bath, and lie in bed, binge-watching *Portlandia*. And I wanted not to think about my ex-boyfriend, Darren.

Actually, I really wanted not to think about him.

Violent clicks of street-corner high heels echoed in my ears, seemingly out of nowhere, growing louder by the second. I twisted my head to the lobby and stifled a cough. The elevator's door had already started to slide shut, but a feminine hand with red-hot fingernails slipped through the crack at the very last second, pushing it open with a high-pitched laugh.

I frowned.

Not him again.

But sure enough, it was him. He barged into the elevator, reeking of alcohol that I suspected would intoxicate a mature elephant to the point of death, armed with two women of the *Desperate Housewives* variety. The first one was the genius who compromised her arm to catch the elevator—a chick with velvet-red Jessica Rabbit hair and cleavage that left nothing to the imagination, even if you were extremely resourceful. The second was a petite brunette with the roundest ass I've ever seen on a human being and a dress so short, you could probably perform a gynecological exam on her without having to remove any clothing.

Oh, and then there was Dean 'Ruckus' Cole.

Tall—perfect size for a movie star—with moss-green eyes, almost radioactive in their sparkle and bottomless in their depth, disheveled, deep brown sex hair, and a body that would put Brock O'Hurn to shame. Sinfully sexy to the point you really had no choice but to look away and pray your underwear was thick enough to absorb your arousal. Seriously, the man was so outrageously hot, he was probably outlawed in ultra-religious countries. Luckily for me, I just so happened to know Mr. Cole was a world-class jerk, so I was mostly immune to his charm.

Mostly being the operative word here.

He was beautiful, but he was also a mess of epic proportions. You know those women who want the fucked-up, gorgeous, vulnerable guy they could fix and nurture? Dean Cole would be their wet dream. Because there definitely *was* something up with this guy. The notion that people in his immediate environment didn't see the flashing neon warnings—his drinking,

excessive pot-smoking, and raging addiction to everything sinful and fun—saddened me. Yet, I recognized that Dean Cole wasn't my business. Besides, I had my own problems to deal with.

The HotHole hiccupped, punched the button to his penthouse five hundred times, and swayed in the small space the four of us shared. His eyes were feverish, and he wore a thin coat of sweat on his skin that smelled like pure brandy. A thick, rust-eaten wire twisted around my heart.

His smile didn't look happy.

"Baby LeBlanc." Dean's lazy tone slipped right into my lower belly, and I stilled. He grabbed me by the shoulder, spinning me in place so that I faced him. His companions eyed me like I was a pile of rotten eggs. I placed my palms on his iron-steel chest, pushing him away.

"Careful. You smell like Jack Daniel's just came in your mouth," I deadpanned. He threw his head back and laughed—this time sporting an honest smile—thoroughly enjoying our bizarre exchange.

"This girl." He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and squeezed me to his chest. He pointed at me with a hand that held onto the neck of a beer bottle, looking at the girls with a dazed grin. "Is fuck-hot and has brains and wit that would eclipse Winston Churchill in his finest hour," he gushed. They probably thought Winston Churchill was a Cartoon Network character. Dean turned to face me, his brows dropping low all of a sudden. "That puts her in a high risk to be a condescending bitch, but she isn't. She's also fucking kind. That's why she's a nurse. Hiding that fine ass under scrubs is a crime, LeBlanc."

"Sorry to disappoint, Officer Pothead, but I'm just volunteering. I'm actually a barista," I corrected, ironing my scrubs with my hand as I wormed out of his touch, offering a polite smile to the girls. I volunteered at a NICU three times a week, monitoring incubators and cleaning baby poop. I wasn't as artistically talented as Millie or as lucky as the HotHoles, but I had my passions—people and music—and I didn't think any less of my aspirations than what they did for a living. Dean had an MBA from Harvard and a *New York Times* subscription, but was he really better than me? Hell, no. I worked in a small coffee shop called The Black Hole between First Ave and Ave A. The money was bad, but the company good. I figured life was too short to do something I wasn't passionate about. *Especially for me.*

Jessica Rabbit rolled her eyes. The petite brunette hitched one bare shoulder and turned her back to us, messing with her phone. They thought I

was a salty bitch. They were right. I *literally* was. But if we were being literal here, they were in for a rude awakening. I knew my neighbor and my sister's ex-boyfriend's ritual by heart. In the morning, he'll call them a taxi and won't even bother to pretend he saved their numbers.

In the morning, he'll act like they were nothing but a mess he had to clean. In the morning, he will be sober, hungover, and ungrateful.

Because he was a HotHole.

A privileged, unhinged, egomaniac from Todos Santos who thought he deserved everything and owed nothing.

Come on, elevator. What's taking you so long?

"LeBlanc," Dean barked this time, leaning against the silver wall and pulling a joint from behind his ear, fishing for his lighter in his tailored, dark jeans. The bottle was discarded and passed to one of the women. He wore a designer V-neck tee—the kind of lime green that made his eyes pop and skin look even more tan—an open black blazer and high-top sneakers. He made me want stupid things. Things I never wanted from anyone, much less from a man who dated my sister for eight months. So I bottled them up and tried to be mean to him. Dean was like Batman. He was strong enough to take it.

"Tomorrow. You. Me. Sunday Brunch. Say the word, and I'll be eating more than just food." He dipped his chin down to exhibit his emerald eyes, a sinister expression on his face. No question marks with this guy. *Brat*, the bitter thought crossed my mind. *He is going to have a threesome in a few minutes, and he's standing here hitting on his ex-girlfriend's sister. They can hear everything, too. Why are they still here?*

I ignored his less-than-stellar advance on me, warning him about something else entirely. "If you light that thing in the elevator," I pointed at his blunt, "I swear I will sneak into your apartment tonight and pour hot wax all over your groin."

Jessica Rabbit gasped. Petite Brunette shrieked. Well, they *would* be in the fire line if that happened.

"Geez, get some chill." The brunette waved a hand at me, ready to explode. "Like, creepy much?"

I paid no attention to the woman with the crayon makeup. Instead, I simply stared at the red numbers above the elevator's door, indicating that I was getting closer and closer to a bath, wine, and *Portlandia*.

"Answer me." Dean ignored the girls he was about to pork, returning his glazy eyes to mine. "Brunch?" Hiccup. "Or we can just skip the whole thing

and fuck?”

Hopeless romantic, I know, but sadly, it was still a no for me.

In all honesty, I wasn't just turned off by how he tried to drag me into his bed, but also by his poor timing. It had been three weeks since Darren packed his things and moved out of the apartment we had shared for six months—we had been together for nine months, after a short stint I had with a greasy monkey, metal music enthusiast named Hal. Dean hadn't wasted any time trying to accommodate the casual rebound position. The fact that Dean was essentially my landlord and that I only paid him a hundred bucks a month for legal reasons didn't make it easier to reject him. He co-owned my apartment with Vicious, Jaime, and Trent, and while I knew he wouldn't kick me out—Vicious would never let him—I also knew I had to play nice with him.

But the notion that he could possibly give me every STD listed on WebMD did make it easier to turn him down. A lot easier, actually.

The red numbers crept up on the display.

Third.

Fourth.

Fifth.

Come on, come on, come on.

“No,” I said flatly, when I realized he was still staring at me, waiting for my response.

“Why?” Another hiccup.

“Because you're not my friend, and I don't like you.”

“And why is that?” he pushed, smirking.

Because you broke my heart and I pieced it back together all wonky and wrong.

“Because you're a hopeless manwhore.” I gave him reason number two on my ‘Why I Hate Dean’ list. That thing was long with a capital L.

Instead of feeling embarrassed or disheartened, Dean leaned in my direction again and pressed his index finger to my cheek with the hand that held the unlit blunt, his face cool and collected. He produced an eyelash he had picked from my face, his finger so close to my lips I saw the round pattern of its print swirling around my curly eyelash.

“Make a wish.” His voice was satin wrapping around my neck, squeezing softly.

Closing my eyes, I bit my lower lip. Then opened them. Then blew the eyelash, watching it rock back and forth gradually, like a feather.

“Don’t you want to know what I wished for?” My voice came out hoarse. He leaned into my body, his lips pressing against my cheek.

“Doesn’t matter what you wished for,” he slurred. “What matters is what you need. I have it, Rosie. And one day—we both know—I will give it to you. In spades.”

I was coming back from a six-hour stint volunteering at a small children’s hospital downtown, which I ran to right after finishing a full shift at the coffeehouse. I was tired, hungry, and my feet had blisters the size of my nose. I shouldn’t have felt a thousand little fingerlings swimming in my chest, but I did. I did and I hated that I did.

“Brunch,” he murmured into my face, his hot, stinking breath fanning my skin. “You’ve been living in my apartment for almost a year. It’s time to reevaluate your rent. My place. Tomorrow morning. Ready when you are, but you better be there. Capiche?”

I gulped, averting my gaze, and when I looked up again, the elevator door slid open. I leapt forward, practically sprinting out, pouring myself into the hallway, and fishing my keys from my backpack.

Space. I needed it. All of it. Now.

His laughter still carried to my door all the way from the twentieth floor, his penthouse, where he ended his journey for the night with two gorgeous women.

After I bathed, poured myself some wine, and had a healthy, balanced dinner consisting of Cheetos and an orange-colored dip with an unknown origin I’d found in the back of my fridge, I parked my ass on my couch and started flipping channels. Even though I wanted to watch *Portlandia*, because it made me feel a little more sophisticated than my dinner had suggested, I somehow got sucked into watching *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.

Awful, and not just because it scored 22% on Rotten Tomatoes.

But because it made me think of Darren.

And thinking of Darren made me want to call and apologize to him once again.

I stared at the phone for long seconds, debating, mulling the scenario in my helplessly tired brain.

He’d pick up.

Try to tell me I made a terrible mistake.

That he doesn’t care. He still wants me anyway.

Only he does. He cares a lot.

*And I'm not good enough.
Not for someone like him.*

Another thing I should mention: despite my sarcastic nature and motor mouth, I was all bark and no bite. I wasn't interested in ruining lives. I'd much rather save them. That was why I'd given up Darren.

Darren deserved a normal life, with a normal wife and an appropriate amount of kids to start a football team. He deserved long vacations and open-air activities outside the hospital walls. When he wasn't working there, that is. In short—he deserved more than I could ever give him.

I tucked myself into bed, pressing my back against the headboard as I gaped at my bedroom door, willing it to open, pushed by a god of a man who was going to keep me warm for the night.

Dean Cole.

Jesus, I hated him. Now, more than ever. He wanted to reevaluate my rent. He couldn't. I was dirt-poor as it was. Especially by Manhattan standards. Besides, he made in a day what I made in two years. Was it really necessary, or did he want to get back at me for not giving in to his advances?

Closing my eyes, I envisioned the world-class douchebag eating out Jessica Rabbit, who was straddling his chiseled, perfect face, while Petite Brunette sucked him off. Appalled, I snaked a hand into my already-damp panties, the crease between my eyebrows deepening, and coughed softly.

Dean Cole was probably the filthy kind. The type to flip Jessica Rabbit over a second after she came and pound her from behind, pulling at her scarlet hair.

I pushed my forefinger inside my sex, then the middle one, looking for that spot.

Disgusted, I imagined Petite Brunette being grabbed by the neck and thrown into position on her back when he was done with JR. Now he was screwing her, too, pinching her nipples. Hard.

I arched my back, revolted.

I moaned, repelled.

Then I came hard on my fingers, repulsed.

I hated everything about Dean Cole.

Everything...but him.

Chapter Two

Dean

S-E-X.

That's what it all boils down to, really.

The whole world is built on one, single, animalistic need. Our quest to look better, work out harder, become richer, and to chase things we don't even need—a better car, more defined obliques, a promotion, a new haircut, whatever bullshit they try to sell us on ads.

All. Because. Of. Sex.

Every time a woman buys a perfume or a beauty product or a fucking dress.

Every time a man enslaves himself to ridiculous payments on a sports car that's not half as fucking comfortable as the spacious Korean car he had a week ago and injects steroids in the locker room at a stuffy gym...They. Do. It. To. Get. Laid.

Even if they don't know that. Even if they don't *agree* with that. You bought that blouse and that Jeep and that new nose to become more fuckable. Science, baby. You don't argue with that shit.

Same goes for art. Some of my favorite songs were about sex before I even knew I could do something with my dick that didn't involve pissing my name in snow.

“Summer of '69”? – Bryan Adams was nine. He'd clearly been singing about his favorite *sexual position*. “I Just Died in Your Arms” by Cutting Crew? – Talks about *orgasms*. “Ticket to Ride” by the Beatles? – *Prostitutes*. “Come On Eileen”? That cheery fucking song everyone dances to at weddings? *Sexual coercion*.

Sex was everywhere. And why shouldn't it be? It's fucking magnificent. I

couldn't get enough of it. I was good at it, too. Did I say good? Scratch that. Amazing. That's the word I was going for. For practice makes perfect.

And God knows I've had a lot of practice.

Which reminded me—I needed to order another box of condoms. I had them specially made by a company called SayItWithaRubber. I didn't just design the foil to have my name on it—hey, some chicks wanted to keep that as a souvenir, who was I to deny them?—and pick the colors (I liked red and purple. Yellow made my balls look a little pale. Not a good color for me...), but I was also picky about the type of rubber, thinness—0.0015mm, if you must know—and the sensitivity level.

“Morning, you,” one of the girls croaked, rising from her sleep. She pressed a fluttery kiss to the back of my neck. It always took me a few seconds to remember whom I spent the night with, but this morning was even worse, because I'd spent yesterday drinking like my mission was to liquefy my liver into rum.

“Did you sleep well?” the second chick droned.

My body was tilted to the side, toward the nightstand, as I scrolled down a long-ass text message written by my friend and business partner, Vicious. Most people wrote curt text messages to get their point across. This intense bastard made Siri his bitch and sent me the whole fucking Bible. Waking up to a message from him was the equivalent of waking up to a blowjob from a shark. And this was what he wrote:

Dear Dickbag,

My fiancée brought it to my attention that her headache of a sister might be late to the rehearsal dinner next Saturday because she's trying to save a few bucks taking two connecting flights to make it to Todos Santos.

She is Em's maid of honor, hence her attendance is not fucking optional. It is mandatory, and if I have to drag her by the hair, I will, but I'd rather not. You know how I feel about this place. New York is hard on the body. Los Angeles is hard on the soul.

I have no soul.

I'm asking you as a friend to knock on Rosie's door and shove a new ticket into her hand. Have Sue book her a first-class ticket next to you and make sure she gets on that plane with you on Friday. Chain

her to the goddamn seat if you must.

This is the part where you're probably asking yourself why the fuck would you do me any favors. Consider this a favor to Millie, not me.

She's stressed.

She's worried.

And she doesn't deserve this type of shit.

If Em's baby sister thinks she can do whatever the fuck she wants, she's wrong.

Make her realize how wrong she is, because every day she plays the dutiful, frugal saint, my future wife is getting hurt.

And we all know how I react when something of mine is being damaged.

Peace, motherfucker.

-V.

Not exactly purple prose, but that was Baron Spencer for you.

I stretched, feeling a hot body climbing on top of me, fighting the lake of navy blue, seamless, silk sheets between us. There were heaps of rich fabric, hot flesh, and soft curves all around me. The sun poured in from my floor-to-ceiling window, shining over my one-thousand-square-foot balcony, a sea of freshly cut grass bleeding into the Manhattan skyline. Rays of warmth licked at my skin. A wet bar called for me to fix myself a Bloody Mary. And plush, gray and navy loveseats begged me to take the girls on a ride against them for all of New fucking York to see and hear.

In short: this morning was awesome.

Vicious, however, was *not* awesome.

Therefore, I allowed myself to bathe in the comfort of these women—Natasha and Kennedy—and do what God, or nature, or both, wanted me to do—fuck them hard. Because civilization and seed spreading and shit.

As Kennedy—the lovely redhead, my memory reminded me—peppered kisses down my neck, making her way to my morning wood, and Natasha—the racy, fun-sized yoga instructor—kissed my mouth ravenously, I processed the new information through the pounding hammers of a well-deserved hangover.

So, Millie LeBlanc was stressed about her dinner rehearsal. No surprises there. She was always this goody-two-shoes girl who wanted everything to be

perfect and worked hard to make it that way. A stark contrast to the man she was marrying, who took it upon himself to tarnish as many lives as he could using his dry wit and appalling behavior.

She was the sweetest person I knew—not necessarily a good thing, by the way—and he was by far the nastiest.

I guess I was supposed to think about the ‘what if?’ because Millie used to be my girlfriend. Because the human brain is designed to fill in the gaps, and I was twenty-nine, and Millie was my only serious girlfriend, so people might assume it was some big, lost love.

The truth, as always, was both disappointing and unflattering.

Millie was never a big love. I liked her, but it wasn’t fierce or deprived or insane. I cared for her and wanted to protect her, but never in a way that drove me out of my fucking mind, like it did to Vicious.

The fact that I still liked her after she bailed out on me and fucked off leaving a half-assed breakup letter just goes to show we weren’t really meant to be. Because the truth was, I was enamored with Emilia LeBlanc...until I wasn’t.

Sometimes I think I just loved the idea of her, or never loved her at all. Either way, one thing couldn’t be disputed—when I was with her, I was good to her. Loyal. Respectful. She, in return, fucked me over.

To this day, I don’t feel like I truly knew my only ex-girlfriend. I knew her traits, sure. The crap that would make it onto your dating website profile. Dry facts. She was artistic, shy, and well-mannered. But I had no idea what her fears and secrets were. What kept her up at night, what made her blood simmer and her body sizzle.

The other part of my ugly truth was I never felt like I wanted to know these things about anyone other than Rosie LeBlanc. But Rosie fucking hated me. So, I stayed single. She was going to change her mind. She had to.

Speaking of Rosie, she didn’t take money from Vicious and Millie unless it was out of necessity. That was common knowledge, and she made that point a year ago by furnishing my two-point-three-million-dollar New York condo she had been living in with Craigslist discards that cost less than two hundred bucks in total. I doubted I could change her mind, but when it came to her, I was always up for trying to.

So, anyway. Back to the important stuff—fucking.

It was when Kennedy took me in her mouth, exhibiting some serious deep-throat talent, that I heard a knock on my door. No one was allowed into

the building without a code, and no one had asked me for one recently, which brought me to the simple conclusion it must be Miss LeBlanc herself.

“Dean!” Her raspy voice crawled from the outside hall into every tissue in my body and I immediately grew harder. Kennedy noticed, I’m sure, because her grasp on my dick loosened, then I felt her breathing hard against my thigh. Natasha stopped the tongue-action. They both froze. Three more knocks. “Open up.”

“Is that the weird girl again?” the latter inquired with a hybrid of a scowl and a pout.

“Sure fucking is.”

“She’s freaking me out.”

“Such a weirdo,” Natasha agreed. Like their opinion mattered. To me. To Rosie.

I rose to a sitting position and tucked myself into my black sweatpants. I didn’t mourn the unfulfilled fuck. I was more eager to catch a glimpse of that tiny thing, wondering what she came here for. I got up and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, my hands sliding up to purposely mess my hair. “This was fun.” I kissed both the backs of their hands before I started stalking to the entrance door with purpose. “We should do it again sometime.”

We weren’t going to do it sometime. Or anytime. This was goodbye, and they both knew it. I was clear when I picked them up the night before at some Manhattan bar I went to. They were inhaling cocaine like it was powdered sugar, maybe a grand’s worth of it, on a table in a glitzy place I went to whenever I needed to make use of those custom-made condoms. I sat at the bar, exchanged some flirty looks with them, then signaled the bartender to send the girls some drinks. They invited me to come over and do some shots with them. I invited them to sit on my face. One drink turned into seven. This script was getting old.

“Whoa, you’re *such* a piece-of-work.” Kennedy was the first to get up from the bed. I twisted my head to watch her collect her dress from the floor, yanking it up like it wronged her somehow.

Really? I thought. Before I hailed a taxi to take us to my place, I laid it out for them, clear as the fucking August sky: this was a random hookup. Christ, what part of picking them up from a bar and using *Two Girls, One Cup* as a small-talk topic made them think there would be more?

I offered the girls a consolation wink before swaggering my way into the vast, champagne-lit hallway, cream marble flooring, and black and white

family portraits glaring at me from every corner with huge, white-toothed smiles.

“Uh, excuse me, Mr. Asshole? We were kind of in the middle of something!” Natasha added in a high-pitched voice. I was already in the foyer, swinging the door open, drawn like a magnet to the source of my entire fucking libido. Baby LeBlanc. That little, beautiful, crazy, pixie.

Rosie wore a pair of untorn jeans and a basic white button-down shirt, her version of a tailored suit. A high, messy bun sat on top of her head, and her huge eyes told me she was not impressed. I leaned my shoulder against the door, grinning.

“Changed your mind about brunch?”

“Well, you blackmailed me into it with your reevaluation threat.” Her eyes strayed from my face to my abs for a second before lifting back up to narrow at me.

Shit, I did. My memory of last night was fogged by alcohol, weed, and pussy.

“Come in.” I stepped sideways. She turned her head in my direction as she stepped in.

“Thought you’d at least make some coffee before you tear me another asshole with the rent. So much for being neighborly,” she muttered, drinking in my apartment through wide eyes.

I folded my arms over my chest, aware of my cut figure, and swiped my tongue over my bottom lip.

“You want neighborly? I can buy you breakfast at the bakery downstairs and give you a few orgasms for dessert,” I said, adding, “And I can tear you another asshole in bed if you prefer.”

“You need to stop hitting on me.” Her voice was painfully flat as she walked past the massive white and gray island in the middle of my kitchen, stainless steel winking at us with a sparkle from every corner of the room. She plopped onto a stool and glared at my empty coffeepot by the sink as if it committed a hate crime.

“Why?” I taunted, turning the coffee machine on. Why did I have to stop hitting on Rosie LeBlanc? She was single now, after she dumped her boring, doctor boyfriend. She was fair game, and I was going to try to play with her until she had third-degree carpet burns all over her back.

In fact, that was the first thing I thought about when I saw the sorry-ass motherfucker moving his shit from her apartment. From *my* apartment.

I'm going to fuck your ex-girlfriend before the tears on her pillow dry, I thought. And she is going to love it so much she'll be crawling back for more.

Meanwhile, in real life, Rosie greedily accepted the mug of steamy coffee I silently offered her, taking a sip. She closed her eyes and moaned. Yes, *moaned*. Fuck, I wanted this sound to be my new ringtone. Then she opened her eyes and poured ice-cold water all over my fantasy.

“Because you’ve already dipped your sausage in my family gravy, and even though I know it’s a secret recipe everyone wants more of, I’m afraid you’re all out of luck.”

“I love it when you talk culinary sex with me.” I took a step toward the island, placing my forearms on it with a heated gaze.

“Maybe it’s because we’re Coca-Cola, and you always settle for Shasta.” Her eyes wandered to the direction of my bedroom.

Every muscle in my torso tightened as I let out a genuine laugh. My noticeable V-taper, veiny arms, tight abs, and prominent pecs didn’t escape her, and her newly peach-colored cheeks admitted that, even if she never would.

“I want you,” I said simply, unapologetically—vulnerably, even—*because I did*.

“As you did my sister.” Baby LeBlanc gave a curt nod. “Are you planning on screwing your way through our family tree? Should I print out a copy of our ancestry.com profile?”

“Please, when you get the chance.” I served her some sass back. “Though I have a feeling you can keep me busy just fine.”

“You’re too stubborn,” she coughed, as she did every other minute, taking another long sip of her cup of Joe.

“Yeah. Not lacking in that department. Or any department, for that matter.” My smirk widened as my eyes slid down to my groin. We were engaging in a battle of will. That was fine. I was bound to win. I always got what I wanted. And what I wanted was sitting in front of me, waiting for my verdict about her rent.

Kennedy and Natasha appeared from the hallway. They were roommates, so I wasn’t surprised when the latter told her friend the Uber they called would be downstairs in three minutes. Sharing a cab was smart economy. They needed to watch their spending after snorting their rent’s worth in coke. Good for them.

“Bye, girls.” I waved.

“Bye, asshole.” Kennedy hurled her heeled shoe at me with an arm swing that made the quarterback in me want to whistle in admiration. I dodged it, ducking my head down fast. The red heel flew across the kitchen, passing next to Rosie’s shoulder and crashing against the fridge.

It made a dent. At least she had that going for her. No woman had managed to do that before.

Rosie took a tentative sip of her coffee, reeking of indifference. “Hmm,” she said. “This tastes good.”

She didn’t mean the coffee. She meant watching the side effects of me being a manslut. But she did that little moan thing. Again.

This is so on, Rosie LeBlanc, I thought. I’m going to drag you by the hair to the dark side, and you have no fucking clue.

“Let’s cut to the chase, sweetheart. You’re flying with me to Todos Santos on Friday.” I fished the scoop of the whey protein from its container, mixing up the powder with fat-free milk. You don’t get to look like me from scarfing junk food all day. I made things happen. No matter the price. At the gym, at work, at being a sweet, perfect son. Everything was calculated and earned the hard way. No shortcuts for me. It’s been like this from a young age, but I didn’t know anything different. To them—to Rosie, her sister, my friends—I was this lucky asshole who was born with a silver spoon shoved so fucking deep in his mouth, he never had to lift a finger and work. I let them think that. No harm in being underestimated.

I heard Rosie shuffling on the high stool by the island and knew she wasn’t going to go down without a fight. For a sick girl, she was feisty as fuck.

“Millie has already asked me. The price difference is two hundred bucks for a ticket. It’s just the rehearsal, dude. It’s not like I’ll miss the actual wedding.”

The actual wedding was on Sunday, but most attendees—Jaime, Trent, and me included—were flying into Todos Santos on Friday, staying a full week and a half and cramming a rehearsal dinner, a bachelor/bachelorette party, and the wedding into one, out-of-control escapade. We were a tight-knit group. Abnormally so. Whenever we could spend a good chunk of time together, we jumped on the opportunity. Rosie was strapped for cash by choice. Her sister was marrying one of the richest men in America. I appreciated how Baby LeBlanc wasn’t the type of girl to leech on someone else’s purse—she did get the nearly free apartment and amenities, and also

got her meds paid for—but she worked hard for everything else. *And* made the time to change dirty diapers and greet guests at a children’s hospital a few times a week. She was a keeper, but I didn’t need a reminder of that.

“You’re the maid of honor.” I turned to face her, leaning a hip against the counter. Her eyes were fixed on my bulging bicep as I shook my drink. It moved back and forth like a tennis ball. She licked her lips, shaking her head, probably to get rid of the mental image of me slapping her ass with the same muscular arm.

“I understand the gravity of the role, and I’m perfectly capable of walking in a straight line in uncomfortable shoes for two minutes while holding her dress. You do realize that’s the only thing my part entails, right?”

“What about a bachelorette party?” I rubbed my naked abs to try to make her moan or lick her lips again, tossing back my head and taking a gulp of the cookie and caramel drink that tasted nothing like cookies or caramel and everything like rotten ass.

“What about it?” She challenged, her gaze hard on my face.

“Who is planning Millie’s? Shouldn’t that be the maid of honor’s role, too?”

“It’s under control, and it’s going to be epic. Why? Are you planning Vicious’s party?” she asked, surprised. She angled her body forward, her small, perky tits squeezing together inside her bra. I grunted, feeling my cock swelling inside my low-riding sweatpants.

From the outside, it looked like Vicious and I had a shit-ton of issues. Truth was, our friendship was strong. It was different from the normal brotherhood the rest of the guys had, but it was solid.

“I am. Jaime is helping, too. We’re doing a weekend in Vegas.”

“Classy.” Her smile was condescending.

“Well, we considered not giving a fuck and bailing on our friend’s rehearsal dinner, but then you came and stole our idea. What crawled up your little perky ass, anyway? Are you jelly your older sister’s getting hitched?”

She spun in her seat, and when I saw her face, something tightened in my chest. *Great going, jackass.* Whatever I said affected her enough to drain the blood from her face.

“Shut up, Ruckus. I’m just wondering if what I have planned is fancy enough. I was going for a slumber party of some sort. With a special playlist and all.” Unsure flaky eyes asked for my opinion. It was unlike her. Rosie was usually burning with self-confidence, and it felt like shit to be the one

who put her flame out.

“Slumber party, ah?” I walked past her just so I could brush my fingers against her waist. *By accident, of course.* “Millie is a low-key chick. Can’t see a reason why she wouldn’t dig it.”

“I’ll tell you why, because you’re doing *Vegas*. Now I need to up my game,” she complained, helping herself to a second cup of coffee without asking.

“You want to be a good sister? You can start by accepting the goddamn ticket I’m going to buy you.”

“The answer is no,” she drawled, sighing big. “Is English not your native tongue? Should I say no in another language? I don’t speak Asshole fluently, but I can try,” she grunted.

“Vicious is dead serious about this. He is going to come here and drag you himself. I’m the lesser of two evils, Baby LeBlanc. You’re coming with me,” I repeated. Not that any of them deserved any favors from me, but I was happy for Vicious and Millie. Even happier to spend a week with Baby LeBlanc. I’d been crushing hard on her creamy, round ass for years now. It was time for me to claim it.

Rosie looked away, folding her arms like a stubborn kid. “Nope.”

“Yup,” I said in the exact same tone. “And you better pack a fucking bag, because the flight leaves Friday morning, and we both have a busy week ahead of us.”

She blinked, not answering.

“Let’s cut a nice deal, shall we?” I got in her face, my elbows on the island. Her body followed suit, gravitating toward me. We were aligned, and she didn’t know it, but we looked like two, sculptured bodies. Made for each other. What she also didn’t know was that we were going to test my theory and see if we were going to match. Soon. Real fucking soon. “I’ll take you to the devil’s den, because you have to come.” I knew how impossible Vicious could be. “But I’m on call if you need anything. Think about it. It’s a good way to get to know each other.” I offered her a dimpled smile.

“I don’t want to get to know you. Everything I know about you, which is quite a bit, I don’t like,” Rosie said. “If we’re not going to talk about my rent, let me know, and I’ll leave.”

“Come to Todos Santos with me.” I ignored her last statement.

Fuck, she was so persistent. Why did that turn me on? Maybe because most women had the tendency to act different in front of me. They were

agreeable, extra nice, and flirty. Three things you couldn't blame Baby LeBlanc for being.

"Forget it," she muttered, hopping down from the stool.

"Rosie," I warned.

"*Dean.*" It was her turn to mimic me. She rolled her eyes. "Let me know what my new rent is before the end of the month, please. I need to make the necessary arrangements if I can't keep the apartment."

She walked to the door and slammed it in my face before I had the chance to tell her that her rent would stay the same if she came along.

That was fine, I had patience, as long as things went my way.

Baby LeBlanc was going to bow down to me eventually.

Her clock was ticking faster, and I was done letting her waste our time.

Chapter Three

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Taking a bus with a route I don't know. Walking the long way home. Feeling my senses heighten as my body becomes more alert to the unfamiliar scenery around me.

“SICK PLAYLIST, CHICA,” MY BEST friend remarked the following Wednesday, as I plugged my USB into The Black Hole’s laptop. I made an eight-hour playlist of the best of the best, just like I had done on every other shift I had. People came in from all over New York to hear my playlists. Customers said I gave them Williamsburg from the comfort of their Manhattan residency. From French electric pop, anarchist punk to old British rock—my music was like a milkshake. It brought all the boys to the yard and made them pay five bucks for a small latte. So. Much. Win.

“Thanks, boo.” I winked, moving away from the laptop and wiping the counter in front of me for the hundredth time that morning. Even though I had one hundred percent disability because of my illness, I chose to work. Productivity spun my straw into gold. Working was my saving grace, because when you’re *my* kind of sick, your whole adulthood is on probation.

“How is your hot neighbor doing?” Elle asked, her elbows pressed against the counter, her legs tapping to the tune of “I’m Shipping Up to Boston” by Dropkick Murphys that played in the background. “Still mega-rich?”

“Oh, yeah. Also, still a mega-douche.” I coughed out my answer. I wish my blonde, curvy, gorgeous friend, Elle, hadn’t met Dean last month for two seconds. I didn’t think he noticed her existence as he met us in the elevator

and asked if I wanted to come, and when I asked where, he said on his tongue, but she noticed him, all right. And when she found out he was one of the CEOs to the monstrous investment firm Fiscal Heights Holdings on top of being good-looking, all bets were off. She'd pretty much been bugging me about him ever since.

"We don't care about that." She waved her hand around, ignoring a table of desperate customers on the far end of the shop who signaled for her to hand them the check a century ago. They could dance the "Copacabana" and she still wouldn't notice. Elle was an amazing woman as much as she was a terrible waitress. I rang their order up and printed out their check, walking over to the table and offering them complimentary lemon cakes before returning to a still-oblivious Elle. Even though I was the barista and it technically wasn't a part of my job, I still covered for Elle all the time.

"You don't, but *I* do. Anyway, he is trying to get me to go with him to Todos Santos on Friday instead of a Saturday. I don't want to." I munched on my lower lip, thinking about Mama and Daddy. I haven't told Elle about my conversation with Dean. She was away all week, visiting her parents in Nebraska. The last thing I wanted was to dump my personal crap on her and ruin her vacation.

"Screw that, hell no." Elle waved her forefinger around, her hazel eyes skimming over two young, male customers who walked into the café, foolishly expecting her attention. "Your parents are a drag, and your mom is always on your case. Also, they still don't know you've broken up with Darren, right?"

Right.

On top of my parents, I would have to hang out with Vicious and Dean, two of my least-favorite people. The week was definitely going to be challenging. I changed the subject, bypassing the self-pity fest I was tempted to throw for myself.

"By the way, I need to change my plan for my sister's bachelorette party. My new one needs to be crazy with a touch of glitter." I unscrewed one of the jars of chocolate chip cookies that lined the counter behind us, taking two and shoving them into my mouth. "Any suggestions?"

Don't say Vegas, don't say Vegas, don't say Vegas, I inwardly prayed.

"Two words: Las Vegas." She drew an imaginary flashing sign in the air. "Do the Sin City Tour-de-Trash. Male strippers. Booze. A Britney Spears gig. All the guilty pleasures you can pack in, basically."

I groaned, throwing my head to the counter with a thud.

Money wasn't an issue. If I told Vicious, he would shell out whatever sum I needed to make it happen. Even though time in Vegas meant less time with Mama and more time with Millie, it was still *not* my thing.

"Any other ideas?" I quirked an eyebrow. Elle had a better chance luring me into a cave full of starving vampires than getting me to consciously spend time in the same Vegas strip with The HotHoles of Todos Santos, AKA the groom's best friends. Especially Dean Cole. His constant advances and sexual innuendos grated on my nerves.

"Honestly, Vegas is your best shot, chica. Otherwise, you can go the usual route. Do a dildo-themed party—which you don't want to do anymore because it's lame—or a weekend in Cabo. Now, now, no more carbs for the bridesmaid." She placed a hand over the jar lid when I went for another cookie, shaking her head. "And remember—you can't be an Annie."

"An Annie?" I frowned.

"Yeah. You know, from *Bridesmaids*. Don't let any of Millie's other bridesmaids outshine you. That shit'll haunt you for life."

Somehow, I doubted that. Millie didn't have many friends. I was her only bridesmaid. Her expectations were terribly low to begin with, thank God.

"I appreciate the tip," I snorted.

"Don't mention it." She wiggled her bony shoulders. "Seriously, don't. To anyone. I swore off rom-coms when I was sixteen as a part of a bet. I think it's still going. But I broke it like once or a thousand times."

I laughed, because with Elle, you couldn't not laugh.

"Seriously, though, Rosie. Vegas would be perfect. Don't think about what you want—think about Millie. It's her week. And that's true about your hot neighbor's invitation to arrive earlier in Todos Santos, too."

I hated it when Elle was right.

Glancing at the time on my cell phone, I had to walk my neighbor's dog in half an hour, and the subway was always packed that time of the year with enough tourists to populate a medium-sized country. I tipped my chin down. "Wine and sushi tonight?"

"Sashimi for me. I'm skinny-bitching this summer." She ran her hands down her body, tracing non-existent curves before giving me the thumbs-up. Then she paused, frowning. "Hey, who are you going to invite to this bachelorette party, anyway? Your sister is not exactly a social butterfly."

That was an understatement if I ever heard one. Other than her high

school friend, Sydney, who stayed in Todos Santos, and a random older chick she met in L.A. called Gladys, who helped her set up her gallery, she didn't really hang out with anyone. I shook my head, busying myself by rearranging coffee mugs on the counter.

“Shamelessly milking an invitation. What has the world come to?”

“Hey, lady, if you don't care for our world, you're welcome to move to another planet. And on that note,” Elle fist-pumped the air once, “we're going to Vegas! High-five?”

“High-five *and* a thumbs-up? No, thanks, I think I've had a healthy dose of lame today,” I teased.

“Is your sexy neighbor going to be there, too? Vegas, I mean. He seems like the type to throw a crazy-ass party.”

“Yes,” I groaned, and as I said that, I realized that I wasn't just annoyed with the prospect of having Dean around.

I was also excited.

Just a tad, but enough to make my stomach do that *flip*.

That should have tipped me off. Been the first alarm bell. Because everyone knew one thing—after the *flip*, comes the *boom*.



“Fuck if I care, Colton. We're dropping that lawsuit on his ass faster than a load of shit after a visit to that all-you-can-eat restaurant on Broadway just to make sure he can't buy any more stocks until further investigation. Am I clear? Colton? Colton! Goddammit.”

Oh, crap.

His voice rushed into my ears a second too late. I didn't have the time to jump out of the elevator before he sent his arm across the barrier—the one clutching his cell phone—to make the door slide back open.

Dean walked past the elevator's threshold wearing his navy blue, three-piece suit and cocky smile, pressing his phone to his ear as he loosened his silk maroon tie.

“LeBlanc,” he hissed seductively, ending the call. I ignored him, staring

at the numbers above my head.

His body pressed against mine from behind and his lips found my ear. “Do your nipples always pucker when someone enters the elevator with you, or do you save this reaction only for me?”

Double crap.

My eyes dropped down to my black top. Horrified, I remembered I wore a thin, barely-supportive bra under my Misfits shirt that morning.

“Just kidding, but good to know you have a reason to be worried.” Dean let out a mocking snicker. *Asshole.*

“What do you want?” I groaned.

“You, in my bed, playing with my balls as I suck your tits until they bleed. Maybe jerk me off. Just as an appetizer, obviously. The main course will be better, but you’ll have to see for yourself.”

Triple crap. Now I was wet.

The elevator pinged. I darted out, jerked my door open, throwing the keys into a handmade bowl Mama made in pottery class that was supposed to be an Egyptian figure but looked more like a crying monkey, kicking my flip-flops against the wall with a thud. Padding barefoot to the kitchen, I opened my fridge and grabbed the orange juice, taking two big gulps straight from the carton. It wasn’t until I wiped my mouth with my forearm that I realized Dean was in the kitchen with me, pinning me down with the most vivid green eyes I’d seen in my life.

“Rent reevaluation.” He smacked his lips together. “Before you throw another hissy fit, hear me out. There’s a good offer on the table.”

“Just tell me the price. Your offers are sexual harassment suits waiting to happen.”

Dean smirked when his phone buzzed again. Then he looked down and frowned, his nostrils flaring. Ignoring the buzz, he met my eyes again.

“It’s not harassment when you’re obviously game.”

I walked to the sink, washing my hands to buy time, abstaining from answering him.

“It’s time to pack a bag to Todos Santos, *Rosie-bug.*”

Just hearing the name my daddy nicknamed me on his tongue made me shudder.

“Is it? I’m boarding a plane Saturday evening. That’s what my plane ticket says.”

“Not the one you’re going to use.” He leaned his waist against my sink,

his eyes undressing me item by item. The call on his phone died, but another one started, making the screen flash. He ignored it, too. “Make that very early Friday morning, meaning tomorrow.”

“I’m not coming with you.”

He chuckled, shaking his head like I was an adorable, silly puppy. “Wanna bet?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. “Why not? Preferably for money. You’re not short in that department.”

“Or any other, as we’ve already established.” He pushed off the sink, stopping where I could smell but not touch him. Not too close, but close enough for that shiver to roll down my spine.

And it was true that even after all these years, he still had this effect on me. The unsolicited feeling that I wasn’t entirely responsible or in control of what I might say to him. Or *do* with him. He stood behind me and brushed a lock of hair away from the back of my neck, making my flesh warm and prickly.

He then leaned down and murmured into my ear, “This kind of apartment goes at eight thousand dollars a month on the market. You’re paying me a hundred bucks a month. Do I need to make you fall in line with the rest of New York, Miss LeBlanc?”

There was zero menace in his tone. Dean ‘Ruckus’ Cole was a different kind of asshole to Baron ‘Vicious’ Spencer. He fucked you over with a polite smile on his face. In that sense, he was the Joker. In his mix of confidence, cockiness, good looks, and money, there was a dash of insanity thrown in. Enough to let you know that he meant every word he said.

Living on the edge, so fully, so recklessly, willing to take the fall.

I swallowed, my heart beating so fast I thought it was going to spill all over the floor. Excitement filled my chest, nauseating and addicting. I’d always stayed away from the Dean Coles of the world. I was the Red Riding Hood who took one look at the wolf, said ‘screw it, it’s not worth the pain’, turned around and ran for her life.

Come to think about it, Dean was the very guy who taught me that lesson.

Darren was more my type. Handsome in a shy, reserved way. A med student I’d met when he ordered herbal tea at The Black Hole. Now, I didn’t know what to do with myself with Dean being so close. My hands felt like they’d been artificially glued to my body. Heavy and alien. I knew what would make the feeling stop. Touching him. But that wasn’t an option.

“Pack. A. Fucking. Bag.” His voice was hard, and if I’m not mistaken, it wasn’t the only thing that was hard about him. “If Vicious comes to New York to take you, he’ll give me shit. See, Baby LeBlanc, I like to keep my life simple. Trouble-free.” He twirled another piece of my hair around his finger, glints of lust flashing through his pupils. The light touch sent frissons all the way to my skull and spine, spinning through the rest of my body like electric shock.

What the hell is happening, and why am I letting it happen?

“That means no girlfriends, no fishy business partners, and no un-neighborly neighbors,” he stressed. “You’re a complication right now, and I hate to do this, but if it’s between pissing you off and pissing that motherfucker off, you know my pick.”

“I hate you so much,” I exhaled, and my lungs wheezed, reminding me that my heart needed to slow down. Being so close to Dean felt like that tumble you get in your stomach when you’re on a rollercoaster. He pressed his body to mine, and I sensed his smile on my skin, just below my ear. In that sensual place between your libido and your soul.

“Vicious claims hate-fucks are the best. Care to test his theory?”

Taking a side step and breaking the physical contact, I retorted, “Care to drop dead?”

There was no point in resisting him, though. He was going to follow through on his threat, and the worst part was, I couldn’t stop him. I knew I was in the wrong. Knew I should just accept the goddamn ticket. Something dark flashed across his face. Something that was always there, but only I seemed to notice.

“Pin this conversation.” He pointed at me with the hand that held his phone and swiped the screen. *Finally*. It was the third time that person called. “Be back in a sec.”

Dean disappeared into my hallway. I stood there, not sure what to do.

“Hello, Miss Golddigger, how may I be of help? Last time I checked, I told you not to fucking call me. Has that changed somehow?” He paused for just a moment before continuing. “But that’s the thing, Nina, my dear. You don’t get to snap your fingers and have me crawling back to save you. You made your fucking bed. Now lie in it. Not my war. Not my battle. None. Of. My. Fucking. Business.” His voice was exceptionally bitter.

In fact, he sounded so pissed, so angry, so not himself, that I visibly winced when I heard him. It ignited a foreign emotion in me I’d never

associated with Ruckus before. Fear. Dean never got angry or flustered. He was the least hotheaded out of the four HotHoles. Rare were the times his feathers were ruffled—that he was truly upset—and I don't think I'd ever heard him raise his voice outside the football field. Even earlier, when he yelled at Colton, he was scornful of the whole situation. Amused.

I pressed my ear to the wall, blatantly eavesdropping.

"I'm not coming to Birmingham." Birmingham? As in Birmingham, Alabama? I always thought I knew Dean's life pretty well. Clearly, he had more skeletons in his closet than Jeffrey Dahmer.

"There is something seriously fucked-up about the fact that I'm even listening to you right now. Your proposal is offensive at best and downright fucking insane at worst. You've had years to make this right. Years to let me see him. It's too late now. I'm not interested. Seriously, Nina, erase my number from your contact list. Save us both time and money."

Inhaling like his lungs were bottomless, he finished the call. A sudden punch straight to the wall dividing us awarded me with a white noise that rang in my ear. No doubt deserving that, it was my cue and I turned around, launching to the opposite side of the island.

Busying myself in the kitchen was hard, especially when I could still feel his anger floating from the other room. I opened the fridge and took out some vegetables, then a knife. Out of breath, I pretended to make myself a salad. I saw Dean's tall figure emerging from my periphery, his phone grasped in a death grip between his fingers. He looked a little startled to see me, like he forgot I was there, but then relaxed and fixed his cocky smile back on his face, like he was rearranging a wonky picture on a wall. Loosening his tie even more, he made his way to me.

"One-night stand gone wrong?" I asked, slicing a cucumber into wafer-thin pieces.

"You can say that again," he muttered, tousling unruly chunks of his delicious hair. "Where were we?"

"I believe you were blackmailing me."

"That's right. I was. Friday morning. Suitcase. Clothes. Attitude. On second thought, keep that attitude. I like all that excess energy. You just need a good place to allocate it. I have the perfect place for you." He winked, and as if I needed confirmation, added, "My fucking bed."

Chapter Four

Dean

WHAT IS TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS?

Is it a lot of money? A reasonable amount of money? So little, it's like no money at all? That depends on who you're asking. To me, twenty thousand dollars was merely pocket change. It had zero effect on my life. Contrary to general belief, it wasn't because my parents padded my bank account. People thought I'm a trust fund baby, and I let them, because frankly, who the fuck cares?

The reality of things was that my parents put me through Harvard University, fronted the money for my initial investment in Fiscal Heights Holdings, the company I have incorporated with three of my best friends, Trent, Jaime, and Vicious, and assisted me mentally and spiritually. A-fucking-lot. But the fact that I was swimming in more money than I could ever spend at the tender age of twenty-nine? That was all me, baby.

Me, and my savvy ways.

Me, and my persuasive nature.

Me, and my talent with numbers.

So, lack of funding certainly wasn't the reason why I found it so goddamn hard to click the *Approve Transaction* button and wire *her* twenty thousand bucks.

I didn't want Nina to have it. I didn't want her to be happy. Did I want her to fail? Did I want her to stay poor, lost, and somber? Did I want to get back at her for being such a vile bitch to me?

And if so, did that make me a bad person? I didn't think I was. Screwed up, sure. Would I ever want my future daughter to date someone like me? Hell no. I could smell my kind for miles. But then I couldn't fully commit to

the word *evil*, either. I'd seen evil. Grew up with Vicious—now that's an evil man. I wasn't cut from the same cloth. I helped the elderly cross the road, carried their grocery bags all the way to their Buick Lucernes, even if it meant that I ran late to important meetings. I never misled any of my one-night stands. I was polite—and not only by obligation, but by nature—I voted, always used my blinkers, never, ever offended people on purpose and had been sponsoring an African kid for five years now. We even exchanged letters from time to time. (Kanembiri and I both agreed that Scarlett Johansson was fuck hot and Manchester United FC sucked hairy balls. Because some things were simply an international consensus.)

So, can I wholeheartedly say that I was a bad person? No. I wasn't.

I fucking loved people. And I loved fucking people even more. The most outgoing and social out of each of my friends. Which was why the situation didn't sit right with me.

Me. Staring at my MacBook screen for twenty minutes. My index finger hovering over the pad. *Just fucking do it*, I pleaded with my inner asshole. *What the fuck do you care? You're still rich. She is still poor. She will always be miserable, no matter where she goes.*

A soft thump on the door threw me out of my musings. Sue walked in without permission. Technically, she knocked, but that was just cheap semantics on her part. My PA was rude, vindictive, and downright nasty when the opportunity presented itself ever since she caught me fucking another chick against an office desk at the Fiscal Heights Holdings Los Angeles branch. Never mind the fact Sue and I only shared a brief, casual fling. Was it wrong of me to fuck my personal assistant? Probably. Did I tell her, right from the start, that she had better chances converting me to Scientology than getting me to commit to a relationship? Yes, I did, multiple times, before I even slipped the tip in. Did she say she 'totally gets it, and, that she's like, totally in the same place in life'? You bet your ass she did. But none of that mattered when push came to thrust, then a moan, then a wannabe actress from Los Feliz screaming my name so loud, security almost barged into the office to check if she was okay.

It'd been almost a year since Sue "caught" me not-cheating on her, and things had gotten progressively worse with every passing month of my non-existent infidelity. Any other chick would be long gone from my glitzy Manhattan office, but Sue had a special contract I had written myself (no legal background, thanks for asking), in a very particular situation where she

deep-throated my cock, so I couldn't fire her. She wouldn't quit either, and I could see why.

I paid her well, and the hours were relatively sane for a financial company in downtown Manhattan—but she wouldn't give me a break either. Like now, she breezed into my office with her pencil skirt and high heels and impeccable bleached-out, side-bangs and sour face. I was lucky my office was made solely of glass windows (other than the black wood door). There was always the possibility she'd try to cut my balls off and shove them down my throat.

“Morning, Mr. Cole.” Her crimson lips barely moved as she swiped a finger over her iPad, staring at it intently. I closed the website window to my bank account, holding the thought of wiring money to my archenemy. She could wait. She sure makes *me* wait. For years and years.

“Sue,” I said, leaning back and lacing my fingers together. I refused to play the bullshit game where I called her by her last name—Miss Pearson—because I was approachable and casual with my staff. Also, it was a little too porno-ish, even for my taste, to refer to someone as “Miss Last Name” curtly when I had been knuckles deep inside of her at some point in my life. “How are you today?” I asked.

“Fine. Yourself?”

“If I were any better, I'd be worried I might explode from happiness.” My smile was intact, but my voice paper-dry. Was I happy? Was I sad? Was I just too fucking high to distinguish the two feelings? Who the fuck knew? What I *did* know was that I needed a drink or three, which was what I usually felt after speaking with Nina.

Sue stopped in the middle of the room, her body tilted toward my glass desk, my executive leather chair, and the floor-to-ceiling painting of an antique world map behind me.

Generic.

Expensive.

Rich.

Everything I sold the world about myself.

This office was a shell, just like my looks.

This office didn't represent me. Just. Like. My. Looks.

“Okay...” she trailed off before huffing, moving her special fancy pen over her special fancy iPad. No common shit for this chick. “I have reservations for you at The Breakfast Club for noon with Cynthia Hollyfield.

Don't forget your Skype meeting with Mr. Rexroth, Mr. Spencer, and Mr. Followhill at two. Your dry cleaning should be picked up later on today and will be waiting at your place." She was firing away all these things while I was flipping through the pages of a report for a client I was supposed to meet when her head snapped up.

"Then there's your email about booking an extra ticket to Todos Santos for Rose LeBlanc? Can you confirm she'll be flying first-class with you tomorrow morning?" Sue arched a plucked eyebrow. The real question, of course, was *are you fucking her?* and the honest answer to that question—which I replied to with two, slow blinks, was *it's none of your fucking business*.

"Confirmed," I said, staring at a paragraph of another merger deal in the works without really reading it.

The AC hummed between us. Forty-six floors down, a bunch of taxi drivers honked their horns. Polite keyboards purred from different cubicles on the floor. Her eyes were on mine, and it was a lost battle for our little Sue. She couldn't read me in them. Only I knew their language. And I chose not to share *me* with the rest of the world.

"Right," she shifted in place. Sue tucked her iPad under her armpit, turned around, and headed for the door. I watched her tiny ass moving to the rhythm of her pointy Louboutins, knowing it was not the end. Sue knew that Rosie was Emilia LeBlanc's baby sister, but never had the pleasure of meeting my pixie-sized neighbor. However, Sue was privy to the fact that I wasn't the type to babysit anyone's sibling, unless there was something in it for me. And Miss LeBlanc was definitely capable of dragging her own ass to the airport, which left her with one, correct conclusion: I wanted into Rosie LeBlanc. In more ways than I'd ever wanted into Sue Pearson.

And it wouldn't be the first time I crashed someone else's special day for pussy, either.

I'd been known for taking my dates to inappropriate places. Sue knew that I dragged a one-night stand to the hospital when I went to Chicago to congratulate my best friend, Trent, when he welcomed his daughter, Luna. When Jaime Followhill—another good friend—married his wife and my ex-lit teacher, Melody Greene, I came to his wedding with two randoms I picked up on the way from a bar. My dad's retirement party, before he un-retired himself and remarried his work? – showed up with one of his interns, no less. So it was really no surprise that I was traveling with a woman, but to Sue, it

was a surprise because she knew I'd be there for more than a week. And spending nine days with the same woman? That was definitely a first.

She didn't know Rosie and I weren't going to stay under the same roof.

Didn't know that Rosie hated my guts, and for a good reason. Every time Baby LeBlanc saw my face, she saw empty fun; a stoner who got to where he was because his daddy was a famous lawyer, and his last name was Cole, and the Coles donated enough money to Harvard to feed the better half of Africa, so my future was paved for me before I even knew how to spell the word *entitled*.

Sue didn't know Rosie LeBlanc was the only woman in my life who wouldn't give me the time of day, and she certainly didn't know that ironically, Rosie LeBlanc was the only woman whose time I wanted.

And Sue didn't need to know any of those things, because like every other part of my personal life, they were mine to keep.

Cue Sue turning around. Staring at me from under what I suspect were fake eyelashes. Sucking her cheeks in.

Then she did the unbelievable and inhaled without finishing the act with another one of her huffs.

"Mr. Cole, will you need anything else from me today? I'm not feeling very well."

"That would be all," I said. "Take the rest of the day off. Go rest. You deserve it."

She nodded.

I nodded.

Yeah, I wasn't a bad person, letting my PA ditch me so she could teach me some useless lesson.

I fired my MacBook right back up and finished my transaction, sending twenty thousand dollars to *her*.

It was supposed to make me feel better.

It didn't.



The next morning was a rehash of the one I had when Baby LeBlanc came to my apartment dressed to impress (by her standards.) Meaning, I woke up next to a stranger, braved a hangover from hell, which I decided to tame by smoking a big, fat blunt on my terrace while sipping a Bloody Mary. *Not* the virgin kind. These days I never took a virgin anything. After all, the last one I had fucked me over, ran away, and was now marrying one of my best friends.

But I digress.

Maybe it wasn't the best idea I had in mind to stop at a convenience store in the armpit of New York on my way to JFK at six a.m. and grab a bottle of who-the-fuck-knows-what and finish it before the poor taxi driver even dropped me off.

I knew it was a shitty move on my end, but couldn't stop myself from smoking and drinking before I boarded the plane.

Fuck you, Nina, I muttered the entire drive to JFK, like it was some kind of bullshit yoga mantra. *Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.*

Zigzagging my way to the terminal, I hoped to hell Baby LeBlanc was already inside the plane and made good use of the ticket and taxi I sent for her. The odds were in my favor. I threatened her, and she had no clue I couldn't, in good conscience, raise her rent, even by a penny. I always had a soft spot for this girl, and it seemed like the more she hated me, the more I wanted to prove to her that it was always us. That if I believed in that bullshit of two people who were meant to be with each other—it was because we actually were.

I was late, and the flight was delayed as a result. Little Miss CrankyPants didn't take any of my calls, and I felt an invisible rope tightening around my neck. I wanted to get to Todos Santos, dump Rosie at her sister's, and collapse into my childhood bed. Somewhere in the back of my head, I wanted more out of life. To stop drinking and smoking like a fucking chimney. To let go of the bad shit that kept ricocheting into my life. To ask her on a date instead of asking her to reverse-cowgirl me, because all the sexual crap I was dishing at her was a defense mechanism in case she said no.

Because no one ever said no.

No one other than her, and if she was going to turn me down, might as well offer her my dick and not my heart.

My last recollection was of the flight attendant showing me the way and the soft thud of my head hitting the headrest, followed by a sharp pain that suggested my brain had just detonated. I winced, scrubbing my forehead

before I heard her strained, out-of-breath voice. At first, I thought she was going to yell at me for being late, for delaying the flight, and for fucking breathing. So, it didn't register when my half-dead mind actually decoded her words into their meaning.

"Here. Two Advils and water." She dropped something in my palm. "I'll ask the flight attendant for some milk after we take off. You pull this shit on our way back home, and I will make sure every woman you bring into the building knows your dick is more contaminated than the public restroom in the subway."

I opened my eyes, turning my head on the cushioned seat to face her, my gaze gliding over her face.

"You seem to take a lot of interest in my dick, Baby LeBlanc. First, you wanted to pour wax on it; now, you want to cockblock it. Maybe you should meet him and see if you two could be friends. I think you will get along great."

"No, thank you, I'd literally rather eat someone else's puke."

"*Literally?* Somehow I doubt it. Unless you have a very peculiar taste for puke."

Rosie had always been a bitch to me. I didn't blame her, but didn't trust her either. But now, her face looked blank and genuine and, fine, fucking gorgeous. Her cheeks the color of ripe peaches, freckles decorating her little nose, and those huge bluest-blues staring back at me. Two hundred different shades of brown and blonde on her head, all courtesy of Mother Nature. She was the very definition of a nymph. Everything about her was so incredibly smooth and velvet, there was no way you could tell she was sick.

I groaned, tossing the Advil and bottle of water into my dry mouth. I wiped my lips as the plane started sliding forward, gaining speed.

"Do you need help?" she asked, her voice neutral. She meant the drinking. The pot. The general mess that was my life. I was a high-functioning, borderline alcoholic who smoked like being stoned was an Olympic sport. Nobody complained when I sealed those deals and wired that money and fucked like a champion.

"I do, actually. I need you to leave me be until we get to San Diego. Think you can do that?"

Fuck, you're a dick.

The last thing I remembered before I blanked out was Rosie's chest rising and falling irregularly to her ragged breaths.

“Whatever,” she whispered. “I’m letting you off easy, because I’ve a feeling you had a shitty week. But if you wanna talk about it, I’m here.”

I wanted to tell her everything.

I didn’t want her to know shit.

She confused me, and right now, she was the very complication I talked about when I told her I always opted for the easy route. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. And when darkness came, so did she.

Nina.

Chapter Five

Rosie

Eleven years ago

What makes you feel alive?

Watching my reflection in the cool, calm water of the pool. Blue-hued, unblinking. Diving into a quieter space without even dipping my toe in the water.

DANGEROUS CHEMISTRY.

That was our main problem.

And that was why I vowed to never be home when Dean came to visit my sister. It wasn't a difficult task. Millie had always been a creature of habit. Her room was neat, her notebooks tidy with perfect handwriting, granting her straight A's back to back. Much like everything else, she allotted a perfectly specific time frame in which she hung out with her perfectly polished boyfriend. Tuesdays and Thursdays after school—because Dean had football practice in the mornings on those days—and on the weekends, they made plans outside of the Spencer's mansion, because Millie couldn't stand Vicious and vice versa.

