



Shadowed
Obsession

A ROSEWOOD NOVEL

PENELOPE BLACK

shadowed
obsession

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SHADOWED OBSESSION

ROSEWOOD
BOOK 2

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*for jen:
you're one of the best humans I know*

*and for every book bestie who slid into my DMs when you hit the cliff in book
one, see you soon*

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- “Eat Your Young” by Hozier
- “Never Felt So Alone” by Labrinth
- “ceilings” by Lizzy McAlpine
- “Matilda” by Harry Styles
- “Lights Are On” by Tom Rosenthal
- “Can’t Catch Me Now” by Olivia Rodrigo
- “ocean eyes” by Billie Eilish
- “Gilded Lily” by Cults
- “On the Nature of Daylight” by Max Richter
- “Out Of The Woods (Taylor’s Version)” by Taylor Swift
- “What Was I Made For?” by Billie Eilish

PROLOGUE

BANE

I pull my vibrating phone out of my pocket and answer without looking. “Hello?”

“Nothin' but net.” Nova smirks with a shit-talking grin.

The basketball swishes through the hoop and the grin slips from my face at the familiar voice in my ear.

“Hey, kid, it's Eddie.”

“Fuck,” I murmur, my gut clenching.

“Yeah, uh, I tried your old man—”

“I'll be right there,” I interrupt quickly, wishing he'd stop talking.

“But he's not answering, and she's in real bad shape, kid. I don't want to call the sheriff, but—”

“Yeah, I'll come get her.” I jab the red button to end the call and shove my phone into my front pocket. I expel a breath and bottle up the resentment and frustration and shove it deeper in my chest. “Fuck,” I exhale quietly and glance toward the sky.

“Top that shot, bro. I dare you,” Nova taunts the other team. I don't even have to look to know he's probably showboating the hell out of our win.

He doesn't care that it's a harmless game of basketball in the park—that kid likes to win.

“I'm out,” I call over my shoulder and start walking off the basketball court without looking back.

“Yo, Bane, you scared, man?” one of the other players jeers.

“Scared, Brian? We're up by twenty, man. Game's over anyway,” Nova taunts. “Later, losers.”

“Wait up,” Silas calls, his voice louder than Nova's. I'm not even remotely surprised when I see him next to me a moment later. I love the guy, but sometimes I wish he wasn't so fucking perceptive. “What's up?”

“Where we heading now?” Nova asks a second later, slinging an arm over my right shoulder and Silas's left. His floppy dark blond hair hangs over his sweaty forehead, and I resist the urge to shrug him off. He shot up like a tree this summer, and the little shit's been strutting around like a proud peacock for weeks now that he's reached our height. “I heard there's a bonfire on the beach tonight. Last hurrah before summer's over?” I see his brows waggle out of the corner of my eye.

“Nah, I gotta go to The Wild Boar.” I don't look at him, even though I feel his gaze boring into the side of my face.

“Want some company?” Silas asks, his tone even.

“Yeah, man. I could use a drink. I'm parched after wiping the court with those Crestview dicks,” Nova says, dropping his arms from our shoulders. He doesn't move from his place between us though.

I arch a brow but keep my gaze on the street ahead. “You're fucking thirteen.”

Nova throws his arms across our shoulders again. “Bro, you just ate half a chocolate cake for my birthday last week. You know I'm fourteen. Besides, since when does age matter when you're a fucking Reaper, yeah?”

“Calm down, baby brother,” Silas says. He shrugs Nova's arm off his shoulder and pivots to grab him in a headlock. It quickly devolves into a faux wrestling match. “You're barely a fledgling.”

Any other day and I would join in on the heckling at the very least, but I can't do that today.

I stop and watch them for a few seconds. “I gotta do something for my dad, but I'll meet you guys down there in an hour.”

Nova pops out of Silas's hold, his face bright with excitement. “No shit?”

I jerk my chin up. “Yeah, man. I'll see you at the bonfire.”

Nova pumps his fist in the air. “Hell yes.”

Silas stares at me, but I just tip my head back and walk backward, silently communicating the only way I know how that I'll be fine.

He nods once, and I just know that if I don't have my ass to the beach in an hour, he's going to track me down.

The seconds tick down like hammers in my ears, sixty minutes to extract my mother from The Wild Boar, get her home, and clean her up. A twisted knot of fear and disgust churns in my gut at the thought of facing her harsh words and verbal assaults again. Swiftly followed by the sharp pang of rage that my father leaves me to take care of her as he fucks off to do god knows what.

Just another Saturday night in Rosewood.

EVANGELINE

“YOU DON’T HAVE to stay with me, you know. I’m sure you have much more important things to do than just sitting with me . . . here.” I let my gaze flit across the room, bouncing off the laminated How Are You Feeling emoji chart on the wall and the darkened TV in the corner and the cluster of medical equipment next to the bed.

Basically everything except for him.

Nerves spark to life in my belly, and I’m struck by the need to fill the silence. It just feels so quiet now that everyone left.

First Nova, then Dixie, and after Silas bribed Hunter with chocolate chip cookies, they left too. Which leaves me and my white knight to my left.

I never believed in that cliché saying everything happens for a reason. It always feels like a throwaway statement, one more often than not offered as some sort of condolences. Like those five words are supposed to magically make your situation better.

And for a missed promotion or a sour breakup, I suppose it works.

But for death and destruction? It feels cheap and insufficient.

But here I am, feeling the full force of those five words as I gaze at the person who quite literally saved me. There’s no denying that tonight would have played out much differently if he wasn’t there. I was lucky tonight. So very lucky.

Gratitude feathers along my consciousness. Soft and smooth and relaxing like a flower petal dragging across my skin. And even as grateful as I am, I find myself at a loss of what to say. Normally, I'd fill the silence with something random or trivial. But I can't do it right now.

I find myself in this strange sort of space. Not nervous to be alone with him but not comfortable like I have been every other time we've been together.

I clear my throat and stretch my hands along the tops of my thighs, my palms clammy. The urge to wash my hands—to wash everything beats against my skin from the inside, each thump louder and more demanding than the last.

I feel unsettled in my skin, twitchy and tender. The lights inside the room are bright and the quintessential scent of hospital permeates the air. I don't have an aversion to hospitals or doctors, but I just might develop one if I have to sit in this cold room for much longer. I've never needed a shower more than I do right now. The urge to submerge myself in a hot water cocoon is constant.

I'm positive it's residual anxiety from the events of tonight.

That's exactly how I'm thinking of it too. An event. Like this thing I can disassociate from, as something that happened and not something that happened to *me*.

I'm sure it's not the healthiest way to process, but it's where I'm at right now.

“Hey,” he murmurs as his big palm settles over my left hand, stilling the nervous flutter of my fingers. He waits for my lashes to lift and my gaze to collide with his before he continues. “I'm exactly where I need to be.”

I expel a breath and nod slowly. My gaze bounces from his left eye to his right, looking for something I can't even articulate.

Answers, maybe.

But for all his heroics, he's still hard to read.

“What's going on in that pretty head of yours?”

His voice holds the same grit it always does, like a pebble slowly tumbling over the rocky bottom of a creek. But that's not what has me pausing, my muscles locking up as realization settles across my shoulders like Nana Jo's favorite quilt.

It's the way my body responds to his voice. I expect the almost drugging sort of arousal at the tone of his voice, especially when I know firsthand how it sounds wrapping around all those naughty syllables.