It wasn't like I was lying in my bed, listening to Miranda Lambert man-hating songs, and crying my eyes out. I was the C-minus troublemaker who loved a good thrill. I entertained myself with friends and after-school activities. Got my navel and nose pierced downtown, applied for odd jobs, saved money for a new bike, and skinny-dipped in the ocean near a deserted beach with friends when the weather permitted, which was always, because...well, SoCal.

Indeed, I did a lot of things that fall. Dutifully, none of them were my sister's hot-as-sin boyfriend.

I can tell you flat out, right here, that being under the same roof with them made me want to skulk deeper into my skin and disappear into myself, vanishing into nothing. They made noises. I hated those noises. They were the worst type of noises.

Heavy breathing, panting, giggling, and loud, messy kisses. The fact that I was able to hear them through the closed door to Millie's room only made the searing hole in my chest grow wider. Despite my shortcomings, I'd always been a sensible chick. I didn't need this kind of negativity in my life. So, it was really for the best that I was never there.

If I could pinpoint the moment that brought on that resolution—staying away from Dean Cole even when Millie was in the room with us—I would pick the pool incident.

It was a Thursday, and Millie was late. She had to stop at the gas station on her way home to fill some air in her bicycle tires. I was about to leave the servants' house where we lived on the Spencer mansion's lot. Everything about that encounter felt like it was ripped out of a movie scene. I opened the door just as Dean was about to knock on it. Our eyes locked and so did my jaw, because I was fighting a smile I was determined not to let loose, knowing it could very well rip my face in two.

Dean looked like temptation. And I don't just mean the fact that he was stunning in his regal blue varsity jacket and panty-melting bad boy expression. The way he smelled, of faint laundry detergent and *expensive sex*, and his commanding height and build made me desperate. I swear, half the time he was around, my desperation for him hung in the air like stench.

"Hey." My goddamn voice cracked.

"Right back at ya," he replied. Our eyes were roaming again. Not good, but also not the first time it happened. It always made me feel guilty. If they were hands, his fingers would pull at my waist now, right after flipping my black Dead Kennedys hoodie down so he could see my face better; mine grabbing at his perfect, sun-kissed brown hair, and our bodies glued together like two pages in a brand new book.

"Millie's not here yet, but you can come in." I stepped sideways and pushed the door wider. "I'm just heading out. She should be back any minute."

"Where you heading?" he asked, placing his arm on the doorframe and

blocking my way out.

“I’m sorry.” I folded my arms over my chest. “I didn’t get the memo. Is it suddenly any of your business?”

“Maybe the memo got lost in the mail.” He took a step in, forcing me to take a step back, and Jesus, I couldn’t even look him in the eyes I was so flustered. Luckily, my head was level with his pecs. “Because you’re definitely my business, Baby LeBlanc.” My heart jumped to my throat, making it impossible to suck in a breath, before he added, “And I think we both know better than to pretend I don’t keep tabs on you.”

I pulled my hood all the way down to cover my burning face.

Normally, he was the poster child for cocky. The whole cliché of the rowdy badass the HotHoles were feeding All Saints High about themselves. Their subjects and minions ate that shit up and came back for seconds. Perhaps I was at fault for not caring for that type of thing, but I never got the power trip and ‘grownup’ vibe the HotHoles were sporting. Part of the reason I noticed Dean in the first place was because he didn’t take himself too seriously, and wasn’t as brooding and douchebaggy as the rest. Ever since he started to date Millie—which wasn’t that long ago—he always tried to catch a word with me. At first, he assured me that he wasn’t touching her. After I told him that he *should* touch her, he got really mad. Nowadays, he was going out with her *and* acting like it—kissing her, God, I heard them just the other day—even though his eyes were on me. Always on me.

“I, ah...” I zoned out, the rusty wheels in my brain reeling, searching for a potential lie. My alibi was sound. I *did* need to go someplace. But I didn’t share it with people, much less fellow students, and definitely not the dude I had a huge crush on. Dean wasn’t a guy to back down, though. I had to say something—anything—so I opted for the truth. “I have a doctor’s appointment.”

Chancing a look up, I saw recognition and calm washing over his face. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Something wrong?”

Yes. My whole life is wrong.

“No, it’s nothing like that.” I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear under the hoodie. “Sometimes I just need to...” *shut the hell up*, the voice told me. Feeling small and vulnerable wasn’t my jam.

“To...?” He dipped his chin down, egging me on. And it was a crying shame that chemistry was an unexplainable string that pulled and bound two people together. Because that was how I felt at that moment. Chained. The

way he looked at me, like I was the center of the world, bothered me. Flattered me. *Possessed* me. God, I had to say something fast to make him shut up and leave me alone. No matter how embarrassing the truth may have been.

“To get a chest massage.” I had to get all the mucus out of my airways, but that wasn’t something I was eager to share with him. I quirked a brow and shoved my fists into my pockets. “You know, just keeping it sexy, and stuff.”

My eyes were securely covered by the hoodie, but it still wasn’t enough. Nothing was enough next to him. Even with three layers of clothes, I had always felt naked.

Chest massages were a weekly occurrence. Sometimes I had to go to the clinic. Sometimes a nurse would come to me. And even though Millie didn’t say a thing about my illness to her boyfriend, I knew that if he really stuck around, he’d find out eventually.

Shouldering my way past Dean, I marched to the main entrance of the manor. There was a flagstone walkway leading straight to the gate, but I liked to take the long way, through Vicious’s massive pool and Dean’s-eyes-green-lawn. To walk on its edge. *To feel alive.*

I heard Dean’s steps jogging after me. Without looking back, I knew that he was sporting that smile that made me angry for some reason.

“Chest massage, huh?” He sounded cunning. “A lot of guys would love to help you with that.”

“Thank you, Dean, for the creepy comment.”

“What’s creepy in pointing out that guys wanna touch your tits?”

“The fact that it’s my sister’s boyfriend who is telling me this. It is also slightly inappropriate. And by slightly, I mean extremely.”

“Never said I wanted to do it myself.” He *tsked*, adding, “Why the fuck would you need a chest massage, anyway? You get a boob job or something?”

I paused by the deep end of the pool, turned around, and held his gaze in a way that felt too intimate. We were face to face. Body to body. The wind was cold but gracious. I took a step back. From that angle, Vicious could see us from his bedroom window. The last thing I needed was to arm him with more ammo against Millie, so he could tell her he saw me flirting with her boyfriend. I needed to make sure she was protected, no matter what.

“I have an illness,” I said, the words falling out of my mouth before I

could stop them. His eyes darkened, leaking suspicion and disbelief to the rest of his face.

“What illness?” he demanded, looking confused, annoyed, and...hurt? Maybe.

“Cystic fibrosis. It’s a lung disease.”

“Curable?” He pressed, his voice hard. His brows dropped like a stone. It was almost like he was accusing me of something.

“Nope.” I felt my cheeks warming up. “Was born with it. Will die with it. Most likely because of it, too. Young, probably. Both my parents carry the gene.”

“Millie doesn’t have it.” There it was again. Was he hoping to catch me in a lie? Because if I were a liar, I was pretty sure I would have tried to sell myself as having a superpower or Einstein’s IQ. I snorted out a laugh, because it was attractive and all.

“Well, Millie’s lucky,” I spat out. She was. In more ways than one. “Just because both parents carry the gene doesn’t mean all their kids will get it. Call it nature’s Russian roulette, if you would. And it’s me who got the bullet in the effing neck. There’s your fun fact for the day. Now can I go?”

With any other guy, I would have turned around and left. *Simple*. But with Dean ‘Ruckus’ Cole, nothing was simple. I wanted to milk every second I had alone with him. I wasn’t even sure why. It felt strange, agonizing, and thrilling to have him around, and then the moment he was gone, I knew I’d hate myself for every single word I’d said, every way I’d acted, and every single breath I took.

“Rosie.”

I lifted my head, and before I knew what was happening, I felt his rough palms on my waist and my body flying into the pool. I didn’t have time to brace myself for the fall. Literally or figuratively. My body hit the water flat, the plunge painful like I smashed right into concrete. I used my arms to swim my way up to get some air. The chill of the water only hit me when I took one, desperate breath. I opened my eyes, my whole body shivering violently, and before my eyes adjusted, there was a huge splash beside me. Dean jumped in, too.

My heart went haywire, jackhammering everywhere. I felt it pounding against my ribcage, dipping down, trying to fight its way outside, through my stomach, through my throat, wanting out, out, *out*. Dean’s body swam to mine, pinning me to the tranquil-blue wall, and I started throwing fists at him.

Frantic, angry punches. They weren't the kind of banter-slaps a girl gives a boy to flirt or warn him to stay away. No. I clawed at his chest with my fingernails, wishing to draw blood.

Then I started crying.

That, too, was completely out of character for yours truly. I'd never cried in front of people I didn't know. And for the sake of argument, anyone who wasn't Millie, Mama, or Daddy was a stranger. Yet there I was, my hot, salty tears mixing with the cold, sweet water.

Life ain't fair.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I roared, my fists continuing their assault on his chest. He'd taken his jacket off before he'd jumped in, and now the only thing separating our flesh was his tight black and gold tee and my soaked hoodie. His skin was warm despite the water and I needed more of it. He wanted to give it to me. His whole body said it. *Sang* it. Shouted it from the rooftop of this monstrous mansion. No words were spoken at all, which made our body language so much louder. *Dangerous chemistry*, it warned. *Run away, Rosie.*

"Your lungs work fine," he growled into my face, capturing both my wrists and jamming me to the wall, hard. What was he doing? Vicious could see us. Hell, Millie could, too. If she walked in the gate right now, what would she think? Her boyfriend and sister in the pool together. Body to body. Soul to soul. "You're fucking fine!" he added, his forehead inches from mine.

Was he trying to convince me, or himself?

And why the hell did he care, anyway?

I forced myself to calm down. I needed to talk some sense into this guy. He had to let me go before we got caught doing whatever it was we were doing.

"Dean," I said, as coolly as I could, freeing my wrists and placing my palms flat against his chest. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes. His lashes dripped water, and everything about him was raw, wet, and delicious. Somewhere in the back of my head, I knew that this was monumental. This thing we shared in that moment. I'd never feel it with any other guy again. This slice of life was ours, even if I didn't want it to be.

"Rosie," he countered.

"I'm sick," I repeated.

"Don't say that. You're not sick. It's just a fucking condition."

I shook my head, water and tears flying back and forth. "It's not just a

condition. I'm going to die really young, Dean. In my thirties, maybe forties...fifties, if I'm lucky."

"Shut up," he hissed between clenched teeth. His palm slammed the wall behind me, and I shook with more than just the cold.

"This is bullshit!" he spat out. "No, you're not."

I needed to find another tactic. Fast.

"Listen, you can't do this, okay? We can be friendly," I lied, because I knew by that point that we couldn't. "But you can't throw me into pools in the middle of the fall—first of all, I really *am* sick, and even if I wasn't prone to pneumonia, it's not that fun to be thrown into icy water anyway—and Millie. It's not fair to her. You can't treat her sister like that. Like...like..."

"Like what?" he challenged, his pupils flaring.

Like you want me.

Does he?

My hormones were rebelling. My morals charred me from the inside. Every hair on my body stood on end. His hand snaked between us and cupped one of my cheeks, tilting my face upwards, forcing me to look at him. "Like. Fucking. What. Rosie?"

There was something in his eyes. An intensity I'd never seen before. It was unsettling, because that something told me he had no idea what he was doing. He just knew it was wrong. And like me, he was confused, hurt, and angry.

"Like you want me," I echoed my thoughts quietly.

"But I do," he supplied. "Maybe it's time for some musical chairs. Your sister doesn't care for me too much, Baby LeBlanc."

He didn't care too much for her either. He cared *about* her. Which made him even more alluring, because our goal was mutual—protecting the person I fiercely loved.

But at the same time, bitterness ate away at me every time I watched the complete and utter waste that was their relationship. When I witnessed how her eyes drifted to Vicious when he was around. How Dean and I looked at each other from across the room. I wanted to grab my sister by the shoulders and shake her. Tell her to pull her shit together and go with the guy who made her heart swell. But I was in no position to ask her for anything, considering my parents ripped our family from our home in Fairfax, Virginia, and moved us all the way to California so I could have better health care. Since I had friends and a social life and she had nothing—precisely because

of that decision. So, I let her have them both. Dean's body and Vicious's heart.

"If you don't let me go," my teeth chattered, and not just for impact, "I will get a lung infection. *Dean.*" His name was a warning, and this time he let me push him with my palms, swimming away from me and watching me climb to the edge of the pool, my heavy, soaked clothes pulling me down.

I didn't turn around to look at him. Was too afraid he'd see my eyes, doped on euphoria, tainted by lust. And my face, rosy in contrast to the rest of my quivering, blue self.

I saw him in my periphery swimming to the edge, bracing his forearms on the wet tiles, his chin propped on his balled hands.

"This shit is toxic. We need to stop it before it goes any further," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

"Any further than what?" I stripped out of my hoodie and tossed the heavy fabric onto a nearby sun lounger. "Than kissing and dry-humping my sister to oblivion and back while hitting on me?" My voice was trembling.

"Rosie," he said. A high-pitched laugh escaped me. *Rosie, my ass.* He was with my sister. True, I pushed him to be with her, but it didn't make me any less bitter. "Don't twist this against me. You told me to be with her. *You* fucking told me to touch her, too. What do you want me to do? Ignore her ass?"

I hated that he had a point, and I hated that something so logical made me *feel* so illogical.

"This," I pointed between us from where I was standing on the edge of the pool, "is not going to happen. You're dating Emilia, Dean. We can't ever be together."

"Says who?" he challenged.

"Says me. And society. And logic. And culture. And damn, every love film and romance book I've ever consumed."

"Mmm." A playful grin found his luscious lips again. "That can't be right."

"It is," I fired. "Juliet didn't have an older sister named Julie that Romeo sampled before he decided she was the one."

"Juliet never went head-to-head with her fucking feelings," he yelled, banging his fist on the tiles. "Since when are you such a pussy?" Dean jumped out of the pool so fast, it looked like an optical illusion. He got in my face, snarling. "Since when do you give a damn about what people think? I

pegged you all wrong. If you walk away from this, I'm going to give this thing with Millie a shot."

It sounded like a threat.

"What have you been doing all along?" I snorted. It wasn't his fault. By the time he noticed me, she wanted to date him, and he couldn't back down. Besides, he made her life so much better. Gone were the days where her locker was stuffed with garbage and people muttered 'white trash' when she passed in the hallway.

"Waiting on you," he answered, and we both let out a sigh as rain started knocking lightly on our standing figures.

"Well." I smiled sweetly, and it took every ounce of energy in me to show him my teeth and dimples. "You have the green light to fall in love with my sister. As I said, nothing will ever happen between us."

Five seconds later, Millie appeared at the pool, wheeling her bike along. We told her that I fell into the pool and that he jumped in to save me. My cheeks were flushed and the pool wasn't that deep and I was a great swimmer. But Millie's eyes were elsewhere—so was her heart—and I had a feeling that even if she caught us with our pants down it wouldn't matter.

I never made it to my doctor's appointment that day.

But I did catch pneumonia that granted me a trip to the ER and a four-day hospital stay. I'd missed two important exams and had to spend hours in a percussion vest.

And that following Thursday, when I got back home after avoiding Dean and Emilia, a book was waiting on my pillow, along with a note. *The Bronze Horseman* in paperback. The yellow Post-It note said:

Fuck society.

Fuck logic.

Fuck culture.

Fuck your illness.

And you know what? Fuck you.

Here's a book about how shit like ours can work. Read it.

—Dean.

But the next day, I tucked it into the slit in Dean's locker with a note.

Make her happy. I will kill you if you ever hurt her.

Fiction is magical. Reality is painful.
—Rosie.

We never spoke of this again until Millie ran away.
But I did buy my own copy of *The Bronze Horseman*.
Reading it.
Memorizing it.
Reciting it.
Never, ever forgetting it.

Dean

Eleven years ago

In the end, Millie and I made a pretty decent couple. Before she pissed all over it, that is.

I didn't put a name on what we were or weren't. Was it love? Probably not, but I cared for her and enjoyed her company. Only thing was, I enjoyed her sister's company more. But it was becoming less and less of a problem, since Baby LeBlanc took a step back, and even though she never explicitly said anything, I knew she was avoiding me. She made things simpler.

But Vicious didn't.

Notorious for making things messy, he did what he was expected to do—he ruined.

Vicious tried to get back at me for dating Emilia LeBlanc in many ways. Sadly for the fucker, I wasn't a little pushover like his fanboys. We got into fights—physical and verbal—every other week over the subject, but I knew breaking up with Millie would leave her exposed to him, and I didn't want him touching her. He bullied, taunted, and hated her. He had enough time to ask her out. Now she wanted to be with me, and Rosie pushed me straight into her arms.

And more than I wanted to please Millie, I wanted to please Rosie. Really fucking bad.

Eventually, Vicious did manage to get back at me in a way that cracked

through my shield. Turns out that shit was thick, but not unbreakable after all.

He kissed Rosie.

He threw a party at his place, and we were cooling down from almost beating the hell out of one another. That wasn't out of the ordinary. What was out of the ordinary was the way he made me taste my own medicine for the very first time. And let me tell you, it was nasty.

I was walking to his kitchen to get myself a bottle of water after popping a Xanax to take the edge off. Tanked as fuck, I knew I needed to go check on Millie. Last time I saw her at that party, she ran back to the servants' house looking upset because of Vicious.

I bumped shoulders through masses of sweaty, glittery bodies, and when I finally got to the fridge, I found out Spencer ran out of water. I looked around—the kitchen was a colossal, cherry-wood and dark room better fitted in Buckingham Palace. Everywhere you looked, there were people. A couple making out against the sink, a bunch of ballers doing shots on the island, and girls snorting the Ritalin I brought over that night. I pushed two of the snorting girls away and swung the pantry door open, knowing where the bottled water was kept.

Turning on the light, I froze in place.

Vicious was there, hovering over Rosie like darkness that was about to swallow her whole. His lips were on hers and her lips were on his, and I wanted to rip them away from each other and tear his body to shreds, organ by organ.

They kissed. Her eyes were closed. His weren't. His arm rose, and he flipped me the finger, his busy lips smirking as he grabbed her waist with his free hand, jerking her body to his. There was no passion there. No lust. The whole thing looked fucking technical and cold. She deserved so much more.

Like who, asshole, like you?

“What in the fuck is this?” My teeth crushed every word that left my mouth. My voice startled her and she jumped, placing her palm over her heart. “Get your hands off of her before I break them.” I felt the darkness in the pit of my stomach spreading like ink, taking over.

Vicious twisted his head to look at me, one of his hands still in Rosie's hair. He smirked.

“Make me.”

It was an invitation I was only too happy to accept. I grabbed him by the collar and backed him away from her, slamming him against a case of mini-

champagnes. I was bigger, stronger, and fucking scarier. His head smashed against the heavy box. He pushed me away. I pushed harder.

“Dean!” Rosie yelled. I recognized, rationally, that she wasn’t mine. Recognized, yes. But I didn’t *understand*. There were other guys. I saw them talking to her at school and at parties. They never got too far with her. Rose LeBlanc got her name for a reason. She was full of fucking thorns. She was so beautiful—so ridiculously, unbelievably alluring—that just like real roses, she grew little spikes to protect herself. Because everyone wanted to have her.

Everyone including you, asshole.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I hissed into Vicious’s face. Ten minutes ago, it was him who almost kicked my ass. We were constantly changing roles. It wasn’t hard to see why. No one said it out loud, but now, it finally made sense.

Each of us was with the wrong fucking sister.

“I’m doing what you want to do.” His eyes narrowed, and he licked his bottom lip, still swollen from that kiss. “Shoving my tongue into Rosie LeBlanc’s mouth. She tastes good.” He chuckled, slapping my back good-naturedly. “Like a fruity gum and 7UP and the girl you’ll never have.”

I threw him across the pantry, and he landed on a twenty-pound bag of rice. I wanted to kill him, and—I had no doubt—was going to if Rosie hadn’t tackled me, pushing me to the opposite side of the small room using her non-existent strength.

“Jesus. Stop it. You’re such a mess. Go away.”

“This is bullshit,” I yelled in her face, tugging at my hair. “You don’t even like him!”

“Irrelevant. I can do whatever I want.”

“And what you want is to rip my fucking heart out?”

Shit. I said that out loud, didn’t I? I was the one hurting her. My head hung down, and I felt all the blood rushing to my eyes. A part of me was glad I was going to move away for college soon. This town was boiling with hot gossip and out-of-control drama. I didn’t want to be there when the puss and shit overflowed.

“Yes,” she whispered, a mixture of elation and guilt marred on her face. She also looked just as drunk as I was. “Maybe it’s exactly what I want.”

“I don’t think you want to hurt me.” I lifted my head up, holding her gaze. “I think Vicious does, and you’re playing along because you’re

shitfaced. Let me take you home.”

“No, thank you.” She looked the other way.

“Funny you say that, I think it’s time *you* grab your shit and get the hell off of my property, Cole.” I heard Vicious behind my back, tucking a joint into his mouth. A joint *I* gave him. *Prick*.

“If you ever touch her again, I’ll make sure you have no lips to kiss anyone with. Just for future reference.” I shrugged, turning off the lights to the pantry they were still in, just to be a dick.

Step. Another step. Then another. Making my way out of Vicious’s house was the longest journey I’d ever made. There was an urgency inside me to do something, but fuck if I had any idea what it was. I wanted to break up with Millie, but I doubted it would make any difference. Rosie still wouldn’t date me—she may even hate me more for bailing on her sister’s ass. And Vicious was definitely going to corner Millie and make her life a living hell.

Back then, I didn’t even know how fucking bad things were, because after that party, Vicious bragged about Rosie chasing him around all month, making Trent and Jaime believe that she wanted him, when really, she was begging for him not to tell her sister. She didn’t know he already did. But I knew, because Emilia had told me—through tears, by the way, what a fucking joke this relationship was—claiming she was fearful her sister would get hurt.

Rosie didn’t know, but her little drunken mistake at the pantry pushed me deeper into a bottomless rabbit hole and right into the arms of my vices.

That night, I was too drunk to drive, so I called a taxi back home.

Then crawled up to my room.

Locked the door.

Took out a bottle of Jack Daniels from my nightstand drawer.

And did to it what I wanted to do to Vicious.

I finished that motherfucker.

Chapter Six

Dean

I POPPED THE TRUNK OF the waiting taxi when we got out of the airport and swung both our suitcases inside. By that time, I was fairly sober. And by “fairly sober,” I mean I could distinguish faces, colors, and large shapes. Good enough for my parents, so Rosie had to make do with that shit, too.

Twisting my head to check on her for the first time since I’d boarded the plane, I drank her in. I was out of it most of the flight. Not that it mattered. Baby LeBlanc wouldn’t have talked to me if I were the last person capable of speaking on planet Earth.

But that was then and this was now, and now she looked like she had a lot to say to me.

I slammed the trunk, leaned against it—the fuckwit taxi driver was inside talking to his wife on the phone in decibels more fitted for a Broadway show—and folded my arms, waiting for her to pour her sweet wrath on me.

“Should I pay a visit to Mommy Cole? Tell her that her son has a drinking problem?” She frowned, peppering the question with a little cough. It was adorable. Baby LeBlanc didn’t even know my mother, let alone have the power or authority to talk to her. I tugged at her ponytail as I bypassed her, opening the door to the backseat and tilting my chin for her to hop in. She did. I rounded the vehicle and got into the seat next to her.

“My drinking isn’t a problem. It’s when I’m not drinking that things start to get fucked up.” I pressed my knees into the driver’s seat on purpose. I was too tall and too big for this car, and the fucker deserved it anyway. He hadn’t shut up since we got in, barely taking a breath to ask where we were heading.

She pulled out a lip moisturizer and dabbed her finger into it, patting her lips. The sweet scent of cotton candy filled the backseat. I wanted to lick the

shiny gloss off her finger, then shove it into her skinny jeans, watch her finger herself with my saliva all over it. She was talking to me now. Fuck if I had any idea what she was saying. I blinked, trying to refocus.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, Dean, but I’m worried about you.”

“Funny shit, because I’m worried about you.” I ran my fingers through my hair, knowing damn well it made her thighs press together. “Worried you can’t resist me for much longer.”

“You live too hard.” She disregarded my comeback, which I loved about her. She never took the bait. But she was going to. Eventually, she was going to succumb to the pressure I was putting on her ever since she broke up with Dr. Dickface. Because giving up was not in my dictionary. When I wanted something, I took it. And I fucking wanted her. A lot.

“You don’t live at all,” I retorted. “That cruise-control shit that you put your life on? Sleep, work, volunteer, repeat? I’m putting an end to it soon.”

She turned her head to look at me and swallowed. I pretended to look ahead, giving her the time to remember she liked what she saw. Luring her into a web. Waiting for her to get tangled before I devoured my prey.

Easing into my seat—we had a forty-minute journey to Todos Santos—I declared my intentions. Only fair to keep her posted on the plan.

“Just so you know, Baby LeBlanc, I am going to fuck you sometime soon,” I said flatly, not giving a damn that her eyes bulged out and her mouth dropped, nor giving a fuck that the driver had stopped talking loudly and now glared at us through the rearview mirror with intent interest. “It may not be this week—it may not even be this month, but it will happen. And once it does, you’ll have to face your fears and tell your saint sister that we are together, or I will. Because once I fuck you, no one else will be enough for you. Ever. Again. So I’m just going to tell you right here and now, you’re welcome to my dick anytime you want, any hour of the day. I see us as a long-term thing, so it’s important to me to keep you happy.”

“Duly noted, Mr. Delusional.”

“Glad we got that all sorted, Miss Soon-to-be-in-My-Bed.”

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Familiar scent. Of my bed sheets, perfume, and first breaths in the morning. Of the faint sweat when the first sun rays graze my flesh. The scent of home.

He always made me feel played.

It wasn't the fact that he wanted to sleep with me. I was the queen of throwaway, short-term relationships. Knowing you can't have anything more would do that to you. I didn't do relationships, just like Dean.

He was my sister's ex-boyfriend and my first love. These two facts should never be connected. Hell, they had no place being in the same sentence together.

That didn't make them any less true.

My loyalty to my sister—who worked two jobs to support us so I could unclaw myself from my parents' suffocating grip and live in New York—was stronger than my need to steal the warmth of his body. Anyway, even if he wasn't Millie's, I had a strict no-boyfriend policy, and a guy like Dean was bound to steal my heart. In fact, there was a small part of it he still hadn't given me back.

A tiny, ageless housekeeper opened the door to Vicious and Millie's mansion and ushered me in. I washed my face in one of the first floor's many bathrooms and gave myself a pep talk in front of the mirror.

You're fine. You're an adult. You're in charge. Don't let them baby you.

Then I made myself known by walking through the foyer of the Italian villa my sister had purchased with her husband-to-be recently.

I passed golden-hued hallways, rounded arches, and grand, dripping chandeliers, walking past the maid's quarter—I guess Millie and Vicious were kind enough to let *their* "help" sleep under the same roof, a courtesy my family wasn't offered when my parents worked for the Spencers—before finally reaching the drawing room. I scanned the infinite space, digging my cold fingers into the back of the silky Victorian sofa. The only reason I got this far in the mansion without being noticed was because it was the size of the Louvre.

My sister and I were both humble creatures—born and raised to find joy in non-materialistic things—and still, even I could admit that living in such a place would bring you naked, unsolicited joy. It was airy, beautiful, and romantic.

Just like Emilia.

I tilted my head slowly, taking everything in. Up until a few months ago, Millie, Vicious, and my parents all lived in Los Angeles, in the same luxurious duplex. When Vicious and Millie had decided to nest in the suburban haven that was Todos Santos and purchased this house, my parents jumped on the opportunity to stay close to their elder daughter and took up a room here. I say a room, but really, they had their own bathroom, living room, and I heard they had two kitchens here. It was hardly going to be crowded.

I loved my life in New York. The urban filth, the boiling sewers, and diverse faces. I loved my independence—clung to it like it was air, knowing how smothering life with my parents could be—but I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a black dagger twisting into my heart.

"There you are!" my sister bellowed, making me turn around on my heels. I slouched against her sofa's hardwood headrest, grinning ear to ear.

She looked different. *Good* different.

She was no longer scrawny, her eyes weren't sunken in, and her pink-purple hair looked luscious and flawless—roots to tips. She wore a white A-line shaped dress sprinkled with red cherries, pairing it with strappy blue sandals that made no sense at all, unless you were Emilia LeBlanc.

"Oh, Rosie," she said when I threw myself on her, making us both stumble backwards as I smothered her with my love. "I've missed you like a limb. Does that even make sense?" She peeled me off of her for a second so she could examine my face, caressing my cheek. Her huge, pink diamond ring sparkled so bright, I was momentarily blinded by the sunlight reflected through the rare twenty-one-carat stone.

I should have been jealous.

Jealous of her engagement and house and fiancé *and* proximity to our parents. Jealous of her *health*. Jealous because she had so much, because I had so little.

Swanky Italian villa or not, she deserved it. And no, it wasn't weird that she'd missed me like a limb, because I'd missed her like a lung. Bitch got me addicted fresh from the womb. She had the talent of taking care of me without making me feel like a burden, something Mama never managed to excel.

Millie smiled, holding my shoulders and scanning me, doing the usual inventory.

"You look too good," I complained, scrunching my nose. "I hate it when

you set the bar too high. You always do.”

She pinched my shoulder and laughed. “Where’s your boyfriend? Thought he’d be coming with you?”

For a reason beyond logic, I found myself blushing as Dean crossed my mind. Millie, of course, was talking about Darren. I never bothered to tell my family we broke up. Millie had enough on her wedding-planning plate without me dumping the breakup into the mix. The plan was to tell them tonight, but I was going to use any excuse to postpone the inevitable. I would rather get a dental treatment from a mechanic than break it to my parents.

“I wanted to spend some time with my family, one on one.” I plastered on a smile. She quirked her eyebrow, silently calling me on my bullshit, and smoothed my light brown hair with her palm.

“I still can’t believe you have a boyfriend,” she mused. “I thought you’d never settle down.”

“Well, I’m getting old. Twenty-eight is like sixty-five in cystic fibrosis years.” I shrugged. “We’ll revisit this subject at dinner.”

Where I will crush your hearts and tell you Darren is no longer in the picture.

She nudged me toward the hallway with a snort.

“Mama is waiting for you. She’s in the kitchen, making a casserole.”

My favorite dish. A zing of warmth slashed through my belly. *She remembered.*

There was hardly any resemblance to the way my parents treated Millie and me. They respected, admired, and consulted with my older sister, whereas I was babied, smothered, and treated like a cracked egg that was about to spill at any minute. Daddy was a trillion times better than Mama, though. He, at least, adored my snarky personality and cheered for me finding my independence in New York. Mama was too busy worrying about my health, she didn’t have time to fully get to know me, to fall in love with the person I was. Always in full-blown mama bear mode, without taking a second to get to know her cub.

To her, I was the token sick child, the punk, the rascal. The silly girl who risked her life to work at a stupid café in New York instead of opting to live close to her family. The girl who never settled down with a nice boy.

Because Vicious is such a nice boy.

That was the second reason why my family was oblivious to my breaking up with Darren. Dating a doctor meant that they got off my case after Millie

moved to Los Angeles. Admittedly, it was part of Darren's charm. His—unbeknownst to him—ability to keep my parents from drilling in my ear about coming back to California and living under their roof like a sad, introvert bubble boy.

I wasn't a bubble boy. I was a music-buff pixie who made a mean cup of coffee, read *Vice* magazine, made anxious mothers to premature newborns laugh, and was always up for a good party. I was a person. With traits and ideas.

But in Todos Santos, I never felt this way.

"Is Daddy around?" I played with Millie's electric hair as we started our way to the kitchen.

"Went downtown with Vic." She ushered me forward. A mouthwatering aroma of earthy vegetables, cinnamon, and succulent meat wafted in the air. "I needed a few things from Walgreens. They'll be back in a few."

In the kitchen, the anticlimactic meeting with Mama had reminded me why I packed a bag and moved to the other side of the country as soon as I graduated from high school. She hugged me, patted my cheeks, and asked me when Darren was coming, making me feel like a consolation prize.

I opened my mouth, ready to spill the beans then and there, but Mama interjected before I could form any words, telling me that she was proud of me, that she was so happy that I 'finally found a respectable man to settle down with.'

Go on and just say it, I wanted to bite out. Not anyone is noble enough to sacrifice so much for a sick girl.

"I reckon he's mighty busy. Hope you aren't giving him a hard time for it, Rosie. I'm just glad he can make it at all." Mama patted my cheek a little too hard, her heavy chest rising and falling to the rhythm of her breaths. Mama was a big woman, with big brown hair, big blue eyes, and big everything else. Ever since I could remember, she had a thin layer of sweat coating her smooth skin. I used to love feeling it stick to my flesh as I hugged her.

"Well..." I cleared my throat. *I should get it over with. Peel it off like a Band-Aid.* "Actually..."

"Can't wait to meet the boy. I even bought a new dress. First impressions are everything. I have a feeling about this one, Rosie." She dangled her finger in my face. "You've been living together for a while now, and he knows your situation with..."

I knew exactly with *what*. Ever since I told my family about *that* situation a year ago, shortly before Millie had left, they started treating me like an old arthritic dog with bladder issues.

Darren was supposed to arrive on the same weekend of the wedding. He thought that, by then, we could also break it to my family that we were next in line.

He thought wrong.

Mama buying herself a new dress for their meeting meant she was no less than ecstatic. Her usual attire didn't exactly give Carrie Bradshaw a run for her money. I let her soak in faux bliss, saving the bombshell for when I wasn't sleep-deprived and slightly jet-lagged.

Living in New York meant that I called the shots and cherry-picked the information I shared with my family. My parents and sister had no way of knowing I broke up with my boyfriend. No one could tell them.

Other than Dean Cole.

I made a mental note to fire Dean a text about keeping his pipe shut.

"So, Rosie, how's work?" Mama asked through the background noise of a lively kitchen, pulling the casserole out of the oven with her flowery mitts. The scent of beef, onion, and fat egg noodles floated throughout the room, crawling into my nose and making my stomach growl. Millie licked her lips, gazing at the dish like it was Jamie Dornan. She didn't normally like casseroles, but maybe she had realized how fundamentally wrong she was, because Mama's casseroles were the eighth wonder of the world. I was just about to answer Mama's question when she cut me off. *Again.*

"My sweet girl, are you hungry? Have a seat. I'll give you a piece right now." She patted my older sister's back. I clamped my mouth shut, waiting to see if she'd prompt me to answer her previous question. If she really gave a damn about my job.

Mama ran from corner to corner, fixing Millie a plate while I stood there, arms folded, watching the scene. Charlene LeBlanc was an old-school Southern belle, down to her very core, and catering to people—especially her children—ran in her blood, thick and vital like oxygen. But there was something else there. The urgency in which she fed Millie, like my sister was incapable, or alternatively, had lost all her teeth.

"Rosie? Would you like some, too?" She glanced behind her shoulder as she opened the fridge, taking out a pitcher of her signature homemade iced tea. Peach pieces floated lazily on top, and drool pooled in my mouth.

I wanted both, but to my surprise, heard myself saying, “No, thank you.”

Mama turned around and brushed Millie’s lavender hair away from her forehead. “Is the casserole good for you? I know that it’s your favorite.”

Millie nodded, taking another bite, and my insides just about detonated.

“Actually,” I opened the fridge, making myself at home—not that Mama had made me feel particularly welcome—“Millie’s favorite food is your pulled pork sandwiches. Noodle and beef casserole is *my* favorite.” I plucked a beer bottle from one of the doors—of course, the fridge was a double-door and about as spacious as our previous Sunnyside apartment. Twisting the bottle cap, I took a swig. It was still early to be drinking, but I guess it was five o’clock somewhere in the universe. Wherever it was, that was where I wanted to be.

My sister and Mama stared at me through a curtain of sheer surprise, Millie’s mouth still stuffed with food. I wished she’d wash it down with the iced tea I loved so much—Millie never liked iced tea, she was more into Coke—so I wouldn’t have to see the confusion swimming in her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” I put the bottle to my lips and waved a dismissive hand. “Long, bumpy flight with Dean Cole as a companion. I think I’m going to take my sour butt upstairs, if you don’t mind.”

Millie got to her feet. “I’ll show you to your room,” she volunteered. “It’s really pretty. I even bought and hung up all your favorite bands’ posters. Let me get your suitcase,” she added, and guilt immediately slammed into my gut for orchestrating that little scene to piss Mama off.

“You will do no such thing.” Mama’s voice was steel, and it cut through my nerves, leaving a burn. “I’ll get the suitcase. Meet you girls upstairs.”

I followed Millie up the stairs, head hanging in shame. The silence was so loud, it bounced off the walls. They were all getting along fine before I got there.

Knowing that I had the tendency to make things stressful—with my illness, my attitude, and my general existence—I vowed to lower my head and get out of their way for the remainder of my stay. Truth be told, it was one of the reasons I didn’t want to come here earlier.

Wanting to make conversation, I asked my older sister, “So what’s up with Mama acting like you’re a six-year-old and force-feeding you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing is up,” Millie chirped, gesturing with her hands to random pictures hanging on the walls and statues in the corners of the airy hallways.

“You know Mama. She’s a feeder, a nester, and a worrier.”

“True, but she never had a problem with you doing my heavy lifting,” I pressed. Millie’s laughter was foreign on her lips.

“She’s been acting like I’m made out of cotton ever since I got engaged. She wants everything to be perfect. Brides don’t look too good with a giant gash on their heads or an arm in a cast.”

I dropped the subject, mainly because I was too tired to dig deeper into it, and partly because I had enough to worry about. I needed to make last-minute changes to her bachelorette party, and I still had to break the Darren news over dinner.

“I’m really happy that you’re here.” She rubbed my arm, we were both small women, but I was tiny. It felt fitting that I was pocket-size, especially as I felt that way whenever Mama was around. “I know you’re busy. You’ve got your life in New York, and I want you to know that I appreciate you coming here. So, so much, Rosie-bug.”

We talked some more before she retreated back to the kitchen. The minute I was alone, I flung my body onto the queen-sized mattress with dozens of fluffy pillows, fished my phone out of the back pocket of my bleached denim skirt, and wrote Dean a message. The first text message I’d ever sent him.

Rosie

Parents and sister don’t know I broke up with Darren. Please don’t say a word. Telling them tonight.

He replied within seconds.

Dean

Shit. Need to cancel that press release I scheduled. That bad over there?

It felt good to be asked a question, knowing he was actually waiting for an answer.

Rosie

The usual LeBlanc shenanigans. You?

Dean

Wolfing down a sandwich while listening to Mom’s town gossip about the new lawn regulations. Living the dream. Call if you need saving.

Rosie
You're not my superman.

Dean
I'm whatever you need me to be.

Rosie
That was so cheesy, you actually gave me the munchies.

Dean
Funny you should mention munchies, I'm just thinking about how a certain body part of yours would be so much more delicious than my sandwich.

I snorted out an unattractive laugh as my head hit the pillow, then closed my eyes. Sleep came, and so did I, numerous times. In my dreams. My co-star? Dean 'Ruckus' Cole.

Dammit.

Chapter Seven

Dean

I WAS A PAMPERED LITTLE shit.

I knew that, acknowledged that, had no fucking problem with that.

The minute I arrived back home, Mom and Dad jumped on me like I was God himself. And to them, I was. I grew up believing the sun was shining directly from my asshole and that I was made of pure gold and chain-orgasms. That was what my helicopter parents drilled into my head, and that was what I eventually grew up to be. They didn't treat my younger sisters—Payton and Keeley—any differently, and they turned out to be just as successful as I did. Keeley was studying medicine in Maryland, and Payton was a TA at Berkeley University while she worked on her dissertation in something both impressive and forgettable.

What can I say? The Cole parents had good-looking, overachieving kids.

Aside from the fact I depended on alcohol and weed to forget that Nina existed, I was pretty much perfect.

The perfect CEO.

The perfect businessman.

The perfect son.

The perfect lover.

I could probably go on, but what would be the point in that? I was also proficient with great time-management skills.

“Your sandwich, honey, with that special mustard you like from the farmers' market.” My mom, Helen, pressed her lips to my forehead before she took a seat beside me at the kitchen table. My dad, Eli, sat across from me, a proud smirk on his lips.

We talked work, politics, and local gossip for a while, before Mom

looked down and started playing with her pearl necklace over her lemon-hued cardigan.

“Sweetheart, I need to tell you something, and I don’t want you to be mad.”

Naturally, I was already irritated.

I looked up from my sandwich, chewing, as her movements grew more nervous and her throat bobbed.

“Recently...we’ve been in touch with Nina.” Mom smoothed the fabric of her cardigan nervously. I shouldn’t have been surprised that Nina had called Mom, but somehow, I was. Dad took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You can’t turn your back on her, Dean. It’s time we talk about it,” he said.

“There’s nothing to talk about. She’s my business, not yours. What did she want?”

“She’s asked me to convince you to see her.” Mom’s heartrending eyes begged.

“She’s fucking nuts.”

“Dean, language,” my dad scolded me like I was four. Whatever. I’d like to see how his ass would have handled someone like Nina. He had Helen fucking Cole. Someone wonderful and supportive and *fucking human*. Judging is easy. Dealing with complicated shit, however, not so much.

“Well?” I slouched back in my chair. “Say it, Helen.” I used her first name, which always got to my mom, and she winced.

You’re a grade-A asshole, Ruckus.

“I need to give her a chance, right? She has the right to explain herself. *It’s time you meet him. Think of the potential bond.* C’mon, I’ve heard it all, but I’m always up for the repeat.”

“It’s not fair to put this all on your mom.” Dad placed his hand over hers. I blinked once.

“Is this fair to *me*?”

“You’ll have to face her at some point,” Mom argued.

“I beg to fucking differ. I’ll never see her face ever again. Try me. Really, you should.”

“We need to sort this situation out. This is *not* how Coles conduct themselves.” My dad started in his authoritative voice. Eli Cole almighty was the definition of a good person. Always wanting to do the right thing. “You

know why she is calling you. It's time you face what she has to say."

"If she wants me to meet him, I gladly will, but not for money."

"That could be arranged." He scratched his stubble with the frame of his glasses. He had no idea what he was talking about. I wasn't going to drag Nina to court and battle her for years over this.

I stood up and leaned across the table.

"Do you love me?" I asked both my parents.

"Of course." Dad scoffed.

"Then trust me when I say it's better I don't meet him. I'm not ready to deal with this right now. Respect it. Let it go."

Feeling like shit—I certainly acted like a little one—I climbed up the stairs to my old room, preparing to get in the shower. My phone pinged. I didn't feel like talking to anyone, but took a peek anyway.

Rosie

I need you to pick me up. No car + dinner from hell = desperate times call for desperate measures.

Trying to collect my fucking jaw from the floor, I chuckled. Oh, it was on.

Dean

Be there in 10.

Rosie

Promise not to hit on me.

Dean

Yeah...no.

I gave her a second to process this before I fired another text.

Dean

I will come. I will see. I will conquer (and then I will come again).

Rosie

I can't believe I'm desperate enough to put up with you. Promise to at least not to tell anyone we're meeting.

Dean

Yeah, whatever.

As if anyone gave half a fuck. At this point, Rosie and I were two loose cannons in an otherwise smoothly operated machine. Vicious and Millie were settling down. Jaime and Melody were married with a kid. Even bad boy Trent was wearing his big boy pants and doing the whole modern family gig, sharing joint custody over his daughter, Luna, with his baby mama, Val. Everyone was setting down roots and playing grown-ups.

Everyone but us.

She was the foul-mouthed, up-to-no-good lesser sister, and I was the stoner drunk whose most serious relationship was with his drug dealer. Nobody cared if we fucked each other's brains out to pass the time as long as we kept quiet and didn't mess up our lines or stain our bridesmaid and best man uniform.

That was what Baby LeBlanc hadn't realized, because she was too busy protecting the precious feelings of her beloved sister. Feelings that weren't even there. I tucked my cell phone into my back pocket and walked over to the closet in my room to change into a clean shirt. Grabbing my keys from the nightstand, my phone dinged again.

Rosie
Do U have weed on U?

Trying—and failing—not to laugh, my fingers glided on my touch screen.

Dean
What about your lungs? Aren't they broken or some shit?

Rosie
Bring your stash, funny guy.

Indulging her was the only way to go. Rosie wanted to test boundaries. Didn't she know I had none? Well, that was a lesson she was going to learn soon.

The fun way.



Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Playing with a different kind of fire. Making mistakes. Owning up to them. Owning up to me. Taking what I want and calling it mine. Even if it isn't. Even if I know it never could be.

War prisoners should be sent to be tortured in the arms and by the tongues of my parents. That was the conclusion I came to after spending eight hours with Mama and Daddy.

I was a tough girl. Dealing with a long-term, life-threatening disease gave you that extra layer of durability. Like that colorless, finishing coat of nail polish no one sees. So the fact that I was on the verge of tears caught me off guard.

I didn't have a car, so I sat on the front steps leading to the mansion and waited for Dean to pick me up, my head slung between my legs.

Dinner's events played in my head, making me gulp hard and fight the tears that threatened to spill over. We were all sitting at the table, served by Vicious's staff, eating wine-tossed Coffin Bay King oysters from *Australia* (apparently, American oysters didn't make the cut anymore, now that my parents were rich by association), talking about the final wedding arrangements.

Everything was relatively tolerable...until it wasn't.

"Alrighty, I think it is time we address the elephant in the room." Daddy put his wine glass on the table and raised his eyes to meet mine. "When are you planning to move back here, Rosie? We were very supportive of you experiencing New York. You were young and needed an adventure, but it is time you move on. You're not a kid anymore, and your sister is no longer there to hold your hand."

"Daddy, Rosie is her own person. You can't tell her what to do," Millie interfered, her voice like a soothing balm on my red-hot nerves. Mama sighed. Silverware clattered. I wet my lips, too taken aback to utter a word.

"You guys are always on her case, Daddy. Rosie is a grown-up."

"She's not like you, sweetheart. She's a little reckless. We love our Rosie-

bug exactly as she is, but things are changing. She gets weaker every year.”

“She is sick!” Mama bellowed, patting her nose with a linen napkin before bringing it to her eyes to do the same. I flinched. She kicked the conversation from first gear to fifth. “Look at her.” She pointed at me. “All skin and bones. Doesn’t she look thin to you?”

Millie sighed at me, apologetic, and shot Mama a look. “She’s always been thin.”

“Too thin,” Mama enunciated.

“Everyone is too thin in your opinion, Mama. Our family cat looked like a raccoon because you overfed it.” The same cat they had to give away when they found out I had cystic fibrosis. Jesus, I was as fun as having leprosy.

“That’s okay, guys.” I sniffed, hating that Vicious saw this exchange. “It’s not like I’m here or anything. Don’t let me get in your way of discussing my future.”

“We’re buying you a ticket back home. You should be spending your time with us, not running around in a big city looking for trouble.” Mama’s voice was dancing on the verge of panic.

“I’m staying in New York.”

“Paul,” she wailed. “Tell her.”

“Yes, Daddy.” I smiled. “Tell me.”

Paul LeBlanc wasn’t going to betray me. You could always count on Daddy to shut Mama up when it came to me. Millie tried to protect me, but didn’t have that kind of authority.

Daddy looked between Mama and me.

“I’m sorry, Rosie-bug.” He shook his head, and at first, I thought he was apologizing on behalf of his wife.

“But your mama is right. I worry for you out there, too.” He shifted in his seat. “But then, maybe we need to take into consideration you have Darren now.” Daddy scratched the ghost of his stubble, mulling this in his head. “He seems to be taking good care of her. Don’t you reckon, Charlene?”

Your father is not a misogynist, I tried to convince myself. He just sounded like one a second ago.

“About that.” I coughed, feeling my palms grow sweaty and my heart twirling like a hopeless drunk, stumbling its way out of my body to the nearest plate. Maybe someone would be kind enough to stab it. “Darren and I broke up.”

“What?!” Daddy roared, shooting up from his seat and slapping his palm

on the hardwood table. He looked as shocked as I'd felt. Had he forgotten my love life was ultimately my business? I frowned, watching as Millie placed her hand over Mama's, asking her wordlessly to stop. When I looked up, I realized that she was crying so hard her whole body was heaving.

"She has no one there. No one. And she is wasting away, dying."

Yup. My family was kind of a bunch of drama llamas.

Daddy's eyes still blazed, threatening to sear my skin with ugly scars.

"He moved out a few weeks ago." I kept my voice neutral, flattening a palm over the white cloth napkin I didn't even get to use yet. "He wanted to get married. Even went as far as proposing, with a ring and all. But as you know, I'm not interested in marriage. Especially considering my recent complications." They knew exactly what Dr. Hasting, the expert Vicious had hired, told me last year, after she ran some thorough tests on me. "He will bounce back." I found myself comforting them instead of the other way around. "I will, too. He deserved better than this life."

There was silence. The kind that drips into your body and nibbles at your bones. I held my breath, ready for a physical blow that would send me flying to the other side of the room.

Vicious leaned back in his chair and played with Emilia's hair. "We should excuse ourselves. Looks like your parents and sister have a lot to talk about."

Millie's inquiring eyes found mine from across the table. I shook my head.

"It's our only family dinner before the rehearsal. Everyone stays."

Mama cried harder and kept saying that her baby was dying. Fun time in the LeBlanc household. Stay tuned for the after-party.

"Mama." I chuckled, feeling my face heating with embarrassment. "I'm not dying. I take very good care of myself."

"Jesus Christ, Rose, what a load of baloney." Daddy snorted, slapping the table again. It also didn't escape me that he no longer referred to me as Rosie-bug. He pointed at me, his face twisting in disgust. "You talk about our family time like you give a damn about your sister. This was your chance to not be a burden on your mama and me. Your chance to finally excuse your sister of taking care of you. And, in classic Rosie fashion, you blew it," he rebuked.

My fork dropped to the floor and my eyes flared, a mixture of surprise and rage dilating my pupils. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Daddy

never spoke to me this way before. Hell, he hardly ever told me no, even when I wanted a goddamn pony. That was where he drew the line, but only because he couldn't afford it. Other than the pony—and staying away from boys, of course—I was pretty much gold.

He was the one telling Mama she should let me go to New York, even going as far as buying me the one-way ticket.

He was the one who'd told me to chase my dreams, even if they took me in the opposite direction from where he wanted me to go.

He was the parent who truly believed I could do it. Live life as a normal person.

And he was lying. All along.

"I'm not dumping my health issues on anyone at this table," I gritted out. "I live on the other side of the freaking country. Where is this coming from?"

"You need to come back. You have to come back, you're not well." Mama snuffled, throwing her napkin over her entrée, the plate still overflowing with food. "Your sister broke her back working two jobs so you could live in New York. Before she'd left the city, she cushioned your life with a top-notch apartment that's been paid for and even covered the tuition fee for your nursing school. And what do you do with all this goodness? Making coffee!"

"Hey." It was my turn to smack the table, and damn, it hurt. "Since when do you frown upon certain jobs? You were a cook for forty years."

"I had no choice!" Mama screamed.

"Neither did I! I dropped out of school because Dr. Hasting made me!"

She stood up and stormed out of the dining room, leaving me speechless.

Daddy, Vicious, and Emilia stared at me. The men with disappointment, my sister with pity. Tears stabbed at my eyeballs, begging for me to let them loose. I never cried, and I hated showing weakness. Especially when every single thing I did in life was designed to prove to my family that I could make it on my own. That I didn't need help. That my petals were falling, but that I was still in blossom.

"Rosie..." Millie said softly. "Give Mama some time."

"Stop defending your sister." Daddy dragged a hand over his face. Each syllable he uttered spread like wildfire inside me. He narrowed his eyes at the Juliet balcony behind my back, unable to spare me a glance. "You're killing your mama and yourself. You had a doctor boyfriend. A man who could give you everything you needed."

"He was a podiatrist. That's like half a doctor. It's no more a doctor than

Ross Geller.”

Yeah. I took most of my cultural references from *Friends* episodes. Sue me.

Daddy didn't find my remark funny. In fact, he ignored it altogether as he slowly gathered his phone and pack of tobacco he chewed after every dinner, ready to leave, too.

“You broke up with him because you were selfish. Because staying meant facing the music, darlin’. Because you can't commit to anything, which is why you dropped out of nursing school, live in a paid-for apartment, and work as a waitress at twenty-eight. Your sister is getting married in a week.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes as if he needed strength to finish the sentence. “And here you are, making us all worried about you again. Your mama doesn't need time. She needs a healthy daughter.”

“Whatever happened to ‘do what you want to do’, Daddy?” I shot up from my seat, every muscle in my face shaking in anger. I had no one. No one but Millie. No one to appreciate who I was without slapping me with the label ‘sick’ and ‘weak’. “Whatever happened to ‘you can do anything, as long as you put your mind to it’?”

He shook his head. My father was a small man with a lean, muscular body from doing labor work all day, but he looked so big and imposing at that moment.

“You were eighteen when you moved, Rosie. You're twenty-eight now. Most men want to settle down and have a family by now. How could you throw away one who would not only sacrifice those things to be with you, but could actually take care of you?” He turned to my sister whose mouth was wide open. “She needs to hear it. She can't afford to be choosy.”

With that, he left the room, too.

“I believe this is my cue to let you collect the pieces,” Vicious's dark voice muttered, pressing a kiss to Millie's crown. He followed Daddy out. The doors closed with a soft thud that made my heart rattle.

My sister looked down at her plate, rubbing her thighs as she did when she was nervous. Her beautiful, silver-starred dress riding up and down her legs.

“I'm so sorry,” was all she said. At least she didn't serve me the usual bullshit and alternative truths people give others to console them.

“Daddy never said a cross word to me before.” I choked on my sentence. I needed my inhaler. I needed my parents. I needed a hug. Millie's eyes

moved up to meet mine. Pain twirled inside them. She thought I was a lost cause, too. She just didn't want to push me like they did.

Now that we were alone, tears streamed down my face.

"They love you," she gulped.

"And I love them," I retorted.

She got up, smoothing the fabric of her dress. "I know that's the last thing you want to hear, but you need to consider moving back. I need my sister by my side, Rosie-bug. I miss you too much. Plus, Mama and Daddy are crazy worried."

"For my health, or for their conscience?" I rested my hands on my thighs and offered her a pointed look. "How long have you known about this? About Daddy believing I was a stupid girl and about Mama acting like I was on death row?"

"Rosie..."

"Do you think I'm not a catch, too?" I laughed through my tears. Jesus, crazy was not a good look for me. "Do you also think Darren did me some huge favor by sticking around because I'm oh, so sick?"

"Of course, you're a catch!" she exclaimed.

Yeah.

It was just that I wasn't as good a catch as she was. The need to prove her wrong burned every bone in my body.

"Please leave me alone." Resting my arms on the table, I buried my face between them.

She did.

I closed my eyes, letting misery carry me down a river of self-pity, and banged my head against the pristine white tablecloth three times.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Welcome to Todos Santos, Rosie.

Chapter Eight

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Running barefoot. Feeling the branches smack my face, my chest, my feet. Getting hurt. Aching. Taking chances.

DEAN PICKED ME UP IN a red, older model extended cab truck. I had no idea where he got it from, but at that stage, I was willing to jump into a huge van filled with balaclava-wearing strangers offering a suspicious stack of candy to get away from this place.

Unwinding was never in the cards for me that night, or so I thought. I simply wanted to steal a few, peaceful moments of steady breaths somewhere I wouldn't be criticized.

The minute Dean's vehicle parked in front of the mansion's gates, I bolted out, hauled myself into the passenger's seat, and buckled up.

I looked like hell in my denim skirt and baggy white shirt—it was Darren's Podiatrists Association tee he got at a convention earlier this year—and my hair told the story of a five-hour flight and a restless nap.

"Drive," I ordered, staring ahead, still unsure of how Dean 'Manslut' Cole had somehow become my savior, and what did it say about my overall situation. I didn't want to look at him and chance showing him what was behind my eyes, because if he could decrypt those feelings, he'd see everything. Every ugly truth.

He didn't ask where. Just pulled out a bottle of Jim Beam and said, "Roll your window down. I'll put some music on."

For once in my life, I was glad he was a borderline-alcoholic. I snatched

the bottle the second it entered my vision.

“Cheers.” I raised it to the air before taking a generous gulp.

We circled Todos Santos for an hour, driving through Liberty Park, passing by All Saints High and the well-lit marina that attracted tourists from all over the world. The salty wind of the ocean hit my face and provided some solace. I drank more. The pirate radio station played sad love songs in Spanish, and even though I didn’t understand a word, they still made my world tilt. I tried to use the time to regulate my heartbeats and remind myself that everything was okay.

I drank half the bottle, but that wasn’t why my vision blurred and my fingers shook as I wrapped them around the neck of the Jim Beam. No. That was the anger.

You can’t be choosy.

You had your chance and you blew it.

Screw them. Screw them with a ten-foot pole.

Dean never once said a thing, giving me the space I obviously needed, driving aimlessly and looking ridiculously hot doing so. It was quite possible that this stoner guy was the only man out of the four HotHoles who actually possessed some emotional IQ cells. Not that anyone would guess by talking to him. Or looking at him. Dean Cole had the lovable pothead act down to an art. He never let anyone see what was underneath the surface. Which reminded me...

“Got weed on you?” I was the first to speak. He stared at the road, gold winking at his wrist in the dark—how much did that watch cost? More than all of my worldly possessions was my educated guess—one hand tapping the steering wheel, the other tousling his milk-chocolate, satin hair.

“Are you wearing underwear?” he quipped.

“Of course.” I scoffed.

“Then I’m carrying weed. For me, it’s a necessity as much as undergarments.”

“Charming.” My eyes rolled on autopilot.

“Apparently so, because that’s the first time I’ve seen you smile in a day, and it’s because of *me*.”

Was I smiling? Shit, maybe I was.

He parked on a grassy hill overlooking Todos Santos. The small SoCal town was pressed neatly in a valley between two mountains. This little reservoir provided the perfect view to the lights of downtown. The large blue

pools of nearby mansions shimmered in the inky night, lampposts littered across the marina.

The reservoir was deserted, save for a basketball court a few hundred feet from us. It was well-lit, and there were teenagers throwing a ball back and forth, but they didn't seem to mind the truck or us.

"Where did this thing come from?" I motioned with my index finger around the truck, angling my body to face him. From what I could remember, Dean's family owned an infinite amount of Volvos. It was the perfect brand for the perfect type of family.

"My uncle in Alabama." He wet his lower lip, scanning me with those twinkling emeralds. "Only gift he ever gave me. I'm not even sure why I kept it, but you wanted to be discreet, so I came in a vehicle Vicious wouldn't recognize."

"You saved a beat-up truck for the off chance you would ever need it?" I couldn't help but chuckle. "Who are you, Dean Cole, and does the CIA know about you?"

Dean pulled his head back, his fingers laced behind his neck, and laughed.

"Shut up."

And it was true that I was one of them. Those girls I pitied, who let his looks, his muscles, and his status seep into their brain and crawl all the way down to their panties, making the unnecessary stop in their chest. Because it felt like he grabbed my heart and crunched it in his fist.

"Okay, Mr. Shady," I teased.

"That's not fair. I haven't had a dead body in this thing in ages."

"Could have fooled me. The thing kind of stinks," I hiccupped, knowing full-well that I was drunk. "Is this where you took your flings when you were in high school?"

"Nope. I'm a sentimental prick. I will never tarnish this baby with a random fuck."

"You're full of surprises, Dean Cole."

"And you're about to be full of me, Rosie LeBlanc."



The grass was wet from the sprinklers, but I walked barefoot anyway. It provided cool comfort against the unbearable heat of August in SoCal. I made it to a bench on top of the hill, overlooking the city, and sat down. The good thing about Todos Santos was the lack of industrial factories and pollution. One of the reasons my parents took a job here when I was a teenager was to help my mucus problem, to make sure my lungs were unsoiled. A blanket of shiny stars above our heads reminded me that we were small and that they were big.

Dean produced two cans of PBR from the bed of his truck—I didn't ask what the hell they were doing back there—and cracked one open, handing it over, before gulping the second one and plopping down inches from me.

"You know," he said, the tips of his disheveled, sexy hair playing with the tips of mine. He smelled of *boy*, sweet hash, and a hint of a citrus, clean cologne. "Every star you see in the night sky is bigger and brighter than the sun."

"What?" I snorted out a laugh. "That's bullshit. The sun is huge!"

Dean looked at me, serious as a heart attack, and it was that moment that I realized what I had just invited into my heart. What I willingly opened the door to. It was like throwing your body off of a cliff, with eyes wide open, arms stretched, and a smile on your face. *This is tragic*, I thought. I forgot what it felt like to spend *real* time with Ruckus. Forgot the mayhem he stirred inside me.

"The sun is just a yellow dwarf star, Baby LeBlanc." His voice was flat, his heated gaze—not. "She's glorified because we're familiar with her, and she is the closest. Most people love whatever's the closest. What they're used to."

He wasn't talking about the stars anymore, and we both knew it.

His knowledge of astronomy caught me off guard. Maybe because I wanted to reduce him to the stoner guy who didn't care or know anything other than his football, women, and boring numbers.

He produced a blunt from his back pocket, raising his hips up to fish for it, and tucked it into his heart-shaped lips, the fire from his lighter illuminating every curve of his Adonis face. Taking a hit, he passed it on to me.

There was a moment where the blunt hovered between his fingers. I waited for him to withdraw. To scowl. To tell me I was mad for smoking. But

none of those things happened. He let me make that decision for myself.

He made me feel like a grown-up.

I took the blunt, allowing myself a little smile that I hid in the dark. Everyone else treated me like I was made out of glass. Only Dean ever did things that could break me. Took one hit. Inhaled. Exhaled. Stayed alive. That was a win in my world.

But of course, I had to cough like a dog who was about to throw up a lung or two. Dean gave me a sideways glance, smirking. “Next time you wanna get high, I’m baking your ass pot brownies.”

I ignored him, looking up to the sky. It was nice to forget about my family, even if for a second. Even if it was with the man I considered somewhat my enemy.

“I once heard the sun gets closer to us every year. That one day it’ll burn the whole planet,” I said, circling the sky with my finger and passing him the blunt. Dean took a swig from his beer, everything about his body language light and youthful and reckless. He looked like a teenage boy for a second.

The teenage boy I loved once upon a time.

“Well, the sun is likely to last seven billion years more than its current four point five billion age. Then it will most likely balloon into a red giant star and collapse down into a white dwarf. Safe to say that by the time that happens, neither my stoner ass nor your perky one will be here to witness the shitshow.” He patted my head with the hand that held his beer, like I was a precious toddler. “Unless you’re planning to still be around? You’re gonna make a fuck-hot old lady. Even a few billion years old.”

I laughed so loud my voice echoed in the sky. “Suffice to say, I won’t be here.”

“None of us will.” He shrugged, passing me the blunt. Our fingers touched, and electricity rolled down my skin, making it tickle. I ignored it, thinking, *But my time will probably come long before yours.*

How many years more did I have? Twenty? Ten? *Less?* That was the problem with cystic fibrosis. It wasn’t as immediate and urgent as cancer or ALS. I still had time. Just not as much as everyone else.

Maybe it was the alcohol, or the weed, or life in general, but it happened. After a few, good years it happened. *Again.*

My ex-therapist once said it was completely normal, considering my circumstances. The realization of dying—how real it was—gripped me and panic coursed through my veins in alarming quantities. I froze. Stopped

breathing—not by choice—when images of my body rotting inside a coffin assaulted my mind. These panic attacks have been going on for a long time. Since I was ten and the concept of death started making sense. That was around the time I knew I wasn't going to die of old age.

I was having a panic attack while hanging out with Mr. Chilled, but he couldn't have known that, because these attacks weren't extreme. After a few seconds, I resumed my breathing, and the only physical thing that bothered me was wave after wave of uncomfortable heat that seemed to have smacked my face and an out-of-control pulse.

Back when I saw my therapist—my parents took me to someone who specialized in teenagers with terminal diseases—we tried to find the root of my problem. Everyone was uncomfortable with the idea of death, but I was one of the rare teenagers who spent sleepless nights lying in bed imagining her dead body being cremated. The therapist was good. I'll give her that. She asked if I remembered being a fetus. I said no. Then she asked if I had any memories of not living. I said no. "That's what death feels like, Rosie. You won't remember it happened, so, in a sense, it's almost like you live forever."

Mostly, when my panic attacks found me, I tried to remind myself of this conversation, but usually it helped to just get distracted by something else entirely. So I shook my head, peeking into Dean's tranquil face, and asked, "What else do you know about stars? And spare me the fun part where they explode and we all die."

He tucked a lock that fell on my forehead behind my ear. "By the time the sun explodes, no one is going to be here to witness it. Well, other than the Kardashians. Those people are always fucking everywhere."

I swatted his shoulder, playful without meaning to be. "Don't go there, Cole. *Kourtney and Khloe Take Miami* is my one guilty pleasure."

"That's just plain sad. Especially when the neighbor upstairs can take you anywhere in his penthouse. Now that's a pleasure worthy of the guilt."

"Focus," I groaned. He put the blunt out on the bench and flicked it into a nearby trashcan. He laughed his one hundred percent genuine laugh, the one no girl stood a chance against. His voice felt good against my skin. In the air. Everywhere.

"So I have this filing system in my head, and if you tell anyone, I will deny it, never speak to you again, and tell everyone we know you have hepatitis and that you dumped Dr. Dickface because he gave you athlete's foot." He propped one hand on the wooden headrest behind us and angled his

body toward mine.

“Now you’re just downright begging me to do it.” I pinched my lips together, conscious of all the flirty smiles I was throwing around.

Dean finished the remainder of his beer before taking mine and chugging it, too, letting out an intentional burp before he continued. “I’m a closet astronomy geek. I label people by what part of the solar system they might be. For instance, Trent is Jupiter because he is so fucking big. Vicious is Arcturus. Red and angry all the time. I can go on, but I have a feeling I’m going to regret it.” He scanned my face, waiting for me to laugh. When I didn’t, he cautiously continued.

“Easier to box people into something concrete, ya know?”

The airhead. The stoner. The party-loving manslut. Ruckus.

Yeah, I had an idea.

“What kind of star am I?” My voice came out thick. I was drunk. I was lusty. I was out of my freaking mind.

Our arms were glued together and our sweat started to mix, but neither one of us made a move to break the touch.

Not even a second passed before he answered, which made me believe he had thought about it before. “You’re Sirius.”

“Sirius?”

“Yeah.” He shifted on the bench, scrubbing at the non-existent stubble along his square jaw. I tried to ignore the fact that he was looking at me with something more than naked desire, but it was becoming too hard with every passing second.

“Contrary to general belief, stars don’t twinkle. There is only one star that sparkles that scientists can agree on. It twinkles so bright, sometimes people mistake it for a UFO. It’s not big, but it stands out. That’s Sirius, and it’s also you. You shine, Baby LeBlanc. So fucking bright sometimes you’re the only thing I see.”

I didn’t know what I was thinking. Perhaps I wasn’t thinking at all. But at that moment, I felt brave. So brave, honesty took hold of my mouth before logic stopped it.

“I want you to make me forget, Dean. Just for one, freaking night,” I mumbled. Staring into space. “Forget about this goddamn town and my judgey parents and...” I let out a giant sigh. *And dying.*

He tilted his whole body toward me and cupped one of my cheeks, groaning like touching me only frustrated him even more. “Hey. Look at

me.”

Not worthy.

Not enough.

Not as good as Millie.

“You’re my sister’s ex-boyfriend,” I mumbled, not protested, trying to reason with myself. Hoping to scrape together some logic and back out.

“We were together for one second,” he snapped.

“You took her V-card.”

“She took *off*,” he enunciated, crushing the last word between his teeth. “She took off without even sparing me a courtesy phone call. She was never mine. And, for that reason among others, I was never hers.”

“She told me you once asked her to never leave you.” I swallowed, my hands tucked under my sweaty butt as I stared at my flip-flops.

“No offense to Millie, but I don’t want *anyone* to leave me.”

Silence, and then.

“I don’t want to make you forget. I want to make you remember. And I’m about to, Rosie.” He breathed hard against my skin. “I’m about to rewrite the pages of our fucking history, baby.”

His mouth came crashing down on mine, and his fingers found my hair. I clutched his collar in my balled fists and dragged him down with me, lying on the bench and spreading my legs for him. His lips were hot, wet, perfect, and they didn’t hesitate or ask for permission. They took. They hungrily demanded. My whole body buzzed with heat and ecstasy. He fisted my hair with one hand and dragged his free one between us, cupping one of my breasts and squeezing hard.

His tongue invaded my mouth, conquering me, melting every rejection I had on the tip of my tongue into warm butter. Was I really that drunk, or was he really that good? His hand moved farther south. He flipped my denim skirt and brought his hand to my underwear, rubbing the fabric, creating friction that made me moan into his mouth and lose the remainder of control I clung onto.

Hot. Everything was hot.

My face.

My nerves.

God, it felt like my heart was on fire.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” he said, pinching my clit through my panties. I scraped at his shirt and arched my back, begging.

“Fuck me,” I groaned into our filthy kiss. It wasn’t like anything I’d ever experienced. Our tongues were at war—his winning—our hands desperate and we were grinding against each other like we were trying to start a fire.

Soon, I knew, we would succeed. *Dangerous chemistry*. Our bodies were attuned in a way souls are. Faultlessly. His skin on mine was like being kissed everywhere down to the most isolated corner in my body.

Ironically, my request made him unglue his mouth from mine and frown.

“How drunk are you?” He scanned my face, stone cold sober. He only had a beer, and by his standards, that was like drinking herbal tea.

“Not too drunk not to know what I’m doing,” I answered.

“Sounds like something a drunk person would say,” he countered. I reached between us and grabbed his thick ridge through his jeans, rubbing up and down. *Rock hard*. “Please.”

He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against mine while he took a deep breath. He was trying to fight it. Trying to find composure. That was what I should have done. But I was greedy that night.

“If I take you, it’s because you want it, not because some bullshit family revenge.”

“I do.” I nodded. “I want it.”

He got up, offered me his hand, and guided me to the red truck no girl had ever been screwed in before.

Longest journey I ever made, but one that was worth taking.



In the cab, Dean flattened the driver’s seat and lay against it, tapping his muscular chest.

“C’mere,” he ordered. He didn’t sound playful. He didn’t sound alluring. He sounded serious and grave. The most tantalizing landlord I had ever come across. I complied, straddling him, then scooting up to his face. I still had my panties on, and my eyelids felt ten pounds each, but I knew what I was doing.

Dean nudged my underwear away, grabbed me by the waist, and pushed me down on his face, his tongue plunging into me, penetrating me in one

sudden movement. I cried out in both pleasure and surprise, grabbing his hair and arching my back.

“Fuck my tongue, Baby LeBlanc. Fuck it hard.”

My hips rocked as I did just that, feeling his warm mouth all over me, his thumb rubbing lazy yet firm circles on my clit while his free hand squeezed my ass, dictating how fast and hard I landed on his face. He made the kind of happy noises I had only dreamed of hearing from Darren. Like this was his idea of heaven. Like what we did was *right*.

After a few short minutes, I clenched around his tongue, my thighs vibrating, every muscle in my body shaking with a rippling orgasm that moved through me like an earthquake. I threw my head back and screamed his name, my eyes squeezed shut.

Then, before I had the chance to open them, he flipped me so I was lying underneath him and he was on top, his knee between my opened legs. Dean unbuckled his belt, his shirt riding up and revealing those perfect abs I tried not to ogle the other day. Jesus, he was a masterpiece. I actually resented him for that.

“I’m going to make you sing my fucking name,” he hissed, his eyes hard on mine, “with your pussy.”

I spread my legs wider as he dug his knees deeper into my sex.

He reached for his back pocket and plucked a condom out of his wallet. Ripping the wrapper with his teeth, he sheathed himself while grabbing my shirt in his hand. He pulled the fabric until it dug into my skin and ripped it from my body.

Ouch.

And also, *what the hell?*

Leaning down, he flung one of my legs over his shoulder and slid into me without warning. His jaw was granite, his eyes blazing with carnal need. I clung onto his bulging triceps, groaning with pleasure I couldn’t fully contain in my small body, and let him pound me like an animal as he hit my G-spot again and again, riding me like his mission in life was to split me in two.

“Oh, Dean.” I couldn’t help shouting, and even though it was hot outside, the condensation on the windows around us proved that it was much, much hotter inside.

Dean fisted my hair again, this time harder than he did on the bench, and turned my head to the space between our bodies so I could watch.

“What am I doing to you?” He sounded menacing. Almost evil. I watched

as his cock—*hey, is that a purple condom?*—slid in and out of me, the way his hips smashed into mine furiously every time he drove in. The ridges of his six-pack were perfectly visible from that angle, too. There was darkness there. In what we did. All-American, fresh-faced, lovely Dean had a very dangerous side, and he allowed me a sneak peek into it.

“You’re...” I stuttered. He tugged at my hair harder for the answer. It was painful, but at the same time, extremely hot.

“Say it, Baby LeBlanc.”

“You’re fucking me.”

“Hell, yeah, I’m fucking you. Feels good?”

“Y—yes.”

“Am I too deep?”

“N—no.”

“Am I too rough?”

“N—no.”

“Good. ’Cause I’m about to be.”

His hand snaked behind my back and spun me in place, and for one second, his cock was no longer buried inside me. He propped me on my knees but I fell flat on my stomach when he drove into me again, this time from behind. He lifted one of my hips with his arm—his muscles tight and sweaty against my thigh—to create the perfect angle for him to tear me apart with his thick, long ridge.

“So deep.” I squeezed my eyes again, feeling another orgasm trickling from my skull down to the tip of my spine. Dean ‘Ruckus’ Cole was a sex god. It shouldn’t have surprised me, but he was right. What we shared wasn’t normal. It was crazy.

Crazy good.

“Don’t come just yet.” He plunged into me once again, and my teeth dug into the vinyl of his seat, clinging to the yellow sponge underneath as I tried to stifle another scream.

“I can’t hold it,” I panted, breathlessly digging my fingernails into the worn cab. He was going at it like he was trying to kill me. And in a way, he did. He killed every single chance I had to enjoy sex with anyone else.

“You need my permission to come, LeBlanc. Beg for it.”

Somewhere inside me, I knew that the whole thing was insane. Drunk or not, I could distinguish right from wrong. Still, I complied, because I kind of liked the fact that for a moment in time, I wasn’t the bitch who hated him and

he wasn't the guy I could never have.

"Please let me come."

"Come all over my cock, baby."

I collapsed deeper onto his seat and moaned as another tsunami swept through my body. And I saw stars. Stars he hung there—stars that twinkled so much brighter than the ones in the sky.

Dean flipped me again, but this time my eyes were half-opened. He pumped into me a few more times—his face scarily blank—pulled out, took off the condom, and came all over my stomach and bra.

I stared at him, not sure if I was mesmerized, disgusted, or too content to differentiate between the two.

He grabbed my torn shirt—the Podiatrists Association shirt that was compliments of Darren—from the seat beside us and clutched it into a ball, cleaning his cum from my body with it.

"Say goodbye to this shirt, and anything else another man who isn't your dad ever gave you. Am I clear?"

"You're awfully possessive," I complained, glaring at him through sleepy eyes like he was my sun, the moon, and everything worth seeing in the constellation.

"That's because you're awfully mine."

"And what on Earth would make you think that? The fact that we slept together?" I pretended to laugh, but there was nothing funny about his statement. Or what we just did.

"Nah," he said, his hand moving to the left side of my chest. He placed it over my heart, and squeezed one time. "This thing right here? It fucking beats for me. You know it. I know it. Keep lying, Rosie. I'll milk the truth out of you. One way or the other."

Chapter Nine

Dean

EVERYTHING THROBBED AS WE DROVE back to Vicious's mansion. Baby LeBlanc fell asleep and I was still able to smell her sex on my fingers and her coconut shampoo on my shirt, and I guess it fucked with my mind, because I found myself driving around the neighborhood four times at three in the morning, not ready to say goodbye.

You're in deep trouble, asshole, logic scolded me. You don't need this shit. Getting involved is a risk. You need to take care of your Nina business and stop drinking.

But logic had no room or space in my mind. I was fully occupied with everything Rose LeBlanc, and I didn't even give a damn that she was sick and had her own baggage to deal with. She was wearing my varsity jacket over her bra, the one I had found in the bed of my truck from ten years ago. Dr. Dickface's torn shirt was where it was supposed to be—in a trashcan in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I parked in front of the main entrance of the mansion and contemplated what to do next. She was snoring, producing a sound that was more appropriate for a grizzly bear than a tiny chick—and I didn't have it in me to wake her up.

Finally, I picked her small body up and carried her into the house. Her flip-flops were clasped between her fingers as I moved past doors, peeking into the ones that were ajar until I found hers, The Strokes poster-covered room.

Tucking her inside her bed, I wrapped blankets snug around her body like you would a baby and kissed her nose.

"By the way," I whispered to my Sleeping Beauty. "I find flip-flops

personally offensive, and I still want to tap you again.”

“Dean,” she yawned, slurring as she stretched, “I find *you* personally offensive, *because everyone tapped you.*”

“Welcome to the club, sweetheart. We have T-shirts.”

“Good, because you ripped mine off my body.”

My cock saluted that fine comeback, but it had to wait.

“That’s right. I don’t want to see that fucker’s stuff on you ever again,” I croaked, refraining from uttering his goddamn name. What was it, anyway? Declan? Darren? Didn’t matter. It’s not like she was ever going to use it.

“Ugh.” She turned her back to me, burrowing into the blanket with her eyes closed. “I’m so happy I don’t have to see you until the rehearsal dinner.”

“Don’t be so happy just yet.” I brushed some hair from her face, causing her skin to break out in goosebumps.

“And why is that?” she asked, and apparently, Rosie LeBlanc had the ability to have long-ass conversations during her slumber.

I leaned down, pressing my lips to hers, my tongue darting out and swiping along her bottom lip before sucking it, long and hard. It was the kind of leisured, teasing kiss that left you thinking about the next one for a week after.

“Because I’ve just decided that I’m moving to the mansion to spend time with you,” I whispered, then ambled to the door, turned off the lights, and smirked to the dark blue of the night. “Sur-fucking-prise, Baby LeBlanc. Now we’re not only neighbors, we’re practically roomies.”

I drove home that night, grabbed the suitcase I didn’t have time to unpack, and moved my shit to Vicious’s. I’d tell him my parents were remodeling parts of the house if he asked. Good thing he never gave a shit about anything.

It was better this way. My parents were big on bugging me about meeting Nina in recent months, and I didn’t care for the same old conversation. I also didn’t care why they were so hot on getting me to meet *him*.

Because all I cared about was my next conquest. *Her*.



I picked up Trent at San Diego airport the following day, this time taking Dad's Volvo XC90. The red truck stayed in the garage. I hardly ever used it, but Rosie asked to keep our little date a secret, and for the time being, I was all about pacifying her.

If Vicious saw me picking her up, he'd start asking questions just to piss me off.

And once he heard my answers, we were going to brawl again. Not that I particularly minded. Throwing a few punches into his face was my idea for meditation. Though I preferred to go around it without the excess drama. Vicious, on the other hand, was an over-the-top *Sweet Valley* type of asshole. He loved making a huge production out of shit.

I double-parked directly in front of the arrival gate and tipped my Ray-Bans down, checking out the herd of flight attendants in blue uniform that crossed the road in front of me. As if sensing my gaze, two of them turned their heads in my direction and smiled. I smiled back, then flicked my eyes down to check my phone.

Jaime

Me and the girls are landing in SD in four hours. C U on the other end, fucker.

Vicious

Hello, Captain STD. Hope you're sober enough to read this. Make sure you pick up Trent today. Seating arrangement is waiting in your email. Call when you're done.

Trent

Get your eyes up from your lap. It looks like you're jerking off.

Laughing, I looked up and spotted my best friend breezing through the gliding doors with a business trolley. To say Trent Rexroth was a good-looking guy was like saying that cyanide was slightly unhealthy. The guy turned heads. Women's and men's alike. Sure, we were all easy on the eyes, but there was only one motherfucker who always stole the show. He was striding directly toward my vehicle, in all of his six-foot-four, aristocratic face, ripped-to-fucking-shreds, ex-quarterback glory. Every chick in our radius did a double take, then a triple one to make sure this guy was really human, and when he climbed into my SUV, two even took pictures on their phones. Probably mistook him for that dude from the mug shot—you know, the mixed one with the blue Calvin Klein bedroom eyes.

Trent slapped my back, the international ‘Good to See You, Bro’ signal and buckled up.

“Am I getting older, or are they getting less attractive?” He motioned with his chin toward another harem of flight attendants, this time clad in burgundy uniforms.

“Definitely getting older.” I stuck to my script as the manwhore, even though I wasn’t feeling it either. “Maybe it’s time for Viagra.”

“Maybe it’s time you shoved your foot into your mouth.” Trent shot me a dry look, flipping the glove compartment open and taking out a rolled blunt he knew would be waiting for him.

“Wait until we leave the airport.” I kicked the vehicle into drive. He obeyed, glancing at his phone for emails in the meantime.

“How’s Luna doing?” I asked, checking the side mirrors. His daughter was almost a year old now. Babies were never my jam—I didn’t want to make them, but I loved practicing while using protection—but Luna had chunky thighs like Pillsbury rolls, a big-ass smile, and she clapped and did a weird dance every time I saw her on Skype. There wasn’t really anything not to like about her. *Other than her mother.*

“She’s good,” Trent said after a long pause, looking out the window with a frown. Dude was an old soul. Wasn’t cut out for the kind of lifestyle we lived. The women. The money. The weed. He didn’t enjoy any of that shit, not really. The only two things I ever saw him fully appreciate were his football—that ship had sailed a long time ago after multiple injuries our senior year—and his daughter.

“Bull. Shit. I’m not buying it. What the fuck is up?” I punched his arm. We were pulling out of the airport and onto a deserted highway. It was noon on a Saturday, and no one drove into Todos Santos unless they were headed to rob a fucking mansion. The blunt was lit, but Trent’s gray eyes remained turned off.

“Luna is amazing,” he said, leaving out a huge ‘but’.

“And?” I prompted.

“And Val is not,” he deadpanned.

Quick recap: Val was the Brazilian stripper who got knocked up with Trent’s baby after a one-night stand. She was a recovering coke addict, but Trent swore she got back on track after he shelled out the money for rehab. They weren’t together, but they were doing the whole co-parenting thing.

“Using again?” I quirked a brow. He threw his head back, scrubbing his

eyes.

“Clean as far as I’m aware. She just seems...*off*.”

“Was she ever on?” I pushed the gas pedal, my mind wandering elsewhere. Rosie seemed downright miserable when I picked her up yesterday. I wasn’t sure if it was about Vicious or the rest of her family, but my bet was on the latter. She was the only person I knew other than myself who didn’t give two shits about Vicious’s power trips and general assholeness. Seeing her hurt stirred something in me. Yesterday was mind-blowing. Best sex I’ve had in...fuck, *ever*? That couldn’t be right. Two things I was certain of, though:

1. Rosie was probably regretting the shit out of it right now; and
2. There was going to be a repeat, soon, and this time, I was going to make sure that she was sober.

Trent twisted to face me. “Is it fucked up that I think Val doesn’t really love our daughter?”

Silence, then.

“Stop tripping.” I grabbed a foam ball from the center console and threw it at him, awkward laughter popping out of my mouth.

“She never spends any time with her. My daughter is either with the babysitter or with me. And it’s not like she doesn’t try. She does. But I think Luna makes her really unhappy. Val’s used to the nightlife. Before this, she was grinding her crotch on a pole for a living. Her alarm was set to two p.m., and she still hit the *snooze* button. She thinks motherhood is boring.”

“She also finds sperm-stealing a legitimate way to make a living,” I groaned, tugging at my hair. Fuck Val. She was manipulative, yes, sneaky, sure, and shady as fuck, but under the daddy-issues exterior, I pegged her for an okay chick. Trent was probably exaggerating. He set the bar way too high where parenting was concerned, taking his kid to swimming lessons and Gymboree classes before she even rolled over. Val was going to come around. She was a strong girl, and Luna was going to grow out of the phase where she shits herself every few hours and cries the rest of the time.

“Dunno, man.” Trent shrugged, smoking and looking out the window. “I just...” he paused, dragging his fingers across his buzzed head. “Sometimes it feels like something bad’s about to happen, but I can’t seem to stop it.”

“Because it might,” I supplied. “And because you can’t. It’s called reality.”

“Reality sucks balls.”

“That’s the rumor,” I agreed. “You need to let it go and make sure that *you* do the right thing.”

As we passed by the lush green sign welcoming us to Todos Santos, I tried to remind myself the same thing.

About Nina.

About Rosie.

About everything.



Dean

Sup, sleepyhead. That hangover kicking your tight ass?

An hour passed before she answered, but I knew she saw the message. She was probably typing and deleting, obsessing, debating, hating herself, hating *me*. That was fine. It was all a part of the process. Then—fucking finally—she wrote back. One word:

Rosie

Yeah.

I stared at the word hard. No girl had ever one-worded me in a text message before. This chick was like egomaniac boot camp. I began to type my next text when another one came through.

Rosie

I’m sorry. So, so sorry this has happened. I can’t look at myself in the mirror. I can’t leave this room, because I don’t want to face Millie. What kind of sister am I? Please let’s pretend last night never happened.

Dean

Okay.

Rosie

Okay?

Dean

If that’s what you need to tell yourself before we fuck again, I’m not going to

burst your little bubble. I'm thinking we should have In-N-Out for lunch. I have a feeling the rehearsal dinner is going to be boring as fuck. What do you think?

Rosie

I think you can't read. I said we can't do this EVER AGAIN.

Dean

I said In-N-Out. I didn't say fisting you on a balcony overlooking the romantic view of the Pacific Ocean.

Dean

(I'm game if you wanna do that tho.)

Rosie

No.

Dean

I'll bring weed.

Rosie

NO.

Dean

I'll bring my dick.

Rosie

How is that helping?!

Dean

After last night, I think you know the answer to that question ;)

Rosie

No dice, Ruckus. Today you're on your own. Forget it ever happened. I know I will.

I smiled, leaned back, and read her message again. She was going to come around—and on my dick—in no time.

After I dropped Trent at his parents' new house in Todos Santos, I stayed there a couple of hours to catch up with Trisha and Darius Rexroth. They were practically my second parents. I then went straight to the gym at the country club my (real) parents were members of and worked out some sweat. Punching bags and running on the treadmill calmed me down, even if only a little.

After I was done with my workout, I walked to the sauna and sat on a wooden bench, pressing my back against the wall.

You need to stop drinking, asshole.

I needed to stop doing a lot of toxic shit, but what was the point? What was the point in not fucking three women at a time, or drinking until I passed out, or smoking every morning and every night to take the edge off?

That was not to say that I was unhappy. I liked my job. Making money felt good. Burning it on crap I didn't need felt even better. And I had a great family I wanted to see more of. But the space between phone calls from my family and friends and the long hours I spent at work was empty, so I filled it with pussy, alcohol, weed, and relentlessly pursuing the one girl I should stay away from.

“Dean? Dean Cole?”

The guy who walked into the sauna looked familiar. I blinked away my latest hangover (courtesy of the four gins I downed after I got settled at Vicious's last night). On second glance, I recognized him. Matt Burton. A guy from high school. We were on the football team together. Not a star by any stretch of the imagination—that title was saved for Trent and me—but still a popular kid. He got rounder around the stomach, which was expected, not everyone was a vain-ass motherfucker like myself, and his hair seemed thinner. We bumped knuckles, because hugging when there was nothing but two towels separating our dicks was unacceptable. He slouched beside me.

“You look good.” Matt let out a heavy sigh.

“You look happy.” His laugh confirmed my assessment. He raised his left hand and waved a golden wedding band in triumph. “I am. Married with two daughters now. How 'bout you?”

“You know me.” I hitched one shoulder. But apparently, he didn't know, because he was still awaiting my answer. “Still sampling my options.”

“Here in California?” He sniffed. His gut was spilling over the edge of his towel. I looked down to my towel. My abs were barely touching the white fabric. My tan flesh clung to my six-pack like a desperate Pats fangirl after the Super Bowl. Maybe eating tacos made Matt happy, but eating pussy made *me* happy. They looked about the same, but pussy had less calories. Plus, you always had room for seconds.

“New York, actually. You?” I asked out of politeness. I didn't give half a fuck. Matt was a nice guy, but I saw my ex-teammates and college friends get married. They always got fat, boring, and weirdly content with their tedious everyday rituals. No, thanks.

“Stayed here. Bought a house just outside Todos Santos. Up-and-coming development. Got my accounting degree and recently became a partner at my

dad's firm."

Blah, blah, blah.

"That's awesome." I stood up. I was feeling a little woozy. Guess it was really time to cut back on all the fucking crap I shoved into my body. "Well, gotta go. It was fun to catch up."

"Dean," Matt said, and I felt his hand on my shoulder, and why the fuck was his hand on my shoulder? I turned around. He was standing, too. We looked at each other. Not like friends. Not like enemies. Not like anything. I wanted to go.

"Are you okay?" he asked. If there ever was a more annoying question in the history of questions, it must have been 'can you come outside? I don't swallow'. But 'are you okay' was definitely a close second.

"Yeah," I said, leaving out "why?" I didn't care why he asked.

Matt offered me an awkward smile, removing his hand from my goddamn body, resting his hands on his hips. "You know, I always thought you'd marry the LeBlanc girl. You guys just had this spark."

I let out a chuckle. Not bitter, just amused. "Who? Millie?"

He shook his head, his expression collapsing into a frown. "The other one. The one who always came to watch us play with her friends and ogled you. She was a hottie. Didn't put out, though. Then again, she did look like a mouthy bitch."

Rosie.

Still a hottie.

Only hearing someone else say it inspired my inner jealous asshole, and I wanted to throw a punch in his face. Maybe it was because I still felt her mouth against my shoulder, her pussy pulsing with heat on my lips, and her moans gliding over my skin. Whatever it was, it made me back Matt to the wooden wall with my deadly expression and whisper, "Hey, Matt? Next time you talk about Rosie LeBlanc like that, make sure I'm not around. Because if I hear it, I'll beat your ass and make sure you can't see what she looks like these days. By the way, she's still more beautiful than any woman who'd ever agree to touch you, and you were right, you genius motherfucker, she is going to be my wife one day. Goodbye."

Chapter Ten

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Regret. For regret reminds you that life has a weight. Sometimes it's heavier. Sometimes it's lighter.

DEAR SELECTIVE AMNESIA,

I need you in my life right now.

Yours,

Hopelessly idiotic girl

Sitting on the bed wearing my percussion vest and staring at the poster-covered wall, I dangled my feet in the air as I replayed every second of last night.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I was the idiot. Not Dean. Dean simply took what I foolishly offered him in my drunken haze. Jesus, he was the voice of reason (now here's a sentence I never thought I would utter, even in my mind) who asked me repeatedly if I was too drunk. Dean, who was sweet enough to wrap me in blankets.

You know you're in a bad place when Mr. Manwhore Galore is your knight in Brooks Brothers's armor.

It was a moment of weakness, but it would never happen again. Tonight, I was going to be on my best behavior at the rehearsal dinner. Millie only had one bridesmaid—yours truly—and I wasn't going to screw this up. Not after

everything she'd done for me.

Besides, as far as I was concerned, Dean and I never had sex. And we certainly didn't have the best sex I'd ever had—so filthy, and hot, it was on a whole different level than what I'd experienced before. Because if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?

In other words, what Millie didn't know couldn't hurt her. I wasn't going to say a word. Neither would Dean.

A knock on the door made me click the *pause* button on my replay of the scene where Dean pushed me onto his hot tongue and bit my clit. *A scene that never happened*, I reminded myself. I scooted up and smoothed my hair away from my face.

"It's open."

Millie came in with a tray full of goodies. Her smile was apologetic. Probably about last night. I smiled back, reaching for a drawer next to the bed and sliding it open.

"Got you breakfast," she announced.

"Got you dessert," I said. Being a music buff had its perks. Millie liked punk rock and alternative music, too, but unlike me, she was too busy to look for those small, up-and-coming indie bands that shouldered their way into the scene. Me, that was what I lived for. To seek them out and hunt them down. So I always made sure I had a stack of demos to give my sister every time I saw her.

Producing a USB the shape of Beetlejuice's Ernie, I dangled it before her eyes.

"Wait till you hear Zack Wade's voice." I grinned. "He has a talent for playing the guitar and the strings of your hormones."

She placed the tray with the pancakes, maple syrup, and freshly brewed coffee on my nightstand, muttering, "My hormones are playing just fine," before biting down on her lip. Upon closer inspection, her eyes bloodshot and her purple hair a mess.

"Dude, are you okay?" I got up on my feet, bracing her into a hug but supporting her weight at the same time. The vest was still on me, and there was a giant tube between us, but we were so used to it, none of us paid any attention. Millie went completely limp in my arms. It had better not be Vicious causing trouble. Although, I had to give him one thing. Ever since they hooked up, he had been an exceptional man to Millie. Too bad he was a cunt to everyone else.

“I’m great!” She waved her hand around, dismissing the question and straightening her posture. “Probably a stomach bug or nerves. Vicious is taking me to the doctor for a check. It’s already ten and you haven’t left your room. I came in to see if *you* were okay.”

I wasn’t okay. I was the opposite of okay. *I was just too busy fantasizing about your ex-boyfriend, seconds from shoving a hand into my underwear.*

“I’m sorry.” I pulled her into another hug, my chin on her shoulder. “I took advantage of this little vacay. Normally I open up the coffee shop at six thirty and don’t go to bed before ten or eleven.”

“Still volunteering with the babies?” She scrunched her nose. I looked down at my hands, bracing myself for another lecture. “You need to stop.” Her voice was forgiving.

“Yeah, well, that’s not going to happen.”

“You’re hurting yourself. Why would you do that?”

Because I couldn’t volunteer anywhere else. All the other places—hospitals, clinics, hospices—were full of sick people, and my immune system was as brittle as my heart when it came to a certain HotHole.

“Trust me, I’m no saint. If I didn’t love it, I wouldn’t do it. What about you? Excited about the rehearsal this evening?” I changed the subject.

Millie exhaled and plopped down on the cushions. I sat back down, but didn’t stare at the ceiling like she did. I couldn’t with my vest.

“I guess. The bachelorette party is what I’m really waiting for, though. It will be nice to spend some time together.”

Millie and I had only been apart for one year, when I was a senior, before I boarded a plane and joined her in New York. We went from living together for years to living on different sides of the country.

“Do you want me to come with you to the doctor?” I smoothed her hair. “I can do a coffee run, watch your car if you don’t find a parking space. Be your bitch.” I wiggled my brows.

“No need.” Millie’s gaze shifted, her hands landing on her thighs, but this time, she didn’t rub them.

I wasn’t stupid. The symptoms added up quickly. She was sick in the morning, woozy all day yesterday, and Mama didn’t want her doing any heavy lifting. Still, before I was an ex-nursing school student and a human being with a functioning brain, I was a sister. A sister who knew my sibling wouldn’t keep this kind of news from me.

Because there was nothing I wanted more than to see her happy.

And I knew that a baby would make Millie really, really happy.

“Is there anything you’re not telling me?” I asked, keeping my voice as casual as possible.

“No,” she said curtly, caressing my arm again, as she often did to soothe me. “Everything’s great.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“But that’s the answer you’re getting.” She cleared her throat. “I mean, come on, Rosie-bug. I’m getting married in a few days. I’m allowed to have a few off days.”

Fair enough. I spun in place and turned off the machine hooked to the vest, then went through the usual ritual of folding everything and tucking it in place. After that, we talked some more. Mainly about wedding preparations and how she thought I kind of looked like Emma Stone from certain angles (she brought it up...not me).

“Good luck at the doctor’s,” I said, when Vicious called Millie from downstairs and she walked through the door. The tray was still by my bed, and it would remain untouched until I got rid of it. I’d lost my appetite at dinner yesterday and never got it back.

I flung my body into the bed and closed my eyes again, ignoring the thump between them and Mama shouting at Daddy downstairs to go to the store and get Millie Twinkies.

They hadn’t spoken a word to me all morning, and since Millie hadn’t brought them up, I knew I was still in the doghouse. I would happily stay there for the remainder of this visit.

I wasn’t going to apologize for who I was. For who I wanted to be.
Independent and free.

Chapter Eleven

Dean

I WAS CATCHING UP ON work emails and administrative shit when Vicious came to his balcony where I sat and slumped on the opposite couch. By the shit-eating grin on his face, I was guessing that someone had died or that he knew something that was going to rock my boat, or at the very least, create a hole in it. He didn't mean to be an evil fucker. I think he was just born this way.

Working on the terrace was a good call, because I couldn't concentrate anywhere else. I saw Rosie's mom knocking on her door twice, nasally whining for her to do this and that—with Rosie barely answering back—and her dad bitching to Millie in the hallway about how his eldest daughter should just buy Rosie a ticket and make the decision for her. "Her irresponsibility will cost her her life," I heard him say.

"I'm graying because of her. Graying!" her mother added.

Pricks.

"Hello, fuck-face," Vicious greeted me.

"Howdy, asswipe," I retorted, pulling out a blunt from behind my ear and lighting it casually, looking at Vicious like he just pissed into one of four different bowls of soup on a table and I wasn't sure which. I was always suspicious of him. He of me, too.

"Care to share?" He jerked his chin toward my blunt. I inhaled and passed it on, smoke skulking from between my lips.

"So why are you really here? Your parents aren't remodeling shit. I saw Eli downtown this morning when I took Em for her doctor's appointment."

I put my MacBook down on the coffee table and leaned back, tapping my lip with my Zippo lighter as I considered his question before I broke the news

to him.

“I’m going after Baby LeBlanc.”

“I sure as fuck hope you mean Rosie and not my future kid.”

“Christ.” I rolled my eyes, leaning forward to snatch the blunt from him. “And then people accuse *me* of being the creepy one.”

Vicious grinned. He wasn’t pissed off. He wasn’t even surprised. Astonishingly, he wasn’t against it either.

“Finally, eh? What took you so long?”

I shrugged. “Didn’t know she was in New York. And by the time I did, and she moved into the apartment, she had a boyfriend. She is single now. Not for long.”

Vicious raised one skeptic eyebrow, his lips curving to one side. Of course, he didn’t give half a fuck if I went after Rosie. It made perfect sense to him, and why wouldn’t it? His wife-to-be, on the other hand, held a different opinion.

Millie and I were civil, but she didn’t trust me. Which was ironic, considering *our* history.

“Emilia is not going to like it.”

“I didn’t like it either when Emilia started fucking one of my closest friends in my apartment. I got over it. Quickly, I may add.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Vicious snapped, his eyes flaring, before smirking. “You took ten percent of the company from me.”

“And gave it back to you.” I smiled.

“For a lot of money.”

“Which you have,” I retorted. “You’re a billionaire. We both know you paid because I needed to make you pay. You can wipe your ass with double the price you paid me and still not notice it missing from your bank account. It was a lesson. Have you learned anything?”

“Yes.” Vicious gave me the stink eye. “That you’re no less an asshole than I am, even though you definitely hide it better. Millie thinks you’re trouble.”

Now it was my turn to give him my I-don’t-give-a-fuck smirk. I wasn’t even trying to defend myself. What was the point?

“And I tend to agree.” He snatched the blunt.

“I’m hurt.” I clutched the left side of my orange Armani tee and made a face. “But I’ll live.”

“Whether you live or not solely depends on how the shit with Rosie is

going to pan out. If you break her heart, use her, and shit all over this, I'd have to take a side." I knew which one he was going to take. Vicious and I were genuinely good friends. We spoke on the phone all the time. We had a good laugh. But we were wary of one another, too. It was just one of those things. There was never competition between Jaime and Trent, or Trent and me, or Vicious and Jaime. But there was always a silent, bloody war between Vicious and me.

And I knew that the bad feelings I harbored for him blossomed, only because I saw myself in him and hated it.

The cruelty.

The frustration.

The raw brutality that lay underneath the white-tooth smile and four-figure suits.

"Threatening me? That's fucking cute." I grabbed the blunt, took one last hit before putting it out inside an ashtray in the middle of the coffee table. Smoke shotgunned from my flared nostrils as I spoke. "I'm not some innocent little Southern girl, Vic. I'm not afraid of you."

Vicious stood up. "Don't fuck it up."

The underlining message was: *but I got your back.*

I messed my hair with my fist. "You didn't fuck it up with Millie." *Thanks, bro.*

"I almost did." *Don't make my mistakes.*

"I know better than you." *I wouldn't dare.*

"That's what I'm counting on." *Then what are you waiting for? Go get her.*



Dean
Whatchadoin'?

Rosie
Sorting through demos. Listening to music. Trying not to throw myself off of the balcony. You?

Dean

In-N-Out for lunch? We can go to the beach before the rehearsal. Chill.

Rosie

You asked before. The answer is still no.

Dean

Why not?

Rosie

Because of what happened last night.

Dean

What happened last night?

Rosie

Am I really that forgettable?

Dean

You said you wanted me to forget. But that was a lie, wasn't it?

Truth was, Baby LeBlanc didn't know what she wanted. She felt guilty, but at the same time, craved me like crack. It had always been this way, but this time around, I was going to push her around as much as I needed until she fell off her self-righteous throne.

Rosie

Stop texting me, Dean.

Dean

Saw your mom on her way to your room. She's gonna give you crap again if you stay here. Hang out with me. I promise not to touch you.

Rosie

What's in it for you?

Dean

You.

Simple. Honest. *True*.

I'd wanted her ever since Millie left. Probably before that. Fine, *definitely* before that. But I waited it out, knowing my place. If Jacob could be patient, so could I.

She didn't answer straightaway; therefore, she was debating this. Rosie

wanted to see me. This week was difficult for her. I gave her another nudge.

Dean

I wanna learn more about your music. You wanna get the fuck out of here. We'll make it to the rehearsal in a timely manner.

Rosie

Dean...

Dean

No touching.

Rosie

Okay.

Little victories.

I was about to stand up and walk to her room when my phone lit and a call came through. *Nina*. I knew why she was calling, and I was tempted to answer. She had something of mine that I wanted, but the price I had to pay to get to him was too damn high. Not the money, even though she requested lots and lots of it. Her *freedom*.

She used to have it all. My time. My heart. My devotion. And she threw it all away.

I was a fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, you're fucking good-as-dead kind of guy. I didn't believe in second chances unless it was with Rosie. So I let her go, merely keeping her alive.

I shouldn't have wanted to answer that phone so bad and end this.

End all the question marks, the torturous wondering, swimming in the unknown.

I shouldn't have. But I did.

Chapter Twelve

Rosie

Eleven Years Ago

What makes you feel alive?

My family. Their imperfections. Their fierce love. Their unconditional worry. Their dedication to a lost cause. To me.

THE NIGHT BEFORE MILLIE LEFT for New York wasn't much different than any other night. We slept in the same bed, even though we had separate rooms. Feet on the wall, staring at the ceiling, hugging a pillow or each other. That was our signature position. Sometimes it was my bed. Sometimes it was hers. I hated that I loved sleeping in her bed because it smelled like him. They weren't having sex, but his scent was everywhere.

On her sheets. On her desk. In my soul.

This time we were in my room, and the glow-in-the-dark stars gazed back at us. I always loved stars. They reminded me how small my problems were in this big universe.

"Dean and I slept together," she croaked into the gloom and took my hand in hers. I stiffened, my eyes fluttering shut. *Think about stars.*

Everything stopped. My lungs burned, my body ached, and tears burned the back of my nose. The room grew darker; my breaths became heavier. She didn't know. My sister, who was so perceptive, knew everything about me, about my body, about my health, my friends and taste in music, didn't even know what her boyfriend did to me. Just hearing his name made my heart prickle. My stomach flipped, wave after wave of warmth swirling inside it. But, of course, she was blind to my feelings. She was too busy with hers.

“Was it good?” I faked a smile. And I hated her. And I hated him. But most of all, I hated myself.

She shrugged one shoulder. It brushed against mine. “It was a mistake.”

“You think?”

“I *know*.” We were still staring at the ceiling and not at each other, and for that, I was grateful. “Our whole relationship is. I think he’s with me because he tries to protect me from Vicious. He doesn’t understand it only fuels the fire in this guy.”

“And you?” I managed to ask through the ball of tears twisting in my throat.

“And me...” Her grip on my hand tightened. “I like Dean. Who doesn’t? He is the definition of fun. But I don’t...”

Love him. Like I do.

“We’re trying to make us happen, but there’s something missing. *The magic*. He says he’s in this one hundred percent. He acts this way, too. He never asked me about Harvard, though. Not that I blame him, but he just applied, enrolled, and made plans without me. Anyway...it’s cool. It’s not like I want to go with him. Hey, Rosie?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s your dream?”

I blinked one time, then another. She didn’t know it, but I was fighting tears, and not just because she had lost her virginity to the guy I loved.

“I don’t have a dream.” The answer came after a few seconds of me trying to regulate my pulse.

“Why?”

“Because what’s the point? I won’t have time to pursue it.”

Instead of arguing, Millie took a different approach. She tilted her body in my direction, brushed my cheek with her thumb, and asked, “And if time wasn’t an issue?”

“Then...I guess to be a mother would be nice. I mean, yeah, I want to be financially independent. Maybe become a graphic designer or a nurse or whatever. But what I really want is to take care of someone and love them wholly and unconditionally. And, of course, do it someplace cool.”

“I think you’d make a great mama. Where would you live if you had the chance?” She smiled. I didn’t know where she was going. I didn’t know she was going at all.

“New York?” I contemplated. “Yeah. The Big Apple. Seems like a good

place to disappear in.”

She smiled in the darkness. “Then that’s where I’ll take you.”



Dean

Eleven Years Ago

I bumped knuckles with Matt Burton after the game, kicking off the heavy mud from my feet. Football season was over months ago, and we’d graduated a week ago, but we sometimes played scrimmages in neighboring cities. Especially with other private schools that were part of the crazy expensive football program All Saints High signed up for every year. This time we were in Sausalito. We’d won. With Trent riding the bench and watching us play—his cast was yellow, old, and smelled like a stale fart—it was my job to guide the Saints of All Saints High from a twenty-five-point hole against the St. John’s Rangers. It was impossible, until it wasn’t, and we scored nineteen points in the final quarter. We made all the plays. We were fucking fantastic, and as the first quarterback playing his very last game for his high school, I didn’t fail to notice—Vicious’s absence in the game (Hawaii vacation) made no difference at all.

Not only did we not need him, but his temper and rah-rah crap proved to be distracting. Case in point, we’d lost the previous flag football game in Monterey, and he was there, double douche canoe galore.

“Gotta love the scrimmages.” Burton slapped my back, and I did the same to him. Jaime approached me, his blond hair dripping sweat to his forehead and messing up his war paint. He grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me into a hug.

“Amazing throw.” He rubbed the dark strips on my cheek like he was my fucking girlfriend.

“Amazing everything, dude. It’s me.” I kissed each of my biceps, looking dead serious but obviously screwing around. He punched my pecs and laughed as we all made our way in the rain back to Coach Rowland. Twenty minutes later we were taking showers, getting ready to hop on the bus back to Todos Santos. We’d be sleeping through the nine-hour ride, but it was a small price to pay for all that glory.

After I got out of the showers, I pulled fresh clothes from my duffel bag, ready to get dressed. As I did, a note fell out, drifting to the floor. I caught it before it got wet, recognizing my girlfriend’s handwriting. Did she leave me a good luck letter? That wasn’t out of character for Millie. She was so fucking sweet, it sometimes felt like too much. A casual smile stamped on my face, I began to read.

Dean,

This is the most difficult thing I’ve had to do. I’m not even sure how to start. The one thing I want you to know before you read this is that it’s not you. I care about you so much. You’ve given me what no one else in this town ever has. Security, respect, time, and love.

My smile melted into a frown. It didn’t sound like a good luck letter. It sounded like a *goodbye* letter. Someone slapped my back as they made their way to another bench in the locker room, and someone else shouted next to my ear. They were all tuned out.

*I have to go away. Trust me when I say I **have** to. Something has happened that I cannot undo. Since the last thing I want is to complicate your life, I need to leave you behind. Please don’t try to find me. It will only make matters worse. I want you to follow your dreams and live your life.*

I don’t deserve your loyalty, Dean. I never did.

Taking a big gulp of air, I read the last paragraph, feeling my hands clutching the paper tighter.

You’re the most alive person I know. Walking away from you is hard, but staying in Todos Santos would be even harder. I hope you understand, and in time, I even greedily ask you to forgive me.

I've met someone else.

Love,

Millie



Dean

Eleven Years Ago

What was I doing knocking on their door, and which sister was I hoping to see, Millie or Rosie? I knew the answer to the last question. I just felt like a fucking tool about admitting it.

Millie and I were done. It was for the best. I saw what love looked like. I saw it on Jaime and our Lit teacher, Mel. Love felt like dipping each other in gasoline and burning together. Love felt like dancing with madness in the dark, watching all of its bright lights. Love felt like gasping for air when your lungs were already full.

Love. Wasn't. This.

Now she was gone, and my thoughts immediately drifted to her sister. The worst part was that I wasn't mad at Emilia. I was a tad frustrated. And...

Don't say relieved. Don't even think it, douche.

Fuck it. But I was.

Charlene LeBlanc answered the door. She didn't even try to hide the fact that she was waiting on my sorry ass to show up on her porch at seven in the morning on a Sunday. Or that she had been crying for hours, by the look of it.

"Can I see your daughter?" I asked. Subconsciously, I didn't refer to her by name because I wanted to leave it to fate. Aside from seeing Rosie here and there at school, swaying her ass in a short denim skirt and lecturing

people about the British history of punk rock, I hadn't seen her properly in months. Millie, I'd seen all the time. Not that she saw me. Apparently, she never really saw me at all.

"She's gone." Her mom dabbed her nose in a piece of tissue that should've been replaced two blows ago. "Been screening my calls all night. What happened? Did you two have a fight?"

I shook my head. Last time I spoke to Millie, we were making plans to go watch a movie. We hadn't had sex since that first time when we celebrated her eighteenth birthday. I think we both weren't feeling it, but admitting it out loud was unnecessary. I was headed to Harvard in a few weeks.

"No, ma'am. I'm as surprised as you are."

She invited me in, and I recited every single encounter I'd had with Millie over the last month, leaving out the part where I deflowered her for the safety of my neck. Charlene looked distraught, right on the verge of a heart attack, then her husband joined us from their bedroom and asked more questions, trying to milk from me a confession I didn't owe anyone.

Finally, after thirty minutes, Rosie emerged from her bedroom. She was the one I wanted to speak to. If someone had answers, or even clues, it'd be her.

"Can I borrow you for a second?" I asked, getting up from my chair. She still had sleep in her eyes and was wearing nothing but a huge New York Dolls tank top that left her long, tan legs bare and beautiful. I tried to ignore them, looking away to make sure the eighteen-year-old dick that was attached to my body wouldn't accidentally salute her in front of her parents. "Meet me by the pool?"

She nodded, too startled and sleepy to protest. A few minutes later, she came out to the pool, still wearing nothing but her top and flip-flops. I loved her devotion to flip-flops, even though every time they smacked the floor, I wanted to burn them down. I got up from a sun lounger and paced, lacing my fingers behind my neck.

"Where is she?" I asked. Rosie looked down, but didn't answer.

"Okay, fine. You don't have to tell me. But do you know?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "She texted me earlier."

"Is she safe?" My voice was strangled. I was worried about Millie, but I was also worried about Rosie. She was extremely attached to her older sister. Me, I knew I'd get over my ex-girlfriend in no time. It was my ego that needed a stroke.

“She’s safe,” Rosie confirmed, smoothing her bed hair with her fingers.

“Do you know why she did it?”

“I have an idea.”

“Are you waiting for a special invitation before you share it?”

She shook her head, ignoring the general assholeness that was me. “I’m sorry, Dean. I know it puts you in a horrible spot, but I can’t. You know where my loyalty lies.”

There was a brief moment of silence before our arms found each other and we clasped one another in a deadly hug. I say deadly not because I squeezed her and she squeezed me like we were trying to bleed the truth and the lies and everything in-between away from our bodies, but also because it felt fatal.

I don’t want you to die.

I don’t want to stop seeing you now that I’ve graduated.

I’ve been in love with your snarky ass ever since you opened the door for me, and now I’m hurting like you ran over me, and I have no idea how to fix this shit for us.

Minutes have passed before we disconnected. When I looked down at her, tears were running freely on her cheeks, and I knew it was a rare sight. In school, she was that fierce bitch no one dared to mess with.

“Thank you,” I said, for the hug. Maybe even for the tears.

She smoothed a hand over my chest. “You deserve someone who is yours. Just yours. No one else’s.”

“Rosie,” I called out for her when she started making her way back to the servants’ house. It felt like goodbye, and I didn’t want it to be. I had to put a spin on that encounter. She turned her head to look at me.

“Don’t be a stranger.”

She smiled. “Being strangers is exactly who we should be, Cole.”

Chapter Thirteen

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Singing like no one's listening. Dancing like no one's watching. Eating like calories don't exist.

“I CALL IT A MAYCHUP, because it’s a mix between ketchup and mayo,” I told Dean as we sat on the hood of his Volvo, eating In-N-Out in front of the ocean, on a golden hill somewhere no one could yell at me about how much of a disappointment I was. I swirled the mayo and the ketchup together into an orange dip using one fry, and nibbled on the tip of it when I was done. Dean took a bite of his burger—no fries—and watched me. I avoided looking at his face all throughout the drive. I couldn’t look at his eyes without remembering how they taunted me when he fucked the living life out of me. I couldn’t look at his lips without remembering how they sucked on my clit hungrily. I couldn’t look at his arms without remembering how they boxed and claimed me in that dirty truck. And, of course, I still felt the strings of his hot cum on my ribs, even though he wiped it off with my ex-boyfriend’s shirt, and I had taken a shower after Millie had left my room this morning.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t let me buy beer.” He swallowed his bite, staring at the ocean.

“As long as you’re around me, you’re not allowed to consume booze or smoke weed,” I said, unaffected by his deep frown. I dangled my feet from his hood and enjoyed the summer breeze on my flesh.

“You fucking suck,” he muttered.

“You wish,” I snorted, but it died in my throat when I realized this couldn’t be a joke anymore. He looked up from his burger, his face brooding

and serious.

“I don’t wish for things, sweetheart. I think by now you know, when I want something, I make it happen.”

Goddammit, I was leaking again.

There was something in the air. A sizzling wire of nerves that kept bouncing between us. So many things had to be addressed, but I didn’t want to talk about any of them. I just wanted to survive this trip.

After we ate, I stuck a USB in his MacBook and shared some of my favorite bands with him. Whitney, Animal Collective, Big Ups, and The Chromatics. He seemed into it, but you could never really tell with Dean Cole, because he seemed to be into everything.

“Remember what we used to listen to when we were in high school?” Dean grinned all of a sudden. I wrinkled my nose, trying to look unimpressed when really, I was elated.

“You mean the music *you* used to listen to. I only tolerated it when I absolutely had to.”

“Cut the bullshit, babe. You liked pop and R&B just like everyone else.”

“I had a versatile taste,” I protested, knowing he was referring to me shaking my ass to Jennifer Lopez tunes in skimpy clothes at Vicious’s parties, even though I was hopelessly passionate about indie bands from the nineties.

He jumped down to the ground, collecting our wrappers and empty cups. “Don’t go anywhere. A blast from the past is coming your way.”

I stayed put, watching as he walked to the nearest trashcan, throwing away our leftovers. His muscles were prominent, even through his white shirt and tailored khaki pants. My eyes lingered on his biceps, scrolling down to his tight ass, before he turned around and looked at me.

Then smiled.

Then winked.

Then mouthed, “Busted.”

I looked away, feeling my face reddening. He was right, of course. I wanted to sleep with him again, and couldn’t think of anything else other than his body against mine. When he sat back next to me, he picked up his MacBook and played “Naughty Girl” by Beyoncé.

“Remember this one?” He turned to me and laughed. “First night Baby LeBlanc ever got shitfaced.”

Covering my face with both palms, the memory of dancing on Vicious’s

coffee table assaulted my mind. I was so goddamn drunk I thought it would be a terrific idea to join my cheerleading friends who danced on the table. *They* knew what they were doing. *I* looked like I was swatting away a thousand imaginary flies. This resulted in me trying to mimic their movements—and failing—smacking them here and there in the process, until Vicious asked, “What the fuck is the little LeBlanc sister doing? Having a seizure on my table? Someone get her down before she hurts the other girls.” Not even a second later, I felt Dean digging his muscular shoulder into my thighs, throwing me over it and spinning me in place until I screamed for him to put me down.

“Whatever. It was hard to fit in as a junior who transferred from Virginia. I had to make sacrifices. Do you remember this song?”

I snatched the laptop from his hands and played another video. “Roses” by OutKast. Dean burst out laughing, his eyes crinkling with mirth.

“Do it,” I prompted. It was the time *he* was the one to dance. And dance he did at Vicious’s party, mimicking the band’s choreography from the video. It was a part of a lost bet—duh—but it was so hilarious, the memory sat in my mind eleven years later, crisp like it was yesterday. I could still smell the alcohol and hormones wafting through the air from that night. “Please, Dean.” I squeezed my palms together. “Deep down in your brain, under all the dead cells courtesy of your weed habit and the porno movies, I’m sure you still remember the dance.”

“Only because you asked so nicely.” He jumped off of the hood again and said, “Play it from the start,” pretending to gel his hair and check himself out in an invisible mirror. It was all so surreal, I couldn’t help but giggle like a schoolgirl, which only made his already-huge smile widen.

I hit *play*, moving my eyes from the original video to Dean’s dancing, the ocean glittering behind him. He did almost everything right, from the part where he slides to his knees at the beginning of the song to the very end, barely messing up the composition. My stomach hurt from laughing, but his face was serious. And when the song ended, he stalked toward me, grabbing the laptop.