But I never would've anticipated the way my body relaxed at the sound. Like everything inside of me unconsciously sighed—and what the hell is that all about. I don't know if I have it in me to try to unpack that response right now though it's a better alternative to letting myself fall down the rabbit hole of tonight.

I swipe my tongue over my bottom lip and look up at him. “I'm just . . . really ready to get out of here.”

He nods, his thumb sweeping across my skin in slow, small strokes. “The minute she gives you the green light, we're out of here.”

I blow out a breath and nod, his response stoking the earlier simmer of gratitude. I tilt my head toward him, lifting my chin as I murmur, “Thank you. I—I don't know what I would've done if you didn't show up when you did.” My voice wobbles a little bit and I have to swallow over the waning adrenaline slugging through my veins. “I still don't understand what happened or who those people were or *why*.”

Okay, so I guess just call me Alice because I dove headfirst down that rabbit hole.

“It's alright. We'll figure it out together when we get home, yeah?”

My eyes widen at the idea of going back to Magnolia Lane right now. Fear slithers around inside my gut, expanding to fill the cracks I work so hard to ignore most days. “Oh, uh, maybe I should call Cora. I . . . I don't think I want to go back to my house tonight.”

He tilts his head to the side, the harsh lights from above showcasing the scruff on his jaw. I didn't realize his hair is a myriad of colors and not just dark brown.

Lincoln St. James is classically handsome in every definition of the word. He's the kind of dark and broody that every woman fantasizes about being the exception for. But in some ways, he wears this persona like armor.

I doubt he lets many people close enough to see past the one-dimensional note of him. To witness how kind and thoughtful he is. To know the man beneath the almost stoic demeanor. And I only saw glimpses. I can't imagine how it would be to feel the full weight of him.

He shakes his head slowly, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. "I don't think I can let you go tonight, baby girl."

My heart kicks hard inside my chest. "What do you mean?"

"Stay with me."

It's not posed as a question, and I can't even blame tonight for the way my insides warm at the subtle demand.

A flash of a different reality superimposes itself over this moment. Instead of Lincoln extending a chivalrous olive branch, he asks me to stay with him because he can't keep his hands off of me.

Now I know I've bumped my head because I'm not some damsel in distress—despite the events of tonight in which I *definitely* needed to be rescued.

But I'd like to think of myself as a modern woman. Independent and capable of taking care of myself. But there's also a part of me that craves to be dominated.

A little.

In certain situations.

And having a man growl low in my ear that he wants me to stay with him because he can't get enough of me or he doesn't want to spend a single second without me. Well, maybe those two ideations can live in harmony.

God, Cora's going to kick my ass for everything tonight. After she hugs the daylights out of me, I mean.

I tilt my chin up further, bringing our lips closer. I'm painstakingly aware of the few inches that separate our mouths. "Why are you being so . . ."

I trail off, unable to find the word I'm looking for.

His gaze trails over the gash on the side of my head. "I should've been there, should've protected you. The thought of someone hurting you twists me up inside, Evangeline." He slips his hand underneath mine and interlaces our fingers together. "Let me take care of you tonight."

His heartfelt words are so unexpected and genuine. My emotions are so surface-level right now, my eyes feel wet. "Why?"

He makes a low sound in the back of his throat. "I let you walk away once. I won't make that same mistake again."

EVANGELINE

“YOU SURE YOU don't mind me crashing with you. Cora really wouldn't care.” I shift in the front passenger seat of my car, stealing a glance at him. He looks large behind the wheel of my car but not out of place. He insisted on driving, despite the doctor giving me a clean bill of health when we left.

He arches a brow and glances at me. “Your cousin shares a three-bedroom apartment with three other women. I have two extra bedrooms that sit untouched. You're not an inconvenience, baby girl.”

My heart thumps hard at the way that nickname effortlessly rolls off his tongue. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, unsure of how to approach that particular topic. I still can't believe it's *him*. Eight years have gone by and yet the pull between us feels real. But I have questions.

Like why he didn't tell me who he really was when he recognized me. When he so obviously *remembered* me.

There's no way a man remembers your favorite coffee drink and doesn't recognize you. I don't remember every single detail from that night, but I can guarantee if he told me his favorite coffee order, I've forgotten it.

But I've never forgotten the way he made me feel. Or the way he felt. I swear my body would recognize his anywhere.

“I can feel you thinking, you know.” There's mirth in his voice.

I clear my throat and shift so my right shoulder leans against the window.

Even though it's dark, it feels important to look at him while I ask the question that's been burning a hole inside of me.

“Why did you lie?”

His head jerks toward me, his brows crowding together over his eyes. “I never lied to you.”

“When you first came to Magnolia Lane, after I accidentally hit you with a candle, I asked your name and you told me Bane.”

“That *is* my name.”

I lean my head back against the glass. “But you told me your name was Lincoln. Back then.”

He dips his chin and stares straight ahead, his fingers tapping a few times against the steering wheel. “Lincoln is who I was—the part of me that existed outside of Rosewood and the Reapers.”

“And Bane?” I ask when he doesn't say anything else.

There's a pause. “Bane is what happens when you're a legacy Reaper.”

“Silas and Nova are legacies too, right?” I murmur.

He dips his head. “Aye, but it's different. Nova got out.”

My lips twist to the side as I try to read between the lines and figure out what he's not saying. “And you didn't?”

He sighs. “That's a long story.”

I lift my shoulder and glance out the windshield. “I've got time.”

He reaches over and settles his palm across my leg, right above my knee. “I'll tell you anything you want to know, baby girl. But that's a story better told another day, and you've had a long night.”

God, I'd all but forgotten about the clubhouse until now. Nerves flutter in my belly and uncertainty dampens my hands. “I think we should add something else to our talk, another topic. Well, it's more of a question, I guess.”

He arches a brow and steals a glance. “Yeah?”

I nod, just a slow dip of my chin. “Yeah, like what exactly is happening

here.” I gesture between the two of us with the flick of my fingers. “And how is that going to work with what's happening with Nova?” *And Silas*, I add mentally. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking.

He chuckles, this low, smooth noise that floats into the space between us. “Now that isn't a long story. It's very simple really.”

My heart thuds quicker inside my chest, my fingertips tingling a little. “Okay.”

His palm curves inward, gripping the inside of my leg mid-thigh, and my breath catches at the possessiveness in the hold.

“We have eight years of lost time to make up for,” he says, his voice low and almost husky. “And I plan to make every second count.”

Heat floods my cheeks at the innuendo, and I sink my teeth into the inside of my bottom lip to ground myself a bit. I promised myself I would have fun this summer, but that doesn't mean I want to hurt anyone.

“And Nova?” I press. “What would he think of this? Of us? *Is there an us?*”

“There’s always been an us, even when you forgot.” He lifts a shoulder and flexes his hand on my leg, stretching his fingers wide. “They're not a factor between us.”

“They?” I ask, my voice going a little high.

“Nova and Silas.”

“*What?*” I inhale sharply, my heart thumping hard inside my chest for a moment before clarity fizzles in. “Oh, because I'm Hunter's nanny, you mean.”

The side of his mouth twists up. “Sure, we can go with that.”

My brows sink low as I try to figure out what he means. I mean, there's a spark of attraction there. But you'd have to be crazy not to notice how hot Silas is.

But in a relationship—or whatever this thing is—with Silas? Not a chance. Rumor in Rosewood is he doesn't date, like ever. So the likelihood of

a relationship with a woman who's also dating his brother *and* his cousin is so slim, it's laughable.

I shake my head, more to myself than him. "What are you saying?"

His thumb starts making little arcs of affection along the top of my thigh. "Nothing, baby girl. We'll talk about it later, yeah?"