“My turn.”

I checked the time on my cell phone. “Okay, but then we have to go. It’s getting late and we need to get ready for the rehearsal.”

It was already four. I couldn’t believe we spent so much time together without even noticing. *Dangerous chemistry*, the words settled in my brain

like thick dust. *Be careful, Rosie.*

“Yeah, yeah, Princess Saint and Prince Dickhead will have us right on time. Don’t worry.” He waved me off, his gaze fixated on the screen. “Drops of Jupiter” by Train started playing. My smile faded.

“I don’t remember listening to this song together.” I swallowed. He moved between my legs, his waist in a perfect position for me to wrap myself around it, but I didn’t, my eyes desperately staring at his lips. We were always a breath away from a kiss.

“*We didn’t. You* listened to it one time when you thought you were alone at home. I dropped by to give Millie her textbook back. The song kind of stuck in my head after that, because I kept wondering what the fuck you were looking for. I couldn’t figure you out, Rosie. When I saw other guys hitting on you, it killed me. Because whatever it was you needed, I didn’t want you to find it in *them.*”

Shamefully, the feeling was mutual. Every time he brushed Millie off and cancelled on her, my heart swelled a little. *She is not the one*, I convinced myself. *I am.*

“You had no right to be jealous.” I looked down at my black flip-flops. He shook his head no.

“Never claimed any differently. And you had no right to be jealous, either. Yet here we are.”

There we were.

I moved quickly, bypassing any attempt he may have had to kiss me. Hopping in the Volvo, I buckled in and pulled my knees to my chest, burying my face between them, praying like hell Dean couldn’t read my mind. The drive back to the house was wordless. The fact he hadn’t tried to sleep with me again proved that maybe Dean was a man of his word.

Then, when his tires screeched to a halt and we both got out, I said, “I think we should stop this.”

“I think we should not,” he retorted, his voice dry and resolute.

“We’re playing a risky game.” I swallowed. He opened the door for me and smirked. “Then it’s a good thing I’m the best fucking player in town.”



I wore a deep purple maxi dress Millie had gifted me to the rehearsal party, sitting pretty, sandwiched between Mama and Daddy. They, too, wore fancy clothes. The rehearsal dinner was scheduled way before the actual wedding, because half the people who were invited had an actual wedding to attend the day before. Todos Santos was small, and everyone was a someone you wanted to mingle with. Keeping up appearances was crucial.

The venue where Vicious and Millie were set to get married was in a vineyard resort that had suffered a serious identity crisis. The outside area had a Hawaiian setting, with palm trees, lush grass, and colorful flower arrangements everywhere. There was a dinner hall the size of a ballroom, swans, fountains, and other things that made it look like a cross between heaven and a Disney movie. Then we got inside and the place looked totally antique. We sat at a ripped-from-sixteenth-century-Europe type of fancy dining table under chandeliers the size of Mumbai.

Mama was nagging me about New York again, threatening to pull the plug on Vicious's assistance with my health care. The urge to burn my bra and march the streets before she took my right to vote was strong that day.

Daddy was raving, probably to make me feel uncomfortable. Something about how Millie was such a thoughtful child. Subtle as a drunk elephant, as you can see.

My sister and Vicious sat next to each other, holding hands. He kept rubbing her back, as if consoling her. She did look a little green and a lot sick. Perhaps it was the nerves. I'd be nervous, too, if I was about to marry Satan's spawn. Maybe I was just extending the disloyalty of Daddy to Emilia, but I suspected her, too.

If she really was pregnant, that meant everyone in her immediate environment knew. Everyone but me.

Dean waltzed in ten minutes late, accompanied by Jaime and his family—Melody and their daughter, Daria—and Trent Rexroth. Against my best intentions, my eyes clung to Dean desperately before scanning the rest. Trent looked busy with his phone, and Dean's eyes scanned the room—looking for me, I assumed, and also foolishly hoped—so when he finally found me, my heart tumbled and stopped.

I looked away.

He turned around and greeted a man I didn't know.

The spell was gone.

A hostess showed him to his seat, grinning way too wide for my liking and checking his left hand for a wedding band.

Since Dean sat at the far end of the table, I had to concentrate on not glancing his way all the time. Luckily, Gladys and Sydney sat opposite from me. Sydney filled me in on what happened in Todos Santos while Millie and I were gone and Gladys told us her favorite L.A. tales. We were two starters and one entrée in when the event coordinator had decided to have us start making toasts.

Daddy made the first toast to the happy couple. He raised his champagne glass to his eye level and talked about what an amazing couple Millie and Vicious were, leaving out the part where he couldn't stand his soon-to-be son-in-law up until the moment the latter slipped a ring with a diamond the size of his mansion on his daughter's finger. Then Vicious raised a toast, followed by the leading best man—Jaime—who toasted the bride. When it was my time to toast the groom, I stood and smiled, clutching the champagne glass in a death grip. My knuckles were snow-white.

“Don't mess it up,” Mama gritted through a toothy smile. My grin didn't falter, but something snapped inside me. Another petal fell down in my heart. Millie's eyes shone as she looked at me, and my heart picked up speed.

Screw them. This is for Millie. I will not let her down.

“Those of you who know me know that I'm a huge fan of my sister. She's my rock, my soul mate, and the reason that I'm still standing here, alive and well. When her heart beats for someone, mine falls in line and thumps for them too. Baron, there's one thing I cannot take from you—you make her happy. Glowing, even.” I scanned his face for a reaction, but there was none. Maybe my sister wasn't pregnant. Maybe I was losing my goddamn mind. “Some loves are old, and sure, others are new and frantic. Yours is both, and that's what made your feelings toward one another outsoar everything. Even the past.” I swallowed, realizing that I, too, wanted to erase my past with a brand new future. “I wish you joy, freedom, health, and wealth, though I think you're all covered with the last one,” I trailed off, and the room burst out laughing. A few people clapped. I suppressed a desperate cough before I continued. “So I guess I would like to make a toast to two of my favorite people. To the woman I love more than life itself, and to the man who spends his life making her happy. Baron and Millie, you don't need my words to make it work. You have this thing covered. But just in case, I wish you everything you wish for yourself and more. Now down these glasses and

have some fun.”

Taking a sip from my drink, my eyes wandered to Dean for reassurance. Some people cheered me on, but it was Dean I wanted to impress. He raised his glass to his lips, staring at me from across the room, and I shook my head, the gesture almost invisible. *No drinking.*

He put his drink down and licked his lower lip, his eyes saying, *but yes to fucking.*

I was going to take care of him. The thought was as irrational as the idea itself. Why would I want to, and why would he let me? But at the same time, I couldn't see him throw his health away like this. Not when I truly knew what health meant.

Sitting back down, Mama flung an arm over my shoulder and squeezed me into her chest in half-a-hug I was quick to return. I was melting back into my former, happy self before she whispered into my ear, “Thank you for not ruining this, sweetheart. Daddy and I were worried.”

Pale, I sank into the silky chair, my throat paper-dry. My phone flashed with a text, and I grabbed it like it was my lifeline.

Dean
I need to kiss you again.

Rosie
You can't kiss me again.

Dean
It's all I fucking think about.

It's all I think about too, I wanted to scream.

Rosie
Tell me something interesting. Something about stars.

Dean
Mars is covered with rust, and your tits will soon be covered with my cum. Tell me something about music.

Rosie
Slash once auditioned for the band Poison but didn't want to join them because they wanted him to wear makeup.

Dean
This game sucks. I still want to kiss you.

Dammit, my heart. I don't think it was equipped to deal with a guy like him.

I looked up and watched him. His phone was by his side, but he was engaged in a casual conversation with a beautiful brunette. My chest tightened. At the same time, I reminded myself that Dean could do whatever the hell he wanted.

I looked away, even though my eyes kept begging for me to steal another glance. The rehearsal went smoothly until this point, and I wanted to get it over with and go back home, preferably to a corner in the mansion where my parents couldn't find me.

It was Trent's turn to make a toast. At that point, it seemed like every living member in SoCal was required to wish something to the happy couple. I wondered if it was because Vicious didn't have any parents to toast for him. His father died a little over a year ago, and his stepmother wasn't in the picture. At least I had an excuse to let my eyes roam toward Dean and the mystery brunette. They were no longer talking, and my phone vibrated next to my plate.

Dean

If looks could stab, this chick would be dead now. This is happening. We are happening. We can take the long, frustrating route—but you will be punished for that. In bed. Or we can make it pain-free. Your call.

I didn't answer his text. Again. My eyes rose to Trent Rexroth, who flashed a shallow smile and started talking. He was mid-sentence when his phone chimed and he looked down to read a text message, frowning.

The champagne glass slipped between his fingers before he caught it midair—killer reflexes, but I wasn't surprised—and placed it down on the table. He then picked up the phone, turned around, and rushed to the entrance door.

Dean immediately followed him, and before I knew it, Jaime and Vicious were gone, too.

Murmurs bubbled from every corner of the table, and Daddy tried to calm the storm by yelling louder than necessary for everyone to stay cool.

Interesting approach.

I looked down and texted Dean.

Rosie

What happened?

He didn't answer.

Panic ran marathons in my veins, and my thoughts wandered to the worst place possible. Did something happen to Luna, Trent's daughter?

"Go see what's going on." Mama read my mind, elbowing my ribs. "Your sister is worried. I don't want her upset."

I rose to my feet and light-jogged to the entrance. I didn't particularly feel like snooping around, but I felt like arguing with Mama even less. Besides, someone had to check on them. It was just unfortunate that I was the nosy one.

The outside area was vast, with a white, soft aisle that was ready for the weekend, a wild garden, two vineyards from each side, and artificial waterfalls enveloping the picturesque scenery.

And there, on a stairway leading to the ballroom, sat Trent Rexroth. He looked pale and shaky and nothing like his strong, poised self. An empty shell of the football hero turned self-made millionaire hottie. His eyes glittered with unshed tears, and he kept repeating himself, his face buried in his hands.

"She can't fucking do this to me. What the fuck!"

"What are you doing here?" Vicious asked when he saw me, his hand on Trent's back, squatting down next to Dean and Jaime. "Get back inside."

"Don't fucking talk to her like that." Dean bared his teeth, lashing at Vicious more aggressively than necessary.

Rooted in place, I said, "Millie's worried. I came to check that everything is okay."

"Nothing is okay." Jaime paced, his body radiating rage, but refrained from adding any more information. Dean stood up to his full height and sauntered toward me, clasp my arm in his warm hand and ushering me back to the empty hall leading to the ballroom.

"Mama and Daddy sent me to investigate." A blush crawled up my cheeks, and who the hell was this girl and what had she done to my old self? I wanted the latter back. She wouldn't take any of Vicious's crap, either.

"Ignore that idiot. You haven't done anything wrong." Dean ran his palm up and down my arm, making my flesh sizzle. "Tell Millie that everything is fine."

"Is it?" I lifted my eyebrows, tilting my head to the side.

"No," he admitted, his jaw flexed. He looked so breakable at that

moment, I wasn't entirely sure it was him I was looking at. He normally carried himself with an invincible halo, the kind of self-assurance him and his friends exhibited like an American Express black card.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaning into him without even meaning to.

"Val left," he said, his head hanging down as he twisted his fingers inside his hair and tugged, his skull probably stinging with the force of his hand. "She fucking left, Rosie. The babysitter found Luna all by herself, in an empty apartment. No clothes or shoes or mother anywhere around. Sitting in an overflowing diaper, crying her fucking lungs out. Fuck knows how long it's been since she ate something. She was crying so hard she lost her voice. The sitter took her to the hospital to get checked. Trent's boarding a plane in an hour to bring her here."

"Jesus." I slapped a hand over my mouth. His cut cheekbones were tainted red, and he looked wary. For a second, I thought he would say something else. Or maybe even cry. Even if one, lonely tear that would fall from his eyelash, as if jumping off a cliff. But he did neither, squaring his shoulders, fixing his halo and clearing his throat.

"Honestly? It's for the best," he said, mentally knocking me on my ass. *What?* "Not everyone was born to be parents. Good on Luna. It would have hurt more if Val fucked off when she was six or seven. Bet she won't even be mad at her when she grows up."

I took a second to look at him—really look at him—trying to read whatever it was that was written on his face, but it was gibberish. A mixture of too many feelings, too many regrets, too much everything, crammed into one, tortured expression.

"Don't give me that look, Rosie. Trust me. Luna doesn't need Val."

"Okay." I pushed his head to the crook of my neck in a hug. Pain seeped through his strong body, and I willingly gulped it, the need to feel him overwhelming. "It's okay, Dean."

"She's better off," he repeated, his voice strangled with agony.

I was blinded. Gone for. Torn apart and thrown to the floor like confetti.

I wanted to take what he was feeling and swallow it like a bitter pill. It didn't suit him. Even with the alcohol, weed, and empty fucks, Dean Cole didn't do sadness.

He wasn't Sirius.

He was planet Earth.

He was oxygen.

He was *everything*.

I allowed his face to disappear inside my shoulder and embraced him until there was no more space between us. We melted into each other, his heartbeats against my skin, my hair in his nose, his fingers on my waist. Our bodies joined together, even more so than in the red truck.

Dean didn't produce any tears, but that didn't mean he didn't cry. He did, and I cried with him. For Luna, who was only a year old, and was already going through something more traumatic than most people experience in a lifetime. For Trent, who was always somehow being forced to grow up, always the one to get screwed over. And I cried for me, because I knew, right there and then, that a part of me was already his despite my best efforts. I never stopped loving Dean Cole. Not even for one damn moment. I just convinced myself that I stopped caring.

Until I didn't.

Until now.

Chapter Fourteen

Dean

FROM SADNESS GROWS LIFE. THAT'S what my dad always said.

That night, I slept in Rosie's room.

We didn't have sex. We didn't mess around. We didn't even kiss.

But our legs were tangled and our skin touched and it felt more real than any other shit I experienced in any bed, at any time. In the morning, I had to sneak so I could hop in a taxi to the airport, but I did leave her a note.

This is happening, Sirius.

Sincerely,

—Your Bronze Horseman



The flight to Vegas was a blur.

I was sober and conscious yesterday—the day I had spent with Rosie—and it felt weird...but nice. The high I got was natural, from imagining her dressing like a stripper, cuffing me to my bed, and sitting on my face until I couldn't breathe and her pussy was completely numb. But then Trent got that phone call and my world had collapsed.

Val's betrayal sweltered in my stomach along with what Trent said after he'd found out. "She's never going to see her kid again unless she commits to being a parent first. I've had enough of her bullshit."

As much as it pained me to admit it, he was fucking right, too. You couldn't half-ass parenthood. It wasn't a lazy Sunday morning fuck. Either you were completely in or you were completely out. Anything in-between was a mindfuck to the kid, and I had to remember that, now more than ever.

Trent flew out to Chicago to get Luna—his parents were waiting for them in Todos Santos and were going to help him pull through this nightmare—and Jaime and I immediately called off the bachelor party. It was Trent who threatened us with physical violence to go through with our original Vegas plans. His reasons:

1. He was going to Chicago to discharge his daughter from the hospital, where she stayed with a very freaked-out, thoroughly scarred babysitter, so it wasn't like he was loitering around waiting for our royal asses to come hold his hand.
2. Vicious was only going to get married once (considering his bad temper and fuck-all attitude, we all knew that there will not be a second Millie to tolerate his shit).
3. #\$\$%%VTCF#\$\$^\$^&@3. Val fucking bailed on his daughter and he had no time to deal with our first-world, white-men problems, anyway.

It was a Sunday in August, and The Strip was bustling with tourists, drunk half-naked girls, and angry, radical Christians with a mic trying to pull all the sinners back to the light. After we dumped our duffel bags in our presidential suite, Vicious toed his leather Oxfords off and said, "I love my future wife, I really fucking do, but I hope we're not going to bump into her annoying-ass friends too many times this trip. I need to see more of her younger sister like I need a bullet to my fucking head."

"How do you mean?" I took off my Rolex and multi-colored Versace shirt, heading to one of the bathrooms. I needed to throw up and take a shower to feel human again. Nina had called me multiple times during the short flight—fifty? Sixty? I stopped counting—leaving several voice messages I didn't bother listening to.

The shit with Trent had reminded me of how much I needed to stay away from her *and* him, even if curiosity burned every bone in my goddamn body.

It just wasn't fair, and even though my dad was right—*life isn't fair*—I was the one to call the shots on this one, and my decision was to never meet him or her.

And that decision was fucking final.

“They're going to be here in Vegas. Rosie changed the plans at the last minute. They'll be staying at this hotel.”

I pivoted, brushing a finger over my lower lip.

“Baby LeBlanc is in Sin City?”

Vicious let loose a malicious grin, scanning me with his cold, dead eyes. “Will be in two hours. They took the next flight in. Why, what the fuck are you going to do about it, man?”

“Whatever she'll let me.” I kicked my shoes off.

“Make Rosie run it by Emilia first.” He threw a soft pack of Marlboros we used for the blunts—and missed—purposely. “I know Em doesn't give half a fuck about you, but I don't want her feeling betrayed by her sister.”

Jaime strolled into the vast space from one of the bathrooms before I had the chance to inform Vicious that I neither answer to his ass nor to Millie's.

“Trent is going to be a little fucked-up after this.” Jaime sighed, picking up the discarded Marlboros.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.” Vicious turned on his heel, walking away from the room, probably to get into the shower himself. Jaime bumped his shoulder into mine, unscrewing a bottle of water and bringing it to his lips.

“Does he know you're fucking his girl's sister?”

“What gave it away, Sherlock?” I snagged the Marlboros from his hand and texted my guy in Las Vegas simultaneously, asking him for weed ASAP. Even if I wasn't going to smoke, it wasn't fair to deprive Jaime and Vicious of their favorite pastime.

Jaime plopped down on the arm of the plush, white sofa and took another sip of his water.

“Talk about Captain Obvious. Besides, you eye-fucked her at the rehearsal dinner when no one was looking. It was subtle, which means you actually give a damn about what she thinks about you.” He paused, his eyebrows dropping down. “But I paid close attention, so even though you tried to hide it, I still saw it. You wanted to bend her against the table and fuck her raw with her face pressed against someone else's entrée.”

Thank you, Jaime. I was going to pin that thought and tuck it into my spank bank for a rainy day.

“Is she worth the hassle?” Jaime cocked his head sideways, lifting one eyebrow. I patted his shoulder. Fucking adorable, this guy was.

“She *is* the hassle.”

“Happy for you, bro. It’s been a while since you were occupied with something other than booze and work.” He grinned. “But we still need to talk about the potential complications. Last time Vicious and you went head-to-head, you compromised Fiscal Heights Holdings in the process. I won’t let it happen again.”

Refraining from correcting him—I didn’t go head-to-head with Vicious, he hired and slept with my ex-girlfriend without my knowledge after separating us while we were kids—I blinked, showing him that his words were barely acknowledged. I was always under control, and Fiscal Heights Holdings *never* suffered. Most importantly, no one—no goddamn exceptions—was going to come between me and what I wanted.

My phone was out of my pocket again, this time texting her.

Dean

What room will you be staying in?

Rosie

One where you’re not welcome. We need to keep it platonic.

That would be a definite no. That was like settling for looking at a mouthwatering cheesecake without ever eating it. I was going to eat it again and again and a-motherfucking-gain. Shit, I was going on a binge.

Dean

Don’t be cute. We’ve already established that we’re happening. Now you’re just punishing me for dating your sister. Tell me I’m wrong.

She didn’t answer. Of course, she didn’t. She was hot for me. More than that. She was hot for all of me—not just my body—and the feeling was mutual. What we shared yesterday? It wasn’t something that happened with a Kennedy or a Natasha. Fuck, it didn’t even happen with Emilia. Rosie and I were connected by an invisible fuse. Even when I was dating her sister. Even when she had a boyfriend and lived downstairs and I was ten floors up boning my way into some kind of a record. I couldn’t wait for the second we exploded, because when we did...*fireworks*. The sparks were already there. She could bullshit me all she wanted, but she felt it, too.

Dean
Fucking going to devour you, Baby LB.

Rosie
DEAN. Change of subject. Fun fact about astronomy?

Dean
The Milky Way is whirling rapidly at approximately 100 million km per hour, and you're about to get my milk splashed in your cunt. Music?

Rosie
Your heartbeat mimics the beats of the music you're listening to. Dean Cole is not that wrong about his theory regarding my sister. He would have to work hard for a repeat.

I closed our text conversation and opened a new one with Sydney, who I knew from high school, asking her to give me all the deets. When they were going to land and settle into rooms, what their schedule was like. I told her not to share it with anyone, because we were planning a surprise for Millie.

When really, I was planning a surprise for Rosie.

I was going to eat my cake, and keep it. Impossible? Just watch.



God bless Sydney Whatsername.

Even though I was oblivious to her existence back when we were in high school (the only reason I had her number was because Millie opened a special text group for people who attended the rehearsal dinner), in Vegas she quickly became one of my favorite people. For one thing, Sydney told me where the girls would be that night. Since Vicious didn't want any strippers at his party (he always hated people, and especially people who tried to touch him. Besides, he was a bastard, but a loyal one), we were all planning to go to a fancy restaurant and hit the casino until morning.

I figured we could crash the club they were going to after that Britney Spears show. Weren't the dancers humping one another the whole time? Thank you, Ms. Spears, for prepping my girl's libido for our late-night

escapade.

It didn't surprise me that Rosie brought her fucking A-game to the table and burnt it down with ace after ace. While the men were drinking and smoking in the presidential suite, talking about Trent with shitty porn playing in the background like we were fucking sixteen, Rosie had somehow managed to take the girls on a special cupcake adventure, a tour of a famous tattoo shop, a Jacuzzi party, and a show.

I knew all that info because Sydney Motherfucking LastnameIcantremember gave me hourly updates, assuming Emilia, the bride, was in for a pleasant surprise. And she was. I was going to bring her groom along with me. But my intentions were purely selfish—I was after her younger sister.

“You should probably let Vic know before he loses his shit,” Jaime said to me when I got out of the shower, ironing the collar of his crisp shirt in front of the spotless, floor-to-ceiling mirror. I chuckled, dropping the towel and stepping into my boxers. Jaime had seen my dick so many times, he could probably recognize it in a police lineup with a hundred more suspects. Our football days meant we were all comfortable with each other. Too comfortable, maybe.

“Let him know what?” I played dumb. Vicious already knew, but I liked fucking with my friends as much as the next HotHole. “Are you talking about the Erickson-Estavez deal?” We were working with two giant engineering companies on the verge of merging together, and Vicious stayed out of the loop, with his upcoming wedding and all. Out of the four of us, Jaime and I were probably the hardest workers. Jaime, because he was just a responsible little shit who had to get everything right and perfect. Me, because I had no kids or other responsibilities, so drowning in numbers and initiating business calls with Asia and Australia in the middle of the night were sacrifices I was happy to make.

“He's drafting the Erickson-Estavez contract as we speak. You know exactly what. More specifically *who*—I'm talking about.”

“He knows, and he's okay with it, but even if he wasn't, it's my life, and it's my business,” I reminded him, shrugging into my navy dress shirt, buttoning the cuff links and adding, “Also, last time I checked, he was the very person to try to steal my girlfriend from under my nose when we were still together, including—but not limited to—kissing Millie while we were dating. Just to be on the safe side of being a full-blown dick, he kissed Rosie,

too. So, really, other than trying to shove his tongue into my mom's mouth, he pretty much tainted all the women I care for." Saved for Payton and Keeley, my sisters. Truth was, Keeley had told me one drunken night that Vicious made out with her when we were juniors. It definitely gave me a little shove as far as my morals went when it came to pursuing Millie.

If nothing else, my little speech zipped Jaime's mouth. Rosie was fucking mine. Every part of her. From the tips of her toes to the baby fine hair on the top of her head. Every single bit was going to be claimed and marked. And the beautiful thing was that no one had a say in this shit. No one but Rosie herself.

"Here's the address to the club." I threw my phone with the Yelp app into Jaime's hands, and he caught it mid-air. "Call the limo service downstairs. I'll go make sure Vic is ready."

"Dean." Jaime grabbed my wrist as I turned to walk through the door to get my pants.

"Baby," I purred into his face, smirking. "I know I'm irresistible, but I'm sure Mel is more flexible, with that ballerina background and all." Jaime narrowed his eyes at me and threw my wrist like it was dirt.

"Jesus, can you un-creep yourself for a second? Listen, I'm the last person to lecture you about who to be with."

"Because you fucked my lit teacher when I was eighteen." I nodded on a laugh. "Married her, knocked her up, and almost gave your mom a heart attack in the process. Yeah, agreed. Neither you nor Vicious can tell me what to do."

"But." He raised his voice, and damn, Jaime Followhill had some authority in him, I'd almost forgotten. "I swear to God, Dean, if this is just another one-night stand, and you're going to screw around with the dynamics of our group—with our families and friends—for a quick bang..."

"It's not just a fuck," I gritted out. I needed to remind myself that Jaime had a good reason for poking the subject. I'd been known as the one to shove his dick into anything that has two legs and a dress, so what the fuck was I expecting? But I wasn't Vicious. I wasn't blind to what had been in front of me for years. I owned up to what I wanted from this girl from day one.

I never pursued anyone this hard, and with Rosie, I didn't even decide to do it. It was like Jimmy Fallon's career. It just kind of happened before anyone could stop it.

"What are your intentions?" Jaime asked, holding my gaze, serious as a

fucking funeral. *What are my intentions?* Living in London made him sound like a British lord or some shit. Making fun of him should have been first priority, but a part of me wanted him—and other people—to stop fucking talking to me like I was a male hooker who refused to slow down until his dick fell off.

“Jaime,” I snarled, nostrils flaring. I got in his face, feeling like a raging eighteen- year-old again. “I didn’t ask you what the fuck your intentions were when you bent Mel over her desk and fucked the shit out of her in the classroom, so you don’t get to ask me the same question. Rosie is a big girl. People need to stop acting like she’s an old pet no one wants. What we have between us is ours. Not yours. Not Vicious’s, and not Emilia’s. Anyone who thinks differently is welcome to settle this with me. And, true to our brotherhood’s fashion, I won’t be nice, polite, or apologetic about it. Am I clear?”

I didn’t wait for an answer. I turned around and walked away. I had a date to go to.

She just didn’t know it yet.

Chapter Fifteen

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Lusting after someone. So badly your center aches, your eyesight is blurry and your morals are thrown out the window.

MY SISTER WASN'T DRINKING.

That was the only thing that occupied my mind. Not the fact that we had a kick-ass time. Not the amazing Britney Spears show. Not the distorted, tall, radioactive-looking alcoholic drinks we carried with us all day. But the fact that Millie did not consume a drop of them, or any other type of alcohol.

We had French roots. For us, partying without wine or champagne was like dancing without limbs.

Glaring at her from the corner of a loud, crowded nightclub with neon lights and sweaty, half-naked bodies, I sucked on my straw, inhaling another cocktail.

“Your sister is sooo knocked up.” Elle popped her big, pink gum while checking herself in the reflection of a shimmering piece of hale-shaped mirrors draping from the ceiling. We were all wearing the same type of dress—pink, Emilia’s favorite color—with sweetheart neckline and ruffled layers of thin, soft-fabric. I found one at a thrift shop. It screamed Millie to the sky and back, so I purchased it, contacted the brand, and ordered four more for all of us.

“She’s not,” I insisted, but it was futile. Even I didn’t believe myself. “I’m the closest person to her. She’d never hide it from me.”

“She’s not drinking, looks like crap, and she ate a cupcake with fried pickles on top for lunch. I rest my case, but if you need me to make her pee

on a stick, I know a guy who makes things happen.” Elle leaned on the wall beside me.

I glared at my sister. Millie shook her ass with Gladys and Sydney on the dance floor, flipping her sweaty hair back and forth and mouthing the words to “The Thong Song” by Sisqó. Maybe the DJ had lost a bet that night. No one knows. But I was in no mood to be a music snob.

Elle patted my shoulder. “There, there. You have a good buzz going on, and you don’t want to venture into plastered territory. Put down the drink. Let’s dance a little.”

She pulled my hand, and I didn’t protest, because what was the point?

Elle and I joined Millie, Gladys, and Sydney, and we danced for an hour or so. Millie said we needed to take a taco break, and since no one had ever said ‘no’ to taco, we all grabbed a table at the restaurant section of the club and stuffed our faces.

I excused myself to the bathroom, and when I came back, saw Gladys leaning down in the booth we were seated in, running her hand over Millie’s stomach. Sydney threw her head back, laughed, and motioned with her hands, making the illusion of huge tits.

My sister was pregnant.

Her friends knew it.

My parents knew it.

Everyone knew it.

Everyone...but me.



Dean

What’s your fascination with music, anyway?

My fingers shook with anger, but that wasn’t the only reason why I didn’t answer him. My gaze wandered to Millie’s face, and I pursed my lips. The rest of the girls had gone back to the dance floor, and it was just my sister and me. I asked her if there was anything she wanted to share, once more. She said another taco and laughed. The pit of my stomach twisted, then sizzled

with rage. She was a liar, like all of them. There was really no difference between her and Daddy. Well, there was. Daddy, at least, stopped the charade and told me exactly what he thought about me. Millie was still a coward who wanted to protect my precious feelings by lying to me.

Fuck it.

I needed Dean.

Dean made things go away. He was weed. He was alcohol. He was music. Only a thousand times more addictive than all of the above.

Rosie

Listening to good music is like a drug. It releases hormones that make you feel happy. What's your fascination with astronomy?

Dean

There were times in my life, dark times when I had to spend my summers in a place I didn't want to be. The nights were long and boring, so I went out and laid down on the hay. The stars were the only things to keep me company, and I guess I got a little attached to them. They reminded me that under the sky, there were better things waiting for me. The people I loved, the places I wanted to visit, all the girls I was going to fuck...

Rosie

A hopeless romantic. I'm getting chills. Stop it.

Dean

You'll be getting more chills in a second. Turn around.

Rosie

?

Dean

Simple English, Baby LB. Turn around.

He was there.

My heart jumped to my throat, but at the same time, hot lava melted in my lower belly, washing over the hurt and pain, creating an urgent need I was desperate to take care of. It was completely possible that this man was becoming more and more attractive with every passing second. I watched him in a navy blue crisp shirt and gray dress pants, ambling toward me like a force that was about to rip roofs and panties in its wake.

I was so focused on Dean, I hadn't even noticed the girls were back at the table and the guys were there, too. Sans Trent, obviously.

Vicious took his place by Emilia. Jaime sat sandwiched between Sydney

and Gladys, offering them a curt nod, and Dean remained standing, staring at me without even hiding what was in his eyes. *Shameless*.

“I’ll get you all some drinks.” I shot up from my seat, but I wasn’t feeling it anymore. That goody-two-shoes act. It wasn’t me. I wasn’t good and I wasn’t nice, and tonight, I was going to fuck my sister’s ex-boyfriend. An angry fuck that would erase the last few days from my memory, even if for a moment or two.

As I passed Dean, he bumped his arm against my shoulder. Every hair on my body stood on end, goosebumps prickling my skin.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I want?” he hissed into my face, licking his full bottom lip, making it shiny, a forbidden glossy apple.

“I don’t care what you want, Dean. You’re getting water. As I said, you can self-destruct all you want, but not under my shift.”

“Point made. Let it be known, though, that you can do whatever you want on my shaft.”

“No drinking or smoking,” I repeated solemnly, giving him the stink eye.

I could hear the smile in his words as he said, “You fucking care,” watching my back as I scurried along.

Yes, I do, I thought, bitterly. Wishing I hadn’t. *I really do*.

Things were about to get messy.

Ruckus was going to live up to his name.



Dean

Ten Years Ago

School was over. So were Millie and I.

Jaime moved to Texas for college, taking a souvenir from home along with him—our lit teacher, Melody Greene. Trent had surgery on his leg and

was bedbound for the rest of the summer. And Vicious...Vicious went fucking nuts, as if *he* was the one she had abandoned.

After Millie ran away, Rosie seemed to have been pissed off with the world. I wanted to be her punching bag. She wouldn't let me.

There were other things I wanted, but it wasn't the appropriate time to go after them. So I settled for being there for her, one fucked-up soul for another.

I wasn't particularly mad at my ex-girlfriend for ditching my ass. As far as I knew, she left me for someone else. That should've made me go ballistic, but for the life of me, I couldn't find that fucking frenzy Vicious was simmering with.

Rosie said I should stop coming to check in on her, but that was like telling me I couldn't touch my dick. Entirely fucking impossible.

I came for her every day.

We would sit outside by the pool in complete silence.

I wanted to talk to her about the stars, but I didn't.

I wanted to talk to her about our futures, but I didn't.

I wanted to talk to her about us, but there was no us, and her creep-o-meter was probably dinging like mad with me coming for her every afternoon.

One day, I saw Vicious walking past his manicured lawn while I made my way across the stone path to the servants' house. He stopped and stared at me, blinking like he'd just seen a ghost.

Approaching me in slow steps, he tucked his hands in his pockets, assessing me through cold, vigilant eyes, preparing for battle. I puffed my chest, fixing my fake smile on. He wanted war? He was going to get one.

"You really think you stand a chance with the mouthy one after what happened with Millie?" he gritted, unable to let the word *fuck*, a word he used so *fucking* much, leave his mouth. Because he knew. Vicious knew that I took Millie's virginity—she asked me to. I had a feeling that it was more about getting rid of her V-card than it was about me—and this was the one thing he could never erase from the pages of history. Not even Baron Spencer could tamper with reality.

I scrubbed my chin. "I know my chances with Baby LeBlanc are about as fat as your chances with Millie. I'm here to make sure she's okay. It's a foreign concept to you, but sometimes people just want to be nice to other people. What crawled up your ass, anyway? You look...guilty." I furrowed

my brows. Everything about my stance was ready to pounce and rip him to shreds.

“*Guilty?*” He laughed, but it wasn’t his usual laughter. The looming, self-assured one. So the bastard *did* know something. Fuck if I had a clue what it was. “Now why would *I* feel guilty? You were the one who went after my girl.”

“Your girl,” I repeated, letting an incredulous chuckle escape. It felt oddly liberating to address the elephant in the room. The same elephant that had managed to crush and ruin every single fucking thing in our lives during senior year. “Hey, asshat, newsflash: Emilia LeBlanc was everyone’s favorite moving target until I slapped my name on her ass. I had a suspicion that you liked her, yeah. I had a feeling it was even something more, but from the outside?” I took a step toward him, and we were dangerously close to fucking up each other’s faces and rolling on the grass until one of us was bleeding to death. “You ruined her life. All you said was that she was a white-trash hillbilly. All you did was make her feel unwelcome. Did I want to tap it? Yeah.” I shrugged. “I’m a teenager with a working dick. But, more than anything, I wanted to make sure she wouldn’t hang herself on your account.”

“How noble of you.” His chest bumped against mine, and we *were* going to war, now I knew. “Poor fucking Ruckus.” Vicious brought his fists to his eyes and pretended to wipe invisible tears. “Had a bad time with Emilia all those months?”

“Nah,” I said, pushing him away. He pushed me back. I grinned. “She was great, but then, you’d never know, right?” He swallowed hard.

“Maybe she ran off because you’re shit in bed,” he said. Real mature.

“Or maybe she ran off because she was tired of *you*,” I retorted. His face twisted in pain, and he *was* guilty. Of what, I didn’t know, but he was not innocent. That much was for sure. I decided to poke the subject. Get his angle on things.

“How does it feel, Vicious? To be the loser who would never know what the girl of his dream tastes like?”

“You would know, Cole. We’re in the same boat, and this ship is sinking.” Now it was his turn to get in my face and—again—I didn’t even blink. I wasn’t afraid of Vicious. I saw through his layers and knew exactly who he was.

A guy like me.

Who was hiding behind walls of muscle, good looks, fancy cars, perfect

clothes, rich parents, and dark mystery. You can never be afraid of what you are. That was why I was the only one out of my friends to defy him repeatedly.

“You fucked up everything,” I whispered into his face, and I saw it in his ink-blue eyes that he knew I was right, because there was something whirling in them. Something that threatened to drown whoever dared to come close. “You fucked up, and now we’re all fucked.” I pushed him, turning around and stalking to Rosie’s door.

By the time she opened the door, Vicious was gone. Probably up in his room, smoking a fat one.

Rosie didn’t look surprised to see me. But she did gasp when I cupped both her cheeks, stepped into her house, and kissed the shit out of her without warning.

The kiss wasn’t just rough; it was downright brutal. It lacked affection in the same way it leaked desperation.

I was helpless.

Careless.

Ruined.

And not by the sister I was expected to love.

She gasped for air. I gasped for her. Our tongues swirled together, engaged, enamored, under a spell of black magic.

I held her by the back of her neck. Maybe too hard. How did I not know my body could respond to another person like this? Every nerve ending in my body was on fire. Her knees failed. She collapsed, but held onto my shirt at the very last minute, somehow holding herself together physically. Mentally, though...we were both in too deep.

Mentally, we were fucked.

It hadn’t even registered to me that she returned the kiss for a long, intoxicating minute before she pulled away, her eyes widening in shock and fear. She laced her fingers through the sides of her head and pulled at her roots, her beautiful, puffy lips falling open.

“Oh, my God.” She sucked in a breath. I felt her in that kiss, and the things she’d given me...she could never take them back. They were mine, and I was going to take the rest of her, even if it wasn’t that day. Even if it would take a fucking lifetime.

If she has a lifetime, asshole.

“Holy shit,” she croaked again. “What have I done? Get out!”

“Rosie...”

“Get. The. Hell. Out, Dean. Seriously, if you come here again...”

“You bet your ass I am,” I said firmly. “I’m going after you even if it takes me years to have you.”

“You won’t.” There was something in her voice, or maybe it was the way she pushed me away, that made it all very final. “I will make sure of it, one way or the other. You’re dead to me, Cole. Dead from the moment you put your hands on my sister. There won’t be a tomorrow for us. There won’t be a Bronze Horseman. And next time we see each other, Dean, we’re going to act like we don’t know one another. Because we don’t. You are nothing to me. Never were. Come here again, and I’m telling Daddy to pull out the shotgun.”

She slammed the door in my face.

And for the first time, she didn’t peek through the window to steal another moment with me.

Dean

Present

I loved watching Rosie dance.

She was so terrible at it, you couldn’t help but laugh. But she didn’t care. The girl didn’t fucking care, and that was what I loved about her the most. Her ability to sing out of tune and dance like no one was watching, when all eyes were on her as she struck a pose, a la Madonna, while jumping up and down like her feet were on fire.

She spun in place on the dance floor and found me, our eyes connecting. I was leaning against the bar, sipping bottled water, as promised, saluting the bottle in her direction.

Vicious was grinding against Emilia.

Jaime was outside on the phone with Trent.

Sydney, Gladys, and that chick who worked with Rosie were dancing with each other.

And again, she and I were left to our own devices.

Nina had been calling and texting nonstop, despite my ignoring her, and Trent was going through hell, but somehow, I still felt that natural high that slammed into me every time I hung out with Baby LeBlanc.

Rosie looked down to her phone and stabbed her thumbs on the screen, typing a text message. It threw my heart into fourth gear, and I clutched my phone beside my body, waiting for the *ping* that felt like a *bang*.

Rosie

I think I'm going to take someone to my hotel room tonight. Had a rough day and need to unwind.

Dean

Is that an invitation?

Rosie

More like a jab. You know what the hardest part was when you and Millie were together? Hearing you make out. It used to kill me. That's why at some point I stopped being home when you were around.

My head shot up, and there she was, swaying her hips, a random guy hugging her waist from behind and grinning into her neck as he matched her tempo. Her eyes were on me, and she had that expression. The 'what-the-fuck-are-you-going-to-do-about-it-huh?' look. I was going to wipe it off of her face.

Here I was, watching someone else touching her, every inch of my body raw with violent rage. The one I hadn't felt all those years ago when Millie left. Oh, it was inside me, all right. It was just waiting to be ignited by someone else entirely.

I'm going to end this shithead.

I looked down and typed.

Dean

Don't test me, LeBlanc. We're not teenagers anymore. Our actions have consequences.

Rosie

And...?

Dean

And with the actions I have in mind, I'm looking at ten to fifteen years in a cage. Cut that shit before he gets hurt.

I felt my pulse in my eyelids. My spine. My fucking balls. It was

everywhere, because my heart was jackhammering like it wanted to jump out of my ribcage and into her hands. It felt like snorting two lines of brown-brown, the gunpowder rushing through my system.

For the first time in a very long time, I cared.

Breaking them up and causing a scene crossed my mind, but I wasn't that person. I was the chilled, asshole motherfucker who smiled at the world, even when it threw shit at him. And Rosie threw shit at me because I deserved it. Because I *did* kiss her sister when she was in the same house. Because I didn't stop it from happening. Because it was payback, and she wanted to take it far. I was going to let her explore the distance, even if it hurt me—but the line was going to be drawn at kissing. She was fucking mine. He could look, but hell if he tried to touch.

The guy spun Rosie around and they danced together, but she kept an appropriate gap from him, probably knowing he wasn't going to appreciate a trip to the ER. Dude was okay-looking, I suppose. Mid-height and young—about Rosie's age, casually dressed. Nothing to write home about.

He yelled something into her ear over the music, and I felt my nostrils widening like a mad bull. She motioned for him with her fingers to wait a minute, looked down, and typed a message.

Rosie
How does it feel?

It felt like death. But that fire in her eyes looked fresh. Too fresh to only be about me. There were other things occupying Rosie's mind. Family-related things. I knew that, and this time...this time I was going to be the punching bag. Fuck, how I wanted to feel her little fists all over my body.

Dean
Point made. Now stop it.

She didn't answer.
And she didn't fucking stop it.

My eyes traveled up and the fuckwit took her hand, leading her to the back door of the club. I looked around. All of our friends were still busy dancing, drinking, and generally not giving two shits. My plan to corner Rosie backfired in my face in spectacular fashion.

Because Rosie wasn't Millie. Rosie couldn't be cornered.

Rosie was never the prey. She was, at times, the motherfucking hunter.

I used every ounce of self-control in my body to stop myself from running after them. No, I sauntered. Cool. Unnerved, pushing bodies, and stepping on feet on my way to the door that led out to an alleyway at the back of the club. I moved past darkness, through saturated lights. Yellow, green, red, and purple twirling together. They probably looked beautiful if you were drunk, but I wasn't. And when I finally poured myself out into the static, hot air of Las Vegas, I stilled.

Her back was pressed against an exposed brick wall and he was hovering next to her, his lips inches from tasting what belonged to me.

"Back. The. Fuck. Up," I hissed, ambling in their direction. They twisted their heads, and I think Rosie saw the smoke coming out of my ears, because she took a visible gulp and placed her palms on his chest as a barrier.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was hoarse. "He's a jealous ex. Not *my* ex, but he didn't get the memo yet."

Evidently, Mr. Prop here didn't want to be the one to give it to me. The guy looked like he peed his pants, and I had to remind myself that he was just a means to an end for her. Poor bastard.

"I'll take it from here." I slapped the guy on the shoulder a little too hard. He looked between us, his mouth falling open. He wanted to know that it was okay to leave her with me, but at the same time, *hoped* that it was, because I still looked every inch of a quarterback monster who only answered to the words 'God' and 'Daddy'.

Rosie nodded, clearing her throat. "Sorry, Adam. Enjoy the rest of your night."

"Planning to," Adam said, turning around and walking away, his steps becoming faster as he approached the door.

I pinned Rosie to the wall, this time not giving a damn about her stupid-ass rules, and grinded my body slowly against hers. I had a throbbing erection, and it pressed against her navel, demanding her attention. She arched her back and got on her tiptoes, chasing our touch, her mouth asking for mine.

"Adam?" I quirked a brow, pulling my face away. Two were going to play this game, at least until she realized there was no game. This was real.

"Nice dude." She still stared at my lips, her breaths labored, and not from her stupid illness.

I boxed her with my arms, my lips hovering over her shoulder.

“I’m glad you think so, because he just cost you an orgasm.”

She moaned, dragging her teeth over her lower lip when my hand slipped inside her panties and grazed her wet slit.

“I need a distraction tonight.” She jerked me closer. “I need your help.”

I thrust two fingers into her and started pumping in and out. She gasped, her fingers lacing my hair, but I didn’t let her wrap her legs around me. No. Fuck that. She had no clue, this girl. No. Fucking. Clue. Who she was dealing with. I might’ve been nicer than Vicious, but I was still a HotHole. I was still a sinner...and I was still the wolf her grandmamma warned her about.

“Yes,” she panted. “Right there.”

I slid another finger until I fucked her with my entire hand, grinding my body against her to create the friction she throbbed for against her clit. She started shaking, losing balance. Her knees were giving in, and if she thought I was going to catch her, she was sorely mistaken.

“Look at the stars,” I growled.

She gave no fucks about the stars, chasing my mouth again. I didn’t kiss her. She didn’t deserve to be kissed. I wanted her to come to me—not under the haze of a looming orgasm—press her lips against mine, and say it.

I’m yours. I’ve always been yours. I will never be anyone else’s.

“You better fucking do it, Baby LeBlanc. I don’t like repeating myself.”

Rolling her eyes, she complied. We both looked up. The sky was full of stars against all odds. You couldn’t really see shit from The Strip, but that night, you could. You could because *she* was there.

Her thighs clenched around my waist and so did her pussy against my fingers. I pulled out, my eyes dead, my lips pursed, staring at her like she was nothing more than a business transaction. A mere inconvenience I bumped into during my day.

“What the hell are you doing?” Her mouth dropped like a stone, and I almost laughed when her groin pressed against my stomach, begging for me to finish the job. I pressed my lips to her ear.

“Consequences, Rosie. Get used to them. I’m not letting you off like the rest of your family. Next time you let some random douche put his hands on this,” I clutched her hips and drove them into my throbbing cock, “you better believe there will be penalties. I’m letting you off the hook this time, because you’re a newbie, but just so you know—it *is* happening, it *is* mine, and you *are* welcome. Lesson learned.”



That night, Rosie snuck into my suite.

It wasn't really a Marine Corps operation. The girls were plastered from drinking all day, and Millie—who was apparently sober for a reason beyond my grasp—dozed off in the club, fuck-tired. Rosie was straddling the line between tipsy and sober, but nowhere near the state she was in back when we hooked up in Todos Santos. And lookie here, she still wanted The Dean's D. Big fucking surprise. I wondered for how much longer she was going to downplay us before she realized that we are diving down a rabbit hole headfirst and it was so deep there was no climbing back up. The very same one I tried to push her into when we were teenagers.

Vicious and Jaime were downstairs, hitting the blackjack tables.

I heard the soft knock on the door and opened it. She stood on the threshold, still clad in that pink dress that made all the other girls at the bachelorette party look like human-sized vaginas but somehow made her look like a princess, and my heart did a wild thing in my chest.

And it was funny how people always said that I was trouble, when trouble looked like a tiny, blue-eyed girl in a huge pink dress and brownish-orange freckles.

Rosie looked pissed.

Her pixie ears were pink, her mouth was twisted into a sneer, and her foot was tapping that red carpet like she was trying to stomp it to death. It'd been like this for days now, and it rubbed me the wrong way. Rosie wasn't herself in Todos Santos, or in Vegas. She wasn't self-assured, fun, and sassy. She was angry, annoyed, and desperate. I had a feeling it had a lot to do with her family, and now I knew that she didn't want to accept my plane ticket not only because of the money, but also because of how this place made her feel.

"You need a cold shower to get some fucking chill." I gave her my unsolicited advice.

"I need a hot fling to make me forget," she disagreed, pushing me into the room and walking in. I let her take the lead, giving her the false-assumption she was under some sort of control—and followed her, watching her round ass in that dress.

"Hop into the shower, Sirius."

“I don’t think so, Planet Earth.”

If a smile could split your face in two, I’d have headed straight to the hospital at that second. “Planet Earth?” I clucked my tongue. “Color me curious and horny.”

She whipped her head around, her chin resting on her shoulder.

“You are chaotic, crazy, and full of wars and angst. But you’re the liveliest place I’ve ever been to.”

Fuck. I was going to put a ring on her finger, and it was probably going to weigh as much as she did, if not more. It wasn’t just this whole, crazy week talking. She was humoring me. Every part of me. Even the dark shit no one wanted anything to do with.

“In the shower,” I repeated, my voice solemn, walking over and swatting her ass. Nothing too bad. *Yet*. “For every minute you keep me waiting, I’ll deny you another orgasm.”

Girl practically jogged her way there, breaking some cystic fibrosis-related records, I’m sure.

She stripped out of her dress, shoes, and panties. Baby blue, lace and satin, and I was tempted to shove them into my pocket, but I reminded myself that if I was going to have my way, Rosie would soon have her whole fucking wardrobe in my closet and I wouldn’t need it. Still, I would probably take a few of her panties with me to work. Just to get me through the day.

I turned on the faucet—the water was ice-cold—and nodded for her to get in while I was still fully dressed. She eyed me suspiciously, and even though she was completely naked, she didn’t try to hide her body. Not that she had a reason to. Rosie LeBlanc was a piece of art if I ever saw one.

“I’m sick,” she said.

“You’re going to be fine,” I assured. I wasn’t a fucking doctor, but I loved guiding her out of her comfort zone—enjoyed her reaction when she realized that for me, she wasn’t a wilting flower. She was a strong tree with a great trunk. Pun intended, obviously.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“Will you join me?”

“If you ask nicely.”

She chuckled, folding her arms over her bare chest. It was the first time I saw her tits, but it took me a few seconds to realize it, because in my mind, she was always naked. Funny how the human brain works.

“Please, will you join me in the shower?” she asked through an eye roll.

“I’m sorry, is that your version of nice?” I unzipped my dress pants and took out my cock. I was completely hard, my dick jerking in my hand, its head pointing at her angrily. Her eyes widened as she took a good look at it for the very first time.

Watching her reaction closely, drinking every single movement she’d made, every blink, every twitch, I waited. She took a second to regroup before she ate the space between us, and a glimpse of that Rosie from New York shone through the girl standing in front of me. When we were flush against each other, she took hold of my cock and stared me in the eye, defying me. The water was still running in the background.

“Ask nicely,” I repeated. “And I’ll join you. Ask *nicer*—and I will even turn the hot water on.”

She dropped to her knees, dug her fingers into the back of my thigh, and wrapped her other hand around my shaft. Her hand was tiny, and my cock was big, so her fingers didn’t even touch as she held me. And yes, of course, it was a turn-on. She swirled the tip of her tongue around my head unhurriedly—it looked as heated as she had felt—before taking some of me in, licking me like I was a fucking lollipop. I loved her version of sucking cock. It was so different than my usual one-night stands, who Hoovered the fuck out of my dick like they were trying to pull it off of my body. No. Rosie teased me. *Enjoyed me*. She licked until I held her hair to keep her head in place and started driving into her mouth, fucking it as I groaned.

I was going to come, and this was out of the fucking question. Not like this. Not right then.

“Fuck, baby,” I said, picking her up to her feet and backing her into the shower. I caged her into the golden tiles, turning on the hot water. The water lashed at us. It was angry, too. I was still wearing my shoes, dress pants, and shirt, but I didn’t give a damn. My mouth closed in on hers, and we both collided and exploded like two lonely stars somewhere in the dark atmosphere.

“Was that nice enough?” She was still fighting a cough from when I buried my dick inside her mouth. The sound of her gurgling alone was liable to tip me off the edge and make me shoot my load.

“No. Not nice. Perfect. Like you.”

I lifted her up, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. I drove into her so hard and unexpectedly, she cried out and not from pleasure.

I fucked her frantically, knowing that the water was still not hot enough and that I needed to keep her warm. She screamed and clutched me, and we both wobbled backwards from the impact, me still holding her by the ass. I laid her on the floor and pinned her arms above her head, holding her by her wrists.

“What the fuck is eating at you, Rosie? Why are you sad?” I demanded as I pounded into her so desperately, I felt her thighs moving away from me. Like the friction was too much. Rosie was going to feel me, all of me, long after tonight.

“Shh.” She pressed her lips to mine, sucking off the water drops from my lower lip and releasing it with a pop. “Please just let me have tonight.”

I fucked her until there was nothing left of her to fuck, until she was a ragdoll, limp and boneless and content after two violent orgasms that made her spasm under me like she’d been electrocuted.

Then I came inside her, and that was when it hit me. That was when I finally remembered that I didn’t bother to put on a fucking condom.

Fuck. Just...fuck!

I was sure she felt it. The warm, thick cum spilling into her as I found my release, but she didn’t say a thing. Even when it trickled down her thigh, and there was no mistaking it from the water running from the multiple showerheads. She didn’t acknowledge it. No. Rosie continued to stare at me through heavy-lidded eyes.

“Shit.” My forehead dropped to her lips, and I shook my head, our hair plastered to our skins. “I’m so sorry. Fuck. Sorry. Baby. I didn’t...I swear I’m clean.”

She ran her fingers through my wet hair.

“It’s okay.” Her tone held no color or emotion. She didn’t sound worried or pissed. She didn’t sound *anything*. “I’m clean, too.”

“I’ll go down and get you one of those morning-after pills,” I muttered, hating that we went from *this* to *that*. From pure, bare lust and healthy anger to talking about how we were going to prevent an unwanted pregnancy and potential STDs. I was trying to avert what I was sure was a shitstorm brewing inside her brain. Chicks were sensitive about this kind of stuff, Nina proved me as much, and *fuck*, I had gone and done the same mistake with Rosie.

“I’m okay, Dean, really.”

She put her hands on my chest and pushed me away, stood up, and started collecting her dress and shoes as I lay there, the water still hitting me like

needles.
Fuck.

Chapter Sixteen

Dean

I FLEW BACK INTO TODOS Santos on Tuesday, leaving Vicious and Jaime behind.

They seemed to be having fun without me, being BFFs and all, so I gave them the space they needed to try each other's makeup and sample tampons or whatever shit girls did. Because really, these two fuckers were super-tight for men. My opinion, anyway.

If anything, I felt bad about leaving Rosie behind, especially considering how I fucked up remarkably on Sunday night by coming inside her without a fucking condom. *Asshole.*

One thing you couldn't take away from me, though...I was a loyal asshole, and Trent needed me. He hadn't said shit, but I read between the lines, and in our last phone call, there was something off there. He wasn't completely himself. Trent always had this quiet calm about him. Even when his football career was killed when he broke his leg, even when Val got knocked up and showed up at his door asking for money, even when life grabbed him by the throat and choked—hard—he always grinned and flipped cruel fate his finger.

Not in that last phone call we had, though.

Which was why I boarded that plane.

I always felt closer to Trent. From day one.

Maybe it was the fact that he wasn't born like the rest. Rich, privileged, and ready to rule the piece of the world his ancestors had conquered for him. Maybe it was because he was a decent dude, humble, and content with what we had, even though his family lived in a place that cost less than our yearly landscaping budget. Something drew me to him as a person, and he was the

only man I fully trusted out of the HotHoles. The only man I ever considered telling about Nina. Not that we'd ever gone that far, but yeah.

Trent was there for me, always.

And I was going to show him that the feeling was mutual, even at the high cost of playtime with Rosie.

When we all graduated from our designated colleges all around the country (Jaime was in Texas, I was in Massachusetts, Vicious in L.A., and Trent went to some bullshit state school in San Diego), I didn't even blink before I gave him a four-million-dollar loan to make him a partner and have him launch Fiscal Heights Holdings with us.

I didn't blink, but my parents fucking crucified me. I had to vouch for him somehow—it wasn't like I had that kind of money in my bank account—so both Trent and I spent our summers away from college filing shit in my dad's office and doing Starbucks runs for free. Providing free taxi services for both my sisters. Acting as my family's designated bitches.

And, of course, Trent and I both signed a draconic contract so Dad knew that he would get his money back.

Trent lived in a studio apartment in Chicago long after we all became self-made rich so he could pay Eli Cole back. In fact, he only just moved to a bigger place after Luna was born because he needed to accommodate the new unexpected addition to his life. I'd say family, but they weren't much of a family, especially after Val skipped town like a fucking deadbeat dad.

I swallowed.

Logically, I knew Trent had help. His parents were there for him. But everything else about me was desperate to see for myself that Luna was okay. So I packed a bag before everyone else, leaving Las Vegas—and Rosie—behind me.

Dean

Last minute change - going back to Todos Santos to spend some time with Trent.

Rosie

If he needs anything, let me know. I'd love to help.

Dean

Thx. Again, sorry about Sunday night. Do YOU need anything?

Rosie

No. Just forget about it. Seriously. We're both clean, right?

Dean
Right.

Since Rosie wasn't the type to steal sperm—that was more like Val's hobby—I gathered she was on the pill or something. It would have been nice if she put me out of my misery and said it, but it wasn't any of my fucking business. I needed to move on and take her word for it. No matter how strongly I felt about this particular subject.

Dean
I'll miss you.

Rosie
You'll survive. I've missed you for eleven years.

Dean
I'll make sure you get enough of me now.

Once in Todos Santos, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. I was so distracted with everything Trent and Rosie, I answered before I checked the number. It was unlike me, and the minute I pressed the green button, I remembered why.

“Yeah?”

“Jesus, finally. I thought you'd never answer,” Nina groaned in frustration. My heart dropped, and my jaw clenched. The world tilted on an axis for a second, before I gathered my wits, dropped my duffel bag to the floor with a thud, and opened up Vicious's liquor cabinet, staring at the neat line of glass bottles like they personally taunted me. I wasn't stupid. I saw the direct correlation between my issues with *her* and my drinking and weed smoking.

Every time I thought of her, I wanted to forget.

Every time I talked to her, I wanted a distraction.

And she was always in the picture. Always asking for shit she didn't deserve. Always messing with my head. Did I want her in my life? Did I not want her? Did I forgive her? *Could* I forgive her? Did I want to know who he was? Was *he* even going to want to get to know *me*?

“You don't give up, do you?” I smacked my lips.

“Not really. We're very much alike. We need to talk, Dean, and you know it,” she purred. She had a way with words. The perfect charmer. A

constant flirt. Shame it was wasted on me, but that was another reminder to how similar we were. It deflated me, because she was the very person I hated more than anything else.

“Not interested, Nina, and you can shove the rest of your ‘every son needs a father’ speech up your ass, where it belongs.”

“I have your happiness in the palm of my hand.” She ignored me. I knew exactly what she meant.

“Still not interested.”

“Give me six hundred K and it’s yours. You can find him. Meet him. Talk to him. Wouldn’t that be amazing?”

Maybe it would. Maybe it wouldn’t. I was still on the fence. The fact that she thought it was okay to blackmail me, even after all these years, was mind-blowing in itself.

“I gave you twenty thousand dollars less than a week ago, so you would stay the fuck away from me. I gave you money to lay low and stop calling. I paid your way out of my life, and you still can’t seem to do the only basic shit you’re required to do. Maybe this should be my last payment ever, seeing as your word isn’t worth shit anyway.”

That was the fakest bullshit I had ever uttered. This cash cow wasn’t going to stop wiring her small sums of money. She barely had enough for bills and food—she never worked—and last time I attempted to stop the gravy train, she called me a hundred times a day, sent enough emails to block my account, and texted me so many times that I had to change my number. Twice. I knew I was nurturing her bad habit, but it wasn’t worth the hassle. She was a lost cause. All she wanted was to have me, to make me work for her, take care of her, and love her.

She had to settle for me merely keeping her above the poverty line. But as I said. The Luna shit opened my eyes. I didn’t want to meet him. I wanted to forget he ever existed and move on.

“Come on, baby,” she whined. “I really need the money.” She dragged out the word ‘really’ in a way that I found particularly annoying.

“Go work. It’s a foreign concept, but it’s doable. You’re a capable woman,” I said. *Sort of.*

“I don’t need to work. I have something that you want. Him.”

I did want him, and it killed me. I didn’t even want to get to know him necessarily. Just to see what he looked like. Maybe from afar. I tried hiring a few private investigators when I graduated from Harvard, but they came back

empty-handed. *She* knew exactly what she was doing. Besides, it was really far-fetched. I think she genuinely knew where he was, but he was nowhere near her.

Small miracles to be thankful for and all. I bet he was better off without her.

“I met a girl.” I changed the subject. As if she cared. As if it made any difference at all.

“Oh?” she responded, sounding both surprised and unhappy. “I thought you always meet girls. Your reputation precedes you.”

“*Our* reputations are similar, Nina. You outshine me in the fucking-people department. At least there’s one thing you excel at.”

“Sensitive much, Dean? I was only being conversational.”

She was only being a fucking headache. Of course, Nina wasn’t deterred by my lack of interest in humoring her.

“Does she know that you don’t find women reusable?” She chewed on something on the other line. Someone else’s dick probably.

“She’s a keeper.” My jaw tightened.

“Why?”

“Because she is the opposite of you.”

And she was. Rosie was brave, sassy, loyal, and witty. *With the potential to be an amazing mother.* She was a hardworking girl who didn’t like taking favors from other people. And, unlike me, Rosie didn’t use any of the shortcuts given to her. Her illness meant she could have had it the easy way. But Baby LeBlanc never walked the line. She danced all over it, her flip-flops smacking on the floor throughout.

I brought a bottle of rum to my lips and took a swig, then another. I did so well for three days, not touching a drop of alcohol—even in Vegas—and it was all flushed down the toilet the minute I answered my goddamn phone.

“You know you still love me, despite everything,” Nina droned, laughing her coy laugh. And I had to admit that, horrifyingly, she wasn’t completely wrong.

I stared at the blooming trees from my viewpoint on Vicious’s balcony.

“Oh, and Dean?”

“Yes?”

“This is one truth you don’t want to miss out on. It will change everything.”

I had no doubt.

“Stop calling. I stopped answering. Bye, Nina.”



“Yo, shithead. Where art thou?” Trent’s voice echoed from the sparse landing. I peeled myself off of Vicious’s antique couch, holding onto my head like it was about to burst. Rosie’s parents lived on the second floor, but I don’t think they were home. Her mom joined the Todos Santos Pie Committee, and her dad worked part-time as a landscaper. Vicious once told me that there was no convincing the LeBlanc folks to slow down and stop working altogether, even after retirement. I wasn’t surprised. Their daughters weren’t any different.

“Right here,” I groaned, not moving an inch.

Trent and Luna entered the large living room. She wobbled on her feet like a duck, her honey-brown curls and smooth, tan skin making her green eyes pop out. Luna threw herself between my legs for a hug. I picked her up and brought her to my chest, and she wrapped her chubby arms around my neck.

Trent placed his temple against the wall, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“How is she doing?” I asked, squeezing Luna to my body, sniffing her hair.

He shrugged, looking out the window.

“She thinks she’s on vacation with Grandma and Grandpa. She keeps putting my phone to her ear and expects to hear her mommy.”

“I read somewhere that our earliest memory can be from the age of two. Maybe she won’t even remember that bitch had ever left.” I offered my support by giving him bullshit data I picked from a dated magazine while I waited for my dentist appointment. I think most people tried to convince him that Val was going to come back eventually, but I wasn’t one of them. What was the point in lying? I knew her kind. They popped a kid, abandoned them, and would only check on their offspring if they saw an opportunity waiting to be cashed.

“And I read somewhere that your earliest memory could be from the womb. Maybe she’ll remember everything,” he offered me a dry look.

Touché.

I put Luna down on the floor. She swayed until she gained balance, then clutched my hand and smiled.

“Look, no offense, man, but you don’t know what it’s like, okay? You’ve never had to deal with this kind of bullshit before.”

I wasn’t going to correct him. It wasn’t about me. I wanted to be there for him, even if he was going to be a pissy little shit for a while.

“Put your big girl panties on, Trent. You have enough money to hire the best nannies in the world and Luna is a cool kid. You have your parents, your friends, *me*. You’re not alone in this.”

“I know, I know.” Trent scrubbed his face, walking over to the liquor cabinet and taking out a bottle of Glenmorangie. “Luna, show Uncle Dean how you dance,” he asked tiredly as he poured himself a drink, his smile flaccid. Girl started shaking it like Beyoncé in Madison Square Garden, and we both clapped for her for a few minutes, before Luna got distracted by a door and decided to close and open it five hundred times in a row.

“She’s pretty advanced for her age,” I remarked.

“Very. She’s blabbing all the time, too. Maybe it’s my bias-ass, but I think she’s special. So special.” He shook his head, frowning. “*Too* special to be discarded like this by her mom.”

“What are you gonna do, bro?”

He stared at me through the rim of his glass while taking a sip, his silence tipping me off that he already had an idea. Putting his glass down, he clucked his tongue. “My parents have a new house here in Todos Santos. Chicago is big and cruel, and I work an insane amount of hours.” He stared at me, long and hard, and I instantly knew what he was asking for. I tapped my lips with my laced fingers.

“Let’s talk shop.”

“This is my so-called life.” Trent gestured with his ripped arms, stealing another glance at Luna, who was still opening and closing the same double door with a devotion better saved for finding the cure to cancer. “It’s a Mess with a capital M, and my daughter is in the middle of the shitshow, dragged through the mud and filth, the consequences of her parents’ bad decisions ruining her life. This stops here. She needs stability.”

“What are you proposing, exactly?” I cracked my neck, looking him dead

in the eye. Fiscal Heights Holdings' headquarters was in New York, and I ran it. Smoothly, if I may say so myself. I was the dedicated bachelor, and I put down the hours. Vicious was working in L.A. and commuting from Todos Santos every day. He wouldn't leave California for the world. This was where he was born, and this was where he would die. Jaime was in London, handling our European accounts, and Trent was in Chicago, our newest and smallest branch. But it was expanding, fast. There was money to be made, and money talked. It fucking screamed, especially to people like us.

"Vicious should take Chicago." Trent stared at me with a death glare.

I smiled. "Vicious should do a lot of things. That gap between what he should do and what he actually does? That's where he thrives." I wasn't joking.

"You need to back me up when I bring this up at our next meeting." He held my gaze firmly, his jaw ticking. I tugged at my lower lip.

"You need more than my vote to make it happen."

"Jaime's in, too."

"Jaime is going against Vicious?" My eyebrows jumped up. Jaime always took his side, even when it was time to call Vic on his bullshit.

Looking at Trent, I saw someone I was willing to fight for. Hard. The guy to always do the right thing. If someone deserved to catch a break out of the four of us, it was him. I nodded, placing a hand on top of Luna's little head.

Protect the strays. Atone your past. Break the fucking cycle.

"When?" I asked.

"November sounds good. Thanksgiving and all. We're all going to be here anyway."

I nodded. "Let's get you back in Cali."

We bumped shoulders and clapped backs. "Fuck yeah."

Chapter Seventeen

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Dean. Dean Cole makes me feel alive.

THE REST OF OUR VEGAS escapade dragged, despite my best efforts. I took the girls to the Mob Museum, a barbecue restaurant (my first choice was sushi, but as much as I was mad at my sister, taunting her was not high on my to-do list), and to a spa. Millie and I exchanged a total of twenty words the whole trip and shared nervous silence whenever we were alone. I was curt, polite, and distant. She was miserable, worried, and troubled.

Then there was the guilt. It ate at my insides like a growing tumor. I wasn't even sure which part was worse. The part where I slept with her ex-boyfriend—there was no denying at this point that Dean and I were more than sleeping together, and that was an issue, too—or the part where I didn't partake in the cooing-fest Gladys, Sydney, and Elle threw when it came to my sister.

On Thursday, we boarded a plane back home, and even though I dreaded meeting my parents, relief washed over me. The minute we got back to the mansion, I entered my room, collapsing onto the four-poster bed. Exhausted didn't begin to cover what I was feeling. My lungs screamed in agony from all the dancing, walking around, and...well, let's just say that having sex on cold tiles wasn't the best idea I'd ever had. I practically felt the mucus covering my airways. And while I needed to book an appointment to see Dr. Hasting as soon as possible, I couldn't leave here before the wedding.

As I rolled to the side of the bed to text Elle and ask how her flight to New York went (she had to skip the wedding for a family event), my older

sister threw my door open and dashed in like a storm.

“We need to talk.”

I turned around, sprawled on a throne of puffy, colorful pillows, and the hurricane in her eyes calmed once she saw my wet cheeks and red eyes. Her face twisted in worry. That was Millie for you. Even when I acted like a brat at her bachelorette party, she still melted under my cold flesh.

I patted the empty side of the bed in silent invitation. To the place where we sat, where we laughed, where we cried, and stared at glow-in-the-dark stars and made crazy plans. I waved the white flag. In return, she stepped from her position—not outside the room but not inside, exactly, either, then closed the door behind her.

Cough-laughing, I bowed my head down.

“Then let’s talk, sister.”



“I never meant for you to find out this way. Ever,” Millie said, her arms behind her head, staring at the ceiling.

My face was buried between her chin and armpit, and from that angle, I could see the blue vein that popped inside her cleavage, running through her left breast, as her body prepared for breastfeeding.

“But I couldn’t exactly mention it to you in passing, either, and we both know why. Daddy is on your case, Mama is crazy-scared now that she knows that you’re alone in New York, and the last thing I wanted was to put more pressure on you. Bad call, I know, but only because people found out way sooner than they should have thanks to my morning sicknesses and tendency to go green every time I smell coffee.” She took a deep breath and rubbed her cheek against mine.

“Gladys and Sydney found out a week ago. I was going to tell you before the bachelorette party, but then you outdid yourself with the Vegas trip and we never got the one-on-one time.”

“I work with babies,” I pouted, hugging a pillow to my chest and pulling at a loose thread. “You *could* have told me this in passing. I still would have

been nothing but ecstatic for you. Why would you assume differently?”

She gulped, looking down to the space between us.

“Because, Rosie, love and passion are the two forces that can drive a person into madness, despite their best intentions.” She turned around to face me, tucking a hand under her ear. “And you are passionate about motherhood. I didn’t want to throw it in your face along with this wedding, and the lavish ceremony, and whatnot. This is weird for me, too, okay? I’m not used to having it easy in life.”

I pulled her into a hug, sniffing her neck, the scent of the cherry blossom perfume she always used. She smelled like home.

“I’ve never been so happy about someone else’s fortune,” I said, each word light and easy, because it was the truth. “And get used to all this goodness, because you’ve definitely earned it fair and square. Now, tell me everything. How far along are you?”

“Nine weeks.” She bit the corner of her lip, sliding a hand over her flat stomach. “The smell of coffee makes me throw up, and the thought of bacon sends uncomfortable shivers down my spine. Oh, Rosie, and my boobs. They hurt *so bad*. All tender and huge. Which only makes Vicious even more fascinated with them.” She rolled her eyes and snorted out a laugh. “They say the first trimester is the hardest, and it’s a breeze from there on.”

I spared her the stories of the young mothers I worked with, and how the real work started when the baby was out, and hugged her, entwining my legs with hers.

“How do you tolerate me, dude? Seriously. I’m, like, the worst person in the world. I acted like a spoiled brat all week just because for a few, miserable seconds, I felt what it was like to be *you*. Not the center of everyone’s world.”

“Jesus. Rosie, it’s no big deal. You were a little quiet in Vegas, but...”

“No, Millie, it’s not just this,” I muttered.

Dare I say it? Might as well. She is giving me her truth. It is only fair that I give her mine.

“And...?” Millie disconnected from our hug, eyeing me curiously. I scooted up, sitting with my back against the headboard. I stared at my hands so hard my vision became blurry. I did the crime. It was time to pay the time.

“And I slept with Dean.”

I didn’t look up. The prospect of hurting my sister was suddenly very real and very raw. For twenty-something years, my life was devoid of

responsibilities. Other than to stay alive, of course. I was let off the hook time and time again, as long as I took my medicine, went to my physiotherapy sessions and did my airway clearance every morning and afternoon. Now, I had to ask for forgiveness. To show remorse. To deal with the consequences.

Starting with the last person I had ever wanted to hurt—my sister.

I was willing to make it right. To give up Dean—knowing full well that he was the only man I was meant to love, the only one I would *ever* love—because my sister was more important. More important than him, and more important than *me*.

So, I held my breath, my eyes half-closed, waiting for Millie’s verdict. Even though my lungs were burning, begging, *gasping*, I held my breath. I wanted her to punch me in the face, kick me in the stomach, tell me I’m the worst person in the world and throw me out of her house. As long as it meant that she would still give me a chance to fix it.

“How was he?” Her voice came out of nowhere.

What...?

“I...uh...excuse me?”

“Was he any good?” It was Millie’s turn to scurry up and sit beside me. She flung one leg over the other, tapping her lips. “I was only with him one time. Between you and me, he barely touched me. Half the time we were just kissing between me doing his homework.” She giggled, and hell, hearing this made me feel good.

“He was...” I narrowed my eyes, inspecting my sister closely. Was she drunk? High? Couldn’t be, as she had a bun in the oven. But it didn’t look like she cared one bit. I knew that she was over him. Knew that they were never in love in the first place. After Millie had run to New York, I monitored her every move from afar, making sure her heart wasn’t broken. She felt regret and sorrow for the way she ended things with Dean, but never longing. So I knew she wasn’t going to feel the sting of heartbreak. But this...this was weird, too.

“He was...?” my sister prompted, tilting her chin down.

Dirty-hot. Filthy-rough. Mind-blowingly hard. The best I’ve ever had.

“Well,” I coughed into my fist, “let’s just say that while I have a lot of criticism when it comes to his personality, you will not hear me complain about him in the sack. So, are you really not mad?”

She shrugged. “He’s a HotHole, Rosie. They’re so bad they can’t even spell the word ‘good’, but I think you already know that. As long as you

protect your heart.” She placed her palm over the left side of my Anti-Flag shirt. “I’m supportive of this, whatever *this* is. I just want what’s best for you. Does he make you happy?”

Did Dean make me happy? I couldn’t answer that honestly. When we were together, I was either drunk or angry. Sometimes both. And I always left him feeling so guilty, there was a pinch of salt to every sexual encounter. To every heart-to-heart moment. Even when I held him close to me the night we found out Val left Trent, I couldn’t let my heart beat for Dean. It had to have Millie’s permission first.

“I think I could be,” I answered, feeling excitement and awe swirling in the pit of my stomach.

“Then it’s settled. You have my blessing.” She clapped once, smiling.

With this blessing—which I did not take lightly, it was my ticket to happiness, after all—I also made a promise. I was going to be the best bridesmaid in the history of bridesmaids on Sunday. The opposite of Annie. The prospect of redeeming myself made my heart beat faster.

“Thank you, Millie.” I exhaled the air I’d been holding since we started this conversation, and my lungs winced in relief.

“Don’t thank me. Thank love. It conquers all.”

“Even Dean ‘Manslut’ Cole?” I joked.

My sister slapped my thigh, laughing.

“Oh, I have a feeling especially him.”

Chapter Eighteen

Dean

FUCK, I HATED WEDDINGS.

I almost forgot about this little fact—*almost*—but then Vicious and Millie’s collision of prissy food, bright colors, and sweaty, dressed-up guests had reminded me that if I were ever to get hitched, it was going to be in Vegas.

It was a good thing Rosie and I had plane tickets to New York first thing tomorrow morning, because I was desperate to get the hell out of Todos Santos and begin my relentless pursuit after her. I called it: *Operation: The Right LeBlanc Sister*. And I was going to start by breaking the fucking news on national television so she’d stop feeling so goddamn guilty every time we slept together. That was one of the roots of our problem, and I was eager to tear it from its base and kill the shame and prejudice I saw when she looked me in the eyes.

Baby LeBlanc and I haven’t had much time for each other between Thursday and Sunday. I passed her in the hall a few times, and every time I did, our fingers laced, or our shoulders brushed, or she would give me that smile. The one that she invented especially for me and didn’t give anyone else.

She was busy. Running back and forth with her sister to salons, spas, and final fittings was time-consuming. She looked so tired all the time, but held her head up. I tried to sneak into her room the night she came back to Todos Santos, on Thursday, but found Millie sleeping next to her.

Fucking Millie. Denying me from Rosie, even eleven years later.

I dutifully played my part at the wedding. Stood in a symmetric line with Trent, Jaime, Vicious, and my dad, Eli, who was a huge part of Vicious’s

support system, to welcome the guests. The air was humid and the sun as angry as a PMSing teenage girl who'd just caught her boyfriend jerking off to a Demi Lovato photo. I sweated inside my five-grand, tailor-made tux and itched to grab a glass of champagne and toss it down my throat, but I wanted to keep my promise to Rosie. No more booze, at least until I conquered the need to drink to forget. I still smoked weed, but no more than one blunt a day.

For cold turkey was the number two reason why addicts fall off the wagon.

First reason? Heartbreak. I was trying to dodge that one, too.

With toothy smiles plastered across our shiny faces, we greeted fancy-looking ladies and rich old men. Trent looked a little better today, and Vicious beamed like he had just won the lottery. A needle of envy prickled my heart, not because of who he was going to marry, but for the fact that Emilia had agreed to settle down with him. Her sister, I had a feeling, was a more difficult creature to domesticate.

“Welcome.”

“Thank you for coming.”

“It's been so long since we've met. How're the kids?”

Blah-blah-fucking-blah. The stream of people didn't dwindle. All I wanted was to get a glimpse of Rosie. I texted her earlier that day and wished her good luck, which was a stupid thing to say, because she wasn't the one who was getting married. She said she had something to tell me, but that it had to wait until later.

And that was pretty much all I thought about until the ceremony took place on a hill overlooking the ocean.

I was standing by Vicious when the happy couple said their vows—along with Jaime and Trent, and watched Rosie from across the aisle beaming at Emilia with the kind of raw happiness you only see in kids. Glaring at her without any interruptions was my painkiller. She looked like a fucking angel in her elegant, Greek-goddess, pearl-white dress. A swan with ruffled feathers for hair, tied back into a messy French twist. She grinned at Millie and took the cherry blossom bouquet from her hands when it was time to exchange the rings. After the ceremony was over, I sauntered in the opposite direction to resist the urge to pick her up and kiss the shit out of her until her lips were raw and swollen. Instead, I plucked my phone out and started texting her, knowing that she wasn't going to see those messages anytime soon. And let's just say that I was feeling particularly blabby, because there

was no other way to explain the shit my fingers came up with.

Dean

You're fucking gorgeous to a fault, you know that?

Dean

Move in with me.

Dean

Seriously. Fuck everyone and everything. Let's do it.

Dean

Dear Ms. LeBlanc, it's your landlord. Regarding the rent reevaluation - I'm raising it by a trillion percent. Take it or leave it.

Dean

But seriously, Baby LeBlanc. Let's fucking do this.

So much for making sure she knew I was staying sober. I sounded like a drunk fool.

After the ceremony came dinner. The seating arrangement meant that Rosie and I were sitting on the opposite ends of the table—fuck this and fuck my life—and even though she probably had already checked her phone, she didn't answer me yet. That was fine. I had patience. She had time.

Actually, neither was true.

I didn't have patience and *she*, predominantly, didn't have time.

Trent got up from his seat to change Luna's diaper and my dad slipped into his place in a second and clasped my shoulder.

"Beautiful ceremony," he commented. I shrugged.

"Sure."

"Are you enjoying yourself, son?"

Enjoying was a strong word. I was tolerating this event until it was time to go home and feast on my dessert. My girlfriend's pussy.

Tucking my hands into my pockets, I leaned back. "Food's good."

"And I noticed you're not touching the alcohol. Nice."

"That'd be Rosie's terrific idea. Seems to be working so far. Mostly, anyway." I thought back to the time I accidentally answered Nina. "It's for the best. The novelty of excessive drinking wears off just around the thirty mark."

"Is she the reason you're staying at Vicious's?" Dad smirked, raising an eyebrow.

I had told my parents that I wanted to stay at the Spencers' mansion on my first night in Todos Santos so I could be there for my friend, but that shit was as convincing as a virgin whore. I never did anything for anyone unless I wanted to. Especially for Vicious. So everyone assumed I had a hidden agenda.

"Maybe." I wet my lips, my gaze searching for her perky butt and French twist through the sea of flamboyant ladies. I didn't out us as a couple. Not yet. I wasn't sure when and if Rosie was going to tell her sister, and even though I wanted to grab the mic and announce it to everyone, I had to be mindful of her feelings. But she was crazy if she thought I was going to indulge her for much longer.

"Why?" I asked Dad.

"You used to date her sister, right?"

"Senior year. For a semester and a half." I took a sip of my water and slung my arm over the back of his chair. "Way over it. Both of us."

"Evidently." Dad jerked his chin to the happy couple, just as Vicious grabbed his bride and French kissed her, his tongue attacking her mouth, in what started as slow and seductive and quickly moved to the type of shit you needed to do behind closed doors. Jaime was there to slap Vicious's back and remind him that two hundred sets of eyes were looking.

"Nina's been calling me lately. More than usual," I told Dad. He was the only one I spoke to about Nina. Mom was biased—she was way too protective of me—and all my friends were...well, in the dark.

Dad pursed his lips, furrowing his brows. "Why not give her what she wants?"

"You mean a ton of money and to cause me the nastiest migraine in the history of headaches? She wants six hundred thousand."

Beat of silence. "Do you not want to see him?"

Eli Cole was a lawyer. A family attorney, to be exact. Cases like mine landed on his desk every single day. People like Nina dragged him in and out of court like a revolving door, so he knew exactly how messy things could get for me.

I *tsked*, my eyes still drifting over the crowd, looking for the person I did want to see, all the time.

"No. Yes. I don't know. What the fuck is the point, you know? He is a part of me. He is not exclusively hers. But then...why reopen a closed wound? I think we're better off without it." I pinched my eyebrows together.

“I really shouldn’t fucking have anything to do with him in my current state.”

“Are you in a bad place?” Dad had an edge to his question. I gave the question some thought.

“Not necessarily. I just think not everyone is father material like you.”

Dad nodded. “Whatever you decide to do,” he said carefully, “just remember that your mom and I will support you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

Trent came back with Luna in his hands, and I spent the remainder of the evening making her laugh.



I crawled into Rosie’s bed around midnight. Our flight was boarding the next morning, but spending the night apart wasn’t an option. She was fast asleep—after fussing around Millie all day, being the perfect bridesmaid, and even running to a Target on the other side of town to get Millie flip-flops—the same necessities Rosie swore by—because she was afraid her sister’s feet would blister.

Baby LeBlanc looked peaceful, tucked under a blanket with her mouth slightly agape. Her eyelids fluttered, telling me she was dreaming. She had her two inhalers, orange tube of pills, and weird vest still dumped on her nightstand. This told me she passed out before she had the chance to get ready for bed. I slipped into the space beside her and spooned her from behind, clasping her close to my chest. She still smelled of sweat and alcohol, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. She didn’t even take a shower when she got back home. My little savage.

“Dean,” she murmured in her sleep, and I hardened against her. It sounded more like a moan, but maybe I was hearing what I wanted to hear. We hadn’t had time to talk to each other all day, and I missed her like a fucking lung. *Lungs*. Her lungs were failing her every single day, and we were wasting days mostly apart. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could live without seeing her regularly, every day, at least a few hours a day. We couldn’t go back to what we were. To occasional elevator encounters, fake

rent reevaluations, and light, meaningless banter that had no path anywhere worth going to.

“Dean,” she said again, her ass wiggling into my groin, begging for contact. I sucked in a breath through my teeth and pressed my cock between her ass cheeks, covered by nothing but thin, short pajama bottoms. I dragged it along her slit and let out a small moan myself. This time I wasn’t going to ride her without a condom. But she asked for me, so I sure as hell was going to give her what she wanted.

“Mmmm,” she groaned in pleasure in her slumber, parting her thighs a little to grant me better access. She liked it, so I took it as a signal to shove her bottoms down and stick my tip between the crack of her warm ass. *Fuck*. This girl. I cupped one of her tits and rolled her nipple between my thumb and forefinger, pinching it.

“Missed me, baby?” I breathed into her neck, not really expecting her to answer.

“Yes,” she slurred groggily, still comatose. “I told Millie about us.” Her ass pressed against my shaft harder, and now half my cock was pulsating between its cheeks. “She’s happy for me.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I wanted to grab, spin, and eat her out, which was out of the question, because not only was Rosie asleep, her whole family was snoring, too. I heard the serenade of snorts on my way to her room.

This wasn’t the kind of conversation I was going to have with a sleeping girl, so I tucked my hand into her shorts and started rubbing her clit in circles, embracing her from behind and feeling my dick jumping and jerking between her ass cheeks. I wanted to slide into that hole. Bad. But anal was definitely one of those things you needed to talk about before you were doing it.

“Come on my fingers, Baby LeBlanc.” I slipped one, two, three fingers into her pussy and enjoyed the slurping noises as I pushed them in and out, slow at first and then faster when her hips started chasing my hand frantically. Pressing my lips to the shell of her ear, I hissed, “Come on, Sirius. I love you.”

Her orgasm exploded on my fingers, and she cried out, her lips parting in desire. I had to shove my forearm into her mouth to muffle her scream. Apparently, Rosie enjoyed being fingered so much, she rolled around on her back and sat on top of me, straddling me in the dark before I had the chance to react.

I still wasn't sure if she was asleep or awake. She looked somewhere in-between. Her eyes were glazed-over, her lips red, open and inviting as she grinded against me, her bare pussy brushing my naked cock.

I desperately wanted to fuck her, but we still hadn't talked about one little thing. (And no, it wasn't the fact that I was in love with her sassy ass. She neither acknowledged nor heard it, probably, and it wasn't even news to me. I always knew I loved her. Way before I admitted it to myself.)

"You on the pill?" I asked. If not, I was going to have to run real quick to the other side of the hallway and get a condom. I wasn't even sure I had any. I always kept one in my wallet, but it hadn't been replaced since that time on our first night in Todos Santos. Though I wasn't above sneaking into Vicious and Millie's room—yes, on their honeymoon night—and stealing his condoms while they were both there. Even if they were naked *and* fucking. That was how bad I wanted Rosie.

"No pills," she mumbled, her body leaning back and slamming into me as she pushed my dick into her pussy. *Fuuuuuck.*

"Baby." I grabbed her arm, kissed her wrist, the inside of her palm, and her fingertips a million times. "You're kind of asleep. And I'm kind of a jerk for sneaking in here and fingering you while you're borderline unconscious. We need a condom. Let me go grab one real quick, okay?"

But she kept going at it, Cowgirling the fuck out of me, and even though I knew it was a bad idea, my dick took charge and Yee-Haw'ed, telling me to fuck the consequences. Every time she came down on my cock and clenched against it, I wanted to plaster her to the bed and tell her to wait a minute. I even thought of flipping her over, scooting upwards and fucking her mouth with my dick to make it stop.

I tried to reason with my logic as I found myself helpless underneath her, unable to deny her what she wanted, even if it was crazy and dangerous. I'd been traumatized by Nina, but Rosie wasn't her. Even if she got pregnant, no big deal, right? Luna was cute. Even though she had a "back-poop" today and Trent made me change her diaper. And maybe I could be a good dad someday. I just wasn't sure nine months from now was a good date.

"No need, no need," Rosie muttered, picking up pace. She was still kind of asleep. For an exhausted girl, she did a stellar job of riding me. My balls tightened, and I felt the familiar rush from my spine. I was going to come. I was going to come, and Rosie wasn't on the pill.

Hey, asshole, you're also an idiot, you know that?

“Baby...” I groaned, but it was futile. I wasn’t going to stop her, even if the reality of what was going to happen afterwards was going to destroy me.

“Dean,” she moaned. “Come.”

And I came.

I came inside her, twice at this point, without a condom.

She collapsed onto my chest after the act, nuzzling into my neck, my cock still inside her. I felt my warm cum dripping between us, sticking to my stomach, and felt the weight of my actions. It was a million times heavier than the woman on top of me.

“I came inside,” I whispered, to me more than to her.

Pressing her lips to my throat, she said, “I can’t have kids.”

And fell back asleep on top of me.

Fuck.

Chapter Nineteen

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Love. When it is fierce and deprived. Raw and delicious. But it also reminds me that one day—soon—it will all end for me.

WE SPENT THE FLIGHT BACK home holding hands and making out.

Waking up next to him felt like a dream. The irony didn't escape me, but then everything about our relationship was dunked in satire. Dean was so careless, sneaking into my room and fingering me while I slept, but I was quick to reciprocate. I remembered riding him, lazy and slow, my clit rubbing against his tight abs. I took what I needed, then dozed off back to sleep. I was so dog-tired—my legs were sore, my lungs needed a break from life, and my head was still pounding with the music and general noise—I was twirling on the line between unconsciousness and awareness of my surroundings.

On the plane, I told Dean about my conversation with Millie, casually skipping the part where he'd asked me to move in with him over text messages yesterday. Not that I didn't want that. Because I did. But for now, I just wanted to enjoy *him*. I wasn't going to make the same mistakes I did with Darren. I wasn't going to rush into commitments, and even though I knew that Darren and Dean were nothing alike (for one thing, my feelings for Dean drove me straight into the arms of insanity, and that bitch knows how to clutch you tight to her chest), this time, I wasn't going to screw this up.

It wasn't going to be beautiful. In fact, life with me was going to be ugly, and I wasn't even sure he'd be up for staying the whole ride. Also, I still had to tell him about my condition. About my inability to have children. About the reality that was waiting for me—a reality that was only going to

deteriorate—and what it entailed. The medications. The vests. The massages. The hefty bags I dragged everywhere. The inevitable disabilities as my systems would come crashing down one by one. Everything.

And Dean had secrets of his own. I knew that, too.

Who was waiting for him in Alabama, and who was the girl he spoke on the phone with the day he barged into my apartment to convince me to go to Todos Santos? There was no point poking at the subject. He had to come to me willingly and tell me everything, just like I had to muster up the courage to open the subject of my health and issues.

Right now, I didn't want it to be complicated.

Right now, I wanted to *live*.

“Millie is pregnant, by the way.” I pressed my lips to his throat and sucked lightly as the same flight attendant, who served us on the way into San Diego a week ago, passed us by and shot me an odd look. Last time, we looked like we were about to kill each other. Now, I was three seconds away from joining the mile high club in front of a dozen or so sleepy first-class flyers.

Dean jerked his head and scanned my face. He looked slightly tortured by the news, and I frowned.

“God, Dean, don't tell me you don't like children,” I teased. He picked up my hand, pressing my knuckles to his lips. His expression was so tight, I thought the wrinkles between his eyebrows would split his face in two.

“How do you feel about it?” He ignored my statement. *Wait, does he actually not like children?* I had a feeling it was a sore spot for him as much as it was for me.

I looked down, smiling.

“I'm happier than anyone.” I munched on my lower lip. “I'm going to spend every penny I have on buying this baby all the toys in New York, and I'm going to learn how to knit.”

“Oh, fuck. Continue.” He snaked a hand between my thighs and leaned forward to nibble on my earlobe. “Tell me more about you knitting. Your dirty talk game is strong today.”

I swatted his chest, still in awe of the fact that I was sleeping with this gorgeous man. I always dated nice-looking men, but Dean was in a league of his own.

“I'm serious. I can't wait to be an aunt. Do you think it's a boy or a girl?”

Again with those sad, brooding eyes that came out of nowhere. Was he

hiding something from me? Was it the same thing I was hiding from *him*?

“A boy,” he said, kissing my neck. “You?”

“A girl.” I rubbed my nose against his in an Eskimo kiss.

When we got back to our apartment building, he escorted me to my door, wheeling both our suitcases, and when I was about to turn around and close the door to my apartment—because there was absolutely no way we were sleeping together, I was too tired to take a shower after the wedding, and it had been twenty-four hours since my body and soap shared a hot date—he shoved his hand and stopped it from closing shut.

“I think we need to make a few rules.” His voice was businesslike.

I opened the door a crack, peeking through it sheepishly.

“You do?” I grinned.

“You fucking bet. Rule number one: I’m allowed to use my key for your place and vice versa.” He dug his hand inside his pocket and produced a key, which he put in my palm, curling my fingers over it. “Rule number two: your dating days are over. You’re mine now.”

“Are you mine, too?” I arched an eyebrow.

“Always have been, Baby LeBlanc. This cock was just a rental that’s now being used by its legitimate owner.” He continued. “Rule number three: no secrets. If something bothers us,” his tone turned a shade darker, “we talk about it. We fucking address it. And we don’t shy away from the bad shit, because I *know* there is going to be some bad shit down the road, and I’m still all in. Understood?”

“Sounds fair.” I nodded, about to close the door again. I really was tired. And even though I was happy, I also needed a shower and to clear my airways after the flight.

“And, sweetheart?” He looked over his shoulder, pressing the elevator button.

“Yes, Mr. Bossy Pants?”

“Congratulations, you have a new boyfriend.”

“You’re not my boyfriend.”

“Your Facebook status claims differently.”

“What?!”

Ping. He walked into the elevator, a cunning smile on his face as the door slid shut.

“Like the fucking post, Rosie. Goodbye.”



Dean

I had a tech guy with a lot of free time (and probably wasted sperm) on his hands who made things happen. That was how Dean Cole and Rose LeBlanc became in a relationship on Facebook, even though they weren't even friends two days ago. I wanted to make sure Rosie knew that this wasn't another drawn-out fling, and that the next time someone out of our group was going to go down the aisle, it would be us, and it would be *us* in every sense of the word. She was going to wear flip-flops, and I was going to wear her out until they had to surgically remove my dick from her body.

How did it feel to find out my ex-girlfriend was having a baby? It felt like a thousand knives to my stomach, but not because she was knocked up by the guy I grew up with.

"I can't have kids."

Every time I thought about the way she whispered it into my ear, I felt like polishing off a whole bottle of whiskey. It was unfair. Unfair that fucking Nina could have a baby but Rosie couldn't. Rosie was the definition of mother material. She had enough compassion to last for five people. How could she even volunteer at a children's hospital? Fuck if I had a clue, but I did understand why Millie didn't want to tell Rosie about it until the time was right.

"Mr. Cole." Sue breezed into my office, offering me a nod. It was a Tuesday, but Sue looked like a Monday morning. Her attire black, head-to-toe and she wore a frozen smile of a cheap porcelain doll. "How are you today? How was Mr. Spencer's wedding?"

"I'm great, the wedding was eventful, and I am not in the mood for small talk, so let's cut to the chase." I rolled a tennis ball in my hand and watched her from my executive chair. Out of all the shit that had happened, the best part was that Rosie finally realized that Millie didn't give a damn about us. Relief washed over me when Baby LeBlanc told me her sister was okay with us. Not because I cared about what Millie thought. But because *she* did.

I thought Millie was going to warn her about my manwhoring ways. Not that I was a manwhore. I was just...*a man*. What the fuck was I supposed to do? Sit around and wait for Rosie to realize it was always us?

“I need you to call all the florists on this block and send every single rose they have, no matter the color, to The Black Hole on Broadway. Addressed to Rose LeBlanc,” I told Sue. Her eyes darted up from her iPad for the first time since she got into my office, and they zeroed in on me like a target.

The thought of doing it myself crossed my mind for exactly one second. Giving a call to those florists, or asking our temp receptionist to do it, was not exactly rocket science. But then I realized that there was a fine line between being considerate and a pussy, and hell if I was gonna hop over to the unfortunate side just to please my PA. Sue still worked for me. I had three deals waiting on my desk, a hundred unanswered emails and four business calls I needed to set up. I was not going to spare her feelings and drown in more work. At the same time, this had to be done.

“Oh?” she asked, tucking the iPad under her arm on a pout. “Any message to go with it?” And if eyes could speak, I would be showered with a *message* full of profanity and physical damage threats.

I told Sue what the cards should say—plural, one for each bouquet—and even though I didn’t mention my name, I had no doubt Rosie would know who was behind this gesture. She fucking better. I made a mental note to ask her if Dr. Dickface still kept in touch with her. If so, I needed to pay him a visit, make sure he understood that I was taking over from here.

Sue slid her forefinger over her iPad, finally making the necessary arrangements as I’d asked her, before lifting her gaze back to me.

“Every rose on the block?”

“Every rose in Manhattan,” I amended.

“That could cost you a pretty penny.”

“I have a beautiful bank account, Sue,” I flashed her a cocky smile. “I can fucking afford it. Anything else?”

“Yes, actually. Can I ask you something, Mr. Cole?”

Again with the Mr. Cole. This chick wasn’t going to let this one go. I rubbed my palm over my chin and sat back. “Go for it.”

“What does Miss LeBlanc have that the rest of the human population doesn’t?” she inquired, meaning I’d never sent anyone flowers, let alone an amount that could potentially fill a whole forest. I smirked, because the answer was so fucking simple, yet so fucking complicated at the same time.

“My heart, Sue,” I said. “She has my heart.”

Chapter Twenty

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Verbal foreplay.

The chase.

The hunt.

But most of all...the part where I surrender.

Rosie

Let me guess, you slept with Sue.

Dean

I think we're going to have an easier time if I give you a list of the women I haven't slept with in Manhattan than the other way around.

Rosie

Remind me why I'm having sex with you again?

Dean

Because no other man knows that in order to give you an earth-shattering orgasm, you want your nipple to be pulled at the exact same time I pinch your clit. Because you like me, maybe even love me, although I am willing to wait until you admit that to yourself. I can go on, shall I?

Rosie

God, Dean.

Dean

God and Dean are synonyms. Save battery power. Choose one next time you text me. What do you want to have for dinner?

Rosie

I made plans with Elle.

Dean

Not my favorite dish, but it's not going to tamper with our plans. Elle can join us. I'll book us a place at The Red Hill Tavern for eight.

That was *before* he sent me flowers.

Although, to be completely honest, calling what he did sending me flowers was like calling the Pacific Ocean a small puddle. There were a thousand—maybe more—roses in all colors arriving in chunks. Vans double-parked in front of the café, and honestly, I was starting to get a little irritated with the amount of tips I had to pay all the delivery guys.

“If I swoon any harder over your boyfriend, I will give birth to a freaking ovary right here and now,” Elle threatened, plucking card after card from the dozens of reds, whites, and pinks that filled the café with the alluring scent of freshness and nature. They all had one word and said the same thing.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

A harem of customers vocally wondered what the occasion was, and when Elle answered them, they begged me for a picture of my boyfriend. After I showed them his Facebook profile picture—of him puffing on a cigar, his legs crossed over his office desk in a sharp suit in black and white, they proceeded to tell me that if I won't marry him within the next year, I was a hopeless idiot, because the man is obviously perfect.

I tended to agree.

Millie and I spent last night talking on the phone for three hours. She was on her honeymoon in the Maldives sipping virgin cocktails in a swimsuit, but still found the time to humor me. Mama and Daddy made zero effort to patch things up with me, and I didn't reach out to them either—not until they gave up the stupid idea of me moving back to Todos Santos—but I loved hearing all about Millie's cravings and how her lower abdomen was hard and swollen. Or how she caught Vicious almost shedding a tear at their ultrasound appointment they had, even though he said that he had something in his eye.

Big softy.

I then told her just how much I liked Dean, confessing that my love for

him was over a decade old. She cried when she heard how much heartache it had caused me to see them together, but I think it was the hormones because she also cried when I gave her a mini-spoiler about the next episode of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. She told me that Vicious claimed Dean's interest in me was genuine and sincere, and I didn't want to tell her that I already knew, because her ex-boyfriend and I shared more than just small talk back when they were together. Things that didn't include words. Or touching. Things that tortured and taunted us to the point we drove each other crazy.

Then she mentioned that Dean had a fling with Sue, and I simply had to stick my nose into the subject.

When Dean proclaimed me as his girlfriend on our Facebook pages—how the hell had he done that, I had yet to find out—he meant every word. He hadn't gone through all this hassle to fool around with other people behind my back.

I shook my head and landed back on planet Earth, grabbing a steamy mug from the dishwasher underneath the bar and wiping it dry.

“Pushy Dean invited himself to our dinner tonight,” I told Elle, and her grin was so wide it was contagious. Or at least that was what I'd convinced myself of when my cheeks hurt from smiling.

“You think his hot, vain ass is going to pig out on pizza with us?” she asked. Elle had given up on her skinny-bitching diet since the bakery down the street reopened. I shook my head.

“He is booking us a reservation at The Red Hill Tavern.”

“That's crazy expensive!”

“I don't think he expects us to pay.”

“I think he expects *you* to pay in sexual favors.”

I didn't want to say anything, but deep down, I was already waiting for the check.



The good news: the HotHole was charming Elle's socks off.

The bad news: he swept me off my feet in the process, too.

I watched them wordlessly, twirling the prawns and pasta with my fork as Elle hooted loudly time after time when Dean said something funny or asked her a question, or was just generally his charismatic, engaging self.

I'd never been to The Red Hill Tavern before, mainly because I couldn't afford it, but even if I could, who had time to book a place three months in advance? Especially seeing as health complications constantly put a damper on my plans. I never knew when I had to shut the door and hide away from the world or sit on the bed with a giant vest for hours at a time, waiting for my lungs to play nice with the rest of my organs.

The Red Hill Tavern was lovely. I was happy we went there. The food was great, but the company? That was the real treat.

Yellow lights were spinning from teardrop chandeliers, old oak and classic red-and-white checked tablecloths and real, well-used candles shone everywhere.

I thought about the happiness Dean held in the palm of his hand. The happiness that he had offered me so generously, but taking it was dangerous, because it was placing him behind the wheel of the vehicle that was called my life.

He seemed like a reckless driver. Then again, ever since we started this, he had been nothing but strong and resilient. A rock I leaned on when things at home crumbled.

Who would have thought? Dean 'Ruckus' Cole, Manwhore Galore.

"So, do you work with a lot of millionaires?" Elle purred, her lips shiny with an extra coat of lipstick and olive oil from the delicious food we wolfed down.

"Sweetheart," he snickered, taking a bite of his filet mignon, "I *only* work with billionaires."

"Think you can hook me up with one?"

"Are you sure? They normally don't look like their bank accounts feel."

"They have sons, though, right?" Elle asked.

"They do." Dean grinned. "I like the way you think."

Just then, his phone buzzed.

"Sorry, I have to take this." He frowned at his phone and stood up, leaving us to admire his broad back and magic ass in his charcoal, tailor-made suit. Elle clapped her hands twice when he got out of earshot, heading toward the door leading outside. She grabbed me by the shoulders.

“This man, Rosie!” she exclaimed. “Tell me he is terrible in bed so I can keep my loyalty as a friend to you.”

Perfect didn’t even begin to describe what he was between the sheets, but I definitely needed a repeat to remind myself why I was putting my heart on the line like this, knowing someone like him would never settle for someone like me long-term.

“*Make sure Darren knows before you move forward,*” Mama said to me when I broke the news about us moving in together. “*You don’t want him to feel like he’s been tricked by a woman who can’t have children.*”

“Dude.” I shook my head, trying to silence Mama’s words. “Don’t even go there. They don’t make them like this anymore.”

“Continue at this rate, and I bet you any money that you will be a victim of a passion crime.” Elle stabbed a fork into her ravioli and brought it to her open mouth. “Someone would kill you. Another jealous bitch, probably. Maybe the PA? I mean, no woman should be the proud owner of a man like Dean.”

“He is not a piece of property.” I rolled my eyes, munching on a breadstick.

“No. He is a hot commodity, though.” Elle pinched her lips before we both doubled over laughing. She asked how Trent was doing—she was disappointed she didn’t get to meet him before the wedding—but then Dean came back to the table. He no longer looked playful, fun, and laid-back. Instead, he looked like he had seen a ghost. Tucking his phone into his back pocket, he said, “Took care of the check. Are you ready to leave?”

I didn’t have to be that close to him to know that he’d been drinking. The mere scent of pure alcohol on his breath gave it away. It bit at my nostrils with freshness reserved for a hardcore spirit. I wanted to bite his head off, but couldn’t do it in front of Elle, and perhaps even at all. He looked troubled in a way that made me physically uncomfortable.

Elle and I exchanged confused looks, our half-eaten dishes still sitting at the table, waiting to be enjoyed. My friend opened her mouth, and I had a feeling that she was going to ask if we could stay for dessert. That was a definite no. He needed to get out of there, and I wanted to save him the explanation.

“Yeah, I’m feeling pretty tired, and it’s getting chilly.” It wasn’t getting chilly, but Elle, and everyone else around me, were always concerned that I would catch a cold. “Let me make a quick bathroom stop beforehand. My

bladder doesn't want to be friends with the house wine."

Fifteen minutes later, we were in a taxi on our way back home. Dean hailed a cab for Elle first—and paid for it—and again, I was met with her angry eyes, the ones that demanded I chain him to a basement and convince him to marry me.

When we were in the taxi, I turned to Dean to ask him what happened.

One look at his face and I realized it was a bad idea.

"Do you want to hang out?" I inquired instead. "It's still early."

"That depends. Will you give me shit for drinking? Because I'm going to. A lot."

I thought about it for a second. He hadn't been drinking all week when we were together—including at the wedding and in Vegas, two events that practically called for it. If I'd told him I didn't want to stay, he'd take it the wrong way. Like I only wanted him under my terms and conditions. Which couldn't be further from the truth. The truth was, I'd take him any way I could get him, and it was important for me to be there for him to make my point.

"No," I said. "You can drink."

"Then yes, stay. I need you tonight."

And I had needed him the whole week before.

He was there for me.

I was there for him.

One thing was for sure—when one of us fell, the other followed down, no questions asked.



Five fingers of brandy, and Dean didn't even allow the expensive drink to tickle his taste buds before he tossed his head back and finished the snifter in one gulp. He leaned a hip against the wet bar and tugged at his hair, staring out the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking Manhattan. This city was powerful. So was he. Problem was, for the first time since we met—since we were teenagers, actually—I didn't see him for the big, successful man that he

was. I saw a lost boy, and that boy? I wasn't sure many people could get to him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” My fingers danced on his furniture as I walked toward him, memorizing every curve of dark wood and fabric of the plush seats. This girl, the nagging one who kept on asking what's wrong—she wasn't me. But caring for Dean *was* me. And I had a feeling his sudden change had something to do with this Nina woman. The mysterious phone calls had purpose, that much I was sure of, but they were an open wound. The last thing I wanted to do was to cut it deeper and watch him bleed.

Truths could be uncomfortable. That was why people often chased them. More often than not, they weren't for all to see. And that was why Dean didn't know why I couldn't become a nurse. Why he had no idea I couldn't have any children.

My boyfriend shook his head. With no trace of emotion in his voice, he ordered, “C'mere.”

I ambled the distance to him and wrapped my arms around his neck, staring him dead in the eye. There was disobedience in my pupils. He needed a diversion from whatever bothered him enough to drive him crazy and make him drink and smoke himself to death.

Dean had a problem. He knew it. I knew it.

He had a problem, and this problem pushed him straight into the arms of his vices. He physically needed the alcohol and the weed to forget whatever it was that bothered him. I wanted to ask—was desperate to dig deeper into the dark rooms of his soul and pull out secret after secret, cleaning it from the cluttered mess—but couldn't. It killed me, but I had to be there for him, any way he'd have me.

“You're gorgeous,” he gruffed, trailing a finger over my jawline with the hand that wasn't holding his brandy.

“You're drunk,” I deadpanned, laughing nervously.

“True.” His predatory eyes played with my body in a way no other man could with their hands. “And still, you were gorgeous when I was sober, and you'll still be gorgeous when I nurse a fucking hangover from hell tomorrow morning.” His hands slid down to my waist, and he grabbed me with force, spinning and placing me on his bar. My lower back pressed against an endless number of luxurious bottles, and the surface underneath me slipped chill into my bones, even through my long, torn, black skinny jeans.

His hand slid to the buttons on my jeans, and he was quick to pull them

down until they hit the floor. My Sex Pistols yellow T-shirt was thrown onto the gray settee in less than a second, my flip-flops nowhere to be found. Dean then flattened me against the bar with his palm on my chest, and when the bottles dug into my back, he wiped them all off of the surface with his arm, a dozen of them falling to the floor in unison of colors, sound, and light.

“Jesus!” I gasped, the noise of shattered glass ringing in the room like an alarm. Dean grabbed the bottle of brandy that sat next to him and took another swig before pouring some into my navel and sucking on it, his warm lips on my skin making my lower stomach explode with nerves and need.

“I’m not a bad person,” he slurred, seemingly out of nowhere and to no one in particular. His level of drunkenness had me genuinely worried, but even though Dean was still a riddle, one thing was stark clear.

He didn’t want to be nursed or contained. He wanted to go unhinged.

His demons came out to play, and tonight, I was going to be their victim. I lay there at his altar, waiting to be punished for something I hadn’t done. His pain was going to be distributed between us.

And I was glad to take some of it away, even if it was just for one night.

“No. You’re the best person,” I mumbled as he dropped to his knees and tore the underwear from my skin. Red, searing marks brushed my thighs like welts. He flung the balled fabric behind his shoulder and dove down, tasting what was between my legs like it was his source of life, grinding his teeth against my sore hot spot, making me go crazy. He was a hungry zombie, feasting on his pound of flesh, and I stood no chance against his darkness.

Dean Cole was nothing like people pegged him. He was the worst kind of devil. One that hid behind a polite smile, preppy clothes, and good manners.

“Shit, Dean,” I panted hard, losing my grip of reality, of my senses, of *myself*. “You’re going to kill me.”

“No, Rosie. I am going to save you,” he growled, placing his thumbs on my sex and stretching me open to the point of delicious pain. He then plunged his tongue into me, fucking me mercilessly while I held onto the edges of his bar and screamed. For help or from pleasure, I wasn’t sure.

“Jesus. Oh, God.” I wiggled left and right, trying to escape the profound thrill that hit me.

“Tell me that I’m doing the right thing,” he snarled, clasping the sensitive flesh of my folds and slowly pulling it between his teeth until I cried out again. Delicious pain swirled between my legs. I wanted him to do it again, and he did, before saying, “I don’t want to know him, Rosie. I can’t deal with

him right now.”

What was he talking about? Who was *he*? The little working cells of my lust-fogged brain were anxious to know. Who was crazy enough to hurt this gorgeous, kind man? And more importantly, who held the power to do so?

“You are.” My voice quaked just as much as my flailing legs as I tried to scoot up the bar and run away from the wild orgasm that had threatened to riven my body. “You’re doing the right thing, Dean. Whatever it is.”

“I hate her,” he said, his tongue penetrating me, deep. His lips, his fingers, his teeth devouring me completely. He was talking about another woman while being with me. That should have made the alarm bells in my head go off, the red sirens to spin at three hundred miles an hour. But it didn’t.

It didn’t, because it was *him*.

“Then I hate her, too,” I cried out, feeling my knees shaking and my body going numb as a hot wave of pleasure washed over me, cocooning my body. I howled, a mauled animal, pulling at his hair, my thighs clenching his head until he had to pry them open with his strong fingers. Then I lay there for a second, motionless, and watched as he unbuckled his belt, stepping out of his pants before he grabbed me by the thighs and scooted me up.

“I’m angry.” The green in his eyes danced like flames.

“I know.”

“If you want to walk away—do it now. For what it’s worth, I think you should.”

“I’m staying.”

“You’re not going to like what you see.”

“What am I going to see?”

“The side of me that I’m not too proud of.”

I gulped, my mouth falling open. “I’m in, no matter what part of you you give me.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he sneered. “I’m going to hurt you.”

“Good.” I placed a hand over his chest. “That’s what I like about you. You treat me like a capable human and not like a wilting Rose.”

And just like that, everything changed. Darkness sucked the sunset from the city that watched us, broken glass crunched under his shoes, promising pain, his eyes shut down, and I was left alone with a stranger. *With a savage.*

The lights were switched off and he pulled me into him, but when I

thought he was going to catch me...that was when he let me fall. A throne of colorless glass underneath me. Even my bones moaned in protest as he grabbed me by the arm and hauled me to his bedroom, dragging me along his pristine black and white floor. My skin split from being dragged against the glass. Black velvet rug greeted me when we entered his domain, beneath an extra-large, king-sized bed from the variety you only see in the movies. I'd never been in his bedroom before, and I gulped when I thought about all the women who had. All the Kennedys. All the Natashas.

All the uncomfortable and painful truths.

He let go of my arm and gave me a little kick with his leg toward an ottoman by the floor-to-ceiling window.

"Elbows," a metal-cold voice that wasn't his demanded, and I scooted up on my knees and placed my elbows on the settee, staring out to the twinkling, artificial lights of New York. Dean stood behind me, but I couldn't see what he was doing. My ass was bare, but I still had my bra on. I figured he was hovering somewhere in my vicinity, but couldn't tell for sure. I didn't turn my head and look. He wanted me to be scared. I wanted me to be scared. This was happening.

"The funny thing is," he started, pacing behind me in his room, and I shivered at his beautiful voice. I heard the whoosh of thick liquid as he took another drink of his brandy. "They all called me Ruckus and The Joker in high school. *The Jester*. The fun guy. The clown."

And he was none of the above. I realized it now, but back in high school, I bought into that image, too. He could I not? He was damn good at selling it, and at a very high price.

"But you know what I am, Rosie?" He stopped moving behind me.

I closed my eyes, sucking the masculine scent of his room into my desperate lungs and feeling my heart disjoining inside my chest.

"You're a Pierrot," I whispered. "You're a sad, lonely clown."

"Always smart and perceptive." A hint of his own voice trickled into his tone. He took three or four steps toward me—I heard *and* counted—and even though I was still mostly naked and couldn't see him through the reflection of the too-spotless window glass—I felt safe.

"Do you know why the Pierrot is sad?" Dean asked.

"Broken heart." I swallowed, fighting tears. "He is pining for love that can never be his."

I wanted to turn around. To hug him. To undo the last few hours that

made him the way he was. But I did none of those things. I felt his hand caressing one of my ass cheeks, his breath tickling the valley between my neck and shoulder.

“Run, Rosie,” Dean hissed. “Run before I fuck it up and ruin us.”

“Try me,” I insisted. “Break me. Use me. *Fight* me. You’ve chased your prey for months. *Years*. A whole decade, goddammit. Are you just going to let it go?”

The smack to my ass cheek made me tumble forward and shocked the living hell out of me. I’d never been spanked before. Not because I was against it. I guess it was one of those things I never got around to. Like bungee jumping or watching *Schindler’s List*. Perhaps it was the fact that all the men I’d been with always treated me like a fragile thing that was about to die in their hands. Or maybe it was due to the fact I was never completely stripped of my self-conscious and shame when I was in bed with anyone else.

But Dean wasn’t anyone else.

He was *the* one.

I groaned, the desire and sting swirling in my body, scooting my ass toward where I’d last felt Dean, begging for more. It felt dirty, but I didn’t mind being dirty with him. He never judged me. Come to think of it, he was possibly the only person in my life who accepted me for who I was. Even Millie tried to convince me to move back to Todos Santos.

The sound of flesh beating flesh assaulted my ears before I felt the second smack, and this time it was somewhere between my butt and pussy. Drool pooled in my mouth and my head sank to the ottoman, my eyes rolling in their sockets. Why did it feel so divine when the man who claimed he wanted to “save” me hurt me? Maybe because a part of saving sick little Rosie was by showing her what she was capable of suffering without breaking.

“Scoot up.”

I scurried up the ottoman until my upper body was draped over it and my ass was in the air. Dean squatted down behind me—I felt his naked body against mine—and shoved four fingers into me all at once. It hurt, but I sucked in a breath and pulled through. He played with my arousal a little before taking it out and serving me my juices.

“Taste your pussy.” His voice was detached. “Taste what I fucking do to you,” he added.

Even though that was another definite first I’d never thought of doing, I brought my lips to his shiny fingers and licked them. Shoving them into my

mouth, he demanded after a brief moment, “Suck them clean, Rosie.”

I tasted sweet and warm. Not half as bad as I thought it would be.

He wiped the remainder of my juices on my ass and smacked it again. This time, I leapt forward, but didn’t whimper. I think he liked that I didn’t bitch about it. His groan told me so.

When his tip started teasing my entrance from behind, I lolled my head from side to side, waiting for him to plunge in. But he didn’t. He did this for a whole minute, driving me out of my mind, before I begged, “Dean...”

“Mmm?”

“Don’t torture me, please. Do it.”

“Do what?”

“Get in.”

“Wrong terminology. Try again.”

Holy hell.

“Fuck me, please.” I gulped.

“Condom?” he inquired. His tone was edgy. Like he was expecting something.

“I’m on the pill.” The lie was bitter in my mouth, and I was already breaking the rules we agreed on yesterday. The honesty part. I didn’t need to be on the pill. But *he* didn’t need to know that. Not until I was ready to tell him, anyway. Apparently, we both didn’t need to know a lot of things. What a fucked-up start to a relationship that was.

“You are? Because in Vegas, you weren’t.”

Jesus, with this guy.

“I am,” I whimpered, waiting for more. Whatever *more* entailed.

“If you say so,” he taunted, placing his palm flat against my throat at the same time he thrust himself into me in one go from behind. I cried out as he pounded into me, the blood in my body rushing to my head, my sex, everywhere. Dean wasn’t kidding when he said he was going to hurt me. This time he didn’t hold back. He fucked me so hard, I was sure my inner thighs were going to burn and my insides throb for weeks later.

“Turn around,” he ordered out of nowhere, still riding me, pumping in and out. Was he that drunk that he didn’t know what he was asking me? I managed a little frown between moans.

“I can’t. You’re on top of me.”

“So? Turn. Around.”

“You’re heavy.”

“And you’re strong. Fight me for it.”

Ignoring the tickling sense of orgasm, I placed my palms on his floor and tried to push myself up, but he leaned forward, deliberately putting more of his weight on my back to stop me. The fact that he actively tried to make me fail irritated me, so I pushed harder. Dean was built like a professional rugby player. Six-three on two hundred pounds of lean, defined muscles. I stood no chance. At the same time...I was wired to fight back.

This was what my disease had forced me to do.

What living next to Vicious and his HotHole friends had taught me.

What life made me.

I went slack, allowing him to manhandle me. And when he began to pound into me even harder, punishing me for my defeat, I pushed on my palms in one sudden movement, gaining momentum, and whirling around. His abs were now glued to my chest, and he chuckled as he pulled out of me, still completely hard.

“Push your tits together,” he hissed, and there was no point denying...dude was weird. Usually, it was light that seeped through the cracks of darkness. With him, darkness glimmered through his walls of normality and daylight.