"Okay," I answer sort of numbly. It seems wildly insufficient after such a conversation, but I honestly don't know what to say. Exhaustion sits heavily on my shoulders. It really has been one of the longest days ever.

"We can talk about whatever else you want later too."

"Over coffee in the morning?" I lean my head against the headrest and look at him.

"The largest dirty chai I can get my hands on. I'll take care of you, Evangeline."

"I still can't believe you remembered that," I mumble, pushing my hair off of my face.

"Did you forget who you're with, baby girl?"

It's hard to see much more than his profile in the dim interior lighting, but I hear the teasing lilt in his voice. He's talking about coffee but it feels like he's talking about something much more.

"I've never forgotten who you are." I murmur.

"And do you remember who you are?" he asks as he turns right onto another county road. "And what you deserve?"

I don't answer him, leaning my head against the window and letting my eyes drift shut.

"You deserve something better than a quick fuck in the middle of a party, baby girl." His voice is gruff in my ear, his lips brushing against the sensitive spot on my neck.

I arch my neck to the side, offering more skin for his pillowy lips to glide across. "If you're about to tell me something cliché like rose petals and candles, I'm going to get up and walk away."

My voice comes out so low and sultry, I hardly recognize it.

His hands tighten on my waist reflexively, like he's inherently possessive. I don't even care if it's a character trait and not an emotion reserved for me. I like it all the same.

“Roses and candles? Nah. But maybe someplace with a bed or a couch or one of those fucking overstuffed beanbag things.”

Amusement trickles in, and a small chuckle slips through my lips.

His right hand slides up and settles along my ribs, his thumb sweeping over the underside of my breast. “Somewhere I could take my time, treat you the way you deserve.”

My breath hitches at his touch. Two layers of fabric separate our skin, but I can still somehow feel him. The ache inside me blooms further, unfurling its petals and growing hungry.

His left hand smooths up my spine, his fingers sinking into the hair at the nape of my neck. “Somewhere with a spacious shower, so I could take care of you after.” He nips at my jaw, dragging his teeth with a hint of pressure. “Where I would try to persuade you to let me worship you.” He uses his grip on my hair to angle my head toward him, our mouths aligning. “Again. And again. And again,” he says against my lips.

Small, panting breaths leave me as the scenario he's painting takes shape in my mind.

“I'd show you what it means to be mine. And baby girl? I always take care of what's mine.”

I'm nodding, eyes closed and hips already rolling against his as I straddle his lap. “Yes, I want that. But I want this too.”

“Tell me what you want,” he tells me. It's a quiet demand.

“I want you. Here. On the beach.”

“Evangeline?”

My shoulders jerk forward, my eyes blinking too fast as I catapult back to the present.

“Evangeline? Talk to me. Are you okay?” His voice is loud, a harsh difference to how it felt against my skin all those years ago. Like whispered gravel.

I glance at him and shake my head a little to dislodge the dreamlike memory still clinging to the edges of my consciousness.

“I'm sorry. I'm fine, really. I must've fallen asleep,” I assure him.

“You were whimpering.” His hand squeezes my thigh gently, his gaze switching from the two-lane highway to me and back again. It's too dark for him to see my expression, these county roads aren't the most well-lit.

I settle my hand on the back of his and squeeze softly, ignoring the warmth in my cheeks. “Sorry. I must've been dreaming.”

He dips his chin and steals another glance at me. Flipping his hand over, he threads our fingers together. “It's alright. I got you. Just rest. We'll be home soon, yeah?”

Home.

Four letters for a word that feels as big as a continent. I used to think Nana Jo was my home and Rosewood was just a place. But looking at his profile, maybe it isn't a person or a place.

Maybe it's just a feeling.

And Lincoln St. James is starting to feel like home.

BANE

I EASE my foot onto the brake as I turn into the Reaper compound. Anxiety lashes my chest, not deep enough to capture my breath. Just hard enough to get my attention, my body's fucked-up Pavlovian response to seeing the small security booth at the gate.

The anxiety dissipates when it's only Rocker and he's alone. I roll down my window and toss my hand up in a wave, and he opens the gate just wide enough for me to drive Evangeline's car through. If she wasn't sleeping right next to me, I'd have half a mind to get another Reaper on the gate with him. Usually one brother is fine, but we're venturing into uncharted waters in the Diamond.

We have no idea who's behind the robbery on Evangeline tonight or if it was a message meant for us.

But unlike some of the other clubs, I don't make a move without all the information. That's how you start a war. And we're trying to keep the peace we all sacrificed so much to broker.

I bypass the garages, taking the two-lane road that curves around the side of the compound and connects the front retail half of the property to the residential half in the back.

I drive slowly, resisting the urge to shift in my seat again. Her car is just that—a car. It's not a spacious SUV or even a luxury truck. It's perfect for her

and it's doable for me. For now. Would I love to see her in a crossover? Absolutely. But for now, this works.

We drive past Aunt Dixie's house, and it's lit up like a Christmas tree. I swear that woman never sleeps, even in times of peace. I heard her once blame it on insomnia, but I think it has more to do with this life. Thirty years in the Reapers will fuck you up in more ways than one. My parents are prime examples of exactly how far you can get fucked.

Rumors of how kind and loving Ma was before she met my dad and submerged herself into Reaper life still float around, usually when Dad's a few drinks in.

But I always call bullshit.

Quietly, of course. I'm not trying to disrespect my old man like that. He may not wear the VP patch anymore, but he's an old school Reaper. Been around since the beginning. And when Uncle Ray died, Dad stepped back. Said he didn't want to lead without his brother. Moved out of his house and into one of the deluxe rooms inside the clubhouse.

So, I moved out of the clubhouse and into my childhood home. Silas once asked me why I didn't raze my parents' house to the ground and build something of my own. I don't remember exactly what I told him, but I know it was bullshit whatever it was. The truth is far more complicated.

I don't think I can.

A lot of life happened inside those walls. Some good, mostly bad.

There's some part of me that needs to hold onto those memories. I don't ever want to forget it—I can't let myself. I need the physical reminder every time Ma comes knocking. Not literally at least, not since she was banned from Reaper property a decade ago. Every ten months or so, she tries to weasel her way back in, but one of the guys usually catches her at the gate.

I cringe, my ears warming with the vivid memory of her trying to seduce Monty, one of the new recruits, at the gate last year. Hair tangled, lipstick smeared, and clothes too suggestive for any son to ever see their mother in.

She was a mess—more of a mess than usual.

Dad never sees her, not even when she makes a scene. Which means that I have to. It's been my unspoken job since I was old enough to understand the dynamic between my parents. And just how fucking dysfunctional they really are.

So, I did what I always do. I gave her cash, called her a ride, and sent her on her way. Only for her to show up six months later, and we did the whole fucked-up dance all over again.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

I pull into the driveway of my traditional two-story house, noting the single light on upstairs next door. I wouldn't be surprised if Silas was perched at his windowsill, waiting up for me. He's about as subtle as a doorknob.

I glance from Silas's sprawling southern-style home to the beige one next to it. I eye his crisp white siding and the wraparound porch and try to envision it from her perspective. I can't imagine she'd choose the older style of my house over the fresh and updated style of his.

I don't really know what I was thinking asking her to stay here. I should've let Nova bring her to his and Silas's place. They definitely have more room, a better setup for guests. It's only occurring to me now that my guest bedrooms have sat vacant, collecting dust for years. They're in no shape to hold someone tonight. Definitely not someone who deserves comfort like she does.

“Fuck,” I say on an exhale. I hate the sour tang of regret coating the back of my tongue, and my eyes narrow on the light blazing from the upstairs bedroom next door.

“Are we here?” Evangeline's voice is soft with a little rasp in it. Exactly like I imagine she sounds first thing in the morning.

And suddenly, I'm reminded exactly why I took her home. There's a dark swirling sort of emotion that flares to life inside my chest when it comes to her.

“Wait right there.” I carefully untangle my hand from hers before pushing the door open. I round the front of the car quickly, opening the passenger door a few moments later.

“Oh, thanks,” she says, shifting to sit up and get out. Before she can get a foot on the ground, I bend down and slide my right arm underneath her legs and my left around her back and lift her out of the car. “Lincoln,” she gasps, wrapping her arms around my neck reflexively.

“Hang on, baby girl.”

She tightens her arms around my neck as I spin us around, closing her door with the bottom of my boot. I send a smirk at Silas's bedroom window, even though it's too dark for him to see it. I hope his jealousy eats him alive. I don't even know if he realizes he's jealous yet—or why exactly.

When it comes to him and his carefully controlled life, there are many different reasons he might be jealous of the beauty in my arms.

“I can walk, you know,” she mumbles, her breath warming my neck as she tucks her face against my skin.

“I know.”

It's as simple as that. I wasn't fucking around earlier. We have eight fucking years to make up for. Time when we could've *been* something. Maybe we'll spark and fizzle out faster than Mrs. Welter's cheap sparklers that she insists on bringing to the Fourth of July parade every year.

But maybe we'll be fucking amazing. Maybe we'll burn brighter than the sun and just as everlasting. It's the possibility of it all that ties me up.

I carry her up the front steps, my heart pounding in my chest that has nothing to do with physical exertion and everything to do with the woman in my arms.

“Okay, Lincoln,” she says. Her grip loses some of its tension, and she relaxes into my hold.

I open the front door, steadily ignoring the way my gut clenches when she says my name like that, and cross the threshold. In another life, maybe I

would've carried her across the threshold a hundred times before, including once in a frilly white dress. She seems like the type that would love one of those big lace-detailed dresses. I bet she'd look cute as fuck in it too.

I don't give her a chance to look around, crossing the living room to the staircase tucked against the back wall. Taking the stairs two at a time, I get us to the second story and walk straight down the hallway until I reach the primary bedroom.

“You can put me down now,” she says. Her lashes wisp against the sensitive skin of my neck, sending a shiver down the middle of my back. Her words are in direct contrast to the way she tightens her grip around me.

“I know.” I nudge my bedroom door open with the toe of my boot and head toward the bed in the center of the room. I gently lower her legs so she's standing at the foot of my bed. Her arms are slow to untangle from around me, her hands smoothing down my pecs before she lets them fall to her sides.

“Is this your room?” she says, looking over my shoulder.

“Yeah, I thought you could crash in here.”

Her gaze flies back to mine. “With you?”

The corner of my mouth hooks up into a grin. “Nah, not this time, baby girl. I'll take the couch.”

Her brows sink low over those dark brown eyes. “But I thought you said you had guest rooms.”

I nod a few times and take a few steps backward until I reach my dresser behind me. I give myself a moment to appreciate her in the middle of my room. “Aye, but then I remembered that they're not fit for guests.”

She shifts her weight, shuffling a little from foot to foot. “Okay, well, I'll take the couch.”

I turn around and open the top dresser drawer, grabbing a few things out. “Nah, you're gonna sleep in here, and I'll take the couch. It's one of those fancy modular ones, so I can rearrange it.”

“Oh, well that sounds fine. I don't want to take your bed from you, Bane.”

I turn around and her eyes dart between mine, like she's imploring me to listen to her.

I take a large step, putting my right in front of her again. "Lincoln." It's a quiet demand.

"What?"

I bend down, my mouth hovering right in front of hers. "When we're alone, call me Lincoln."

She swallows and sinks her top teeth into her plush bottom lip. Without thinking, I reach up and tug her trapped lip free with my thumb, my eyes focused on the way it flushes a dark pink. "Got it, baby girl?"

The tip of her tongue flicks out, just barely grazing the edge of my thumb before she nods. "Okay, Lincoln."

There. There it is. So eager to comply. It's exactly how I remember her responding all those years ago.

"Good girl," I murmur, smudging my thumb along her lip before letting go and handing her the t-shirt and boxer briefs I pulled from my dresser. "Here."

Her hands hold the clothes against her stomach, but her eyes are still half-lidded and focused on my mouth. I clear my throat, reminding myself and my dick that now is not the time to start making up for our lost time.

"Evangeline," I murmur, nudging her toward the en suite bathroom. "Go change. There's a spare toothbrush in the top drawer."

She blinks, looking from my mouth to the clothes in her hand and back. "Right. Okay."

She shuffles to the bathroom.

I'm sure she's gonna crash as soon as she lays down, but just in case she gets the urge to explore. I grab my gun from the nightstand drawer and tuck it into the back of my waistband. I have more than a handful stashed around the house—a consequence of too many years living in conflict with neighboring clubs.

I make a mental note to make sure Evangeline knows how to handle a gun. She should know the very basics in this life.

The bathroom door opens a moment later, and there, backlit by a yellow halo of light, is the woman who's haunted my dreams for the better part of a decade. She pulls the bathroom door behind her, leaving only a sliver of light to shine through.

“Goddamn, baby girl. Nothing has ever looked as good as you do right now.”

The hem of my favorite black tee barely hits mid-thigh like an oversized dress. Soft curves, tousled hair, and those dark eyes that seem to see right through me.

She takes a few steps forward, head tilting to the side as a small smile spreads across her face. She pinches the hem between two fingers and tugs it away from her thigh.

“In this?”

“You look good in everything and in nothing,” I reply, closing the distance between us. My hand reaches out to trace the curve of her hip almost without conscious thought. “But this is my favorite. You, in my clothes.”

“Yeah, about that, I left the boxer briefs in the bathroom,” she says, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

Visions of her completely naked underneath my tee flood my brain, sending all the blood straight to my cock.

Her fingers twist in the bottom of the oversized tee once more, showing me glimpses of her upper thigh. “Hope that's okay. It's just, I don't like to sleep with shorts or pants on.”

“You can do whatever you want. Have whatever you want,” I reassure her. My voice comes out gruffer than I intended.

Her eyes flicker to mine, the dark swaths of exhaustion bright against her pale cheeks. My hand leaves her hip to slip alongside her neck, tilting her face toward mine.

Slowly, giving her a chance to pull back, I press my lips to her forehead and drop a soft kiss. “Let's get you to bed.”

NOVA

I LIFT the bottle to my lips, swallowing down a mouthful of whiskey. I welcome the burn as it slides down my throat, the familiar hurt a respite to this churning maelstrom inside of me. It's easier to focus on the fleeting ache of whiskey than the devastating wound my mother inflicted upon me tonight.

Or maybe it was self-induced. I did seek her out, demand she answer my questions. I don't think I'll ever forget the tortured look on her face when she broke down. I don't know if I ever want to forget. There was no disguising her pain. Her nearly desperate plea for me to understand she's always loved me. I let her parting words roll over me.

“All I kept thinking was this is my miracle. You were my miracle, Asher, and I've thanked god every single day for you. From the first moment you were placed in my arms. You're my son, and no amount of blood work will ever change that for me.”