I used my bra to do as I was told. He took his sleek cock in his hand and guided it to the valley between my breasts, coming inside the gap. His thick, white cum pooled inside my cleavage, and he watched it through droopy eyes. My ass was on fire from the smacks, but I still took a moment to forget everything and drown in him.

“Drink it,” he whispered, dipping his forefinger into his arousal and bringing the warm liquid to my lips. “Every single fucking drop.”

I did, and after I was done licking his cum from my fingers, he awarded me with two more orgasms.

I fell asleep in his arms that night, feeling the safest I’d ever been. Safer than I was with Millie, or with my parents. Definitely safer than I had ever felt with Darren.

I fell asleep in the arms of his demons, knowing I’d wake up in the arms of a sweet man.

For Dean ‘Ruckus’ Cole had many faces. And all of them were beautiful. At least to me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dean

WELL, FUCK.

Rosie was still asleep when I woke up, and guilt swiped through me like an angry earthquake. What the fuck was that all about yesterday? One second I was entertaining her friend in one of Manhattan's finest joints, the other I was fighting her on the ottoman while smacking her sweet little ass like it had tried to run over my puppy. Apparently, there was no middle ground when it came to her. Either I tried to pull the type of Hugh Grant shit that wasn't me or I showed her *all* of me, in all of my fucked-up glory.

Not that this was who I was. But that was the part Nina left behind and I never bothered to fix.

Yesterday drove me insane and right into the arms of the brandy. I wish Rosie hadn't seen it, but at the same time, I was kind of relieved she stuck around after all.

Peeling myself off of the bed and feeling a blooming headache pounding its way out of my temples, I sauntered to the kitchen to make scrambled eggs, bacon, and coffee. Fuck if I knew where all the shit I needed for it was, but I had to show her that I could do this. The whole boyfriend mumbo-jumbo.

What was I even saying? If Vicious could do it, I sure as fuck could, too.

Last night's conversation with Nina played in my head as I cracked the eggs and poured the spicy grains into the coffee machine. She called me from a New York number, so I thought it was one of the many lines from my office and picked up. Totally by accident. Totally a train wreck.

"I'm here," Nina said when I answered the phone. Fuck my life sideways. Not even the complimentary hello.

"You're here where? Hell?" I asked-slash-hoped. That was where the

bitch belonged. If she ever came there, she would probably take over and become president.

Nina's flirty laugh assaulted my ears.

"I'm here in New York, silly. I told you I would come for you. You need to meet him."

"Didn't I tell you I don't wanna see his face?" I gritted, walking to the bar and leaving Rosie and her friend, Elle, behind. I'd signaled the bartender to pour me a drink. So she was in town. Of course, she was. Why the fuck not? I gave her the money, after all, right? So why was I even surprised?

"All you have to do is wire me the money and I will leave you alone, Dean."

"Nina." I chuckled, loosening my collar. "I'm not going to give you six hundred K just so I can see him. You're fucking tripping. Babies are usually made by two people, right? Hence, both parents hold the responsibility. You fucked it up," I ground out. "Now you clean that mess."

"I'm thinking of pulling this offer off the table, Dean. You're terribly snarky with me nowadays."

"When have I ever been anything but a complete asshole to you?" I retorted, downing my drink and pointing at the empty glass, asking for another. "Because I would like to turn back time and rectify that if I was ever anything but."

"There was a time." Her sugary voice reminded me. "There was a time when you'd do anything for me."

Worst part? The bitch was not wrong about that one.

"How's your husband?" I changed the subject.

"Still alive," she huffed. "Unfortunately."

At least we could agree on one thing.

"How's your new girl?" It was Nina's turn to ask.

"Why are you asking? Think you could fuck that up for me, too?"

"Now, now." She chuckled. "Come on, Dean. Don't be like that. I'm happy for you. All I want is to secure my future and leave my goddamn awful husband behind. You've got plenty of money. I have what you want. Why are we running around in circles?"

"Because I want you to stay poor and miserable." There. I said it. "And, because, apparently, I don't mind paying the price to keep you that way. Enjoy your filthy motel, Nina. Bye." I hung up and downed three more glasses of liquor.

As I was making breakfast, I heard Rosie shuffling in my bedroom. My heart sank. If I scared her away by being an aggressive asshole, I had no one to blame but myself. Was she buying time to try to avoid me? I made out the sound of her turning on the faucet, flushing the toilet, and wondered how much longer she could postpone facing me.

“Good morning.” I heard her gruff voice and turned around from the stovetop to watch her walking around in *my* dress shirt, her light brown hair a hot mess. She smiled at me, a toothy one from the heart, then turned around when she found her jeans. Her bare ass—I tore her underwear last night—peeked from under my shirt when she bent down to pick them up, and fuck, her skin was red and raw. It was bruised down to her inner thighs, and there were streaks and little cuts from the broken glass I cleaned this morning. I wanted to throw up, but held myself together, turning off the stove and piling scrambled eggs and bacon onto our plates.

“Hungry?” I cleared my throat.

“Famished,” she said absent-mindedly, pulling her jeans on. “But I need to go down and put on my percussion vest, take my medicine, all the rock ‘n’ roll stuff. My own version of breakfast of champions.” She pretended to flex a non-existing bicep.

She wanted to go. Leave. Of course, she got scared. I showed her the ugliest side of me and expected her to just...what? Roll with it? It was too soon. Way too soon. Frankly, when you’re my type of fucked up, the best time to show your significant other your inner scars is never o’clock.

“I can bring them to you,” I said, hoping to fuck I didn’t sound too desperate. She flashed me an odd look.

“You don’t know what I need.”

Right. I had no fucking clue. Other than that ugly-ass vest. I recognized it from Todos Santos.

“I made you some breakfast.” I tilted my chin to the dining table I’d never used. I usually sat at the island when I ate, and even that was rare. In fact, I didn’t remember the last time I ate at my apartment. Every time I was there, it was a protein shake and fruit to keep me going until my next meal. I was pussy-whipped to the max here, with a table full of whatever-the-hell I could find in my fridge. I bet Rosie didn’t have the greenest clue I’d never done something in my life for anyone. Anyone but her.

Her baby blues scanned the table, a smirk on her face.

“Hey, Dean?”

“What?”

“I’m just going down to get my meds and vest, then I’m coming back up. You know that, right?”

“Of course.” I snorted. No. No, I didn’t know that.

My face must’ve given away a peek into my inner shitshow, because she giggled as she tiptoed to me, pressing her lips to mine as she wrapped her arms around me in a hug. I gathered her and squeezed, this time careful not to hurt her.

“Are you enjoying my morning breath?” she droned, exhaling on my face on purpose.

“I want to bottle it and make all my employees wear it as their new perfume,” I retorted, kissing the side of her head. “But just in case, I’ll buy you a toothbrush so you don’t have to go downstairs when we have breakfast. Ever. Bring your meds. Your clothes. Your vest. Do you want a drawer?” I refrained from asking if she wanted my whole fucking closet, although I did think it’d be fun to have her shit around. All those secondhand, tattered shirts and Forever 21 skinny jeans in my nickel hardware, black imperial walk-in closet that was the size of her whole living room.

“Mmmm.” She leaned forward for another kiss, and my hands itched to clutch her ass and throw her on the counter for a morning fuck, but she needed her medicine, and I needed to not make new marks on her before the day had started.

“Maybe?” she purred. “I just don’t want to take things too fast.”

“I think we’re taking it a little too slow,” I admitted. “What’s fast about what we’re doing? I want you. Always have. I know who you are. You know who I am.” Though, really, she didn’t know all parts of me until last night, and my Nina secret was like my dick—big and long and certainly uncomfortable if you weren’t ready for it. “This is not two people dating each other for the first time. We have history. Chemistry. And a shit-ton of sentiments toward one another. I’m serious as hell about this,” I said, in case a thousand roses, dinner with her friend, and making her breakfast didn’t tip her off.

“Sold.” She smoothed my unbuttoned shirt, reminding me that I needed to get dressed for work—and shit, I never stayed home beyond eight o’clock in the morning. People at work must have thought I was finally murdered by one of my flings. And I bet Sue was already planning the party memorial. “I guess a drawer would be nice. Thank you.”

“Do you have a shift today?” I found it hard to let go of her waist.

“Not at the café.” Rosie shook her head. “But I’m going to the children’s hospital for a shift later this afternoon.”

“Can I visit you there after work?”

She laughed. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. New parents are a little icky over strangers hanging around their premature newborns.”

“Go figure.” I rolled my eyes, ignoring the stab in my chest when she said that.

“Yeah. Tomorrow?”

“It’s a date.” I nodded, watching her walk toward the door, the realization that the decision whether she came back up or not was completely hers hitting me in the gut.

“Oh, and Dean?” she said when she was at the door. I looked up.

“Yeah?”

“I really enjoyed last night. You can let your inner Pierrot come out to play more often if you’d like.”

I bit my fist as she closed the door behind her, knowing for a fact she was going to come back up.

Well, fuck indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

First dates. Holding hands. Forming jokes that are only ours. Memories that no one else but us has. Creating life with a man who doesn't even know that I cannot create life, not really, and feeling the remorse churning inside me.

SEPTEMBER CAME AND WENT, AND October followed suit. Seasons bled into one another. The trees had changed, but we hadn't. In fact, it was when the leaves started falling, dancing together in orange, pink, and yellow, that what we had grown together became stronger and more alive.

Dean and I fell into a routine. It wasn't flawless, but I learned at a very young age that nothing was. Even if it seemed so from the outside.

We spent every waking, available moment together.

When he was at work and I didn't have a shift at The Black Hole, I came to see him. We would always lock the door to his office and close the electric blinds. Sometimes, it would be enough to hide what we were doing there. Mostly, though, I walked out with cheeks the color of beetroot and watched the whole floor judging me with their gazes as I fixed my hair and covered my stubble-scratched neck with my hand.

Sue, especially, would look at me like I sacrificed innocent babies for a living.

One time, I came in wearing a thick coat and nothing else. When he slipped the coat off of me, he was so happy to find me naked, he ate me on his desk for forty minutes and missed his Skype meeting with the rest of the HotHoles. He did scold me right after for not wearing clothes.

"You could get sick." He bit my ass cheek—and not softly. "Stop fucking

with what's mine and wear a goddamn sweater."

When I did have shifts, we tried to do lunches together. Sometimes he would drop by unannounced, sit at the bar, ask for an Americano, and pretend like we didn't know each other. Especially if there were other customers around, we would play a game where he hit on me by dirty-talking his way to a quiet orgasm that came in pleasant chills. It always made the person sitting next to him squirm. One man even asked me if I wanted him to call the cops on Dean.

I said yes before I declined, just to see the look on Dean's face.

We laughed. A lot.

We cried some, too.

Well, I did all the crying. When you volunteer at a children's hospital and work with premature newborns three times a week, sad things are bound to hit you in the face. At the end of October, we had lost a newborn. A baby girl named Kayla. She was tiny, born at twenty-four weeks yet wrinkly as a hundred-year-old woman. I broke down in tears in the hospital hallway the night her doctor told me that she didn't make it. When I got off from that shift, Dean was waiting for me on the other side of the road.

I collapsed into his arms and cried until I had no more tears in me, and he kissed my head and told me that if he could suck the pain out of me like venom, he would.

And I believed him. One hundred percent.

Not everything was great, though.

Dean's phone was bombarded with Nina phone calls every single day. He never took them—ever—and was careful not to answer unidentified calls. She wasn't a mistress, and wasn't in the picture anymore. Those were the crumbs he'd thrown my way when I asked him about her. Anything else about Nina remained a complete mystery.

Countless times I found myself itching to pick up his phone, call, and ask her what the hell did she want and why couldn't she leave him alone. But I didn't. Because I was a freaking hypocrite to try to milk a truth I wasn't ready to deliver myself.

When October rolled in, and with it the official signs of winter, Mama and Daddy got back to their nagging, but it was better than the radio silence I'd suffered through September. As far as they were concerned, I was single and alone and dying a slow, painful death. Which couldn't be further from the truth. My health issues were under control. My lungs, along with the rest

of my organs, were in good condition. Other than my heart. This one was in the hands of the man who had once broken it, and I had no guarantee that he wouldn't do it again.

Our Todos Santos crowd and friends knew about Dean and me. First, there was the Facebook relationship thing that got people talking, and then—there was the fact that the HotHoles knew almost everything about one another.

Millie was happy for me. Vicious was indifferent—as he was toward everything else—Jaime and Mel were wary but glad for us, and Trent, who still lived in Chicago with Luna, didn't give a damn because he had more urgent matters to deal with.

Dean never answered Nina, but sometimes, he would still drink when her name or number showed up on his screen (he said there was no point changing his number. She always found out what it was, somehow.) When I asked him why he didn't have her arrested, he said it was complicated.

I hated when he drank, but it didn't happen more than once every two weeks or so. When it did, I had to humor him all the way down to the pit of hell and drag him back into the light once he was done. I bowed down and let him use me like a pawn. Perhaps 'use' was not the most accurate term for what we were doing. I enjoyed his evil version as much as I enjoyed sweet lovemaking in front of the TV, carton takeout boxes decorating the floor beneath us.

I enjoyed it when he spanked me. I enjoyed it when he fucked my mouth with his cock until tears ran down my cheeks. I did not complain when he angrily took me in a dark alleyway behind Madison Square Garden and fucked me against a brick wall that made my back look like it had been scrubbed with sandpaper.

The night before Thanksgiving, we were going to grab dinner at a diner across from The Black Hole. Or so I thought.

I was jogging my way across the road in my thick, black hoodie and wool hat—it wasn't anywhere near freezing, but I always kept myself covered just in case—and slipped into a red vinyl booth, placing a little brown paper bag on the table, containing Dean's favorite chocolate chip cookies I got him hooked on, the ones Elle kept begging me to stop eating so I wouldn't balloon. And now, ironically, not only did I eat them all the time, but my boyfriend was wolfing them down, too.

I waited for fifteen minutes before I texted to see where he was. Dean was

always late, but never by more than a few minutes.

Rosie
Sirius to Earth, are you coming or what?

Dean
I am. On your face. Tonight. BOOM.

Rosie
Cute. Where are you?

Dean
Right here.

Rosie
Where is here?

Dean
In front of the diner. In a taxi. Waiting for you.

Rosie
?

Dean
Shit, I forgot to tell you I'm not hungry. So I thought we could skip dinner and just fly out to Todos Santos to tell our parents that we're moving in together. Oh, and dating and shit. Happy Thanksgiving.

Rosie
??

Dean
Come out.

Rosie
???

Dean
Now, Baby LeBlanc. I got places to go, people to see, a pussy to eat on our way to the airport.

Rosie
NO.

Dean
Too late, I already asked for a limo with a divider and tinted windows.

I didn't mean the oral. I meant the surprise trip across the country.
I looked out.

He wasn't kidding.

There really was a tinted-windowed limo.

This man was born to be my downfall.

What the hell, God? Was cystic fibrosis not enough for you?

Making my way across the road, I narrowed my eyes when Dean stepped out of the vehicle and opened the door for me, exaggerating a bow.

"Miss LeBlanc."

"Mr. Batshit Crazy." I gave him a slight nod, tucking myself into the black vehicle. Inside, there were champagne and two glasses, plush beige leather seats, and one grinning, gorgeous boyfriend still dressed in his work suit. *I could get used to it*, I thought. Which was why I had to tell him everything about what Dr. Hasting had told me. Already, I was being dishonest by not disclosing my fertility situation.

Dean poured me a glass of champagne and pushed the button of the divider, handing me my drink. He, himself, sipped bottled water.

"So," he licked his lips and tugged at my wool hat, exposing my hair and tossing it aside, "you think your parents are going to like me?" he joked.

My parents already knew him. Worse, they were well aware that he had dated my sister. I wasn't particularly hot on telling them about Dean and me. Knew they would jump on the opportunity to criticize me for this, too. But at the same time, I didn't want to let them stand in my way of happiness.

"Honestly?" I took a deep breath. "I wouldn't be surprised if they'll be against us."

"I don't give a shit." He crossed his long legs, entwining his fingers together, nonchalant. "Do you?"

I shook my head, realizing that making them proud was something I had given up on long ago. It'd been sealed and finalized during the week we spent in Todos Santos, but had been going on even before that.

"I need to stop by our building to grab my medicine and vest." I rummaged through my bag to make sure my inhaler was there.

"No need." He placed a hand over mine. "Got everything packed for you, baby. Pills, inhalers, nebulizer, vest. Other than packing a new set of lungs, you have everything you need here. Working on the latter, but the black market is slow these days."

I looked up and grinned. "You are not going to like what I'm about to say," I told him, and he frowned in a way that was completely extravagant to show me that he was already irritated.

“I don’t think you can eat me in here. You’re way too tall to pull this off. Even in this big limo.”

“I find challenges refreshing. They keep me young.” He loosened his tie and pulled the fabric of his dress pants over his knees, preparing to dive down. I stopped him with a hand on his lightly stubbled cheek.

“I’m also wearing really tight jeans.”

“I’ve been known to rip apart things that stood between me and your pussy, and I’ll be damned if twenty-dollar ASOS denim are going to deprive me of your pussy, love.”

Love. We still hadn’t said those words to one another, and not because we hadn’t felt them. We were both new to this feeling. To this life.

I pressed my forefinger to his lips and leaned into his face. “But I can go down on you.”

His eyes followed me dutifully as I sank down below him, my face leveled with his groin. If I was being honest, this part of our relationship was one of my favorite things about us. The deprived lust that sizzled between us. Like nothing was ever enough. Like doing dirty things in public places was a *necessity*, rather than something we needed to do to spice things up. Because with Dean Cole, you didn’t need any extra spices. He was already hot as hell.

I reached for his dress pants and took him out. His cock was half-mast, just like his smirk as he brushed some of my wild hair away from my face.

“Sometimes, when I think about how we could have been together all those years if you weren’t so fucking stubborn, I want to shoot you in the eye with my super sperm. You know that?”

I licked my lips, still holding his junk, feeling it swelling between my fingers as more blood rushed to it. “That’s the most disgusting compliment I’ve ever received,” I admitted.

“Maybe it’s because you didn’t strip it down to the meaning of its naked bones. You were always the one, Rosie. Before you even opened your goddamn mouth, I knew that I had to have you. And it took me a long time, but now that I own you—and let there be no mistakes, you’re mine, baby—nothing will come between us, get it?”

Best pep talk to a woman facing a huge one-eyed monster that was staring at her, waiting to be sucked. I leaned forward and licked the crown of his cock, screwing my tongue into the little slit before taking him all in. He jerked his hips forward and his head back, hissing through his pearly white teeth. “Holy fuck, Rosie.”

“Holy fuck and Rosie are synonyms. Save words. Only use one.” I served him the same sass he gave me just a couple months ago, and he laughed, a tortured kind of laugh from a brooding millionaire who had his dick inside the mouth of a sick, poor girl on their way to the airport.

He didn’t hold my hair and guide me like he usually did. Instead, Dean watched in a mixture of awe and fascination as I worked my magic on him, sucking him off with tender lips, giving him the love and devotion he deserved for being the best boyfriend a girl could have. Because he was. Everything I didn’t even know I could have.

I’m worthy.

I’m a catch.

And I’m about to show the world what a handsome, successful, funny, and smart man I’ve bagged.

After ten minutes of nonstop TLC to Dean’s cock, I heard him moan. “Shit, baby, I’m about to come.”

I massaged his thighs, giving him silent permission to do so in my mouth, and he sucked in a breath before wrapping his fingers around his shaft and milking his cum into my mouth. After he was done, I righted my spine and plopped on his lap. He kissed me on the lips, then nuzzled into my chest.

“That blowjob needs to go into the history books, Baby LeBlanc.”

“God, I’m glad you’re not the man in charge of our national education system.”



By the time we landed in San Diego and got to Todos Santos, it was the middle of the night between Friday and Saturday.

We went straight to bed and crashed in my room, burrowing into each other’s warmth. I slept with a smile on my face, knowing that I was about to see my sister. Emilia was showing—she sent me weekly pictures—and I couldn’t wait to stroke that Buddha belly and coo at it like the crazy aunt that I was.

True, Mama and Daddy were going to be a struggle, but all in all, my joy

for my sister overrode the occasional bumping heads with my parents.

In the morning, I wandered out to the hallway, still in my PJs. Last night the housekeeper, Anna, opened the door for us, so I wasn't even sure if my family was expecting me. I found out the answer to that question when I walked into the kitchen and saw Mama and Daddy reading newspapers at the table, drinking their coffee.

Mama lifted her head from her magazine. Daddy didn't. Neither one of them looked surprised to see me.

Mama wanted to rush and squeeze me to her chest, her body leaping forward, but Daddy put his hand on the table in a silent gesture that advised against it. He reminded her that I had to be punished for my disobedience.

"Sit, Rose," she said instead, her voice sad. Every cell in my brain begged me to protest, but this was not how I wanted our visit to go down. I grabbed a chair at the far end of the table and laced my fingers together. My parents and I had been distant but civil over the past three months. We texted a lot. Mostly health-related stuff and quick updates about my life. They sometimes called to remind me to wish a relative a happy birthday or to pick up Millie's mail from our old apartment or ask when I was going to come back, but that was the extent of it.

"I think we should talk—" I started, but Mama cut me off.

"Kathy from my knitting club saw you on that Facebook website the other day. Called and talked my ear off, she did. Said she had some interesting news to share. Why, Rose LeBlanc, out of all the men in Manhattan—out of all the men in the *world*—you have your eye set on the one your sister had dated!"

"Good morning." Said sister breezed into the kitchen, flipping her lavender hair off of her shoulder. "I smelled food so I came to eat it all." Millie chuckled, but everyone else in the kitchen looked ready to roll on the floor in a punch-fight.

"Not in the mood for humor? Well, I guess I'll join the funeral." Millie plucked a carton of coconut water from the fridge and took big gulps, rubbing her belly.

It'd been ten minutes since I woke up, and already I had my dose of drama for the whole weekend. Millie wore a long dress the color of honey with no shape and fringes at the bottom, and her long hair danced around her shoulders. She looked like a fairy. A very pregnant one at that. Her belly was the size of a watermelon. How many babies did she have in there? She kept

me posted, so I knew it was just the one. At five months she looked like the bun in her oven was baking pretty nicely.

I jumped from my chair, emptying my arsenal of affection, kisses, and hugs on the one person in my family who actually accepted them. Millie pulled away, smoothed my hair, and crinkled her nose. “Did I arrive five minutes too late?”

“Thirty seconds, but the bomb has already dropped.” I sighed. My sister gave me that look, a mixture of an eye roll and a knowing smile, reminding me that it was the same old story, different day.

“Mama, Daddy.” Millie motioned for me to get back to my seat, grabbing her own chair and plopping down. “You need to hear us out. I’m done seeing Rosie get hurt.”

“Oh?” Mama folded her arms. Daddy still pretended to be reading from the newspaper, but his eyes weren’t moving. It made me want to throw something at him. Scream. Yell at him that he had no right to be mad. That *I* was the one who had felt abandoned and discarded. That for someone who wanted me around all the time, he had a funny way of showing it. He mourned a daughter who hadn’t even died yet, but he wouldn’t let her love him.

“Your mama doesn’t need time. She needs a healthy daughter.”

I wondered what kind of daughter he referred to. One who wouldn’t follow her dreams, perhaps? One who would bow down and do whatever it was *he* wanted her to do with her precious time left in this world? Not that I couldn’t see where my family was coming from. It was heartbreaking, I’m sure, to watch your sick kid making a life somewhere else. But that was what my parents hadn’t realized.

New York wasn’t about New York. It was about independence.

It was about doing what I wanted to do, experiencing life out of the bubble my parents had created for me. Most of all, it was about finding out who I was without people dictating it for me.

“Rosie’s boyfriend, Dean Cole, called Baron yesterday, telling him they wanted to come here and announce their relationship.” Millie took my hand and smiled, that type of smile that lit up the room and the one next to it. “It’s Thanksgiving, and we have so much to be thankful for. I have a baby coming soon, and Rosie is happy and doing so well health-wise. We wanted to celebrate together. I’m sure you remember Dean and I used to date in high school. I’m also certain you remember how it *ended*. Briefly. Tragically. But,

as you may recall, not heartbreakingly.”

Millie rubbed circles on my back, trying to soothe my nerves away. I was legit too nervous to breathe.

“I don’t want to dwell on the past, but I do find it important to say one thing to make sure our future is brighter: Baron and I were always meant to be together. Everyone knew that. Everyone...but us. As for Dean and Rosie?” She sighed, shaking her head, the sorrow seeping from her expression. Millie knew how much it hurt me, *us*, and wished she could take it back. “Mama, Daddy, they were crazy for one another from day one. I hadn’t noticed, because I was too busy being a selfish teenager, but there is no way I am hurt or annoyed by their relationship. Just look at her.” She flipped my hair and grinned. “She is glowing. And when she is happy, we should all be happy. Do I look dejected in any way?” She cradled her tummy and laughed, and I laughed with her, not because I was feeling relieved or optimistic, but because my sister was the definition of health, and even if I wasn’t, I liked that what I would leave behind was safe and whole.

Emilia was both.

Daddy finally lifted his eyes from the paper. “Is that true, Rose? Did you always love Dean Cole?”

I couldn’t read his tone. Was it serious? Sad? Disappointed? Pleased? Did he think I was an idiot for loving a man who wasn’t mine to love, or did he appreciate the sacrifice I had made for my sister all those years ago?

“Always.” I blushed, looking down to my knotted fingers. “I’ve always loved him.”

And it was the uncomfortable truth no one wanted to hear. No one but the man who didn’t know it. Dean himself.

My father pushed himself away from the table, hands on his waist, looking ready for another argument.

“Is he taking care of you? We need to know.”

Jesus Christ. Either my dad was the biggest caveman to walk on Earth in the twenty-first century or he really thought I was a useless sack of bones. He trusted Emilia with my life when we lived together. He trusted Darren without even meeting him. But me? Nah. He’d put his faith in a crusty pair of underwear before he believed in me, so it seemed.

Taking a deep breath and closing my eyes, I offered a small nod.

“Yes, Daddy. He looks after me.” My jaw moved back and forth, every feminist cell in my body demanding I would put him in his place.

“Are you sure?”

“He packed my medicine and my supplies for me before we arrived here.” Biting my tongue to prevent myself from lashing out, I continued. “He sends me a taxi three times a week so I won’t miss my physiotherapy sessions. And comes with me to Dr. Hasting when he has the time.”

“When he has the time.” Daddy snorted, shaking his head. “Of course.”

“Paul,” my mother warned, looking down at the table.

“Yes, fine. I’m willing to talk to this man, but it changes nothing, Rose. We still want you here in Todos Santos. If you want your mama and me to stand behind you while you’re...doing whatever it is you’re doing in New York,” he waved his hand dismissively, but for the first time in the weeks since I’d visited here, didn’t look at me like I was unworthy of his time, “you gotta make some promises and changes to set our minds at ease. Because you *are* sick, Rosie-bug. And we’re worried. Everything we want and ask from you—is for your own benefit.”

Rosie-bug. Choking on my tears, I nodded.

Mama rolled her eyes. “Now can I please get a hug? This mama’s been missing her little girl.”

“And this future mama needs Rosie to make her kick-ass chocolate chip cookies,” Millie cooed, pinching my cheek and laughing.

I thought the worst part was behind me that morning.

I was wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dean

SOMETIMES LIFE IS A SNOWBALL and you have no way to stop it.

Sometimes you don't even want to.

Everything moved fast. I had zero control over it. I wasn't kidding when I told Trent you couldn't prevent life from spiraling out of control. It just so happened that my chaos was drenched in mind-blowing sex.

Nina settled in New York. She called me every day. Every. Single. Goddamn. Day. I never answered.

It was ridiculous. It became even more ridiculous when one October day, right before I got out of the office to pick up Rosie so we could catch a Hugh Jackman movie (I still had my balls intact, thank you very much), I saw Nina waiting for me at the reception, clutching a damp, cheap coat to her chest. Her eyes were wide and, if I'm not mistaken, had huge-ass dollar signs in each pupil.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cole." Sue rushed over to me, clasping her iPad and looking genuinely flustered for the first time in years. Nina had been trying to sneak into the building frequently, from what I'd heard, but my staff knew asses would be fired and people would pay if she stepped foot inside my domain. "I don't know how she got past security downstairs. We're in-between receptionists as you're aware..."

Ignoring my PA, I walked to Nina. I was three inches away from her face, and my eyes burned their way into her soul when our bodies met. The kind of look that told her that next time she showed up at my office, she was getting out of it in the form of scattered body parts that would later be thrown into the Hudson.

"Get. The. Fuck. Out."

“He wants to see you.” She thrust her body into mine. *Pathetic*. Her words caught me off guard, but I maintained my balance, not letting her manipulating games get to me. Now that I was looking—really paying attention—I noticed her clothes were tattered, and that bright pink lipstick she loved to wear so much was smeared all over her face. Such a fucking mess. She was using again.

“I mean it, Nina.” My voice relaxed, but my posture didn’t. “I don’t care. Tell him I don’t want to see him. Now get out. I’d hate to call security. We both know you can’t afford another arrest with your criminal record.”

That should have been the end of her, but it wasn’t.

Nina didn’t show up again in person—I think she knew I’d follow through with my threat—but started sending me things that belonged to him to gauge my reaction. To get me to cave in and answer her calls. A black Raiders cap, to show me that he, too, loved football. A plastic cup with Birmingham, Alabama plastered all over it. A pen. Whatever. Fuck. I didn’t want these things to taunt me, but they did. They did and I needed to get away from it all. I was reaching the breaking point that made you crumble.

The decision to go to Todos Santos wasn’t only about getting away from Nina. It was time everyone knew what my intentions were about Rosie. I was going to marry the fuck out of that chick, soon. By the end of that month, we were moving in together, officially.

I was diving headfirst into a messy reality, and I didn’t give two shits. I chained myself to her destiny, knowing how it was going to end. Rosie started every morning with gulping down a ton of pills and wearing that vest twice a day. Every other afternoon, she would go to physiotherapy. When we took strolls, she would stop and lean against a tree, out of breath, smiling apologetically as she clutched onto her side. My girlfriend was not well. She was never going to be well.

And we were still going to make it work.

People had to know, accept, and move on with it.

The other reason I dragged her ass to Todos Santos was Trent. Jaime and I promised him we would get Vicious to agree to switch branches. The fucker was going to Chicago with Millie and the baby whether he liked it or not. I knew he wasn’t going to go down without a fight—hell, fighting was one of our favorite pastimes—and I was ready for battle.

Rosie’s meeting with my parents was supposed to be low-key and intimate, but when my mom realized I was bringing a girl home for the first

time since...well, ever, she got a little too excited. And by “a little too excited,” I mean goddamn crazy. She called my sisters, and what do you know? Keeley planned a visit from Maryland, anyway, and Payton was just around the corner in NorCal, and this was how a quiet brunch with my folks and girlfriend turned into the mother of all shit-shows, hosted by yours truly.

“I’m so nervous I’m about to puke all over my cleavage.” Rosie clutched my hand when I parked one of Vicious’s cars in front of their house. “The bright side is, at least it will cover my tits. Looking gross is better than looking like a floozy, right?”

“Did you just use the word *floozy*?” I chewed on my right cheek to contain my smile.

“Weird, huh? I think it’s the nerves.”

“Holy shit, Baby LeBlanc. I didn’t know things were that bad.”

She’d never met any of her past boyfriends’ parents before. Never went this far with anyone else. It was almost like we waited for this moment so we could experience it together. We weren’t kids. I was kissing thirty. She was twenty-eight. We were emotional virgins, and it was like she just handed me her V-card.

This time I asked for it.

This time I took it.

And I loved that we got to experience a few first-times together.

“Just be you. I’m sure it’d be good enough. And, if not,” I shrugged, popping my minty gum, “I’ll replace you. You have a hot cousin, right?”

I punched the doorbell as Rosie shot daggers at me with her lake blues. Any other time, I would breeze right in, but she needed those few seconds. Her palm was sweaty, and she had a coughing fit she tried to tame by gulping deep breaths. Rosie had no idea that she already impressed my parents simply by dealing with my crazy ass and accepting me for who I was. I wasn’t going to reassure her of that just yet, though. I loved watching her make an effort. She wore a formal blue dress under her huge coat—and no, the cleavage wasn’t half as generous as she thought it was—and had braided her hair. That whole good girl act was a complete fucking sham, and watching her lie for me in that goody-two-shoes dress was a turn-on.

My mother opened the door, wearing her signature lime-green pastel cardigan and syrupy smile. She threw herself at Rosie and hugged her like they’d known each other forever, and Rosie melted in her arms, her stiff body shielding its armor. My dad shook Rosie’s hand and offered her a grin, the

kind he saved only for his children. He then proceeded to pat my back and whispered something entirely inappropriate into my ear about my girlfriend. Payton and Keeley stood at the door like two stage-ten stalkers and complimented her dress. They then turned their attention to me.

“You’re still working out.” Keeley’s tone was borderline accusing. She tossed her dirty blonde hair.

“What, no gyms in Maryland?” I brushed my shoulder past her and squeezed her biceps playfully. Keeley had no time to work out, and even though she was a little on the fuller side, it suited her just fine.

“Oh, look, our brother is still super funny.” Payton elbowed her. I rolled my eyes, and my sister gasped. “What, no sense of humor in New York?”

Juvenile sparring aside, things started off on the right foot.

Rosie and I were led into the dining room, where White Trash Hash, cowboy breakfast bowls, bagels, and brownie cupcakes were waiting on the rustic modern table. Orange juice, coffee, and milk were sprawled, ready to be demolished. Rosie’s mouth almost dropped to the floor, her tongue rolling like a red carpet, and I wasn’t sure if it was because she was starving or because of what she was seeing. I suppressed a chuckle when I thought about how she’d probably imagined my family. A bunch of snotty assholes who only ate French-named dishes and lived in a mansion like Vicious’s.

Truth was, my parents came from a town on the outskirts of Birmingham, Alabama. My dad was a senator’s son, but my mom was the Rosie type. Her parents worked on a farm. They’d met when she cleaned his room to cover for her sick mama. His parents hated her, and she hated them, but neither of them gave a rat’s ass.

My dad became one of the most powerful attorneys in California, making the rest of their past ancient history. But they were Southern people through and through, and I think the fat-laden food on our dining table was fucking proof of that.

“Park your ass, Baby LB.” I pulled a chair, giving her my own version of being a gentleman. We sat next to each other. I poured her coffee. She liked it black. No sugar. No cream. No nothing. Actually, Rosie avoided dairy altogether, and I noticed those things because every little detail about her was observed, recorded, and filed in my brain. I kept my hands off of her, knowing full well that the minute my fingers found hers, they wouldn’t stop until they dove down between her legs. My parents had no idea what a fucking horny bastard they had raised. I was trying to keep it that way.

“Rosie, I heard you volunteer at a children’s hospital.” Keeley grinned.

“At the Mott’s Children Hospital in Manhattan,” Rosie confirmed, taking a long sip of her coffee. “ICN unit.”

“You must really love kids. Does Dean know he is going to father at least three or four of them?” my sister joked, taking a bite of her greasy bacon. Rosie blinked, her easy smile unfaltering. My gut turned into a knot of hard wires. Because while Rosie still hadn’t told me about her situation—well, she did, but not consciously, and certainly not the details—it didn’t make her reality any less *real*. I shouldn’t be mad at Keeley. She was direct and playful. I shouldn’t, but I fucking was.

“Thank you, Keeley, for freaking my girlfriend out five minutes into our brunch.” I smirked, casually asking my mom to pass me a bowl of who-the-fuck-knows just to keep things moving. “Two can play this game. I’ll be waiting for your future boyfriend with an arsenal of questions about his sperm quality and parenting methods when the time comes.”

Rosie put a hand on my thigh.

“Dude, it’s okay.” She smiled with her whole face. “Yeah. I have a passion for children. I would love to be a mother one day,” she added after a pause. “And I think your brother would make an amazing dad. There, baby. Just making sure the anxiety is distributed evenly between us.” She patted my cheek and winked.

I laughed because she expected me to, but it never reached my eyes. Or any bone in my body, for that matter.

“I’m rolling with whatever you want.” I clasped the back of her neck, planting a kiss on her temple. “Three kids. Ten kids. One. None. Don’t give a damn as long as it’s with you.”

As I said it, I knew that my balls would never forgive me for the cheese I just poured all over my reputation, but my balls had no say in this. Besides, I didn’t hear them complain when Rosie licked them last night in-between sucking my cock. My dignity was a price I was willing to pay for her happiness, and I was hoping she’d read between the lines and understand that her infertility issues weren’t going to come between us.

Less children = More Rosie for me. No complaints there.

“Awww,” Payton cooed. “Someone grew a heart.”

“What did you put in his drink, Rosie?” Keeley snort-laughed, pretending to fan herself with her hand. “This is not something my brother would say unless he’d lost a bet.”

My mom smiled so big I thought her face was going to collapse into the back of her neck. Dad looked a tad uncomfortable, but it couldn't have been the topic. He was the one drilling it into my head that I needed to settle down. Dad kept moving his gaze from his Bvlgari watch and back to me. Eli Cole wasn't a man who was easily irked.

"When are you guys leaving Todos Santos?" he asked.

"Tomorrow morning. We'll be spending Thanksgiving dinner at the Spencers." I threw a strawberry into my mouth and chewed. Maybe he was pissed that I was staying with Rosie's family, but he ought to know that winning her parents over was a priority this year. Rosie's parents didn't completely hate me—I helped them get their shit together back when they moved to L.A. and Vicious was in New York playing Romeo to Emilia—but I got where they came from. If I had two daughters and a bastard who boned both of them, I'd be suspicious of his intentions, too.

I needed to rehab my image, make sure they knew chasing a LeBlanc ass wasn't a hobby of mine.

"Would you be able to drop by afterwards?" Dad smoothed his Polo shirt. "There are a few matters we need to discuss."

Mom's face changed, her eyes were pleading with me now.

"Are you guys getting a divorce?" My voice was dry, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh, Lord!" My mom scoffed, clutching her pearls. "What are you talking about, Dean? Of course not."

"Someone dying?" I proceeded.

"No," Dad said.

"And none of these girls are preggo?" I threw a thumb in Keeley and Payton's direction. My bet was on Payton. Kid was trouble. But my parents shook their heads in unison, denying this, too.

"In that case, I'll take a rain check." I took a sip of my water, leaning back in my chair. "We have a board meeting in our L.A. office after dinner that will take some time."

"Everything all right?" Dad furrowed his brows. I shrugged.

"We're twisting Vicious's arm. He needs to switch branches with Trent. He wants to be close to his parents now that Val is gone."

As the words left my mouth, I'd realized that Rosie didn't know shit about it. I forgot to tell her. Didn't think she'd care. But, of course, she would. Her parents lived in Vicious's house, and her sister was having his fucking baby. Though I knew Vicious would never sell the mansion—he

loved it too much—I still felt like a dick, throwing it in her face out of nowhere.

She leaned forward and my fingers were no longer touching her back, and her lips were no longer smiling, and fuck, I was an asshole. She had every right to give me grief about it.

“You can still make it, even if late,” my dad insisted. Goddamn, what was with him today?

“No can do, Dad. Told you. This could take a while. If you have something to tell me, do.”

“I’d rather not.”

I put my silverware down—slowly—taking the time to scan every curious face at the table before I spoke again. “We’re family. All of us.” My hand found Rosie’s neck, but she pulled away, gently yet firmly, making sure I knew I was in the doghouse.

“Dean, honey.” Mom licked her lips, and Keeley and Payton offered each other puzzled looks from across the table. They didn’t know what the hell was going on either. Thank fuck. The last thing I needed was an intervention or some shit.

Nothing about the situation made sense. Our family didn’t have secrets. Well, there was one, and it was mine, but it was buried six feet under, covered by the dirt of everyday life and the dust of years of denial. The rule was that when we were together, we talked about it freely. Never held back.

Only it wasn’t just us in the room now. Rosie was there, too. It tipped me off, and my jaw locked, my eyes narrowed.

What the fuck has Nina done now?

“That old thing. I still haven’t told Rosie about it.” I rubbed my face tiredly. “Yeah...fine. I’ll throw her in the loop after we’re done here. She’s not gonna give a fuck. I promise you that,” I said, watching as all eyebrows in the room—Rosie’s included—rose in disbelief.

“Please, if you need to say something, do. Don’t mind me. It’d make me feel right at home,” my girlfriend joked. None of us found it funny. My teeth ground together.

“Any reason why you’d choose to bring it up now?” I played cool.

Brunch was turning into the kind of Jerry Springer crap you made fun of when you were doped, slung on your couch drinking ice-cold beer.

Say hi to your current life, asshole. It’s not a TV show; it’s your reality.

“We heard Nina was in New York.” My dad jerked his chin up, and that

was when I noticed he hadn't touched anything on his plate. Eli Cole didn't eat his fucking cowboy breakfast. That was weird. He would marry greasy food if it were legal. Mom only let him have it once a year.

"I see she gave you an update on her whereabouts." I reached for the orange juice, my hand a little shaky. "I'm taking care of it."

Sort of. Kind of. Okay, not really.

"We all know what she wants." Dad put his hand on mine and made the shaking stop. I raised my eyes to his. We both swallowed hard. "And I think it's time you face what she has to say, son."

"You do?" I leaned back, breaking the contact, one of my elbows propped on the table and my other arm snaking around Rosie's seat. "Who is going to pay for this little adventure? You or me?"

"Me, if that's what you care about. But it's not. Your mother and I want to discuss this with you. It's not a subject to be addressed on the phone."

Rosie's hand came down on my knee. Payton and Keeley looked confused, but she was downright frightened. I needed to make it stop. I postponed this conversation long enough. It was time to tell her and face the consequences.

My eyes were still locked in a battle with my dad. He was pissing me off. That almost never happened. I had a very good relationship with my father. We golfed together. Went to football games together. Talked until the very late hours of the night together every time I came home for a visit. Other than drinking together—I had a problem and didn't want him to witness my ugly side for himself—we pretty much did everything together. He was a source of pride for me. Even my friends dropped by to ask him for advice.

"Fine," I bit out. "I'll try to make it. Don't say I didn't warn you. It could be three or four in the morning. These meetings can drag." Boy, could they. We always took our sweet-ass time when we locked the door to the world outside. And convincing Vicious to do something he didn't want to do? Yeah, we'd be lucky to leave there before January.

"We'll stay up all night if need be." Dad took Mom's hand in his, his cheekbones flexing.

"Any way we can go back to eating and talking about Dean's future babies?" Keeley squirmed in her chair. "Rosie looks fifty shades of pale, and I'm kinda scared."

"Are you okay?" I twisted my head, checking my girlfriend out. She didn't look okay. She looked like she was going to faint. Rosie nodded, just

barely. I took her hand in mine, and this time she let me, which *wasn't* a good sign if you knew Rosie.

She was supposed to be pissed off with me.

“Inhaler, please.” Her voice was barely a hiss.

I rushed to her bag. I knew by then her inhalers were hooked into the front pockets and grabbed both of them before returning to the table.

Everyone’s silence grated on my nerves as Rosie sipped water after she used her blue inhaler. I shook with rage. What the fuck did my parents think they were doing? They had all the time in the world to tackle the Nina subject, and they decided this brunch was the perfect opportunity?

Fuck them.

Fuck that.

And fuck *me*, for forgetting to give her a heads-up. I forgot to tell her about us cornering Vicious, but even if I hadn’t, what good would it have done? Rosie was going to run to her sister and warn her off. It only would have made things messier.

“Well...this was fun,” Rosie muttered, her smile weak when we stood by the door. I helped her into her coat, feeling like the biggest douchebag on planet Earth. Which was ironic, because that was what she called me. *Earth*. What she hadn’t realized was that I really was our goddamn planet. Because when I was going to explode, a lot of fucking people were going to get hurt in the process.

My sisters and mom still waved at us when I opened the door and helped her into the Jeep. Her eyes were droopy, her body slack. I always brushed aside Rosie’s illness, but it was there, looming in the shadows, waiting for the perfect chance to grab at her throat.

I needed to come to terms with that but couldn’t. Every time I saw her using an inhaler—including today—I got so fucking mad, the need to punch a wall took over me. Nebulizers, pills, nasal sprays. My apartment was full of them now. I had Dr. Hasting on my speed dial, her physiotherapist’s address, and knew the exact times and days she went for appointments and what to do when she started pounding her chest and hissing like a snake. I knew that the average lifespan of a cystic fibrosis sufferer was thirty-seven. I knew all of the male diagnoses with CF were infertile, and many of the women had difficulties having children.

And I didn’t want to know any of these things.

Because she wasn’t a fucking illness.

She was a person I made plans with. And those plans exceeded the ten years she statistically had left.

I started the car but didn't release the E-brake. Staring out to the neatest tree-lined street in the world, where my family resided, melancholy trickled into my heart.

What the fuck are you doing, asshole?

"You have a secret. Big one," Rosie whispered, looking out her window.

Rosie and I didn't get off on the best foot in our relationship. I wanted her to get used to *us* before she knew I was actually a *we*.

Her whole package may have been explosive, but mine was messy. Very.

"So do you," I said. She offered me a startled glance. No denial there.

"Yeah," she said. "We already suck at this relationship thingy."

"Are you kidding?" I chuckled. "We're fucking killing it. It's a bump. A little dog ear in our book of awesome."

"In my reality, every bump can have crucial consequences," Rosie reminded me.

"And in *our* reality," I countered, "I will always be here to make sure we smooth things over."

We drove in circles for a while, just like we did our first night together in Todos Santos. I took her to all the places we visited before we had sex for the first time. To our old school, the marina, Liberty Park, and then, finally—to *that* bench. People were calling us, our phones buzzing and vibrating in our pockets. My father, mother, Rosie's parents, Vicious and Millie. So when I parked on the hill overlooking the basketball court, I threw both phones into the glove compartment and shut it before we headed to our seat. Nervous didn't quite capture the chaos that brewed within me. I was going to place my secret in her hand. A secret no one was supposed to know but my immediate family. And I was going to bare my weaknesses before her.

All of them.

Layer by layer.

Naked and exposed.

And hear for the first time if the real me—all of me—was still worth loving.

It didn't feel right to sit. There was too much adrenaline in my bloodstream, too much sorrow in the air. The winter nipped at our skin, and Rosie was covered head-to-toe, as she should be.

"Let's take a walk," I said. She coughed a little.

“I’ll only slow you down. I can’t do long walks.”

“You never slow me down. You give me time to appreciate my surroundings.” My balls protested again. Stupid balls didn’t understand that making her happy would benefit every part of my body. Them included.

We strolled downhill, past lush green knolls, dodging low hanging branches and untrimmed vines that had begun to invade the cleared path. Her hands were tucked inside her coat and mine were in my pockets.

There was never a good time to break the kind of shit I was going to tell her, so I did the Band-Aid thing and went straight to the point.

“My biological mother left me to die in a Walmart bathroom when I was three hours old.” My tone was blasé. She continued slugging ahead, her muscles tensing at my confession. “She was a crackhead. The minute she found out she was knocked up, she took off, left her family in the countryside and disappeared somewhere in the gutters of Birmingham.”

Rosie was a smart girl. I knew she was bound to suspect something was going down.

Maybe she thought I was a deadbeat dad who fucked off once things got too real. Yeah, that wasn’t an option. I always wrapped up Dean Junior. I had personalized condoms, for fuck’s sake. The only person I didn’t use a condom with in my entire life was Rosie herself. I’d never felt another woman’s pussy, flesh-to-flesh, before her.

“I didn’t...” She tried to gulp all the oxygen she could get to stop herself from crying. “Please, continue.”

“I was found by the janitor. My mother, Nina, was found a couple blocks down the road, buying cigarettes. Her dress was covered in blood. When they took her to the hospital, she called her sister to help her deal with the legal trouble she had gotten herself into. Nina’s sister is my mom, Helen.”

“Jesus.” Rosie’s lips trembled, and so did the fingers she covered them with. A part of me, the logical part, I guess, acknowledged that it was fucked up that none of my friends knew I was adopted. But this, right here, was exactly why I wanted to keep it that way.

I was powerful.

I was imposing.

I was a motherfucking god.

These looks of pity and hushed whispers of sweet words did nothing to soothe the gash Nina created when she dumped my ass. Only reason I was willing to tolerate them now was because it was Rosie who was giving them

to me. I would take any emotion from her. Even pity. Even hate. Anything, as long as it's not indifference.

“My mom—my *real* mom, Helen, the one who raised me—decided to adopt me. I think Eli was game because...” I gave it some thought, a chuckle escaping my lips. “Well, because he is pussy-whipped, I suppose. He really loves my mom, you see. Nina didn't want me anyway. She had a lot of shit going on in her life. I don't even resent her for that. I mean, it's pretty screwed up to leave your newborn in a public restroom, yeah. But that's not why I hate her guts today. Not really. By the end of the first day of my life, we were all at the same Birmingham hospital. Nina signed my birth certificate and didn't include my father's name—she said she didn't know, and honestly, it wasn't that surprising to anyone in her inner circle—and my parents started filling out the paperwork for the adoption.”

“Oh, Dean. I'm so sorry. So, so sorry,” Rosie repeated herself. We were still walking, which was good. I didn't want to have this conversation with the unnecessary discomfort of eye contact. Already, it felt like the truth was being ripped from my mouth like teeth, one by one. She took my hand, squeezed it in hers, and I drew in a breath, feeling the pressure in my lungs as they filled.

“My dad accepted a job offer in California, and they moved. Mom got pregnant with my sisters. And I looked so much like my family that no one bothered to ask. People just assumed I was Helen and Eli Cole's son. We never bothered to correct them—because why the fuck, you know? *It worked*. We got away with it, and the lie became so big, so fucking huge, it was too late to backpedal and expose it to the world.

“It's not like my family ever made me feel different. My sisters know. My parents always treated me the same as them, so it's not like my adoption mattered to anyone.” I paused, scowling. “Well, anyone but me. My mom was under the false illusion I could bond with Nina. My dad believes that everyone deserves a chance—well, he would. He's a lawyer. His job is to defend criminals. Either way, they always made me go and visit her in Alabama. Every summer until I was eighteen. That was the deal.”

I thought back to my last summer with Nina when I turned eighteen, and a chill broke down my spine. *The gold-digging bitch*. The mere thought of what she did had my fists itching for a bloody fight.

“At some point in her train wreck life, Nina got married to a dude named Donald Whittaker. People called him Owl because he used to deal drugs from

two a.m. to six a.m. on street corners. Real catch, as you can imagine. Whittaker got locked up, was released, and decided to move to the outskirts. Bought a piece of land—a farm—and lived the farmer’s dream. Nina kicked her crack habit, so as far as my parents were concerned, she was clean. She *looked* clean, because she was no longer shoving needles with poison into her veins. She moved to more dignified mommy drugs. Adderall, Xanax, oxy. The fun stuff that makes your addiction fairly invisible. And I never bothered to correct them because I was a pathetic little bastard who hoped to shit that one day the woman who gave birth to him would realize that he is worthy and love him.”

“Dean.” she shook her head, her tears flying from her cheeks. “Oh, Dean.”

“Every summer when I came to see them, she made me bike the twenty miles from the farm to the city to get her her housewife drugs.”

“Why did you agree to do it?”

“Because I wanted to make her happy?” I laughed, a bitter lump twisting in the back of my throat. “Because I sought her acceptance? I mean, how fucking worthless can you be when your goddamn mom wants to flush you down a toilet before you even open your eyes. At seventeen, I finally opened my eyes and said no to spending the summer with them. Told my parents I was tired of doing labor work for two months. They agreed, but then I fucked it up at a party and they decided to send me anyway as punishment. It turned out to be the worst summer of my life, because it was then that I realized not only Nina didn’t love me...she fucking hated me.”

Rosie was crying. I didn’t dare look at her, but I felt her shoulder vibrating against mine. And I hated myself for making her cry, and I hated Nina for making *me* have this conversation in the first place. “To make a long story short, Nina did some deplorable things to me when I was a kid. I was a pawn in a very fucked-up game. A means to an end. She used me as an errand boy and made me do some stupid, illegal shit, then bribed my ass with alcohol and weed to make sure I shut up and didn’t rat her out to my parents. I was twelve when I had my first bottle of whiskey and hit from a blunt. I thought it was cool that Nina and Owl gave me stuff like that. That it meant that they saw me as a grown-up.”

Rosie gulped and looked away. “That’s why you do it,” she said. “That’s why you’re an addict.”

My nose twitched. “That’s how it started. It made me feel good. Weed

and alcohol made my summers move faster. They put a smokescreen on my reality—a thin shell that no one had managed to crack through. And so I carried the habit, even when I came back to a place I *did* love, back with my parents and sisters.”

“Nina never told me who my dad was. That bothered me. I knew she was a fuck-up, but I always wanted to know if I was a full-blown fuck-up from both sides, or if maybe I had some redeeming genes in me. And after shit reached a boiling point eleven years ago during my last visit on the farm, I decided to drop the subject and walk away. Cut her out of my life. It worked through college, because I had nothing to my name but a trust fund and a dorm room. But when we founded Fiscal Heights Holdings and started rolling in the dough, she agreed to tell me who he was.”

“And?” Rosie asked, a little breathlessly. I slowed down my steps.

“And she wants six hundred thousand dollars to give me his name.”

“That’s insane!” Rosie protested, stomping her leg on the ground. I halted and turned around to look at her. Her face was red, streaked with pain. *My pain. I put it there.* And even though it was never my goal to hurt her feelings, I enjoyed her warmth, because she burned for *me*.

“So? Did you ever pay her?” She kicked some mud around.

“Nope.” I ran a hand over her braid, tugging at it. “But that’s why she’s acting like a deranged stalker and keeps calling me every half hour. Whittaker’s farm is losing money, and she has an expensive coke habit to keep up. Prescription drugs just don’t cut it anymore. She hates her husband. Wants out. And she wants me to help her. That’s out of the fucking question.”

“But you want to know who your father is, right?” Rosie blinked, confused.

I nodded. “Yeah, but the feeling is not mutual. If it was, he would have contacted me by now.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know of your existence,” my girlfriend suggested. That was what I hoped. And prayed. And convinced myself every night.

“Or maybe he doesn’t care.” I resumed walking, and she fell in step with me.

“Or maybe he’s scared of your reaction after all these years,” she countered. “Maybe, Dean, you need to do what’s right for *you*, even if it isn’t what Nina wants.”

“Or *maybe*.” I was acting like a fucking four-year-old, I knew it, but

couldn't stop. "He is competing with Val over the worst parent award—there's a lot of candidates for this title—and just like Luna is better off without her no-show mom, I'm better off without him."

We stopped in the middle of what looked like the woodlands but was less than a mile away from the car. Rosie was striding at a snail's pace. She turned to face me, and I don't think I'd ever seen so many tears on one face. Her cheeks and chin were wet, gray clouds of mascara fanning her lashes.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," she said, and she was. But I didn't want her pity. I wanted her to know that I was a beast of a man who'd carry us both through storms and hurricanes. Hell and back. Through life—and if necessary, then yes, even through death. "I can't believe you hid this from us all those years." Rosie wiped a tear with the sleeve of her black pea coat. "Your friends have the right to be there for you, Dean. You should tell them."

Yeah, not happening.

"Nah-ah, baby doll. It is what it is. We all have our secrets, trust me. That's what makes us who we are. It doesn't make our friendship any less strong." And it was the truth.

"You know what you need to do?" Rosie chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating. I stared at her. Even if she had told me to do naked burpees all the way down to Todos Santos and back, I would.

"What would that be?"

"You need to get to the belly of the beast and kill it." Her eyes zinged with determination. I smirked, tucking a loose lock that fell from her braid behind her ear.

"Killing Nina? Tempting, but I don't think she's worth the jail time."

She rolled her eyes. "I mean talk to her. Pay her the money. *See him.* Move on with your life, no matter what you find out. The truth of the matter is, you are never going to let go of your vices if you don't, and I think we both know that."

"She doesn't deserve the money," I murmured.

"After what she's done," she placed her palm on my neck, dragging it down to my torso, "nothing will ever make her happy. She's tainted. You don't come back from that. Making others feel bad is never gratifying, no matter how badly you're hurt. Compassion, however, is the most rewarding trait one could have. That's why all wars eventually end. That's why most people love their children, not abuse them. Promise me you'll answer her?"

I nodded, even though dealing with Nina's ass was the last thing on my

to-do list. My life was complicated as it was. I was crazy about a girl who went to sleep every day not knowing if she was going to wake up the next. And I was fighting the alcohol demon, wrestling my way out of his claws. Every. Single. Day.

“I promise,” I said. “I will do this for you.”

“No,” Rosie stressed, pulling at the collar of my Ted Baker floral sweat bomber. “For *you*,” she corrected, the tears still running down her face. Then she took a step back, just when I was about to reach and hug her.

“My turn.”

“I’m listening.” My eyes clung to her face. Rain started sprinkling on our heads, and we both looked up, silently staring at the ashen sky. I took off my coat and bundled her with it, then reached across her back and behind her knees and lifted her into my arms, honeymoon-style, and began walking up the hill back to our car. It was just a sprinkle, not really all that cold, but I was still worried about her, even if I hid it every time we were together for her sake.

Her arms knotted around my neck. She looked down to her midsection and started talking.

“A year ago, when Vicious and Millie reconnected and he hooked us up with this crazy awesome health plan, I met Dr. Hasting for the first time. She wanted to run a bunch of tests on me to get a better feel of my overall condition, especially as I was just recovering from another lung infection I couldn’t seem to shake off. I was about to get back to nursing school when she told me that...” Rosie stopped, swallowing hard and shaking her head. Her eyes were closed. I broke a thousand times inside, but on the outside, I stared at her blankly, waiting for more. She gulped air before she opened her mouth again. “She told me that I shouldn’t bother going back to school, because I could never be a nurse. My immune system is so weak at this point, I have to get her okay before I even board a plane, which is why I was kind of shocked and worried when you picked me up to the airport for Thanksgiving. There was no way I could ever work around sick people, so she suggested I might as well look for something more practical to study. But I love helping people.” She coughed out the last few words, and I picked up my pace a little, a dash of panic thrown into my gut along with the wrenching feeling of grief. “So I decided to volunteer instead. The only place that is absolutely sterile from diseases is, you guessed it...”

“The ICN.” I finished for her. The place that served Rosie a constant

reminder that she couldn't have kids. And she still did it. Fuck my life.

"Dr. Hasting didn't just come to me bearing bad news about nursing school, though. She also said that it looked like I am completely infertile. I can't have any kids. Ever. Too much mucus around my reproductive organs. She said it's like dropping a sponge into a pool full of sticky glue, hoping it'd make it to the bottom. Technically feasible, but extremely unlikely." She bit her lower lip, staring ahead at nothing.

"Rosie..." I inhaled, my nostrils flaring. "Baby, do you have any idea how many options are out there for you? For *us*?" And, yes, it was no longer about her. It was about us. We were in it for the long haul. We were in it for *forever*, however long forever may last. "So fucking many, not only medically, but also adoption. We're rich and young and have spotless criminal records." I was already bunching us together as a married couple and conveniently giving her access to every single dime of my multi-million-dollar empire. As I said, full-blown stalker mode with this girl. "We could adopt a kid tomorrow morning if we wanted to. We are the perfect candidates."