I pull another drink from the bottle, the burn easing all too soon. Before long, it won't burn at all. Maybe then I can achieve the illusive numbness I'm desperately chasing. To give my restless mind a break.

I've spun so many circles—too many—in the last few hours that I've lost my sense of direction. I watch the lightning dance across the sky as the clouds open up on the earth from my perch on top of a picnic table in a rest-stop pavilion. I'm right on the edge of Rosewood, a hundred feet from city

limits where our town borders Crestview. It feels a little reckless in a way, kind of like I'm flirting with the idea of trouble, but I don't have it in me for caution tonight.

Shit's brewing in Rosewood, and we still have no idea who was behind the attempted robbery at Evangeline's place. My chest constricts a little just thinking about her. She's one of the few genuine bright spots in my life, and I hate the fact that I can't be with her right now. I exhale a silent plea to ease the tightness and remind myself that she's with Bane and Silas. And they'll take care of her until I can get back.

Still, I should probably check on her. Or check-in. Before I lose myself in the bottom of a bottle for the night. I slip my phone from my pocket and fire off a text in our group chat.

Me: How is she?

Silas: Who?

A slice of blind panic pierces my booze-warmed haze. Did Ma tell Silas already? I don't know why, but I wanted to be the one to tell my brother that we're half-brothers. And I hadn't really planned on telling him—or anyone else—anytime soon.

Me: Evangeline

Perspiration dots the back of my neck as I watch his dots bounce along the bottom of my screen. “C'mon, old man, don't type with just your index fingers,” I coach like he can hear me. This is it, a perfect opening for him to tell me he talked to Ma.

Silas: She's with Bane at the hospital

Me: Still?

My brows sink at the same time my shoulders relax. They've been there for hours already. In my experience, that's not usually a good sign.

Silas: How's the cleaning lady doing?

Our not entirely original nickname for the clean-up crew who handles the unsavory shit the Reapers need cleaned up. Truthfully, we haven't had much need for them over the last handful of years. Not since we brokered peace.

Me: Great. She'll be done by now, and she's giving me her full report on any areas that need extra attention before next time.

I lift the bottle to my mouth and absently take another drink, my attention on my phone. Patience has never been my strong suit. I give him another thirty seconds before I send another text.

Me: @Bane where are you

Bane: Home

I exhale, irrationally irritated with his one-word answer.

Me: Where's Evangeline?

Bane: In my bed

Silas: You better be joking.

Bane: I didn't say I was in bed with her

Silas: You implied it.

Bane: Don't bring me into this. You're the one thinking about our girl tangled up in my sheets

Silas: Absolutely not. Just because I didn't want to see Hunter's nanny hurt doesn't mean shit. Stop reading into it.

Silas: Back me up, @Nova

Me: Keep her safe until I get back

Silas: Where are you?

Me: I'll be back tomorrow

I don't wait for their replies, I just turn my phone off and stuff it into my

pocket. There. I checked in on my girl and I told them where I am. Kind of. Now there's nothing to distract me from the emotions swelling like the tide.

I'm half-tempted to walk into the rain just to see what would happen, but I'm not quite there yet. I don't want to be able to feel the crushing weight of the secret tearing open my ribcage.

Dixie St. James isn't my biological mother.

“Fuck,” I say on an exhale, tipping the bottle back for another drink. “Seriously, fuck me.”

A low, disbelieving sort of laugh spills from me, but it's all harsh sounds. I . . . I don't even know where I'm supposed to go from here. Or what I'm supposed to do.

Or how the fuck I'm supposed to feel.

I *feel* like my family isn't even my fucking family. I'm not too far into the bag to recognize that sentiment is based on emotion and not facts. Because the fact of the matter is, the only person who isn't actually related to me is Ma. It's just fucking ironic that a man who preached about brotherhood and loyalty my whole goddamn life is a fucking hypocrite.

Anger courses through me, swift and savage, and I push to stand on the table. I spread my arms out wide, tip my head back, and unleash my emotions into the wild. Let the wind carry away my helplessness, let the rain drown my rage, and the lightning recharge me back to who I was.

Betrayal coats the back of my throat and anger is all too quick to set it all on fire. I yell my injustice into the open space around me, begging the universe for answers she can't give.

I don't waste time with the bullshit questions. I don't care why he had an affair. I want to know why Ma never told me until I confronted her. There are a lot of uncertainties crowding my head, but I know one thing for certain: she wasn't lying when she said she always considered me hers. It's in the way she's loved me my entire goddamn life.

And that—that almost makes it worse somehow.

The woman has never looked at me once with resentment or ill will. Never, not even when I was a fucking unruly teenager and gave her a *run for grays* as she called it. I've felt loved by her my entire life, and somehow—some fucking how—that makes it harder to bear.

I feel like a stranger in my own life.

“God, how fucking pathetic does that sound?” I murmur to myself as I bend down and hook the whiskey bottle with my index finger. “How fucking ridiculous.”

It's a special sort of torture recognizing that I'm spiraling and yet not being able to reel myself back in. It's not that I can't, but it's more like I don't have the energy to. Maybe this is exactly what I need. One night to let myself feel as unhinged as I need. Scream into the night and rage against the unfairness of everything.

The two people who deserve my questions and my anger aren't even around anymore to receive it. Some people believe that we're released back into the aether when we pass on, and I don't know if I subscribe to that logic. I rather enjoy the idea of being tied to your family throughout your existence. Maybe that means heaven or maybe it means reincarnation. But either way, I can't see Dad floating around in the warmth of the sun and the dew on the grass as some sort of peaceful existence. I've never felt his presence like some people witness, but for tonight, I kind of wish I had. Then I would have something tangible to direct my anger toward.

Instead, it balloons around me, growing larger and larger and larger. And when the sun crests the horizon in a few hours, it's going to pop.

And I'll be left here, alone, trying to wade through my mountain of shit so I can get on with my life.

But tonight, tonight I'm going to give in. I'm going to give myself permission to spiral in anger and betrayal and sink into those what-if scenarios. I'll let myself reflect on family dynamics growing up and try to view them armed with knowledge.

EVANGELINE

THE MORNING SUN streams through the gaps in the blinds, and I have to blink several times against it. My head is pounding and my mouth feels like sandpaper. I groan and roll over, expecting to see the blush-colored overstuffed armchair in the corner.

Instead, there's a low profile dresser along the wall. And like a switch flipped, the events of yesterday rush in. I roll over to lie flat on my back and stare at Bane's ceiling fan slowly twirling around and around.

There's a persistent throb in my temples, but that's easily attributed to the lack of sleep. But my right cheekbone aches and the cut along my hairline throbs. I hesitantly press my fingertips along the sensitive areas, wincing a little at the swollen, tender skin.

I push myself into a sitting position and blow out a breath. I need to get up and find my phone, call Cora before she hears some exaggerated version of events from a customer.

Nana Jo used to say Rosewood was always one person away from the worst game of telephone ever. Not only does everyone know everyone's business, but sometimes the truth gets so twisted so quickly that it's damn near unrecognizable by the end of the day.

Peeling back the comforter and swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I notice my phone plugged into a charger on the nightstand. A few pain

relievers and a bottle of water right next to it. My heart staggers a little, and I can't stop the small smirk from tipping up the corners of my mouth.

God, that man is thoughtful.

Am I surprised that he gave me his bed last night? A little. Am I more surprised that he didn't join me? Absolutely.

But as much as I want to see if he's a cuddler or not, I crashed pretty much the moment my head hit his pillow.

I pop two aspirin and wash them down with half the bottle of water before I even stand up. I snag my phone and turn it on. Surprise flares through me when I only have two texts. I ignore the one from my mother and click on Cora's.

Cora: babe, the wannabe Rosewood gossip girl posted about you dancing on a table at the reaper clubhouse last night. you better call me with the details asap

I tap my index finger along the side of my phone as I stare at it. No mention of the break-in or the late-night hospital visit. Then again, the hospital can't be the best hub for gossip. Not in this town, at least. I guess that's a good thing . . . right? I nod, reassuring myself that it's definitely a good thing.

Me: hey! Getting a late start today, but call me when you're off work and I'll give you all the juicy details. Including the ones where I shook my ass in front of Nova's club LMAO

There, that should buy me some time to get my thoughts together and figure out what the hell I'm going to tell her. And what kind of condition Magnolia Lane is.

“Shit,” I whisper. “I need to call Robert Law.” I don't even know who my house insurance company is, but I can guarantee they're going to want a detailed report of what was stolen.

I drag my hand through my hair, tossing it off my face, and heave a sigh. I feel like I'm already overwhelmed at the prospect of going back to the house

and seeing proof of what happened.

It's not even about the fear—though I recognize there's a healthy dose of fear still—but it's the fact that those people just took all of Nana Jo's things like that.

I shake my head, anger and helplessness swirling together to form a toxic tornado inside me.

It's not right.

I let myself sit for another minute before my stomach rumbles, reminding me that it's breakfast time.

I freshen up in the attached bathroom and slip on Bane's boxer briefs from last night, rolling down the waistband once so they fit more comfortably.

The wood floor is cool on my bare feet as I pad down the stairs to the first floor of Bane's house. God, just *thinking* that sentence feels weird. I have half a mind to tell Cora that I spent the night here without any other details just to watch the steam float from her ears. And maybe if the circumstances were different, I might.

I sigh, the sound a weak echo of the weight firmly lodged inside my chest. A mass of worry and confusion and bone-deep exhaustion has taken residence tucked beneath my ribs. I know I can work through it, aided by a lot of coffee, some hugs from my best friend, and sleep. So much more sleep. My body feels like it's been tossed around in the washing machine. Wrung out and aching in the oddest places.

Even though I slept like a dream in Bane's bed last night. His sheets were the perfect temperature—cool but not cold—and they smelled like him. Warm dark amber and that crisp, fresh scent of the woods after it rains. I fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

“Hello?” My voice sounds loud in the quiet. I pause at the end of the stairs with my hand on the cap of the newel post and look around. It's not exactly what I would've pictured for Bane, but for all the feelings the man evokes, I don't even know his favorite color.

But he definitely doesn't feel like the stuffed duck and taxidermy bass on the wall. He feels like artfully cut driftwood and dried pampas grass. He feels like a modern lake house with a huge waterfront property and a garage full of four-wheelers. He feels like a lit fireplace and a cozy Sherpa throw blanket.

Concrete tile flooring from the kitchen to the living room. It's an open floor plan where one room bleeds into the other.

The kitchen has rich, maple-colored cabinets and polished silver hardware. Two backless black metal stools are tucked under the island.

There's a square blond oak dining room table with a dark-patterned rug underneath it.

I can't quite figure out the aesthetic of his house. It feels like there are five people living here, all with very different tastes.

“Lincoln?” I hesitantly step into the kitchen, peering around the half-wall corner to see the rest of the living room. It stretches along the entire side of the house. And it's empty.

“Huh.”

A bright orange sticky note in the middle of the island catches my eye. I cross the space in a handful of steps and lean over the counter to read it.

*In case you wake up before I'm back:
went to grab the biggest iced chai I can find.
Make yourself at home. I'll be back soon.
—lincoln*

I trail my finger along the edge of the note as something warm and soft spreads across my chest, radiating from the center. I sink my teeth into the corner of my lip and glance at the clock. God, it's only seven-thirty in the morning. No wonder I feel groggy. I'm not usually a huge nap-taker, but I have a feeling today's going to be the exception to the rule.

I push off the counter at the same time the side door opens, an electronic

bell tinkling from somewhere by the toaster in the corner. I turn, a smile already stretching wide across my face at the prospect of coffee.

Broad shoulders fill the doorway, but it's not the St. James I was expecting.

Instead, standing ten feet away is one of the only men I know who could earn serious money with his almost legendary neutral expressions.

And damn does he look good this morning. He looks like he just walked off the set of a magazine shoot. A collection of stoic men with biceps stretching the fabric of their plain cotton tees and glares that sometimes feel like a possessive caress.

He pauses in the doorway, head bent low and to the right. Low murmuring hits my ears a second before I see the familiar dark mop of hair of my favorite kindergartener. Hunter comes from behind Silas, his little face tipped up toward his dad. One arm propped on his hip and the other cradling a saran-wrap-covered plate. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they're in the middle of quite the discussion.

With Hunter, that could mean any number of things. The best chocolate chip cookies—which I learned very quickly that he's obsessed with—or unending questions about dinosaurs. Whatever it's about, it stops the moment Hunter lifts his head and spots me. The wrinkle between his brow smooths out and a wide smile replaces it instantly.

“Eve!” he yells, springing from the door and running toward me.

“Wait, bud,” Silas calls out, his hand outstretched as he takes a big step inside.

“It's alright,” I tell him as Hunter collides with my legs. “Oomph,” I grunt, accepting his weight. He wraps his arms around me and squeezes. My arms curl around his shoulders and I bend over a little to return his embrace. I run my hand over his back a few times. “It's alright, Hunter. I'm fine.”

“Alright, bud, let's give Evangeline some space, yeah?” Silas says, stopping at the island.

Hunter steps back and regards me with the same look I get all too often from his father. I bite the inside of my cheek to hold back the laugh as I glance from father to son in their matching expressions. It's just this side of concerned, though Silas gives more inconvenienced than anything. I let it roll off of me though.

“You don't look alright though, Eve,” Hunter says. He's not trying to be mean. It's the simple honest commentary of a kid.

I chuckle lightly. “Yeah, I know. It does hurt a little, but I'll be alright.”

Hunter nods a few times, his little mouth twisting to the side like he's deep in thought. “You should have my dad look at it.”

Silas grunts at the same time I say, “Oh, no, that's okay. I got checked out by the doctor last night, remember? I'll be right as rain in a few days.”

“I don't know, Eve. I've had lots and lots of scrapes and bruises and even a really, really bad rug burn once. The only thing that made them all better was my dad's special owie cream.”

“Owie cream?” I glance at Silas, surprise lifting my brows when I see the apples of his cheeks pinken. And shit, it only makes him more attractive.

“Tell her how magical it is, Dad.” His voice is so hopeful, I find myself holding my breath that Silas starts reciting the mythical property of what I'm sure is just Neosporin.

“It's a secret, bud, remember? We can't tell everyone about our magical cream.”

“I know that, Dad,” he says it like *duh*. “Only people who see it can use its magic. That's what you told me. So that's why I brought it over. So you can show Eve!” He pulls a tin out of the pocket of his sweatpant joggers and holds it high in the air like a trophy. “See?”

EVANGELINE

I GLANCE from Hunter's proud grin to Silas's scowl and decide I'd rather get a front-row seat to Silas's mood swings than disappoint this little boy.

“I mean, I *would* classify this as an owie,” I say with a slow nod, pointing to the tender skin on my cheek.

Hunter's face falls into a serious expression. “Absolutely. And your forehead looks like it's bleeding, doesn't it, Dad?”

“What?” My hand flies to my forehead reflexively.