Jesus fucking Christ, if this chick had a bunny, I'd be boiling it by now, getting ready to serve it as a Lapin a La Cocotte.

"The thing is..." Her arms loosened around my neck, and my back stiffened. "This is why I broke up with Darren. I don't want to get married. And I don't want to adopt, either. I'm not sure how much longer I am going to be here. And I don't want to leave more than I already have behind. Having a kid is a terrible idea. Why would I? So they would be orphans in days or weeks or months or, best-case scenario, even years later? It's not fair for them."

I didn't fail to notice that Rosie was the exact opposite of Nina. Nina popped out a kid and said fuck the consequences. Rosie deprived herself from having one so they wouldn't suffer.

"Listen to me, Baby LeBlanc."

She squeezed my bicep. "Don't, Dean. Please. Let me down."

We were already in front of the car. I jogged the whole way back to make sure she was safe and warm. Carefully, I set her down. She stood before me. The rain grew heavier. I didn't want her to get too wet. Not like this, anyway.

"Listen, I'm not going to give this up. *Us* up," she clarified, pulling me to her, chest-to-chest. Our lips brushed, and our noses touched. Our foreheads stuck together, glued by wet strands of hair. We were a unit. We always

were, even when we dated other people. “I’m too selfish to let you go, Dean Cole. Like I knew I would be. I’m yours as long as you’ll have me. The only condition is—no baby talk and no marriage. I can’t give it to you. Not because I don’t *want* to. I can offer you all the love and devotion in the world, Dean. But just for a fraction of time.”

“Rosie.”

“Hey, listen. I know that you like me...”

“Like you?” My face twisted in abhorrence, spitting the words like they were revolting. Her eyes widened. I shook my head, a dark chuckle on my lips. “You think I fucking like you? Are you kidding me here? I don’t like you. I love you. Even that’s an under-fucking-statement. I live for you. I breathe for you. I will die for you. It. Has. Always. Been. You. Ever since I saw your sorry ass for the first time on that threshold and you fucking poked me in the chest like I was a toy. We’ve been apart for ten years, Rose LeBlanc, and not even one day has passed without me thinking of you. And not just in passing. You know, the occasional she-could-have-been-a-great-fuck. I mean really taking my time to think about you. Wondering what you looked like. Where you were. What you were doing. Who you were with. I stalked you on Facebook. And Twitter—which, by the way, you need to deactivate because you never once bothered to tweet—but you aren’t exactly a social media animal. I asked about you. Every time I was in town. And once I realized you were in New York with Millie...” I took a deep breath, feeling how quickly I was losing my grip on reality and rolling down a very slippery path to irrationality in trying to explain that she couldn’t give up on life just because it was going to end at some point. “Rosie, I bought a new penthouse in TriBeca a few months before you moved into our building.”

“Why are you telling me this?” She blinked away her tears, but fresh ones rolled down to replace them in no time.

“Because I had to sell it and lost a shit-ton of money the moment I realized you were going to be my neighbor if I stayed in my current place. Real talk, Rosie, you are all I ever wanted. Even when you wanted me to be with your sister. She was a comforting candle. You were the dazzling sun. I’d lived in the dark—for your selfish ass. And if you think I’m going to settle for *something*, you’re dead wrong. I am taking *everything*. We *will* have kids, Rose LeBlanc. We *will* have a wedding. And we will have joy and vacations and days where we just fuck and days where we just fight and days where we just live. Because this is life, Baby LeBlanc, and I love the fuck out of you,

so I'm going to give you the best one there is. Got it?"

There was a moment of silence that I really hated, because after this kind of speech, the last thing you want to hear is a half-assed "okay." Rosie didn't "okay" me. She pressed her forehead to my chest and breathed me in.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you so much that I hated you for a while. And now that I know that you are damaged, I love you even more. Perfect things are not relatable. Unbreakable is fascinating, but not lovable. You're breakable, Dean Cole. I'm going to do my best to keep you whole."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her until she lost her balance. In the rain. In the reservoir. In the middle of fucking nowhere. This mess was our mess. This chaos was where we thrived.

When I pulled away, she growled.

"We're getting married," I stated, not asked. "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but we are. And we're having kids. At least two. Maybe more. I haven't decided yet."

"You're crazy, Dean Cole."

"I am," I agreed. "And yet, this crazy train is in motion. You can't stop it."

"I love you."

"Forever starts now, Baby LeBlanc. With you."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dean

THANKSGIVING DINNER WASN'T TERRIBLE.

Or maybe it was terrible and I hadn't noticed because Rosie LeBlanc told me that she loved me, several times, and I was going to put a diamond on that finger. It was an impulsive decision, but then anything worth doing usually was. When you think about it, anything passionate—lust, love, violence, hatred—is spontaneous. Why not this?

I would have been perfectly happy marrying her on that night we took the elevator up together and I had Kennedy and Natasha by my side. I simply didn't know it was a possibility. Now that I knew, I was going to put that shit on lock as quickly as possible. Vicious was wrong. He always said I loved the variety too much to settle for one girl. But the truth was, I never loved any of the women in the catalog enough to stop browsing. Once I found what I needed, I dropped the habit of Tinder and threesomes and fucking strangers in sordid bars so I could get off on the danger because casual fucks didn't make the cut anymore. And unlike alcohol, I didn't miss it one bit.

Anyway, yeah, dinner was okay.

We ate, talked, did the usual family shit. Rosie's parents still nagged her about moving back to Todos Santos, even after I confirmed that I wasn't a total douchebag. That didn't seem to pacify them, but at least her dad stopped looking at me like I was sodomizing her on an hourly basis.

After dinner, Jaime summoned all four of us and we took Vicious's Jeep north to L.A. Face-to-face board meetings were always in an office. We couldn't risk losing our shit in public, which happened more often than not when the four of us shared the same space.

Things got intense in the vehicle before we even broached the topic that

brought us all together. I was behind the wheel because I was the only guy who hadn't had a drink. Vicious sat next to me, looking glum. He must've had a general idea what we were going to ask him for—put two and two together, I'm sure—and Trent and Jaime were in the back, talking football.

“How's Luna doing?” Vicious asked Trent sometime during the last seven miles on Interstate 5. Everybody shut up immediately, and Trent cleared his throat, looking between Jaime and me in the rearview mirror.

“Not terrific.”

“How come?”

“She doesn't eat. Doesn't talk. Doesn't walk.”

“Does she know how to walk and talk?” I'd give Vicious one thing, his voice wasn't hard or rough. Plain conversational.

“She does,” I intervened. “I saw her walking last time we were in Todos Santos in August.”

“Wanna know my angle?” I saw Trent from the rearview mirror scratching his head on a heavy sigh. “I think she's depressed. I'm not sure what's happening yet, but we're having it checked out.”

“Trent's mom is in Chicago.” Jaime's eyes met Vic's in the mirror. “She is helping him out with Luna for the time being, but his dad can't leave here. He has his own mother to take care of.”

The complexity of life met me in an odd place. We were going to grow old someday, too, and I wondered how the hell I was going to be there for my own folks. Because I definitely wanted to be there for them. Which reminded me that I still had to visit my dad tonight after this was all over in L.A.

We parked in Vicious's parking space and went into his office. Everything was minimal, cold and impersonal, just like him. When we switched branches a year ago, I refurbished the whole thing and put in new furniture and a bright green wall just to piss him off when he came back.

Now every time he saw the color green, he thought of me.

Vicious and Jaime took a seat on the black leather couch overlooking Vicious's glass desk. I plopped down on the desk, tucking my hands into my pockets. Trent stood in the center of the room, his hands folded over his chest. We all looked at Vicious. And Vicious looked pissed off.

“Well?” He lifted one eyebrow, even broodier than usual. “Go ahead and fucking ask for it. You've been dying to, and you can't wait to see my reaction, right?”

“You need to switch branches with Trent.” My voice was cut and

impersonal. I was always the one to go against Vicious. I think Jaime was helpless when it came to this fucker, and Trent harbored the real dark shit none of us ever experienced, so he ought to slaughter him if they talked about it directly and Vicious refused his request.

“Not gonna happen.” Vicious hitched a shoulder, lacing his hands behind his head and making himself comfortable. He flung one of his legs over the other and looked about as chilled as a motherfucker could be under the circumstances. I leaned forward, a nonchalant smile on my lips.

“We’re not asking. We’re giving you time to wrap your head around it and pack a bag.”

Maybe I was too forward, but there were special circumstances in this case. I was talking full-blown, fucked-up situation, and Trent needed to be here more than Vicious did. That, we all agreed on.

“Jesus fuck, Cole. Don’t you have a bottle of liquor to drown yourself in? There are actual grown-ups having a conversation here.” Vicious’s words were venom spreading through the room as he chuckled.

“One more comment like that, and a bottle of something will be shoved in your ass,” Trent said, jumping to my defense.

“Listen to the guys, Vic.” Jaime pursed his lips. “I think you know Trent has the right to be here.”

“I have just as much right, Jaime. Trent has a baby. I have a baby on the way. We both need to be next to our families.”

“You have Millie. She can take care of the baby.”

“And be away from her family? After all the time she has already spent away from them? Yeah, not doing this to her. No matter your motivational speech, which, by the way, is horribly lacking.”

“*You* were the one who did this to her, fucker.” I laughed. It wasn’t even hostile. I was just wondering what the fuck went on in that sick head of his. His backward logic fascinated me. Vicious yawned as he took out a fat blunt and lit it, inhaling deeply. I didn’t smoke all that much these days—blame Rosie, the number one party pooper in America—and was dying for a few hits, but kept mum.

“Doesn’t matter what happened. I’m not moving away. You all knew that before you came here. But Trent is welcome to come back.”

“Who is going to manage Chicago?” Jaime frowned. “The tooth fairy?”

“We can hire an outsider,” Vicious suggested.

“Fuck that. I work seventy-hour weeks breaking my back so that some

stranger can step into what we created and rule it?” I snorted out. “This is our empire. We reign it. We lead it. No outsiders. That was the rule when we incorporated it.”

“It was going to happen sooner or later, Dean.” Vicious sounded so calm, which was difficult for me to comprehend. “How much longer do you think you can keep going the way you do? Rosie is bound to get sick,” he said, and Jaime stood up, ready to yell at his sorry ass, and Trent took a step toward Vicious, too, but I held my hand up, still bracing myself against the glass desk. He continued. “It’s true. Why the fuck are you guys trying to sugarcoat it for him? Rosie *will* get sick eventually. I saw what state she was in last year. And Millie told me she always gets worse in the winters. Or even if she doesn’t get sick, you’ll still want kids, right? A family? A wedding? All the fancy shit. I know you do, Dean. I fucking see you with her, man. You’re going down, hard. Think you can put the same amount of hours in at work a year from now? Two years from now? You’re fucking tripping, man. Here, maybe this will make you think straight.” He got up and passed me the blunt, and I took it, closing my eyes as I let the rancorous smoke crawl into my throat.

Fuck, I missed it.

“And, Jaime.” Vicious continued, pacing across the office now. He planned it all along. Knew that we were going to corner him. Sly bastard. “Don’t you want to move back to Todos Santos? Have Daria grow up with Luna and my kid and Dean’s kid and her grandparents? Don’t you want that?”

Jaime growled. “Are you going somewhere with this speech, Martin Luther King, Jr., or are you just rubbing it in our fucking faces?”

“Going somewhere,” Vicious assured, sauntering over behind me to his desk and flipping his laptop open. “So the last six months had me thinking. Between the wedding, my future kid, what happened to Trent, Jaime living on the other side of the world, and Dean dating a girl with enough health issues to last a fucking lifetime,” he said casually, typing on his keyboard. “Why the fuck are we working our asses off? We’ve already made a sick amount of money on top of what we were born with. More than we can ever spend. I feel like we’re making something truly straightforward extremely complex. I, for one, don’t care for this lifestyle. I want to spend time with my wife, I want to fuck her three times a day like I used to, I want to work out more, to stress less, to go on longer vacations, and to live. Unlike the

majority of the world, I actually *can*. So why am I here? Why are we all here?”

He was starting to make sense, but the concept he was offering was insane. Fiscal Heights Holdings was our baby. We got very far very quickly with our hedge fund company. Mainly because we worked twenty-four seven. The idea of *not* working, or working less hours, taking less responsibility, never crossed my mind.

“So, you want to retire? Be a philanthropist at the tender age of thirty?” Jaime asked.

Vicious dragged his laptop so we were all looking at a Wikipedia page without a picture. *Jordan Van Der Zee*.

“Fuck no. I’m still going to work, but maybe two, three times a week. The rest of the time, I will indulge. The rest of the time, I will act like the god I was born to be.”

“Bad high.” Trent pointed at Vicious, rolling his eyes. “You talk like Napoleon on crack. Why are we looking at this man, Vicious? And more importantly, did you forget that I wasn’t born into money? I can’t spontaneously decide to quit.”

“You’re already a millionaire,” Jaime barked at Trent, and that meant that he was actually considering Vicious’s idea. Whatever Vicious was offering, Trent was against it. Jaime pro.

This made me the deal-breaker.

“Millionaire or not, I’m not interested in retiring at thirty,” Trent spat every word, his eyes narrowed slits. “I don’t have a wife, and I don’t have a girlfriend. I have a daughter, and right now, she’s going through a ton of issues. I need a distraction, an outlet. And fuck,” he kicked the coffee table underneath him, and the thud rang in our ears, “am I the only bastard around here who enjoys working?”

“You can still work,” Vicious stressed, pointing at the screen. “This dude is buying out all of the investment companies around this area. He started with San Francisco three years ago and worked his way down to SoCal. Multi-fucking-billionaire. *Forbe’s* darling boy. Savvy as hell, and, let’s not forget—his deep pockets like us. A lot.”

“We know who Jordan Van Der Zee is.” I put a lid on his speech. “You’re not the only one to pick up a business magazine once every full moon, Vicious, but thanks for the useless info.”

I went to Harvard. So did Van Der Zee. Not at the same time, obviously.

He was much older. But he was a legend there, because he was one of those rare self-made people. You know, worked his way up from a scholarship in an Ivy League university, interned, busted his ass, and became a mogul in his own right. I watched a documentary about him after I graduated from business school. Dude came from a Dutch working-class family. His father was a shoeshiner, for God's sake. "Do you wanna sell out your shares? Is that it?" I probed.

"I want to sell most of them, and I suggest you do the same. Let's sell out, keep fifty percent of the shares between us. We're at a point where we can negotiate a very good deal. If Trent still wants to work, he can. I do, too."

"I'm not retiring," I said.

"Me neither." Jaime's voice was unconvincing.

Vicious looked between us all and smiled. "Then why don't we expand Los Angeles and all work here?"

"Let's start with the obvious reason—he'll want to buy us out with fifty-one percent shares." Trent leaned his massive shoulder against the wall. Vicious *tsked*.

"That would be the obvious thing to do, right?" Pretty much. It was Business 101.

We all stared him down impatiently. Vicious grinned.

"But as I said, he is savvy. He wants to control us enough, but doesn't really give too many fucks about FHH. He'd buy fifty sharp."

I knew then and there that the fucker had already drafted a contract with him. He sounded too cocky to make this sort of assumption. The looks Trent and Jaime gave me told me that they knew it, too.

"This shit can take months, even years to negotiate," Jaime argued.

"Van Der Zee had already asked if we wanted to meet him." Vicious continued, and all eyes darted to him.

Passing him the blunt as I coughed on a chuckle, I asked, "How long have you known that we were going to ask you this?"

"Enough time to make adequate plans."

"Fucking fucker came to you first, how come?" Trent grabbed the blunt and inhaled, his eyebrows bunched together. Vicious tipped his head back and blew rings of smoke to the ceiling, his eyes hooded and evil.

"I'm in California. He's in California. I handle the legal shit here. Who cares? You'll get what you want, Trent. Time to wipe that miserable expression off of your goddamn face."

We all looked between each other. I was smiling, and I didn't even know why. No one promised me that Rosie wanted to move back to Todos Santos. In fact, she loved New York, which was why she lived so far away from her parents. But the ability to give her that option made me unreasonably happy.

"I'm in," I said.

"For the right contract—and money—me, too," Jaime added.

Trent blew out air, laughing. "Luna's gonna be a Cali girl."

Vicious grinned. "Let's fucking do this."



Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Being loved. Wildly. Under the open sky. Under the pouring rain. Under a spell that never, ever ends.

"No offense, Rosie, but I don't want anyone to leave me," Dean said when I confronted him about asking Emilia to never leave. At the time, I thought it was because he was a cocky douchebag. Now, it was crystal clear.

He had abandonment issues.

He had abandonment issues, and Millie abandoned him.

It made me irrationally mad at my sister, but also grateful that she did.

Flopping on the bed after Thanksgiving dinner, I thought about the afternoon, about that kiss in the rain—like we were in *The Notebook* and he was Ryan Gosling and I was obviously delusional—and started giggling. The giggling turned into coughing, which wasn't that surprising.

But then, the coughing turned into blood.

Spitting a lump of bloody phlegm, I stared at it in the tissue in front of me for long seconds, unblinking.

The decision to keep this to myself was immediate. There wasn't much

point, anyway. Dean and I were heading back home in a few hours. He was in Los Angeles with his friends, and the last thing I wanted was to throw my whole family into high gear and make them drag me to a nearby hospital. Dr. Hasting used to see me at crazy hours, days and weekends. I could always get to her in New York if it happened again.

I rolled in my bed, side-to-side, unable to get some much-needed sleep. I coughed some more. Then sniffed some. Changed positions to try to figure out the best way to breathe without the mucus blocking my airway. And it was ironic, that my need for Dean was suffocating not him, but me.

No matter how much I enjoyed our love declaration, my body didn't appreciate that it was in the rain.

He told me he loved me.

It brought to me the kind of glee money could never buy. But this happiness was also dunked with dread. Because I knew that someday—someday soon—I was going to die. Die in the middle of this beautiful life he had planned for us.

Would I leave him, a widower in his thirties, with kids to take care of? Would I let him take the fall? How many hearts was I going to break, and why did I stop fighting the need to prevent myself from breaking them?

He told me about Nina.

That was the other reason I couldn't sleep. He tore my heart right out of my chest, and I had no idea how to put it back. Only Dean had this spell over me. The ability to make me feel like I was completely crushed, yet elated in the best possible way. I heard the door to my room creak and coughed into a worn tissue. Squinting my eyes at the material, I detected more dark spots of blood, my shoulder sagging on a sigh.

Thanks, reality. I had a fun ride today, but you just had to ruin it.

“Mill? Shut the door after you. It's chilly.” I croaked again.

The door was pushed all the way open this time. Dean walked in, his body bigger than my fears and doubts. He slipped into bed while his clothes, shoes, and coat were still on and pulled the cover up to tuck us both in, then turned around and spooned me from behind. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. The red numbers said six o'clock in the morning.

“What are you doing?” I clutched the toilet paper in my fist and buried it under the duvet before he could see it. He couldn't know. He would want to take me to the ER, and I *hated* ERs. Emergency rooms were where your soul went to die so that your body would keep functioning.

“No point in getting undressed when we leave in an hour,” he murmured into my ear, pressing his hard-on to my ass. He sounded too sleepy for sex. Surprisingly, I wasn’t disappointed. I felt like hell, and sex with Dean wasn’t something you could wing or half-do.

“How was the meeting?” I rasped.

There was a pause before he answered. “Good.”

“Is Trent moving to Todos Santos?”

“Eventually. And in time, so will we.”

“Excuse me?”

“Priorities, Rosie. They change. We’re changing, too.”

“You sound like them,” I accused, though I wasn’t as mad at Dean as I was at my parents.

“No.” He clasped my chin between his fingers and turned my head for a soft, slow kiss. The kind of kiss you give your wife on your wedding day, not to the girl next door you occasionally screw. “I sound like *me*. And I don’t give a fuck about what they want. But I know that you’re in New York for the wrong reasons. You can have your independence here, too. The only power people have over you is the amount you give them.”

I swallowed, changing the subject. “Did you stop at your dad’s?”

“Didn’t have time. Dropped Trent off ten minutes ago at his parents’ house. He’ll have to wait. Why are you awake?”

“I had a lot to process today.” Not a lie. That seemed to appease him. I stifled the rest of my coughs to avoid producing more blood. When we finally got to the airport, I locked myself in a restroom.

And coughed. And coughed. And coughed.

When I landed back in New York and called Dr. Hasting, her receptionist said she had a family emergency and was out of town. She urged me to go to the hospital for a checkup.

I should have done that, but I wanted to push reality’s boundaries just a tad more, thinking *what could possibly go wrong?*

The answer was everything.

Everything could go wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dean

SETTING UP A PHONE CALL with Nina felt like willingly taking the steps to death row and urging the guards to keep up with my pace.

She was so surprised to see my name on her screen, she spent the first two minutes of the conversation stumbling on her words. I wanted to get shit done and meet him. Get it over and move on with my life. My dad was begging for me to talk to him about the Nina stuff, but I was screening his calls in an attempt to keep the drama level in my life relatively low. If it weren't for Rosie making me promise her I'd do it, I'd have probably never made the call. Opening this Pandora box was not the kind of shit I'd looked forward to. But hey, I made a promise.

The first thing I did after our trip to Todos Santos was rent a place in the Hamptons for Rosie and me for the whole next week. Proposing wasn't in the cards—too much too soon—but I sure as fuck was going to tell her it was time for her to save those one hundred bucks and move her stuff up to the penthouse. It made sense. For the past two months we'd been pretty much living together. But she still had to go down every night to bring a hair straightener, or a clean shirt, or a goddamn hairband. It got to the point where I couldn't even look at her floor number in the elevator without feeling my eyelid tick with barely-contained frustration. Speeding shit up was high on my list of priorities.

To be honest, I was more or less done with New York at this point. The only thing I really wanted from here—Rosie—was beginning to look a lot like mine, and moving her back to SoCal was going to earn me some serious brownie points in the eyes of Paul and Charlene LeBlanc.

Besides, Vicious was right. The weather here was shit, the air too

polluted, and as much as I enjoyed playing a hotshot New York businessman, I enjoyed having a fucking tan, a cold beer, and a yacht on standby even more.

Trying to kill the newly found bounce to my step, I pinned the idea of moving back to Cali as I waltzed into The Black Hole to surprise my girlfriend with lunch. I had a business thing with three investors, but decided to cancel at the last minute to tell her about the Hamptons. It was pissing rain that day, so the café was mostly empty. There was no one behind the counter and only a few people scattered at some tables, staring at their digital screens. I rapped my knuckles over the wooden bar a few times and smoothed my tie.

“Baby LeBlanc. Get your sweet ass here,” I barked, ignoring the curious glances. They were going to turn into fascinated glares once I grabbed her by the collar, pulled her over the counter, and shoved my tongue down her throat.

A few seconds of nothingness passed before Elle appeared from the kitchen, a tight smile on her face. She tied her blonde hair into a bun and wiped her wet hands over her apron.

“Hey, Dean, we weren’t expecting you.”

We? Did I not get the memo that Elle became the fucking queen?

“Yeah, thought I’d drop by to bring Rosie some lunch.” I dumped a greasy brown bag on the counter, with Rosie’s favorite grilled cheese from a bakery across the street. I peeked behind her shoulder.

“Speaking of my girlfriend—where is she? Thought she had a shift today.”

“She did.” Elle’s tight smile didn’t falter, which made me irritated, because that meant that she had something to hide, and I didn’t like secrets. “She had to get off early because she…” That was when Elle’s voice died and she clamped her lips together.

“Go on.” I narrowed my eyes, taking a step in her direction. “Finish your sentence, Elle.”

She bit her lower lip and looked down. This was not Elle at all. I’d gotten to know her in recent months, and she was a troublemaker like my Rosie.

“I can’t.”

“You can, and you will. Right now. Where is Rosie, Elle?”

One thing I would give women as a sexual category; they were more complex. I proved to be a simpler creature than Rosie and Elle, because the first thought that crossed my mind was that my girl was cheating on me. And

the second thought was that I was going to kill him and beg her to visit me in prison so we could work on our relationship. Pathetic? Stupid? Insane? Guilty. Of all three.

“She went to the hospital,” Elle whispered, but hurried to look up and explain. “She’s fine, I swear. It’s just a little scare. I think she should be on her way to your apartment right about now. She specifically asked me not to say anything, so you *cannot* tell her that I told you, Dean. I’m serious about this. The only reason I did tell you is because I want you to keep an eye on her. Promise you won’t rat me out?” She gave me a pointed look, her lips pouting. My mind was already elsewhere and my heart pulverized at a thousand miles an hour.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, already on my way to the door with the stupid bell above it. “Thanks, Elle. Bye.”



Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

The feeling that I won't be...soon.

“You sure of that?” Dean asked for the one hundredth time, twirling a piece of lettuce around his fork as we sat at the dinner table. My eyes darkened. If he was going to ask me this question one more time, I was liable to stab an eyeball out of his face with the butter knife I was holding.

“Never been so sure in my entire life,” I bit out.

“Because you sure as fuck look ill to me.” He ignored my reassurances, his jaw granite-hard.

I shrugged, picking up my half-eaten sandwich.

“Do I? You can fuck me from behind tonight so you don’t have to see my face.”

Lord, I was bitter. Couldn't help it, though. Today, I finally dragged myself to the hospital to check why I had coughed up so much blood over the last couple of days. My CF team at the hospital said some blood vessels had burst. I told them there were chunks of blood—big, gooey chunks coming out every time I had a fit—but they said it was okay. So, I guess I was okay. I wanted to be okay. I wanted more time with Dean, but as much as it did my head in, I wanted a lot more time with my parents and Millie, too.

Dean didn't answer my snarky comment. I scrubbed my eyes, sighing.

"I apologize for acting like a brat. It's been a long day."

"I got us a place in the Hamptons for next week. Talked to Elle. You have the time off. And your manager at the children's hospital. I'll get there before you," he informed me in a cold tone that cut through my nerves.

"That's great," I said, my mind elsewhere. There was a pause, and then.

"I'm meeting my sperm donor Friday at noon."

My pulse was hot against my throat all of a sudden.

"Do you want me to come with you?" I asked. He shook his head.

"Thanks." His voice melted, but not by much. "I'd rather make it as quick and painless as possible. Sue'll send a taxi to pick you up at the end of your shift this Friday."

My head bowed a little at his gesture. The conversation was downright painful. We sounded like two ninety-year-olds trying to make plans for someone else's funeral. We had more fun dishing jabs at each other when we weren't together. Why? Because of me. Because I didn't let him know what was really going on. Because I was scared that I was going to lose him, and more importantly, that he was going to lose *me*.

"I love you," I said. He looked up from his dinner. Our eyes tangled and met.

"It's mutual, and that's why I need you to be well, Rosie. If there's something I should know about your health..."

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Focus on your family stuff." I smiled, patting his hand from across the table.

That night, he didn't touch me, and I didn't ask him to.

And when Friday came...so did our grand finale.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Dean

Eleven Years Ago

“DON'T LET OWL KILL ME, baby.”

Nina's tears bled out of her eyes as she clutched the collar of my damp wife-beater, clinging onto me for dear life. I only wore wife-beaters when I came to visit her. It wasn't like anyone there was going to appreciate my collection of flamboyant YSL men's T-shirts or suede shoes. “You gotta do something about him. He's hitting me real hard. See these marks? See 'em? He's going to end me. Are you gonna just sit around and let it happen?”

“You should leave him.” I took off the sleeveless undershirt and tossed it over her bed. I was done weeding her huge-ass garden and was getting ready to make the three of us some dinner. “Come with me to California. Mom wouldn't mind.”

“Helen is not your mother, Dean. *I am.*”

There was no point arguing, but that didn't mean I agreed with that statement.

She always dragged me into her marital shit, every single summer without failure. I swear she thought of me as a hybrid between a bodyguard and personal assistant. Couldn't blame her, though. I constantly tried to save her. To protect the person who compromised me.

That night, Owl came home drunk. Nothing out of the ordinary. He may not have been a junkie like Nina, but he sure as hell liked his bourbon on a hot summer night. He crawled into their bed, slurring and swearing. I heard everything from my room across the hall as I lay in bed with their neighbors' daughter, Tiffany. She snuck into my room every night through the window.

It was a one-story, barn-like house. I had bite marks all over my fists from stifling her moans to prove it, but no one asked what they were or where they came from, because no one gave a shit.

Come to think of it, no one gave a shit about anything under that roof.

Muffled shrieks and sobbing filled my ears, and I couldn't concentrate on our make-out session, failing to elevate things from dry-hump territory.

"This crap is going to drive me nuts all night," I groaned, brushing away some of the hair that fell on Tiff's face so I could see her lust for me better. This time, the rusty springs on their mattress didn't scream. Something was different. It was the first time my intuition was so strong, it burned me from the inside.

"Your aunt is a mess," Tiffany retorted, climbing atop of me, straddling my hips with her thighs and grinding against my dick.

She didn't know Nina was my mother. My parents made sure Nina kept her mouth shut.

I heard the smack of skin hitting skin. I heard Nina yelp in horror, and then her trying to get away, bumping into furniture, shit falling to the floor. Placing both hands on Tiffany's waist, I moved her aside and got up.

"I'm going to check and see that everything is okay."

"Nothing is ever okay in this place," Tiff said, slumped on my bed. She wasn't wrong. Everybody knew the Whittakers in this minuscule village. Knew that Nina was a drug addict with pupils like saucers and that Owl drank his own body weight every night and that they were both losing money trying to pay for the mortgage on this land every year. Guess most people prayed they'd finally have to call it quits on this little adventure, sell the property, and move the fuck away.

"Let me rephrase." I clasped the door handle, half my body already in the hallway. "I don't want Owl to kill Nina on my watch. Better?"

"He won't kill her." Tiff scooted up the bed until her back hit the wall and lit a cigarette, making herself comfortable.

"That's right, because I'm about to make sure of it myself." *Thwack!* Another hit and another yelp pierced the air from the far end of the hallway. I stalked toward their room.

"You don't want to do that," Tiffany called behind me, blowing clouds of smoke like she didn't have a care in the world. "They're insane. You'll get yourself into trouble."

She was right, of course, but I didn't want to listen. *Protect the strays*, a

voice inside my head recited. *Even the person who made you one.*

As soon as I walked in the room, Owl threw a vase at me. And missed. That was enough to turn my rage switch on and pull me into the situation without thinking of the consequences. I lunged at him with balled fists, punching his gut mercilessly as I crouched down, immobilizing him completely, not giving a fuck if an inner organ exploded.

“Just fucking stop it,” I demanded on a scream. “Touch my mom one more time and I’m breaking every goddamn bone in your pathetic body.”

My mom. Sweet Jesus. I needed a good dose of a reality check with a generous side portion of spine.

“You tell him, boy!” Nina yelled from her throne on the bed, straddling a pillow, and at that time, I didn’t stop to think about how she looked perfectly okay. Composed, fresh-faced, and mark-free. How she looked so *turned on* by all of this. And how sick the whole situation really was. “Kill him, Dean! Kill him!”

I broke his nose.

“Show him not to mess with me!”

Mounting him in a crucifix position, another elbow flew across his face. It was the first time she truly acknowledged me, and her voice didn’t reek of boredom when she spoke to me. And I took it. Swallowed the fishing rod along with the fucking bait. *Thwack! Whack! Slap!*

I was strong. I was athletic. I was capable of finishing his old ass in less than two minutes, it wasn’t even funny.

“Kill him for me, baby!”

“Dean! No. Stop.” I heard Tiffany’s stifled voice from the door. What the hell was she doing there? Not that I particularly cared if they knew she snuck into their house, but she could get into a shit-ton of trouble. Her father was the village’s pastor. “Get off of him. You’re going to kill him. Do you really wanna end up in jail? This guy is insane!”

I kept hitting Owl, but not with the same gusto as before, noticing that he never once tried to fight me. He just took it. And Owl never took any shit from anyone. Least of all me.

My movements slowed down before dying completely, as Tiffany’s quivering voice grew firmer and sharper.

“You really want to get arrested? Is it worth it? *Are they worth it?*” she pleaded, pressing her palms together. She had a point.

I straightened my spine, hearing Nina shouting in the background, “Shut

up, bitch! Get the hell outta here! Do it, Dean! Do it!”

That was when I noticed the camera.

I stood up, my feet unsteady. Owl was underneath me. His face was so blood-soaked, I couldn't make out his eyes from his nose, or even lips through all this mess. I hadn't even noticed that my wife-beater was drenched in gore, and it wasn't mine. I looked straight into the camera. The red dot flickered at me. Almost taunting. Nina held it in one hand and yelled at me to kill him, her voice hoarse from screaming.

Film running.

Act one – record your spawn committing a crime.

Act two – blackmail him with the videotape.

Act three – get rich and bail out on his ass again, this time starting over somewhere new.

The End.

My biological mother never took a picture of me. She never recorded a video of my first step, first word, or any birthdays. Not to mention even owned an album where you could find a picture of my face. But here she was, recording me in my plea to save her. Framing me. Pulling me down into the abyss that swallowed her chance to be a someone in this life.

“The fuck are you doing with that thing, Nina?” I asked, taking one step toward her. My voice was cold, and even though the adrenaline was sizzling in my bloodstream, I was no longer angry. She did it. After all this time, she managed to staple that dark chip onto my shoulder. I would live with it—and die with it—because of her. “You have one second to explain, and it better be good.”

“This is attempted murder,” she slurred. God, she was high. Bitch was all over the place. “I can put you in prison for a very long time for something like this, son.”

“Son?” Tiffany gasped behind me. Fuck. She was still there. Part of me wanted her to leave me alone. A bigger part wanted her to stay so she could serve as my witness. I tilted my head sideways and smiled. Because it finally dawned on me.

My mother was the devil.

My mother hated me.

My mother envied me.

And my mother was never going to stop unless she was stopped. By me.

“You really think you can pull this shit off?” I chuckled. I wanted to scare

her, and by the way her face collapsed into a frown, I knew I'd succeeded. "C'mon now, Nina. You're a goddamn mess. Don't let my chivalry confuse you."

She lowered the camera, just by a few inches, taken aback by how well-spoken I was. Yeah, I definitely wasn't the same polite, wide-smile bastard who wanted to please her. The penny had dropped, and with it, any type of sympathy I'd had for her. I realized that she was going to piss all over my future if I was going to let her have this hold on me.

"Put that fucking thing down, Nina." I walked over to her nightstand and took out a blunt, lighting it casually, her camera still following me. "I won't ask twice, and trust me when I say, you don't want my dad to find out about this."

Owl cried in pain on the floor, and I kicked him, the rolled blunt still between my lips. "Shut the fuck up, asshole."

"Should I call an ambulance?" Tiff asked, biting her fingernails, still leaning against the doorframe. I cracked my neck and sighed.

"Owl brought this shit on himself by listening to his junkie, brain-dead wife. Let her take care of him. So, this is how you wanna play it?" I made the necessary steps to Nina, grabbed the recorder, took out the tape, and tore it to tiny shreds, before throwing the camera to the floor and smashing it into a fucking flatbread with my foot. "You wanna blackmail me with a stupid tape?"

Nina's pupils were dancing in their sockets. Reality started to sink in for her, and it wasn't pretty. I tipped the ash from the blunt on her sheets, exhaling smoke through my flared nostrils.

"Well?" I growled in her face. "You gonna talk, or what?"

Up until that point, I didn't know about Walmart. I didn't know she had abandoned me. I didn't know she went to get fucking cigarettes and a beer right after she left me to die, naked and screaming, in a public restroom. My parents saved all the juicy parts for themselves, and I didn't blame them. Their version of things was far easier to digest: Nina had a drug problem. She couldn't take care of me. So she gave me to them, knowing that they would love me fiercely. Which they did.

"Like you were even going to miss this money!" she screamed in my face, pushing me away. "You got everything! They give you everything, goddammit!" Her Southern twang deepened.

"They do, because *you* didn't." It was my turn to raise my voice. I tried

hard not to fling my arms around. To stay composed. But the need to kick something was intense. And Owl was right there, but he was starting to look a little purple so I didn't want to push it. Nina shot up from her bed.

"That's right. I didn't. I threw your ass where you belong. In the toilet. Because you were nothing and a no one!"

The blunt almost fell out of my mouth.

"What?"

She repeated herself. Then shouted the rest of the story of my birth at me. Then she proceeded to cry and attend to her husband, mumbling to him that everything was going to be okay. Tiffany still stood at the door, watching me with a mixture of pity, pain, and horror.

"Get out of here." I jerked my chin at Tiffany. "Now."

"But, Dean..."

"OUT!" I yelled, pointing in the direction where the front door was. "I fucking mean it. It's over."

And it was. Every single thing about this part of my life was done.

I got on a plane back home the next day and never set foot in Alabama again. As far as I was concerned, the state ceased to exist on the U.S. map.

The fun-loving, happy guy I was died there, too.

And I was present at his funeral. It took place every single fucking day from that point forward.

In my mind.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

Watching the trees flash by, the ocean sparkles, the world spinning around me like a ballroom dress. Knowing I'm a part of it. Accepting that not being a part of it is life, too.

I SAT IN THE BACK of the taxi on my way to the Hamptons, creating a sick playlist for our stay. Romantic, fluffy stuff I wanted us to listen to while we made dinner and love and unforgettable memories.

It was a big day for Dean, and as the gray sky darkened over the shore, I wondered if the weather symbolized how it was going to turn out for him. It was raining hard. I was covered in four layers. Two of them coats. I brought all of my medicine and nebulizer with me in a shoulder bag that weighed no less than I did. Truth was, I wasn't feeling my best. But Dean booked us a Friday-to-Friday week in the Hamptons, and I so badly wanted to make him happy, now more than ever.

He was going to resolve a thirty-year mystery. He sure paid a lot to do it. I was going to be there for him, in every sense of the word, even if I had to endure a little physical discomfort.

"It's raining pretty bad out," the driver noted, pointing at the windshield wipers. They moved furiously across the windshield. The rain knocked on the roof like it was trying to break it.

"It is," I agreed. "Sorry you have to drive all the way back to New York all by yourself. It's probably a hassle."

"Pffft," the old man hooted. "Don't feel sorry for me. Feel sorry for the homeless. For the crazy joggers out there. Cyclists. People who actually have

to stand out in the rain.”

“I feel bad for them, too,” I said. “Other than the joggers. No one made them go out in this weather.” We passed by a man in a bright yellow rubber coat who ran on the shoulder of the road.

Dean was supposed to be at the house we had rented by now. I texted him earlier to ask if he would be there by seven, and he said yes. It was already a quarter to eight. I hoped the reason I hadn’t heard from him since was because he had a good, long meeting with his biological dad. I hoped that it meant that they were trying to reconnect. I hoped a lot of things, but I tried not to push him by calling and texting too much.

Still, I was worried, so I took out my phone and typed.

Rosie

Almost there. Getting excited to spend all week together. How did it go?

Dean didn’t answer. The taxi parked in front of a Sheffer-designed, single-clad property boasting a front garden that would put the Palace of Versailles to shame. It didn’t escape me that the house was surrounded by greenery, woods, and nothing else. No neighboring houses. No stores. Just the two of us in this huge space. The driver, a plump man in his sixties, poured himself out of the vehicle, jogged to the back, and pulled out my suitcase from the trunk. He then helped me with my nebulizer bag. I ran all the way to the front door, shielding my eyes from the rain, and pushed the doorbell a few times. Twisting my head back, I waved at the taxi driver.

“Have a great weekend!” I called out to him, out of breath. Damn lungs.

“You too, sweetheart.” He sat there for a few more seconds. I waved him off again. There was no need for him to sit there in the cold and wait for me. He finally drove away.

I rang the doorbell again. Nothing.

I fished my phone out and called Dean. The wind from the shore almost swept me all the way to the other side of the street and the frost trickled into my inner organs. No answer. I called three more times, then texted him.

Rosie

Sirius to Earth, where are you? I’m outside, waiting.

Rosie

Okay, it’s really cold, and it’s been ten minutes since I got here. I’m going to call a taxi and wait for you at a café downtown.

Rosie

Next available taxi comes here in thirty minutes. Where are you? I'm worried. Call me back. Love you.

The rain lashed on me, and I threw my fists at the door, praying that he was there. That he couldn't hear me because of the downpour, or was napping, and that he would answer at any second.

The desperation in my voice threw me off balance. "Hey! Hey, I'm here!"

No answer.

My teeth chattered.

My body shivered.

I was soaked, head-to-toe, with no one to turn to, and my clothes became heavy with the rain. Terror found me in the space between anxiety and dread. I knew what was happening, but couldn't stop it. And as hail knocked on my face like glass, I wished for one thing above anything else.

Don't let me down, Dean. I prayed. Don't be my downfall.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dean

THE EARTH DIDN'T SEEM AS firm under my feet that day. That should have been my first warning.

After wiring the six hundred thousand dollars to Nina's malnourished bank account, she texted me the name of a café across the road and said that he would be there at noon. It allowed me plenty of wiggle room to get to the Hamptons on time. Even if the traffic was insane, the roads were blocked, and the weather was against me.

"I'm taking the rest of the day off. If anyone asks where I am, just say hell," I said to Sue, shutting my laptop and walking past the reception area. I shouldered myself into my Valentino tropical print coat. Sue gave me a sidelong look, and flashed me a smile of the eat-shit variety.

"Have a good weekend, Mr. Cole."

"You too, Miss Pearson." Fuck her. She wanted to do last names, I was game. Nothing bothered me anymore. Sue was nothing but white noise at this point.

I powerwalked my way to the café across the street. The rain was PMSing that day. Furious as fuck. Not half as much as I was probably about to be, but yeah. The minute I pushed the door open and the overhead bell rang it took me back to The Black Hole and to Rosie, so I managed to draw in a deep breath. I was optimistic about Nina not joining us. She got what she needed and had nothing else to coerce me with. She probably forgot my name by this point. Wishful thinking, and all.

The café was crammed with businessmen and women trying to grab a sandwich on their lunch break, so at first, I skimmed the room through skeptic eyes, wondering how in the hell we were going to recognize each

other. Maybe I should have mentioned that I was big on eccentric designer clothes. There was no overlooking my sick jacket.

I walked past the bar and started looking into people's faces, plates, phone screens, desperate to catch someone who might resemble me.

Three young men in suits. Nope.

Two students sipping coffee with their MacBooks. Next.

An eighty-year-old guy in a three-piece-suit. Like hell. He wasn't Nina's taste.

A thirty-something woman who returned a gaze and smiled red and bright at me. Sorry, sweetheart. Happily taken.

My eyes were frantic, begging to find a suitable suspect, and my heart was doing that thing it did when Rosie took off her clothes before we got into bed.

Then I recognized a head of thick gray hair that made my eyebrows dive down and a chuckle leave my lips.

"Dad?" I walked to a small table at the corner of the room. My dad, Eli Cole, sat there, staring into a coffee cup. "Jesus. You're in town? Why didn't you say? Is that about the Farlon case?" I asked.

He looked up from his coffee and stood up, but didn't say a thing.

Not a goddamn thing.

No.

No, no, no, no, no.

I took a step back.

"Where's Nina?" I asked. I was crazy, right? The kind of sick, twisted shit that went through my mind when I assumed Rosie was cheating on me when she was actually at the hospital. My dad was happily married to my mom when Nina got knocked up. Maybe my biological dad bailed at the last minute, and Eli was here to pick up the pieces.

"Sit," he said.

"No." I couldn't feel my face. "Tell me why the fuck you are here and where is Nina."

"Language, Dean."

"Fuck your language, *Dad*." I righted myself using a back of a chair. "What's going on?"

Panic ran in my blood. This couldn't mean what I thought it had meant. Dad inched closer and put his hand on my shoulder. His squeeze wasn't as firm as it usually was.

“I wanted to tell you when you were in Todos Santos for Thanksgiving...”

“No.” I laughed, embarrassed. I pushed him away, feeling like someone punched my nose from the inside of my head. His back hit the wall, and his shoulder bumped into a woman who stood in line and gave us a pointed look. “My life is not a fucking soap opera, and you didn’t fuck Nina while you were married to Mom.” I said that as a statement, but obviously, this too was wishful thinking. He put his hands up in surrender. “There’s a lot to talk about, son. You should sit down.”

“Stop telling me to fucking sit down!” I raised my voice, smacking his table with both palms.

Eleven years ago, Donald Whittaker was finally admitted to the ER after two days of excruciating pain to help him get over the broken nose, two fractured ribs, and several cuts I had caused. He wasn’t insured, so Owl and Nina had to pay a ton for his hospital stay. What he didn’t know was that the only thing that separated him from death was the preacher’s daughter, Tiffany.

Eleven years later, and I wondered who would be the designated Tiffany to save me from doing something to my dad. Something I couldn’t take back. Because I wanted to fuck something up real good. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to use my girlfriend’s body as an outlet this time.

“There’s an explanation for all of this.” His voice was so low he almost whispered. People stared at us through rims of coffee cups. Dad grabbed me by the bicep and tried to pull me into the seat in front of his chair. I didn’t budge.

“Tell me it’s a mistake, Eli.” The coldness in my voice sent goosebumps down my body.

“It is not a mistake.” Eli narrowed his eyes, still composed, still firm, still himself. “*You* were not a mistake.”

I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t know what to feel. I didn’t know why my mom was still married to him when he obviously fucked her older sister.

And then it hit me like a speeding truck. I was *him*.

I was the douchebag who did this. Who came between two sisters. That asshole I flipped the hate switch on? I had all the potential to be him.

“*This* is how you break it to me?” I spat.

“You shut me down every time I tried getting through to you.”

Jesus Christ.

“You’re dead to me.” And in that moment, it was the truth. “Fucking. Dead. Don’t call me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t even *think* about me. I won’t be thinking of you.” Then I stormed to the door and slammed it behind me, bolting to the nearest bar on the block.

I tapped my fist three times over the counter.

“Bartender. Brandy.”

And blacked out.



Rosie

My eyes fluttered open and I groaned, reaching with my hand to touch my temple. There was an annoying sound buzzing in my ear. It sounded like an old car trying to pull through a journey it wasn’t meant to do anymore. That was when my eyes grew wide, and I realized I had tubes tucked into my veins. IV drops next to me. Bright room. Fluorescent lights. The whole big hospital show.

Story of my life, and I’m getting tired of the angsty plotline.

“What’s going on?” I coughed, even though I had no indication that someone else was there. My fuzzy vision got clearer with every blink. The room was scorching hot, and I wondered who tampered with the thermostat. It was hot and humid enough to fry bacon on my forehead. Mmmm, bacon. I was hungry. That was a good sign, surely.

The machine. It kept on doing that noise that seemed to scrape on my nerves.

Phhhhhhstttt. Phhhhhhsttt. Phhhhhhst.

Someone seriously needed to turn it off before I went all Hulk on it.

“You’re at the hospital.” I heard my sister’s voice before I felt her warm

hand on mine. Even though I was sweating, my skin still felt bitter-cold against her flesh. I lolled my head to the side, squeezed my eyes shut, and opened them again so I could look at her. My parents were sitting by her side. Three wide-eyed faces, inspecting me like an animal at the zoo.

Her lips came down to my cheek, fluttering over it. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than I look, I’m guessing by your stares. Why am I here?”

I remembered most of what happened. I remembered pounding on the door to that house in the Hamptons until the skin on my knuckles split open. I remembered calling and texting Dean. I remembered hailing a taxi while shivering in the rain. But I don’t remember what happened next. My anxiety attack came back in full swing and I must’ve fainted or something.

“Who brought me here?” I coughed out every word.

“The taxi driver.”

Oh. I felt like a complete idiot for asking the next question.

“Where is Dean?”

Millie looked at Mama, Mama looked at Daddy, and Daddy looked out the window.

“We don’t know.” Millie munched on her lips. “Vicious is trying to get ahold of him. We flew in the minute we heard.”

I looked around me. I didn’t recognize the room, which meant that it wasn’t Lenox Hill Hospital. We were more than two hours away from Manhattan. And in Manhattan, they didn’t have that machine, with that terrible, terrible noise.

“You have a serious lung infection.” Mama pushed Millie aside and sat on my bed. She took my hand in hers. I almost whimpered at the gesture. I pressed my fingers to her palm, enjoying this brief moment of intimacy. Her face remained tortured. “Your infection has spread, and the fact that you caught a cold didn’t make things better. Your system is weak.”

I patted her hand and mustered a smile. “Don’t worry, Mama. I get lung infections all the time.”

“This time your liver and pancreas are affected, too.” Millie licked her lips, blinking fast. Daddy walked over to the window and pressed his forehead against the glass. Rain pounded on the other side of it, and maybe he did it because he didn’t want us to see him cry.

“We told you the boy was trouble.” Daddy sighed. He wasn’t angry anymore. Exasperated, maybe. Drained, mostly.

“Now’s not the time,” Millie scolded him.

“You should’ve just come back to Todos Santos.” Mama wiped the tears from her face, and it occurred to me that maybe my biggest problem wasn’t that I didn’t know where Dean was. Because Mama rarely cried, and my father never did. And Millie...? I chanced another glance at her. She nibbled on the dead skin around her finger, fighting tears, too.

“Can someone turn off that machine?” I changed the subject, trying to lighten the mood. “You know? The one that sounds like it’s about to explode in a second,” I barked out an awkward laugh.

Millie looked up from her round belly and inhaled before she opened her mouth. “That’s your lungs, Rosie.”

I clamped my mouth shut and listened carefully. Crap. It *was* my lungs. They wheezed every time I drew a tender breath.

Phhhsssstttt. Phhhsssstttt. Phhhsssstttt.

“I don’t get it,” I muttered. “I’m fine. Really.”

Was I? I tried to sit up in bed, but my back ached and my lungs burned. Millie darted up and helped me, rearranging the pillows behind my back as Mama held me by the shoulders so I wouldn’t fall backwards. My eyes zoomed to my feet, and I swallowed, thinking back to what Dr. Hasting told me in one of our very first meetings.

“You can live a fulfilled, happy life, Rosie. If you play your cards right and take care of yourself. Most cystic fibrosis patients die of long-term lung complications and become disabled as time goes by, but if you do your exercise, intensive physiotherapy, and take your medicine, you should be fine.”

Was my health taking a wrong turn? Riding the road to lung complications, taking a curve in the direction of disability? I definitely didn’t feel like I held the power over my body. That scared me, even more than the idea of death.

When Mama released me to sit on the bed with my back against the pillows, my eyes darkened. I no longer tried to pacify them. It was time for *them* to pacify *me*.

“Can we get you anything, Rosie-bug? Maybe chocolate?” Mama’s contrived smile felt like an insult. It was painful to see her try so hard. No wonder they begged me to move back to Todos Santos. It took me exactly four short months to let myself deteriorate since Dean and I happened and find myself pounding on locked doors in the middle of the pouring rain,

waiting on Ruckus to open up his heart.

Stupid girl. The words floated in my mind, just like they did all those months ago, after we had sex for the first time. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

“I’m good, thanks,” I said, just as Vicious swaggered into the room. The fact that he was there in the first place took me by surprise. My health really was in the shitter if Vicious dropped by to say goodbye. He tucked his phone into his dress pants and leaned down, kissing Millie on the forehead. My heart squeezed.

“Dr. Hasting is on her way. She’s cutting her vacation short,” he said to no one in particular, but we all mumbled our thanks. I thought she was out of town on a family emergency, but maybe the emergency was taking a break from people like me.

Vicious looked up and asked, “How are you doing, Rose?”

“I’ll live.” I laughed bitterly. “I mean, you know. Or not.”

“Dean’s MIA,” he admitted, raising one eyebrow and looking at Emilia, as if asking for her permission to continue. She gave him a faint nod.

“You can tell me. I’m a big girl.”

Even if I don’t look like one. Even if I didn’t act like one by recklessly standing in the rain waiting on Dean.

Vicious rubbed the back of his neck and blew out air. “No one’s heard from him since Friday morning. So, a little over twenty-four hours.”

Good. I hoped he was dead.

No. No, I did not.

Worry gnawed at my gut. What happened with his father? What happened with Nina? Why did he slip under the radar, and at what point was I going to shake myself off of the loyalty I had for him and focus on myself?

“No one cares about Dean.” Millie bared her teeth, standing up and holding the back of her chair. “And if he shows up here, I will give him a piece of my mind.”

“Dude.” I coughed, and everyone stopped and looked at me, waiting for me to finish. My whole face reddened before I managed to stop the flow of dry barks. “Make sure he’s okay first. Find out that he is healthy, and *then* give him a piece of your mind.”

“And if he wants to see you?” she asked.

“If he comes here walking, no, thank you. On a stretcher? Yes, please.”

“Glad you still have your sense of humor.” Her nostrils flared. “Now quit joking around and get some rest.”

She didn't need to ask me twice. Ten minutes later, I was fast asleep again, tucked securely in the arms of unconsciousness and painkillers. And even though the voices around me were muffled and the light in the room didn't keep me up, the sound of my life slipping away played in the background as my lungs fought for air.

Phhhhhhssstttt. Phhhssssstttt. Phhhssssstttt.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dean

WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT smell?

It took me about a minute from the moment I recognized that I was lying somewhere on my stomach, in a room I didn't know, till I managed to open my eyes. Shit, they were heavier than carrying Trent on my back, which I actually did once when he got injured in high school. That wasn't the time to dwell on that story, though.

Where was I? I looked around. There was a white nightstand to my right, the sheets were pink, and the room looked clean and smelled of flowers...

Holy shit, no.

I got up too fast, stumbling over a pile of dresses and righting myself on a white and pink nightstand. I knocked off a row of beauty products, then heard dishes clanking outside the room. I didn't have my shoes on, but my pants and shirt were intact—thank God—and it took me exactly three seconds to stand in this woman's hallway—her apartment was the size of my pantry—and try not to throw up my last meal on her floor.

The room spun, my head was pounding, and I was pretty sure there was an infinite hole in my stomach waiting to be filled with soft bread so it could soak up some of the alcohol I consumed yesterday.

"Did we sleep together last night?" I asked the woman in the kitchen. She spun around and looked at me like I was a green creature who fell from the sky wearing a silver onesie. I blinked a few times, trying to figure out if I was hallucinating or if this was real.

"I would stab myself in the face before sleeping with you." Elle pursed her lips and got back to washing the dishes. "No. I saw you zigzagging on the street and mumbling something about your dad and Rosie. I tried to call your

girlfriend, but she didn't answer, so I figured I'd offer you a place to stay. I took the couch. You owe me a massage gift card. Just putting it out there." She hitched one shoulder.

Rosie.

I thanked Elle and ran out, not even bothering to grab my coat. My phone died sometime yesterday, and I had to plug it in the charger to read her messages. I tried calling her a thousand times, but she didn't answer. There were a pile of missed phone calls from the rest of the guys, but I ignored them. My next phone call was to Millie. It went straight to voicemail. I called Rosie's parents. Nothing. Finally, my screen lit just as I was about to call her again and it was Vicious. I pressed the phone to my ear.

"I don't know where she is," I answered, terror gripping me by the throat. "Fuck, Vic, she's not in her apartment, and she didn't have the keys to the Hamptons house, so I have no clue where she went."

"She's in the hospital, dickbag. Her lungs are collapsing. Her liver is not functioning, and she can barely breathe. Congratulations, you fucked up royally," he said in his dry voice.

I collapsed onto a stool in my kitchen, clasping the back of my neck so tight I drew blood.

"What hospital?"

"I'm not telling you shit, man. No one wants to see you here."

"I need to see her."

"Not happening. I will beat your sorry ass if you try, and even if you somehow manage to get past me, her dad will shoot you straight in the fucking face. Stay away."

"Vicious," I growled.

"What the fuck were you doing? What was more important than opening the door for your sick girlfriend?"

Getting drunk, I thought bitterly. Then it dawned on me that that was exactly what she did. Clawed at the door desperately when I was sitting in a bar by a fireplace, drinking hard liquor.

Asshole, asshole, asshole.

"Is she awake?" I asked, already grabbing my keys. He heard and *tsked*, telling me it was a bad idea.

"She comes and goes."

"I need to see her." I was a broken fucking record that would not stop spinning until it got what it wanted.

“You already said.” Vicious didn’t seem impressed by my persistence. “It doesn’t look good. The LeBlancs are distraught. Millie looks like hell. Not a good time to come here.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, you should.” Vicious’s voice was grave. “Timing is everything.”

It was, and we knew it. Timing brought Millie and me together, even though we shouldn’t have been. Timing tore Rosie and me apart, even though we *should* have been. Timing was also what brought us back together.

I was going to defy timing. For her.

“Tell me where she is.”

“Not happening.”

“Vicious, I will ruin your ass if you don’t tell me, and we both know that I’ll find out at some point.”

No answer.

“Vicious.”

Nothing.

“Vicious!”

The line went dead.

I had a feeling my heart was going to do the same soon, if I didn’t find her.



I found out where she was hospitalized an hour later. Made Elle call Rosie’s parents, promising her a spa weekend wherever she fucking wanted, and made my way there. Took the Mercedes that sat unused for months and drove there like I was being chased by demons. And I was. Those demons made me drink. They made me responsible for the fact that my girlfriend was dying in a hospital bed.

Hey, asshole. You deserve to die, too.

My dad kept on calling, killing my battery in the process. Hundreds of times. Mom, too. My sisters left voice messages and texts to last for centuries. Fuck ’em. Well, not my sisters. First, gross. Second, they probably

only knew what my parents wanted them to know. They would never forgive Eli. Fuck, how could my mom take him back after what he'd done to her? I made a mental note to ask her that when my life wasn't covered chin-high in shit. Whenever that would be.

I parked by Good Samaritan Hospital in the Hamptons and approached the receptionist asking for Rose LeBlanc. She told me to go fuck myself, but in nicer words. The bottom line was that the LeBlanc patient was not accepting any visitors who weren't family. I couldn't tell for sure where the order came from—her or her parents—but the outcome was the same.

I loitered around the waiting room because there was nothing they could do to stop me from staying. Called Vicious, Millie, and Rosie every two minutes. Kicked the vending machine a few times when my mind strangled me with guilt. Pulled at my hair. Made promises to Rosie that she couldn't hear. Broke those promises. Thought about creative ways to sneak into her room. Remembered I didn't even know what her room number was. Cursed some more. Generally acted like a fucking madman.

I was losing it, and it wasn't pretty.

Vicious came out of the elevator a few hours later and strolled over to me, not even half-surprised to see me there. He clasped the back of my neck, just about ready to pull me into an embrace. Fuck no. This wasn't a daytime soap opera. Though I did find out that his beloved hero, Eli Cole, was actually a manwhore, fucking douchebag of the worst variety.

"You look like shit." His lips barely moved.

"Fucking coincidence, you ain't Victoria's Secret material yourself." I cocked a brow.

He laughed.

The fucker actually laughed in my face. Rosie was fighting for her life, and he looked like he didn't have a care in the world.

"Well," his mirth died abruptly, "you acted like a little shit, too."

"How is she?" I rubbed my eyes, feeling like I hadn't slept in years.