“Don't touch that,” Silas practically barks the order.

My hand halts midair immediately. I blink and he's in front of me, like the man himself is magic and not the little tin clutched in Hunter's palm. His fingers wrap around my wrist, and a band of sparks flickers against my pulse, right underneath his skin.

“Okay?”

He holds my hand in the air for a moment, his dark gaze searching for something in my eyes. He switches his attention to the gash on my hairline.

“Hey bud, you know where Uncle Bane keeps his first aid kit?” Silas asks.

“Under the sink in the bathroom!” Hunter exclaims.

“Can you grab that for me?” Silas murmurs.

“You got it, Dad.” Hunter's footfalls echo in the house as he runs upstairs.

“Is it bad?” I try to pull a clue from his expression or body language, but he's more locked down than the nurse was last night when she was fixing me up.

“If you opened your cut, you could infect it. Your hands are full of bacteria.” He lowers my hand but doesn't release me. “Bane should've taken better care of you,” he says with a soft tsk, almost like he's thinking out loud.

I bristle at the insinuation. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

His gaze snaps to mine, his brows lifting high on his forehead. “Clearly.”

“And Bane took great care of me,” I continue, ignoring his sarcastic response. “The man gave me his bed for goodness' sake.”

“C'mon, Evangeline,” he says, tilting his head to the side and arching a dark brow. “That wasn't an entirely altruistic idea.”

Something about the condescending head tilt and almost mocking tone of voice strips away every self-preserving filter I possess.

I don't think about how he's my boss or my boyfriend's brother or why he brings out this side of me.

I mimic his expression, right down to the head tilt. “Oh, I suppose you're just here to enlighten me that your cousin wanted to”—I lean in close and hiss the next part—“*fuck me* in his bed last night, huh? As if that's the only possible place two people *could* fuck.”

The last thing I want to do is get into another weird tug-of-war thing with Silas—and I definitely don't want Hunter to witness it. But I can't stop myself.

He shuffles a step closer, the sides of his black boots on either side of my feet. “You've got a filthy mouth, Evangeline.” His voice sounds like a grumble, something more suited to voice acting.

I huff and roll my eyes. “Saying the word fuck isn't filthy.”

“You better not be talking like that around my son. I would hate to fire you already.”

I straighten up, my earlier teasing still clouding my senses. “Don't insult

me, *Mr. St. James.*” I smirk, giving him my professional, no-nonsense voice, even if I did pitch his formal name in a tone that I know he understood. “I take my job very seriously. Besides, we both know you'd love to be able to fire me.”

The skin around his eyes twitches, and if I wasn't already staring at his deeply dark eyes, I would've missed it. “Don't call me that.”

He lets go of my wrist to settle his hands against my waist. His palms are steady and warm, searing my skin underneath the thin cotton shirt.

He hoists me up onto the island, and my hands fly to his forearms, bracing myself. “What are you doing?” It's less accusation and more breathy curiosity.

“You're too short.”

He says it so simply like that explains why he just lifted me onto the counter like it was nothing. Like that's why his hands are sliding down the curve of my hips slowly.

As I release my hold on his forearms, my eyes wander over the intricate designs inked onto his right arm. His veins are visible, breathing movement into the art.

And why the hell are *veins* so sexy all of a sudden?

I have to swallow a couple of times to get my voice to work. My throat has quite literally gone dry watching the way his forearms flex. “And?”

He cups the uninjured side of my face, sliding his thumb under my chin and applying a little pressure. It's a silent request, and I find myself all too quick to oblige. I don't have time to ponder any of it as he turns my face away from him.

He shuffles between my legs, his breath feathering over the slope of my neck and that sensitive patch of skin underneath my ear.

The heat of his body and the tenderness of his touch cause something to clench inside of me and I squirm a little.

He grunts, angling my head again.

“That bad, huh?”

Is it just me or did my voice come out a little too breathy? I clear my throat a little and curl my fingers over the edge of the counter, holding myself still.

“Got it, Dad!” Hunter sing-songs. It sounds like a herd of elephants are running down the stairs, not a single five-year-old.

Silas steps back and turns toward Hunter, taking his citrusy bergamot scent with him. I exhale a silent breath and shift to jump down.

“I’m not done with you,” Silas says, his hand landing on my thigh.

“Oh,” I breathe out. “Okay.”

“Hop up, bud. You can help me, yeah?” Silas doesn’t turn toward me. And he doesn’t take his hand from my thigh.

“Of course,” Hunter exclaims.

The next thing I know, Hunter is next to me on the counter, sitting crisscross and facing me. He’s talking to me about the chef show he watched this morning, but I’m distracted by Silas.

Silas and his gentle touch as he opens an alcohol pad and wipes it around the cut on my forehead.

“You’re good at this,” I hum.

He just grunts, and for some reason, his grumpy reaction makes me smile.

“All done,” Silas murmurs.

“Wait, Dad. You forgot to seal it with a kiss,” Hunter says.

Silas grunts his displeasure and I feel a smirk tugging up one side of my mouth even as I try to stop it.

“She doesn’t need a kiss, bud.”

My brows fly toward my forehead and I speak before I think. “I don’t?”

Because I feel like I very much do need a kiss from Silas St. James.

God, I wonder what he kisses like. Would he press his lips to mine in a gentle caress, or would he take my mouth with a ruthless hunger?

A sudden jolt of electricity courses through me as Silas’s long fingers

wrap around my right thigh. His touch brings me back to reality. I'm sure he meant it as a silent warning, but the man's been between my legs for the last ten minutes. It's hard to think straight.

“You always told me that a kiss seals the magic in,” Hunter says, narrowing his eyes at his dad. “Nan says we shouldn't lie.”

Silas's jaw twitches, and I imagine he's trying to figure out a way out of this pickle he's in. I could throw him a bone. Or . . .

I look at Hunter, giving him my best serious face, even nodding a few times. “Your grandma's right. We shouldn't tell lies.”

His fingertips dig into me as he tightens his grip, his thumb sliding lower against the delicate skin of my inner thigh. The sensation threatens to send my mind wandering again.

“I did say that, didn't I, bud? I guess I'd forgotten since it's been so long since you needed some magic,” Silas says, ruffling Hunter's hair with his free hand.

My heart does this stupid little flip at the affectionate gesture. It's such a juxtaposition to the possessive, intense way he's touching me.

Silas abandons my thigh and I exhale a quiet breath. I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed. I honestly don't know what the fuck is happening right now. There are a lot of confusing feelings happening since I came to Rosewood, but nothing more than the complicated relationships I have with the men of the Rosewood Reapers.

I don't have time to dwell on it right now, because Silas slides both hands along my neck. He threads his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck, tilting my head as he shuffles impossibly closer.

I look at him from underneath my lashes, my heart pounding in my chest loud enough I'm positive he can hear it. I can feel the heat radiating off of him, and suddenly I'm so close I can see the flecks of gold in his deep brown eyes.

His lips are surprisingly pouty and slightly pursed, like he's got a

mouthful of words he's holding back. In a move so sweet it makes my chest ache, he leans in and presses his lips to my forehead, right underneath my freshly cleaned cut.

My lashes flutter closed I half-heartedly wonder what it would feel like to be loved by someone like Silas St. James.

EVANGELINE

“HOPE I’M NOT INTERRUPTING ANYTHING.”

Silas flinches at the sound of Dixie's voice. He takes a step away from me so quickly that he slams his knee into the stool with a muted thud.

“Ma, what are you doing here?” Silas asks, his eyes darting toward the doorway.