"Not good," he admitted. "Stable, though. She sleeps a lot. And she makes that rattley sound when she breathes. Like her lungs are full of rusty needles."

Kill. Me. Now.

He knew. He knew by just looking at me that there was no point giving me grief for everything that had happened. I was already in the gutters of life, trying to claw my way out and back into Rosie's universe with bleeding

fingers.

“What happened?” Vicious started walking toward the Starbucks across the road, and I fell in step with him. As much as I hated to be the underdog around Vicious, I had to recruit him to my side. That, in itself, felt impossible. We always went head-to-head. I think that was what had kept our friendship alive. The constant battle.

“The mother of all shitstorms.” I ran a hand through my hair and punched the nearest wall. Fuck, I was going to tell him. Because I had to. Because of Rosie. “In bullets: I’m adopted. Up until now I thought that my parents adopted me from my slutty aunt who got knocked up by a no-show piece of shit. Turns out the no-show piece of shit is actually hot-shot lawyer Eli Cole. He slept with his wife’s sister while they were already married and decided to keep it from me for thirty years. Just, you know, in a fucking nutshell.”

“Fuck,” Vicious hissed, stopping to look me in the eye, making sure it wasn’t all a big, fat, sad joke. After that, we took our coffees and sat down by the window overlooking the hospital. The thought that she was so physically close yet mentally far messed with my mind. It felt like the end of everything. The world. Us. Her. “That’s some heavy mess. I had no idea Eli was capable of out-dicking us,” Vicious said, probably referring to the fact he dipped his dick in his wife’s sister.

“It’s in the genes, I guess.” I stroked my chin thoughtfully, taking a sip of my cup of Joe. “Who fucking cares, Vic? Seriously. She needed me, and I stood her up. She needed me, and she stood in the rain waiting on me. I should burn in hell. In fact, I bet you’d be happy to light the fucking match.”

Vicious offered me an uncommitted shrug, moving his teeth across his lower lip.

“What?” I elbowed him.

“I mean, honestly? Who hasn’t fucked up? I fucked up with Emilia so many times. I did things that were far worse. But she wasn’t sick. That’s the only difference. She was there to accept me when I finally pulled my head out of my ass and started groveling.”

“And you think Rosie is not going to make it?” I cleared my throat so I wouldn’t choke, and there was not enough air in the fucking room as I waited for his answer.

He looked down. “I’m not a doctor, but I’d be lying if I said her prognosis is good.”

“I have to speak to her.” I angled my body to face him, clasping both his

shoulders and forcing him to look at me—look at my grief. “You need to help me, Vic. I can’t not see her right now. You realize that, right?”

He measured me, silent and cunning. His lips were pressed together. He was thinking.

“What do you want?” I scrubbed my face. “Name your price.”

Holy fuck, we were doing this again. *This*. Negotiating each other’s happiness. Fine. Whatever. Everything had a price tag. Especially in Vicious’s world.

“What would it take for me to get to her?”

Nothing was a hard limit. I think he knew it.

“I want fifteen percent of your shares in Fiscal Heights Holdings.” He served me my own medicine and shoved a good amount of it down my fucking throat. I didn’t even think about his request before the words left my mouth.

“Take them. They’re yours. Now get me up there. I need to see her.”

“Twenty,” he said. Fucker.

Straight-faced, I said, “Yours.”

“Twenty-five. All of your shares. Mine. Sign it tomorrow morning.”

“Take all my shares. Take my clothes and my apartment and my inner organs. Let me see her. Reason with the LeBlancs.”

He got up, finished his coffee in one gulp, and set his cup down.

“The thing is, Mr. Cocksmacked, I don’t need any of your shit. But I’ll help you. This is the hard part, by the way. Even if her parents would let you see her, the LeBlanc sisters don’t go down easy.”

I stood up, finally allowing a smirk to grace my face.

“Well, then it’s a good thing I’m a very good tackler.”

Chapter Thirty

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

The struggle. To breathe. To live. To not let go.

THE MUTTERS BEHIND THE CLOSED door awakened me. Whoever stood there lost their patience quickly. The stomping on the floor tipped me off. Then the voices started bleeding into my ears and the puzzle pieces fell into place.

Mama raised her voice. “I don’t actually care. My daughter is very sick, and you were well aware of that. You know her, after all. Now go away, boy, and don’t you come back here. Rosie is fighting for her life, and make no mistake, I blame you for it. What makes you think she’ll want to see you?”

“Mrs. LeBlanc.” His voice had an edge I couldn’t decode. Dean Cole wasn’t the groveling type. “I apologized. Let your daughter decide for herself. I assure you, she wants to hear me out. Ask her.”

“She’s asleep.”

I opened my mouth with the intention to call out to them, but nothing came out. The unwelcome transformation my body had gone through in recent hours left me speechless. Literally. No longer able to move my head, I found myself fighting for my next blink. Everything was sore. I had to take shallow breaths purposely, to make sure that my ribs wouldn’t crack. I needed to tell the nurse to up my painkiller dose. But I didn’t complain. Morphine would only make me sleep more, and there was so much going on around me, I didn’t want to miss a thing. The other reason I didn’t want to be given more narcotics was naked, raw fear. What if I died in my sleep? My eyes were heavy, but I fought to stay awake.

I was desperate to see Dean again. Did he screw up? Yes. Badly. Was I mad at him? Sure. Furious. But when you were on your deathbed, there was no time to be mad. Vindictiveness was thrown out the window, along with any other soul-eating, negative trait that was ingrained in us. When you were on your deathbed, time reminded you just how precious it really was. Feelings were bare and open for the world to see, poke, and dig into.

“Charlene.” Vicious interfered from the hospital hallway outside my door. “Rosie loves Dean. He has a reason for not meeting her in the Hamptons yesterday, and I can tell you that his reason doesn’t suck. At least ask her if she wants to see him.”

“Fine, but not right now,” Mama huffed, and I heard her smacking her thigh. “As I said, she really is asleep right now, and I’ll be damned if something like this nonsense wakes her up while she should be resting. Go. I will call you when she wakes up.”

“New York is three hours away, ma’am.” Dean tried to reason with her.

“And that’s a long journey, huh, Mr. Cole? My daughter made it to see you here. You didn’t even bother to show up.”

That shut both of them up. A few minutes later, the door opened and Mama walked in. I didn’t know where Millie or Daddy was, but I guess they were all taking turns to watch over me. Every single waking moment was spent with someone else. It made reaching out to Dean by a text message or a call impossible. Asking for personal space wasn’t fair to the people who stopped their lives to cater to me.

The mattress dipped as my mother came to sit by my side.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

I opened my mouth and tried to talk, but my words came out as a desperate hiss. “Been better.”

She laughed and sniffed, wiping away a couple of tears. I wondered if all families were messes of epic proportions when a youngster was dying, or was it just mine? I wasn’t a kid anymore, but I was used to being everyone’s baby. Vicious called me Little LeBlanc. Dean called me Baby LeBlanc. Everyone else, Rosie-bug. And so a part of me came to foolishly believe that I had more time.

“Everyone’s keeping you in their prayers. I go to the church down the road every day. Baron is talking to a fancy pulmonologist from England. He is going to fly him here if things don’t get better soon. But they will, my dear girl.” She stroked my forehead, tears running down her face. She was no

longer trying to hide or wipe them. “Sweetheart, you will get out of here walking. I know you will.”

Her forehead met mine, and I closed my eyes, feeling warm tears leaking under my lashes. I didn’t want to cry, especially not in front of Mama, but I didn’t feel like being strong anymore. Being strong sucked. Wanting to be independent and strong was what got me here in the first place.

Being strong made me weak.

“Mama,” I sniffed, “I’m going to be okay, right? I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you about Todos Santos. I know you meant well. I just wanted to stop being babied.”

“I know, honey. I know, I know,” she repeated, kissing my forehead and my tears again and again. It didn’t escape me that she didn’t answer my question.

It did not escape me at all.



Dean

I was perched on the porch outside the Hamptons’s mansion I had rented, letting the rain crack at my fucking face, because I deserved it.

Just to make sure that I was a full-blown loser and not a half-assed, miserable idiot, I drank vodka straight from the bottle, trying to feel how she felt when she was locked outside for fuck-knows how much time.

I earned it. Each and every piece of shit life was handing me. Fair and fucking square.

I shouldn’t have drunk three bottles of vodka in twenty-four hours. But I did. Because that bullshit they feed you about hitting rock bottom and seeing the light? It’s just that. A load of crap. In reality, when you hit rock bottom, you lie there for a long, extended nap, because rock bottom is still solid ground. Especially when the rest of your world is hanging on by a feather for balance. Being an addict whose life crumbles in front of him is tiring. More

so than being the darling son, the sharp businessman, the manwhore who would give you four orgasms before he even touched you.

I found that out the hard way.

Truth was, weakness invited more weakness. And knowing that Rosie was dying didn't throw me into knight in shining armor mode and help my drinking problem disappear. It served as the heavy brick that drowned me into the depth of misery.

Sprawled on the steps of the mansion's entrance with a bottle to my lips, I stared at leafy trees trying to fight the wind away and laughed at how pathetic I had become.

It was a Monday. Noontime. The rest of the world was buzzing with life. I was buzzing with anger. I needed to think of a way to get her back. Vicious's word with her parents didn't help one bit.

I didn't bother to answer my parents when they called. The one thing I did do was show up at the hospital at random hours, demanding to see Rosie. At first they kicked me out because she was asleep. Later on, it was because I was too drunk to function.

At least I had somewhere to stay while I was waiting for Rosie to see me. Oh, yeah. Karma is not the only one who is a bitch. Irony has a twisted sense of humor, too.

Vicious tried to be there for me, but I shut him out. Trent was worried, but he couldn't leave Luna, and Jaime was pissed off, because neither Vic nor I told him what made me go batshit crazy on the world and bail out on my girlfriend.

Nina stopped calling, now that she had the money—at least I had that going for me—although I couldn't even appreciate her absence from my life, because after all, essentially, my biological mom stopped giving a fuck the minute I paid her to.

Holy shit, asshole. Your life is a hot mess.

A rental car pulled up in front of the mansion's door, and I didn't need to see the occupants' faces to know who they were. Volvo. Always with the fucking Volvo. The fib of white picket fence and three perfect kids they were trying to feed the world. I actually bought into this shit. Until now.

Fucking Vicious gave him the address. He must've had, because I sure as fuck didn't.

My mother was the first to get out of the car. She didn't open the umbrella in her hand, just light-jogged the distance from the silver vehicle to

the front porch, rubbing her arms, even though she was in a tailored, pink wool coat.

“Sweetheart.” Her face was made up, her hair perfect, and she didn’t look nearly as crushed as I was by what my father had done. Same father I could see behind her shoulder, throwing the vehicle into park and sitting in the driver’s seat.

Fucking coward.

“We have to talk, honey. We can’t go on like this.”

“We can, and we are. Go away,” I groaned. I looked like shit. I acted like a little one, too. And I was drunk off my ass, which she could see. My mother ignored me, took the stairs to the door, and pushed it open. “I’m making some tea. You should join me, dear. It’s cold out.”

My mother still acted like the loving parent that she was, even when I put her through hell. Even when she was the very last person I should be mad at, because every time she looked at my face, she saw her husband’s unfaithfulness with her sister. In my eyes, which were Nina’s. My lips, which were his. My very being was supposed to be a thorn in her heart. But somehow, she always made me feel like that heart beat for me.

And that was what made me scrape my ass from the porch and jerk a finger, pointing directly at my dad.

“Stay where you are.” I raised my voice. “She’s fine, but you’re not welcome here, you cheating piece of shit.”

Two minutes later, she wrapped a quilt around my shoulders, and I was sitting in a stranger’s kitchen drinking strong tea for the first time in my life. What man under sixty drinks tea willingly? Me, I guess.

“Listen to me, honey.” Mom propped forward in her seat across from me and took my hand in hers. She was still warm. How was she warm? Well, not sitting outside for hours upon hours trying to atone for your behavior had something to do with it. “I know that you’re mad and confused. You have every right to be. And if you think for one second that I just rolled over at the time when it happened and let him get away with it, you’re dead wrong. I filed for divorce, Dean. I didn’t want your dad after I found out what he did. And, frankly, I did not want you, either.”

Ouch.

“You’re still here.” I sneered, my eyes dead.

“I am.” She smiled. “Because of you. You were worth it. Once I realized that you were mine to take care of, I wanted you. So much so that I was

willing to give Eli another shot, even though he did not deserve it. Your father messed up. Big time. But things are not always as they seem. You should know that better than anyone.”

She referred to Millie and Rosie. And she was right. Even though I didn't truly love Millie, and she didn't truly love me, it still happened.

“It was your idea that I should bond with her. I spent my summers on her farm,” I ground out.

Mom shook her head. “Dean, you were begging to go. You said you *loved* it there. From my point of view, she stopped using drugs and was living on a farm. She sold us lies. I figured that you would tell us if you didn't like it there. I asked you, Dean. Every single summer, I asked you if you liked it there. You always said yes.”

“I wanted her to love me.” I swallowed, darkness clouding my expression. “Jesus, I sound pathetic. Even to my own ears.”

My mother's eyes were glistening with unshed tears. I hurt for her as much as I hurt for me, but not even close to as much as I hurt for Rosie.

The front door opened and closed, and my mother stood up and looked behind her shoulder, her face serene.

“You have a lot to talk about, you and your dad, but I will say one thing, Dean. Love is not perfect. Life is not perfect. Yet, they're both extremely beautiful things you should treasure every day. I'm happy with your father. And whatever happened in the past belongs just there—the past.”

Eli walked into the country-styled yellow kitchen and took the seat my mother occupied a second ago. I took off the mask I put in front of Mom and gave him my douchebag face. The one I now *knew* I got from him.

“Thought I told you not to leave the car.”

“Thought you knew better than to go around firing orders at your father, Dean Leonard Cole.”

I unfolded my arms and leaned back in my chair, smirking.

“Guess I owe you a thank you for finally telling me I'm your biological son. If I throw in a few hundred more grand, are you going to give me more details about it? Maybe where I was conceived? And, of course, if Nina is a screamer.” Not that I didn't know the answer to the latter. Nina had a thing for making me feel uncomfortable. *Really* uncomfortable. I couldn't recall one summer where I didn't catch and/or hear her and Owl getting it on. It made me gag, but I couldn't do shit about it. Thin walls. Plus, sometimes I would walk into the kitchen or the living room and they'd be porking each

other and grinning at me. No wonder I loved lying on the hay outside so much.

“I can help you.” My father ignored my bullshit, which was rare for him. He never let me get away with being a dickhead. Not even at thirty.

“With what?” I laughed.

“With your self-destructive spiral. And with understanding the truth better.”

“Your *truth* cost me six hundred thousand dollars.”

“You know money isn’t the issue here. It never was, Dean. I had no indication that you were ready for the truth to come out, so I left it for you to decide. Son,” he placed his glasses on the table, pressing his thumbs to his eye sockets, “your mother and I miss you. We want to make this right.”

I looked down at the phone on the table. Vicious texted me that morning saying he still hadn’t managed to defrost the LeBlancs and talk them into letting me see Rosie. I had nothing else to do, anyway. Might as well burn the time by listening to my piece-of-work dad.

“Hold on, asshole,” I muttered as I got rid of the quilt and turned the heater on.

Dad watched as I tucked a blunt into my mouth and puffed a cloud of smoke, pursing his lips. He didn’t like it. But this time, he was going to have to suck it up.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” I asked when he stared at me for a minute straight. What the hell was wrong with him? He looked like he’d been crying, which made me feel uneasy. Not that I thought that men who cried were pussies—okay, I’ll rephrase: that depends on the amount of crying, situation, and circumstances—but it felt odd to think that Eli Cole produced actual human tears. Normally, he looked so unflustered by the world. While he could be sentimental, he was always collected. Extremely so, down to the smallest bone in his body. And right now he looked very, very scattered.

Dad shook his head. “Nothing.” He tapped the round, oak dining table, ignoring the healthy amount of F-bombs I showered him with. I tried to keep my language PG-13 whenever I was around my parents, but I wasn’t feeling very respectful toward my dad at that moment.

“I’m always in awe of how alike we are.” He pinched his lips together.

“You have a weed and alcohol problem, too?” I laughed, tipping the ash into an empty vodka bottle and taking a sip from a half-empty beer can.

“I did,” he said.

My jaw almost dropped at this revelation. That was definitely news to me.

“Elaborate.” I took another hit of the blunt, before he snatched it from my hand and put it out.

“Hey.” My eyebrows pulled together. “What the fuck?”

“The *fuck* is that I’m your father, and you’re going to act in accordance with the social codes we ingrained in you from a young age, at least around us. That means you don’t drink or smoke weed in front of me and cut back on the F-word, Dean. It doesn’t make you tougher. It makes you sound like a goddamn thug, and I spent a lot of money on your education. Enough to assure that you’re *not* a thug. So, while I am content with indulging you when you and your preppy, trust-fund baby friends talk the big talk behind closed doors, to me you will be polite and straitlaced. Understood?”

Hello, bucket of ice to the face, thanks for sobering my ass up.

Dad stood up, snatched a can of beer from the table, and started walking around the kitchen, pulling a small trash can and throwing all the vodka bottles, rolled cigarette butts, and beers into it as he talked. “Back to our main topic—addiction. Yes, Dean, I was an addict like you. Not weed. Where I grew up in Alabama, weed wasn’t a rich man’s vice. But after I graduated from law school and married your mom, I had a lot on the line. I had my own father to impress, and he was far less thoughtful and supportive than I am. The only way I could take the edge off of all the pressure was to drink. So I did that. Excessively. Every. Single. Day.”

I smacked my lips shut and stared him down, trying to figure out if I was hungover, drunk, or in that sick space in-between. I drank so much that weekend I constantly felt like throwing up. I didn’t remember when my last meal was, but I was pretty sure it didn’t stay in my stomach after all the late-night puke-fests I was throwing for myself.

“I was drunk ninety percent of the time. A high-functioning drunk, mind you, but I don’t recall a day between the ages of twenty-two to twenty-eight when I wasn’t tanked-up. Even at work, when I couldn’t risk smelling of whiskey, I would get into the bathroom and drink Listerine before important meetings. I was far worse than you, Dean. Far worse.”

“Well, you’re good now,” I muttered. Mature as a fucking toddler. Was I a class act or what?

Dad took the trash can—threw it through the motherfucking window like a rock star—then went ahead and took another one from the bathroom, filling

it with more bottles and cans of alcohol.

“I’m well, because I had a wake-up call, Dean. You know when?”

“Enlighten me, Master.” I talked back just for the sake of talking back, and it wasn’t funny or adorable on a fucking thirty-year-old. Dad must’ve shared the sentiment, because he shook his head and continued.

“It happened when one time I came home late from work, crawled into my bed drunk and disorientated, and made love to my wife. Because when I woke up the next day, I remembered that Helen was not even supposed to be in Birmingham. She went to visit her mother in Fairhope. So I looked to my right and saw her sister. I looked to the woman sleeping beside me, and I knew I’d *fucked* up my whole life, as you like to call it.”

That made me sit up straight.

“She *tricked* you?”

“Well, I think we both know that Nina wasn’t the type of woman to *allure* me.” Dad looked incredulous. Guess not. Nina was the exact opposite of Helen, my mom. She wore skimpy clothes, chain-smoked, and flirted with everyone and their cat. My mother was country-clubbish and yuppie, her hair always looked like she just walked out of a woman’s magazine, and she was reserved and polite, but never overly friendly to men.

“But, Mom.” I held my head and shook it in disbelief. My mother took bullshit from no one. This was why my sisters and I were well-behaved. She knew how to hammer it home, all right, when she wanted to. “She told me she wanted to divorce you. How the hell did you pull it off?”

Dad bobbed his head, throwing the second trash can full of drinks through the window as well, before turning his head to face me. “Baron is picking up everything I’m throwing out, and so you don’t have access to it, I will be taking your wallet and making sure your fridge is filled with food. You’re detoxing starting today, Dean.”

Vicious is here? What the fuck? I really did hit rock bottom this time.

“About your mother—no, she did not forgive me. Not at first, anyway. When I saw Nina in my bed and she told me what happened, I was mortified. I kicked her out and called Helen. She cut her trip short and got back home. I came clean immediately. She packed me a bag and threw me out.”

Despite my best intentions, a smirk formed on my face. “Good for Mom.” I was the bastard child who was rooting for the cheated woman.

“She made me pay, that’s for sure. I slept in my office for those nine months. Helen sent me so many half-filled divorce forms my mailbox got

clogged. Nina ran away. I tried to find her but couldn't. She went under the radar, and it was a different time. Easier to disappear. No Internet and things like that." Dad tucked his hands into his pockets and looked out the window, his brows wrinkling. "Your mother filed for divorce two months before you were born. It wasn't even about the cheating." He laughed bitterly. "Because trust me, I had no clue what I was doing when I slept with Nina. Don't remember one second of it, thank God. She was just tired of my problem, and my lack of motivation to fix it. She deserved better, and she knew it."

"Then what happened? Why did she change her mind?" I was still sitting at the table. Things becoming clearer somehow. The story started to make sense. Not a lot, and not completely, but I didn't feel quite as lost as I had been feeling the past few years about the whole Nina ordeal.

"*You* happened." He turned around and smiled at me like *I* was Sirius, which couldn't have been right, because Rosie was Sirius. But every person has their own Sirius in their life, I suppose. The one that shines brighter than the rest. "You were born, Dean. We found out about you through the news. "The Walmart Baby." Your mother knew instantly that it was Nina. Wasn't hard to figure it out. She called me, and we drove together to the hospital where they had taken you. Your mother wanted you so bad, she was willing to give me a second chance. Said you deserved it all, even though the woman who brought you into this world didn't."

"I don't understand." I shook my head. "You made me spend time with Nina and Owl. Almost every summer. All summer. Damn, Dad." I stood up, pacing back and forth. "Owl was the one who gave me my first blunt at twelve. Nina gave me my first sip of beer when I was fucking nine."

"Language," my dad instructed, and I rolled my eyes, feeling like his son just a tad more than I did when I stormed out of that café. "We had a little arrangement with Nina. Mainly because providing you with a safe, stable life was our main concern. She wanted to see you in the summers, and we complied as long as she was sober. That was the condition. Nina got paid for the time you spent at her house. The money was supposed to go to trips, clothes, things like that. We weren't stupid. We knew that she pocketed the money and saved it for herself. But we hoped the time with you might inspire her to get better. Like it made me stay sober and grow as a human being."

"Only Nina is not a human being," I finished for him. He shook his head, and I wasn't sure if he agreed or disagreed with that statement.

"Everyone's human. Some people are more human than others. Nina

made many mistakes along the way, but I made one of them with her. And you make mistakes, too. Mistakes that will have grave penalties if you continue down this path.”

I had nothing to say about that. It wasn't about Nina anymore.

“Why didn't you tell me sooner?” I ran a hand over my hair. “Why did you let me pay her? Why did you meet me on her terms? It makes no fucking sense.”

“But it does, Dean. It makes perfect sense.” He took a step closer to me, and we were face-to-face now. Same height. Same hair. Same eye color. Fuck, how could I not have seen that earlier? My father and I looked exactly like one another. That was why people never asked if I was adopted. *Because I wasn't*. Not fully, anyway.

“I didn't know if you wanted to know your father or not, and I left it for you to decide. I knew that if you really wanted to see me, you would shell out the money. It's not a big deal for you—the money—you have more than you could ever spend. So it wasn't something that I was worried about. But if you didn't want to know, if you weren't ready to face this truth, and I served it to you anyway, I wouldn't have given you anything. I would have taken something from you. *Your choice*.”

I looked down at my feet.

“I wanted you to *choose* to know me, Dean. But in the meantime, I tried, son. Every time we've met since you became an adult, I tried tipping you off. I even wanted to come clean on Thanksgiving night, but you never dropped by.”

My jaw locked, and I felt something I hadn't had the pleasure of experiencing in a long time. Relief. Things made sense now. I was still angry as fuck at my dad, and I still loathed Nina with enough hatred to last for a few generations. Nothing got fixed. But at the same time, at least I had my answers. And in a sense...my peace.

Nina no longer had leverage over me. My biological dad turned out not to be a junkie or a criminal or an asshole. He was a man I knew and loved. It just so happened that he crushed me, and I needed to step away until I would forgive him.

And I would.

But not right now.

“So this brings me to the real topic I came here for.” Dad put his hand on my shoulder, and I looked at it like it was a giant cockroach.

“Spit it out and leave,” I told him.

“Rosie,” he said.

“What about her?” I asked, my heart beating faster just from hearing her name again. Being away from her was like having my flesh torn from my body. The kind of longing that wasn’t sweet and romantic, but threatened to tear my fucking guts out.

“It didn’t escape me that you and I had the same sister problem,” Eli said, walking me over to the window, his hand on my back. I let him, waiting to see where he was going to go with it. “My drinking almost killed my relationship, but, ironically, it also saved it. And it also gave me one of the most important things I have in life. *My son*. I’m afraid that you won’t be as lucky as I was. Rosie is sick. Very sick, from what I’m hearing. Time is not on your side, and you cannot afford to wallow in self-pity. That’s the one thing money can’t buy you, Dean. Time. So I suggest you go to the hospital right now and start your groveling, because there’s a long way to go.”

“They won’t let me see her,” I said, just as Eli pointed at the parking space. Vicious was standing there, leaning against his rental Audi with his arms crossed, looking directly at my window.

Right next to my parents’ Volvo.

Goddamn adorable asshole.

“Your friends want you to get the girl. Your father wants you to get the girl. Your mother will probably kill you if you *don’t* get the girl. So...are you going to get the girl?”

“I’m going to get the girl,” I muttered, transfixed on the vision of Vicious doing something nice for once in his goddamn life.

“Even if it means you need to stop drinking?”

“Even if it means I need to stop *living*,” I corrected, breathing hard. “Yes. I’m getting the girl.”

I grabbed my coat from the hanger and bolted through the door, leaving my dad to sit there, surrounded by oracle silence.

I am coming to get you, Rosie.

I waited. Impatiently. Tapping my fingers over my thighs on what was supposed to be a sigh, but no air came out of my lungs. Staring at the turned-off TV, I didn't know how much time passed, but I did notice it was nighttime. Nights in the Hamptons were very different than in New York, I pondered as I stared out the window. Less pollution. More stars.

Where the hell are you, Earth, and are you doing okay?

It was annoying. To sit there and wait for someone to put me out of my misery and boredom. Sitting by myself did not make me feel good. In fact, it opened a door to that dark place inside my head. My anxiety attack returned in full swing. I mean—why not? My boyfriend was ignoring me, wherever the hell he was. I was clearly doing bad. The doctors said very little, and Dr. Hasting kept asking me to get some rest, as if I was planning to run a marathon this Christmas.

You are going to die.

Disappear. Suffocate, in a grave.

He will move on.

And find another girl.

He will move on.

And it won't be you.

He will move on.

But it won't hurt. Nothing will anymore. Because...you'll be gone.

A sharp knock on the door stopped my thoughts from swirling in my head. The intensity of it suggested that whoever was behind the door had been trying to get my attention for long minutes. I knew it wasn't my parents or Emilia, because they never knocked before they came in. I didn't want to be filled with hope, but couldn't help myself either.

“Yes?” I cleared my throat, biting my lip to suppress a cough. My eyes clung to the door, desperate, begging for it to be him.

The door opened.

And someone walked in.

It wasn't him...but it was second best.



Dean

I didn't say a word to Vicious as he maneuvered the vehicle through the rain on our way to the hospital. He parked, walked around, opened the door for me, grabbed me by the collar, and threw me against the nearest wall, growling in my face. That caught me off guard, and my mouth hung open.

"What the fuck, Cole? I thought you said you had this shit on lock. She is dying."

"I know," I hissed, pushing him away. The weight of my actions threatened to crush the remainder of my sanity. It clutched my lungs, preventing me from getting all the air she couldn't breathe. "I fucking know, okay? I'm trying to make it right."

"Stop drinking," he barked, but there was no need for him to tell me that. I already knew my love affair with alcohol was over. It was over the minute Rosie told me she would take care of me. All I ever had since were relapses brought on by circumstances.

But no more relapses.

No more fucking up.

From now on,

I was going to be good. If there was someone to be good left after this was all over.

"So let me tell you what happens now, *Ruckus*," Vicious spat my childhood nickname, his breath fanning my face as his hold on my collar tightened. I let him have his moment. I kicked his ass on a weekly basis when we were teenagers. I got it. I fucked up. Atonement was in order.

"I'm going to help you. One time. One, fucking time, and you're not going to make me regret it. No. You are going to go up there, and you are going to apologize. To her, to her parents, to Millie. To the fucking nurses, the receptionist, and the guy who cleans the windows. To everyone. Because you. Fucked. Up. You fucked up so bad, and other people had to fly across the country to clean up your mess. Understood?"

"Save the bullshit, Oprah." I pushed him away, striding inside the hospital. "I know exactly how bad I ruined things, and while I appreciate you being on my side, I know how to make this right."



Dean

We passed by Millie, who was getting herbal tea from the Starbucks under the hospital. Vicious stopped and jerked his chin in her direction.

“Make peace with her.”

“We were never at war.” My eyes were sunken, tired. I didn’t have time for Millie. I was at the phase where I wanted to make things right, not dwell on the past.

“This is pointless, Dean. Rosie will never take you back without Millie’s blessing, anyway. So just do it.”

Reluctantly, I approached my high school girlfriend, who looked very pregnant and very pissed off, sitting at a table at Starbucks, sipping her tea. Vicious waited outside and pretended to mess with his phone. Asshole.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hi,” she said.

We never talked anymore, Millie and I. There was no anger there, though. Just indifference. We made small talk when we spent Thanksgiving together, and I even helped her with the dishes, but we mainly stayed away from one another.

“Tell me something, Dean. Do you love my sister?” Her blue eyes searched mine. I sucked my anger in, refraining from losing my shit.

“She’s my whole fucking world,” I admitted.

“Then why did you let her down?”

“I was selfish.”

“My sister can’t be with a selfish man.”

“*I will change.*”

“What if you can’t change?”

“Vicious did,” I snapped. “Vicious changed, for you. Look, Millie, I like

you. I do. Always have. But Rosie...Rosie is *it*. Whatever you think Vicious is capable of doing to be with you—I can do that, probably more, to be with Rosie. It was one little fuck-up. I learned my lesson.”

It was her turn to be thoughtful and blink away tears. “I’m scared,” she admitted, biting on her lips. “So scared.”

“Me, too,” I said.

We hugged. Hard and long. I counted the seconds, the seconds I was away from Rosie. But when Millie finally let me go, I knew it was with her blessing. I thumbed away a tear on her face.

“I really love her,” I said.

“I know.” She nodded and laugh-cried. “God, how were we even together?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Everyone wants a piece of me, I guess.”

She punched my arm.

“Show her that you love her, Dean.”

I was going to, even if it was the last thing I was going to do.



Dean

It was the eighth time I walked to her room since she was admitted into the hospital three days ago, hoping she was awake and her parents were feeling generous enough to let me see her. Machines were beeping lazily from the rooms along the long hallway. Nurses in blue uniforms hurried past me, their shoulders brushing mine as they flipped through their reports. Vicious was by my side. We rounded the corner. Four doors down from her room, I stopped. Vicious halted next to me.

“What?” he asked, his eyes were still hard on his phone.

“Tell me my hangover is messing with my vision.” I pointed at her door. He swiped his front teeth over his lip, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

“Darren,” I spat out. “Fucking Darren. Doctor Dickhead just walked into her room.”

There was a moment when so much adrenaline coursed through my veins, every nerve-end in my body sizzled. What was *he* doing there, and who gave him the courtesy call I never got? It couldn't have been her. It *couldn't*. Picking up my pace, I noticed Vicious following suit.

“What the fuck are you doing, man? Let it go.”

The fuck I will.

“Charlene!” I called out to her mother, who was at the other end of the hallway. Her head shot upward from the chewed foam cup she was staring into, and she got up from her seat. Her grave expression suggested that I was Lucifer himself, and at that moment, she wasn't completely wrong. I'd had enough of this bullshit. I stopped a foot away from her and jerked my finger at the door.

“Her ex-boyfriend just walk in there?” I swear I was foaming from the mouth. “Did that just fucking happen?”

“Darren,” she supplied, her puffed eyes and swollen face somehow breaking into a timid smile. “*Nice boy,*” she articulated. Because apparently, I wasn't.

“Who invited him?” I demanded.

“Paul.” *Rosie's dad.* “Darren has always been there for her. It was only fair that we let him know.”

“I was always there for her,” I stressed, punching a wall and not feeling anything, not the pain, not the burn, nothing.

“Not when she needed you.” Charlene's voice was too sad to be flustered by my spontaneous act of violence. “When she needed you, Dean, you disappeared.”

“I'm kicking him out.” I made my way to the door. Rosie was obviously awake if they let him in. There was a little square window on the door, but I knew better than to look. Did he hold her hand? Was she glad to see him? Was she going to kick me out? My head spun with possibilities.

Vicious clasped my arm, squeezing once. “Man.”

“Fuck. You.”

I stormed in. Darren was sloped in a chair by Rosie's bed. She was awake. And she looked horrible. I'd never seen her like this. So...not herself. Her eyes were dim, dark circles framing her baby blues. Ten pounds skinnier, exhausted, and sad. It was then that I realized that Nina never broke my heart.

Rosie did, eleven years ago.

She did when she pushed me into her sister's arms.

And she did now, in that hospital bed. Because if she was going to die—so was I.

“Leave,” I commanded, my eyes honing in on my girlfriend. *My girlfriend.*

Paul and Charlene barged in, yelling at me in decibels human ears weren't meant to contain. I didn't listen. I didn't fucking care. I was going to give Darren a very good reason to stay in the hospital if he didn't get the hell out.

“She wants me here,” Darren's white-boy, Connecticut soft voice reported. God, I bet he never said ‘fuck’ and used the word ‘shit’ sporadically.

“Darren.” Rosie leaned forward to pat his hand, her lungs wheezing like a balloon that was losing air. “I'm so sorry my dad asked you to go through all this trouble. There's a lot going on in my life right now. Please don't take it the wrong way. I'm very grateful you made it here, but it's time for you to go.”

Hearing her kicking him out soothed some of my rage away. I gulped thin hospital air and stepped deeper into the room.

Darren looked between Rosie and her dad. Paul shook his head, his lips pursed. Her mom rounded the bed and hugged her. Millie was probably resting somewhere in the hospital. Vicious and Rosie's parents were about to join her so I could finally have a few fucking moments alone with my girlfriend.

“Fine,” Darren said, finally. “As you wish, Rosie-bug. If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

Confrontational silence hovered between us after Darren left the room. All eyes were on me.

“Everybody out,” I said.

“Even me?” Rosie quirked an eyebrow and tried to smile. And failed. Looking pained for even trying.

“No. I'm keeping you. No one else can handle your ass, anyway.”

“Why are we letting this happen?” Charlene LeBlanc threw her hands in the air. “He left her in the pouring rain, for goodness' sake! He. Did. This.” She pointed at Rosie, her finger dancing. “Paul, do something.”

“Mama—” Rosie said.

“Sweetheart, I know, but—” Paul tried to pacify his wife.

“Jesus Christ, just shut the hell up.” Vicious slammed his palm against a bed stand, and everyone *did* shut up. Probably shocked that he would tell them to zip it. “I mean, really? Dean stood her up. *Once*. After chasing her ass for a long time. I’ve never seen a man endure so much bullshit when it comes to a girl before Dean Cole. Charlene, Paul, I love your daughter. A lot. I would die for her if I had to, but even I have to admit—I did terrible things to her. Things I thought I would never be able to overhaul. The fact that she agreed to marry me is a small miracle. The fact that she knows who I am and still chose to have a baby with me is an even bigger one. But Dean...Dean is not Vicious. Dean made a mistake, not a conscious decision to hurt her. And he deserves to be heard.” He twisted his head, pinning Rosie down with his stare. I stopped breathing, waiting for her to say something.

She coughed, wiggled in place to fix the pillows behind her back, then offered a faint nod.

“Mama, Daddy, I *need* to hear what he has to say.”

Rosie’s parents exchanged worried looks.

Charlene exhaled. “We’ll be outside.”

The door clicked shut. Our eyes met. She was not doing well, I knew. Now was the time to tell her I finally got it. Why she pushed me into her sister’s arms. Why she let us both suffer through this shit. Love makes you do crazy, irrational things. Love and death are connected by an invisible string. Pull too hard, and you’re gone. I couldn’t live without Rosie. It was, perhaps, the only thing that was clear to me at this point.

I plopped on her bed, sitting by her thighs, grabbed her hand, and placed it over my heart.

Sorry didn’t cut it. I had to go big. I had to go all the fucking way this time.

“You turned my life upside down, and I’ll never be the same,” I said, feeling my words were a living thing. I not only said them, I *felt* them.

She smiled, shrugged. Looking like her old/young self for a second. Other than that yellow hue on her skin.

“It’s not my fault you fell in love with a dying girl.”

“It’s not my fault you made it fucking impossible not to.”

“Where were you?” Her voice died in her throat. Did she mean the day she waited for me in the Hamptons or during her hospital stay?

“I was right here, Baby LeBlanc. The whole time. The minute I found out

where you were I all but flew here. They wouldn't let me see you, so I stayed at the place I rented for us. And drank. And felt sorry for myself. And kept the loser asshole torch burning pretty bright, thanks for asking."

She snorted. "Friday?"

I let out a sigh, scratching at my stubble.

"Dean? How was your meeting with your father?"

The words poured out of me like a broken floodgate. I told my fading girlfriend exactly what happened, not sparing a detail. She shed a few silent tears, clutching my face in her ice-cold hands, but I'd never felt warmer in my entire life. I kissed her lips and said sorry, again and again and again.

"I'm sorry." My lips slid to her forehead. "Fuck, Rosie, I am so, so sorry," Cheek. "I can't tell you what it does to me, seeing you like this, knowing that it was me who caused it." Tip of the nose. "It can't end like this. It *can't*." Lips again.

She pulled me into a hug, and I felt her hot tears streaming down my neck.

"I'm kind of hoping it will end like this. You made me happy. Very happy. But...you deserve everything. Wife, kids, a white picket fence."

"And I'll have all of it. With you."

"You know that can't happen with me."

"Then it can't happen with anyone. There won't be a next Rosie. And there won't be another story like ours. This is it, Rose LeBlanc. And this is us. If there is no you, then there is no me."

"You know, I always hated *Romeo and Juliet*. The play. The movie. The very idea. It was tragic, all right. Tragically stupid. I mean, they were what? Thirteen? Sixteen? What a waste of life, to kill yourself because your family wouldn't let you get hitched. But Romeo and Juliet were right. *I* was the stupid asshole. Look what happened to me. I met my true love at the age of eighteen and spent the next eleven years killing myself slowly while I grieved for you. Then you came back, and I still thought it was just a fascination. But now that I know..." I pulled away so I could look at her face. She was fading. I saw it. Her lungs hadn't been functioning well. Her doctors said the infection had spread to the rest of her organs. She was burning with fever. Despite her frequent trips to the hospital, this time it was different.

And all of this could have been prevented if I wasn't an alcoholic bastard.

I pressed my cheek into her palm, kissing her wrist. "Now that I know that it can only ever be you, you're going to get better for me so Earth won't

explode. Can you do that, Sirius? I promise not to leave this room until you get out. Not even for a shower. Not even to get you your chocolate chip cookies. I'll get someone to drive all the way to New York and bring them for you."

"I love you." Rosie's tears curtained her vision. Her shaky fingers found my lips when they wanted to touch my cheeks, but once her fingertips swiped across my mouth, I realized that I was shedding a few tears, too. I couldn't remember the last time I cried. I was definitely not the sobbing type. In fact, it was probably around the time Nina dumped my ass at Walmart when I cried the last time. But I did now, because the woman I loved more than life itself was losing a battle I personally sent her into.

"I love you, Baby LeBlanc," I said. "So fucking much. You taught me how to love. How well did I do?"

She smiled, a tear rolling down her cheek. "A-plus," she whispered. "You aced it. Can you promise me something?"

"Anything."

"*Live.*"

"Not without you."

"And have kids. Lots of them. They're fun."

"Rosie..."

"I'm not afraid. I got what I wanted from this life. *You.*"

"*Rosie.*"

"I love you, Earth. You were good to me."

"Rose!"

Her eyes closed, the door opened, the sound on her monitor went off, and my heart disintegrated.

Piece.

By piece.

By piece.

Epilogue

Dean

Three Years Later

“MAN, WHAT THE HELL IS your son doing?”

“It’s not my son.”

“Oh, like hell it’s not.” Trent brings the bottle of beer to his lips, taking a slow sip. “He’s wearing a goddamn multi-colored blazer. It’s Knight, all right.”

I squint my eyes, because it’s bright as fuck in Todos Santos on a September afternoon, and sure enough, it is my son. My four-year-old is... what is he doing, exactly? I’m not entirely sure, but knowing Knight, it can’t be anything remotely constructive, and it will probably earn him an indefinite amount of naughty spot time. This kid has seen more walls than a mural painter.

He is my mini-me on steroids. Swag, attitude, and mischief all wrapped up in an innocent smile.

“I think he just drew a giant dick on Jaime’s daughter’s forehead,” Vicious remarks, staring into his glass of whiskey like it holds the answer to the mystery of life. I sip water. For the last three years, it’s only ever been water for me. I’m not gonna bullshit you about being a born-again Christian like Donald Whittaker. Yes, I’m fucking dying for a drink. Staying sober is a sacrifice, but one I am willing to make for my family.

Vicious elbows Jaime, tilting his chin toward Knight and Daria. “If that’s not pissing all over his property from a young age, I don’t know what is. Your daughter’s in trouble. Keep an eye on that one.”

“They’re just kids, dickface. It’s called playing.”

“*Playing.*” Vicious tastes the word on his tongue. “You played the same game with Mel, if my memory doesn’t betray me. But with a real dick, and it wasn’t her forehead you put it on.”

That last statement awards Vicious with a punch to the arm. I flip my wedding band around my finger and watch our kids running around us, sunrays glittering between them.

“Knight!” I call out for him, and he looks up, the black marker clutched in his small fist.

Oh, fuck.

It doesn’t look like a marker. *It looks like a Sharpie.*

“Come here, please.” I nod toward the corner where Jaime, Vicious, Trent, and I are standing. Luna is clasping Trent’s leg like an anchor. Her gray-green eyes are wide and exploring, and she is wearing a black top, black jeans, and black Chucks.

She never leaves her father’s side.

Knight sashays toward us, swinging his arms next to his body in an exaggerated way. We’re celebrating his fourth birthday today, and all of his pre-school friends are here. Trent’s flipping steaks and burgers, there’s a hot dog stand by the giant pool, a clown, a magician, and a cotton candy machine. Only the best for my son.

I know, I know, he’s mine and I’m biased, blah, blah, blah, but I swear, this kid is something special. My wife and I knew that the minute we saw him.

“He was born on August eighteenth,” the woman at the adoption agency stated when she slid a picture of him across her desk three years ago. We came to see her right after our shotgun wedding in Vegas. My wife and I exchanged an unreadable look before we burst out laughing. That was the date we slept together for the first time. August eighteenth. Fate has a twisted sense of humor like that.

Knight looks just like me, even though he didn’t come from me. But his hair is ash brown, his eyes jade green. He is twice as tall as kids his age. Well, other than Vaughn, Vicious and Emilia’s son.

Knight (my better half called him that because he came to save the day) stands in front of me, waiting for the inevitable Spanish Inquisition.

“What did you do to Daria?” I ask, kneeling down to his eye level. Daria is two years older than Knight. She should be the one bossing him around, not the other way. But I guess it is in our blood to raise little hell-raiser,

alpha-males and the girls who fight them off until they cave to their charm.

“I tattooed her,” my kid says, his voice even. He’s staring me right in the eye, and he has that what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it look on his face.

“You drew on her forehead,” I correct. “Why did you do that?”

“She asked to get inked.” *Jesus Christ*. No more watching *Ink Master* with this dude when his mom is too busy to notice.

“What did you ink...paint on her forehead, exactly?”

Don’t say a dick. Don’t say a dick. Don’t say a dick.

“A spaceship,” he answers. He turns around and calls Daria, who jogs the short distance to us. Knight proceeds to explain, his finger moving across her forehead. “This is the external tank,” he points at the head of the cock—and did I mention that my kid wants to be an astronaut and loves space just as much as I do?—“and this is the orbiter,” he points at the balls.

“And what is shooting from the external tank, exactly?” Jaime inquires, his voice stiff. I swallow my laughter and wait for Knight to answer. His eyes widen.

“Bullets, of course. Lots and lots of bullets.”

Thank God, he didn’t say cum.

I place a hand on my son’s soft, ruddy cheek. “Listen to me carefully, Knight, okay? We do not draw on other people’s body parts. Ever. *Especially* not spaceships.” Jaime is a friend, but I’m not sure how I feel about other fathers knocking on my door complaining that my son is drawing dicks on their daughters.

“Got it.” He nods. “No spaceships.”

“And no giving other kids tattoos, period. Now, why don’t you go play with Vaughn?”

“Because I hate him,” Knight answers matter-of-factly.

The next generation is definitely following in their fathers’ footsteps. I mess his hair. “Go check on your mom, bud.” I kiss the top of his head.

“Okay, Daddy.”

“And give me the Sharpie.”

Daria is still looking at her dad. Jaime pulls her into his leg with a hug.

“Baby, can you promise Daddy something?”

“Yes.”

“Never, ever, look or talk or play with Knight ever again.”

Daria rolls her eyes and walks off to the cotton candy machine my mom, Helen, is in charge of. Jaime, Vicious, and I laugh.

Trent is flipping burgers with a beer in his hand, shaking his head.

“Who the fuck are all these people? I don’t even know half of them.” I motion with my bottled water to the crowd. Now that we all live in Todos Santos—life away from each other felt a little too close to death, we realized, after what happened to Rosie—and live in the same neighborhood, we hang out every day.

“You did invite most of our colleagues.” Jaime shrugs.

“Did I?” I scratch my head.

“Your wife did,” Vic interrupts. “Em told her to. Networking and shit. Oh, and lookie here. Our new partner came to say hi.” He jerks his chin to a man I *do* recognize. His face was just plastered across the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Jordan Van Der Zee. Late fifties going on seventy. Looks like an evil version of Putin. He bought fifty percent of our shares two years ago, making us split the rest among us.

A multi-million-dollar deal that left us with more money than we can spend in ten lifetimes but less power in Fiscal Heights Holdings. We now have the time to spend with our families. Together. Van Der Zee scattered his own management team around Chicago, London, and New York, and none of us are crushed, because we took our souls with us when we signed the deal. Sue now has a new person she can call Mr. Whatever.

“Racist bastard,” Trent mutters into his beer, and we all jerk our heads toward him. He doesn’t swear around Luna, but sometimes we forget that she is around. Trent looks down, kisses his daughter’s cheek, and whispers, “Sorry. Daddy said a bad word. Won’t happen again.”

She doesn’t nod. She doesn’t answer. Just stares at him with her blank eyes.

“Come again?” Vicious asks, spinning the wheel of the conversation back to safe water. Trent’s eyes flare, the recollection of what makes him call Van Der Zee a racist flashing through his mind.

“Guy’s a racist. I had an incident with him. To say I don’t like him would be the understatement of the fu—” his eyes dart down to Luna, and he clears his throat, “of the *fudging* century.”

“Well, none of us are going to buy him a beer—or a fudge, for that matter. But maybe he was a poo-poo head to you for the sake of being a poo-poo head. It’s kind of his thing,” I offer, refraining from saying the words ‘little shit’ and adding, “Is that his kid over there?”

I sure the fuck hope it is, because otherwise, he has passed Sugar Daddy

territory and is now in Sugar Grandpa zone. It's hard to miss the girl beside him because he doesn't let her move. Literally. He is clasping her slender arm in his and spits when he talks to her. She is too young for me to form an opinion about her looks. Eighteen or nineteen, maybe. Her skin is ghostly fair, she has long hair the color of the sun, two hoops for nose rings, and even though she doesn't want her father to know, when she tried to jerk her arm away, her shirt rode up and a tattoo peeked on her abdomen. Not a small one, either.

"Edie Van Der Zee," Vicious confirms my assessment. "Poor kid."

Jaime laughs. "Poor, she isn't. And since Edie is easy on the eyes, I bet he's just trying to make sure she doesn't get harassed by the harem of corporate dickbags we work with."

We all frown at Jaime.

"Little Edie looks twelve," Trent retorts in horror. It's been three years since Val bailed on his ass, and he's never bothered reclaiming his throne as the king of one-night stands. No interest in the other sex whatsoever. It's like his blood turned blue or something.

"Not twelve," Jaime says evenly. "She looks twenty. Twenty-two, maybe? Totally legal, but still taboo. Lethal combination. Danger is my favorite flavor."

"She is eighteen." Vicious puts Jaime out of his misery, *tsking* his disapproval. "Her dad just bought my old car for her birthday. Jordan believes in showing Edie money doesn't grow on trees and all that jazz. Fun guy. And what the fuck is wrong with you?" It's his turn to punch Jaime's arm. "You either go for the old ones or the young ones. No middle ground for you."

"Fuck you, my wife is not old."

"Your wife is not old, but she is *here*," Trent reminds him, and we all shift our gaze to watch a very pregnant Mel. "So you might want to stop drooling over a teenager. And while you're at it, stop cursing in front of my kid."

"Shit, sorry, Luna," Vicious says. Jaime laughs. I shake my head. Our kids are going to talk like drunk sailors before they hit ten.

"She doesn't look a day over sixteen," Trent offers his two cents on Van Der Zee's daughter. Yet, his eyes are fixated on her. I'm not sure what to make of it. On one hand, it's a good sign that he is actually looking at someone. On the other, he is looking at the wrong fucking person. Story of

our lives, I guess.

“Sixteen, huh? Is that why you’re glaring?” I smirk. Trent looks away and frowns before sliding a burger onto a bun, squishing ketchup onto it, and handing it to his daughter.

“We were having a conversation about her, so I stated my *fudging* opinion.”

“Stated your *fudging* opinion, or imagined how it would feel to *fudge* her?” I start, and Jaime cuts into our conversation.

“This is getting creepier by the second. Make me one as well.” He points at the burgers.

My dad walks over to us, holding a red Solo cup with a very virgin punch. Everyone slaps his back. I stay put, but when he comes in for a hug, I stretch my arms open and let him in. My arms, my heart, my life.

Shit, I sound like a cheese ball, but it’s true.

Three years ago, I spent a month and a half in the hospital nursing my dying girlfriend.

Three years ago, she came back to me.

Three years ago, one night, when I thought she was for sure going to die, I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of beeping hospital machines. I snuggled next to her every night, one hand pressed against her heart—I didn’t trust any fucking machine other than the beating organ in my chest—and realized that her flesh was warm again. My Rachel came back to me. Fourteen years it took me, but this Jacob got the sister he had yearned for.

I love my friends, but they don’t get it. *Me*. I have to fast-forward everything to truly enjoy life. That’s why Rosie and I eloped four days after she left the hospital. That’s why I can’t afford to hold a grudge against my father and mother. That’s why I finally let go of the bad shit and let all the good come in, even if it cracks my cocky bastard armor.

“Knight is trying to start a fire using two rocks by the fountain,” Dad warns, tilting his head to the far end of the garden. He adds, “Vaughn is helping him.”

Vicious grins. “And you said our kids can’t tolerate each other.” His shoulder bumps mine. “Of course, they can, when there’s enough destruction involved.”

“How old is she again?” Trent asks out of nowhere.

“Eighteen,” Vicious enunciates. “And you’re thirty-three, in case I need

to remind you of that, too.”

“I’m well aware, assface.”

“Then peel your eyes off of her body, dickbag.”

“Language, boys,” my dad says, and it never gets old, even when we’re thirty-three.

Trent looks away, smiles a genuine grin for the first time in years, and pats Luna’s head as she wolfs down her burger. I wonder if she understood anything from the conversation we just had, and if she did, how much of it. Her doctor claims that there is nothing wrong with her, that she is mentally in line with kids her age.

But she doesn’t speak. To anyone. Ever.

Completely mute.

“I’m going to make sure they don’t burn my house down.” I motion with my chin to the fountain, right near the swan stone benches. We sit on them every night when we look at the stars. They’re the place where I tell Rosie that I love her, that she is the only one, that she will always *be* the only one, no matter when she leaves me. It’s the truth. If Rosie’s lungs collapse tomorrow, and with them, my whole life, I will not bother to pick it up again. I will be there for my son—soon-to-be sons—and I will raise them the best I can, but the ride will be over for me.

“Knight! Vaughn!” I stride in their direction, and they both whip their heads around, looking guilty as fuck. I wiggle my finger before they do something stupid. “Stop trying to set the place on fire. How much trouble are you going to get yourselves into if this is what you do at four?”

“My guess is just as much trouble as you gave us.” Dad chuckles behind me.

We all get back to the house—three men from different generations—and Vaughn. I put the two boys where I can see them. The media room we set up for Knight and his baby brother.

“Did you ever check on your mom?” I ask Knight.

“Yeah. She said she is good. She also said that she loves me more than she loves you.”

I narrow my eyes. “She did not.”

“Did too.” Knight shrugs, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Bull...’s head.” I clear my throat. Knight jumps and high-fives Vaughn.

“Told you I’d get him to say a bad word! I’m goooood.”

He *is* good, and I am blessed.

And whole.
And fucking alive.
Thanks to *her*.

Rosie

What makes you feel alive?

My family. My home. My men. My belly. I'm alive. And my therapist was right. I am going to live forever.

“Dean, stop.”

“Why?”

“Because I hate it when you do that.”

“What am I doing?”

“Singing the ‘super sperm’ song.”

A dark chuckle leaves his mouth. I roll my eyes and turn on my back in bed, my huge belly poking out. I have a high-risk pregnancy. I don't get out of the house very often. I see my doctor every other day. My body was not designed to carry another person, and while my appetite quickly caught up with the plan, my lungs are struggling to function for two. But it happened. I fell pregnant. And I fell pregnant because...

“Superrrrr spermmm.” Dean hits those high notes, walking out of the shower and into our bedroom, his sex hair still dripping water. Not that we've been having sex recently. Which is a crying shame, because pregnancy makes you really horny. My hormones took the wheel eight months ago and drove me into the arms of soft porn and erotic books. Doctor Bernstein said no funny business until I pop this kid out. “Gets the fucking job donneeee!”

Oh, yeah. The super sperm song has rhythm and double meaning. Justin Timberlake, watch out.

“Daddy, you said *another* bad word!” Knight calls from his room, ecstatic. It's ten o'clock at night. What is he doing up? “This is the best bet ever. Vaughn is going to owe me a lot of candy.”

Sometimes I feel like Dean doesn't even try not to cuss in front of Knight. I don't resent him for it. That's who he is, and if people have a problem...

well, *fuck* them.

He doesn't say that—he probably wouldn't admit it, either—but I know that one of the reasons he agreed to sell all those shares to Jordan Van Der Zee is because he wanted to spend more time with us. He doesn't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Neither do I. But I do know that both my boys are going to be in very good hands. This is the man who impregnated me after I was told that there was only a 0.0001% chance I will be able to conceive. He took that slim chance and made it happen. Since he doesn't carry the CF gene, my son will be healthy and strong. Just like him.

“Put a dollar in the jar for me,” Dean yells to Knight, smirking at me and opening his towel before knotting it back. “I'll pay you tomorrow.”

“There's a twelve percent interest on that,” Knight yells back. Dean chuckles.

“Are you sure he is not biologically mine?” He gives me that look. You know, *that look*, that still makes me damp and begging for his dusky side to spank me.

I shrug, downplaying his effect on me. “He is the closest thing to the real you.” Other than the one that's in my stomach.

Dean walks over, flattens his palm against my huge belly, and sits down beside me.

“Hey, Sirius?”

“Yes, Earth?”

“Why do you shine so fucking bright? You make it hard for me to sleep next to you.”

“Mmmm.” I take his hand and kiss his palm, smiling. “Thanks for the cheese, but it gives me heartburn.”

“Okay, what I'm really trying to say is that you started snoring about two months ago and fuck, I'm tired.”

“This too shall pass,” I say, teasing. “Soon, my snoring will be replaced with a baby who cries all night for the next two years.”

He kisses my temple, then my belly, then between my heavy tits, making a suckling sound. I love him. I love him so much I don't know why I didn't do what I should have done all those years ago. Push my sister aside when she came running into his arms and claimed him as mine.

Because he always was.

Every part of him.

The good and the bad, the happy and the sad.

Mine.

Just like I was his.

Nina died weeks after I left the hospital three years ago. Drug overdose, back on the farm she lived on in Alabama. Her husband by her side. I was there to pick up the pieces of Dean's broken heart. To see him finally break, finally admit that he cared. That he loved her and wanted nothing but to be her son. That his heart was never going to be the same again.

Lev means a heart in Hebrew. *Lev* is also going to be the name of our son. I count my blessings. Every single day.

I count them when I kiss Knight good night, when I watch Dean from the window trying to turn on the sprinklers, kicking blades of grass before remembering that the sprinklers are automatic, and when Millie and I do brunches and watch the kids play and fight and shout.

"You know what I just realized?" Dean leans down, and now he is kissing my lips and I get all dizzy, knowing that we can't take it any farther. Not just because of the pregnancy. Knight has been known to burst into our room and negotiate his bedtime. He is getting pretty good at it. By six, he will start giving his dad a run for his money as far as trading goes.

"What?" I smile.

"*Baby* LeBlanc is having a *baby*. And it's mine. I fucking love you. Love your face." He kisses my nose. "Your tits." He kisses my nipple through my tank top, biting it softly. "The kid you're making for us." He kisses my belly and mouths into it, "And you, too, buddy."

"The fucking spectacular sex that we have—I'm saving all my sperm for our reunion, so be warned, I might knock you up again in no time." He kisses between my legs. "And down to your feet, that I worship every day." He kisses my toes.

I take a deep breath. I don't need my inhaler. I have him.

"And I figured out one more thing." He raises his body back up and boxes me underneath him. His arms are flexed, his bulging muscles are making it hard for me to concentrate on what he is saying, and suddenly, the room just got a little too hot for my liking.

"What?" I whisper as our lips brush together.

"Jacob got his fucking Rachel. And she gave him a baby. They will live happily-ever-after. Grow old together. It's in the Bible, *Baby* LeBlanc. You can't dispute it."

"I love you." I laugh.

“I love you,” he says back.

“I love you’s!” Knight bolts into the room, throwing the door open, jumping onto the bed between us, hugging my belly.

“We love you.” Dean puts his hand on my stomach, and now we all touch Lev.

And what does Lev do? What HotHoles do. Ruin.

“God, oh,” I moan.

“Yes, baby, I’m a god, but our son is here. This will have to wait.”

“No, Dean. My water just broke.”

“Oh,” we all say in unison. “God.”

And I now have my happily-ever-after. At least in this moment.

Now is forever, at least for me.

For I am not a wilting Rose, I’m in full bloom.

Thanks to *him*.

THE END

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Love,
L.J. xoxo

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