“Nan!” Hunter exclaims at the same time.

Dixie plants a hand on her hip and arches a brow at her son. “What? I can't come and see my favorite boys now?”

“No, of course you can. You just surprised me is all.” Silas starts gathering the discarded first aid supplies next to me, his gaze firmly fixed on the countertop. He walks around the island, giving me a wide berth like he needs to maintain a certain amount of distance now.

“Mm-hmm. You sure do look surprised,” she says, walking into the kitchen and stopping in front of Hunter. “How's my favorite grandson?”

“Great,” Hunter chirps. “Me and Dad fixed Eve up. Dad even used the owie cream.”

“Well, I'm sure you two did a great job.” Dixie's smile is so full of warmth and tenderness as she looks at him. My heart squeezes a little just bearing witness to it.

Like it usually does, seeing any kind of maternal affection reminds me of

Nana Jo. And then my heart squeezes for an entirely different reason. Pain lances through me, acute and quick.

She drops her slouchy black leather purse to the stool in front of Hunter's legs and turns to look at me. I sit up straight under her undivided attention. I've never been more aware of what I'm wearing in my life. Even though it's entirely innocent, I'm still dressed in her nephew's shirt and boxer briefs. While in a compromising position with her son, and actively dating her other son.

Kind of wild when I think about it like that.

But I should've known better than to expect the same kind of judgment I'd expect from my own mother here.

Dixie and Mom might've been friends twenty years ago, but they couldn't be more different.

Her gaze flits around my face, pausing on the corner of my forehead. Logically, I know she's looking at the cut, but it doesn't stop the irrational part of my brain that swears she's staring at the place Silas's lips were just touching.

Her brows crease together and she finally looks me in the eye. "How you doing, honey? Sleep okay?"

My shoulders relax a little. "Oh, yeah. Bane insisted I take his bed, and honestly, I was pretty tired, so I was out right away."

Her rose-painted lips curve into a smile. "Mm-hmm. I'm not surprised. I raised all my boys with good manners."

"I brought Eve some of our cookies, Nan! So we're gonna have to make some more," Hunter says.

Dixie pats my knee and turns toward Hunter, helping him down from the island. "Well, perfect timing, because I'm here to whisk you away for the day."

Hunter whips his head toward me, his mouth pinched into a frown. "But it's an Eve day."

“It sure is,” I agree, flashing him a smile. There's no way I'm going to crush those hopeful little sparkles in his eyes.

“Not today, bud. Eve needs to rest, remember?” Silas says at the same time.

Hunter tilts his head to the side and looks up at me. “Are you too hurt to play with me today?”

Dixie presses the back of her hand to the side of her mouth, smothering her chuckle.

Silas huffs from somewhere behind me. I almost look, just to see if he's rolling his eyes too. It sounded like the kind of noise that usually accompanies a frustrated eye roll, and I just can't imagine him doing it.

“I said not today, bud. You've got Nan today, and I took tomorrow off. Uncle Nova or Uncle Bane the day after that. Then an Evangeline day.”

Hunter's face falls, his shoulders slumping forward.

“I'm never too hurt to hang out with you. Best friend summer, right?” It was Hunter's idea to name our summer mood boards, and I love it. “But your dad already made plans for your grandma to spend time with you. And you know what? He's probably right, I should rest just a little bit so I'm ready to hang out with you in a couple days.”

“Well, how are you going to rest? Watch a movie? Take a nap?” he asks, eyebrows high and hopeful.

I nod a few times, pretending to think it over. I don't actually know what I have to do today, other than head to Magnolia Lane. But there's probably a list of things I need to do.

“Definitely. I have to go home for a bit. And I'll probably take a nap.” I shrug a shoulder.

His eyes widen as he looks at me. “You're really gonna take a nap?” He beckons me closer as he climbs back up on the stool next to me. Of course, I'm going to oblige him. “Eve, that was a trick question. Only *babies* take a nap.”

He says the word babies like I say brussels sprouts. There are some things in life that aren't meant to be eaten, and those mini cabbage bombs are one of the top tiers.

I laugh. "I tell you what. How about we can have a rest day together too? We can make our own popcorn and watch a movie."

"We'll need to go to the store because Dad ate all the microwave popcorn last week and he *still* hasn't gotten more," Hunter says, casting a pointed look toward his dad.

"I'll bring over my popcorn maker and we can make our own on the stove. How does that sound?"

"Yes," Hunter crows, his excitement palpable. "I can't wait!"

God, when's the last time I was that excited about anything? And something as simple as fresh popcorn? I can't even remember.

"Save some energy for your grandma day today, hm?" Dixie smooths Hunter's wild hair back off his forehead.

Hunter's smile falls into a sort of grimace. "It's just . . . Dad said you can't play with me for the rest of the summer because your shoulder is broken and you need a new one."

She nods, resting her hand on his shoulder. "Which is why I thought I'd take you to the splash pad."

His eyebrows fly toward his hairline. "The splash pad! Yes! Let's go right now, Nan! C'mon, I gotta get my swim trunks on!"

He jumps off the stool, grab's Dixie's hand, and pulls her toward the side door.

"Alright, guess we're going now," Dixie says with a laugh. She snags the handle of her purse and lets Hunter pull her across the kitchen.

"Aren't you forgetting something, bud?" Silas asks, amusement bouncing around his words.

Hunter stops a foot from the door and spins around. He drops Dixie's hand and bounds toward his dad. Silas bends all the way down, his ass

practically resting on the heels of his black boots, and opens his arms wide to scoop his son into a hug. He plants a kiss on top of his head and murmurs something into his hair.

Hunter nods, his arms wrapped tight around Silas's neck. "Love you too, Dad."

Silas runs a hand over his son's back, and I don't know what the hell is happening, but something inside me melts a little.

I've never really believed the heroines in romance novels who swear their ovaries cry or explode when they see a doting father, but damn, I think they were onto something.

I blink a few times and squash whatever squishy feeling he was eliciting.

Hunter pulls back from their hug and thrusts his fist between their faces. "Here, Dad, you better hold onto this just in case Eve needs more magic, okay?"

It's the little tin of antibacterial cream.

I have to stifle the grin that threatens to spread across my face. If reluctance had a name, it'd be Silas St. James right now.

He's entirely too slow at grabbing the tin. His fingers take an entire year just to curl over the top of it. "Have fun with Nan, yeah? I'll come get you this afternoon."

He pushes off of his dad and yells, "Okay, see you later, Dad!" To my surprise, he beelines to me and leans against my legs for a quick, slightly awkward hug. "Bye, Eve! See you tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow," I confirm. My hand just brushes along his back, and he's already pulling away. He hops to Dixie, who's waiting by the side door.

Before they leave, the door behind them opens. Nova stands in the doorway with a wide grin. "Well, if it isn't my favorite nephew! Where do you think you're going, little monster?"

He makes some growly noise and bends down to scoop Hunter into his arms. He bicep-curls him and blows a raspberry against the dinosaur on

Hunter's shirt. Naturally, Hunter squeals and laughs so hard, he squeezes his eyes shut.

“Put me down, Uncle Nova, or I'm going to pee my pants,” Hunter huffs out between giggles.

Nova only grumbles like some kind of dinosaur-wolf hybrid, and I feel that weird squishy feeling in my lower abdomen again.

Okay, so I guess that specific feeling isn't exclusive to single dads. Apparently, it extends to single uncles too.

“Alright, alright,” Nova says, putting Hunter back on his feet again. “Don't want Uncle Bane to come home to a pee kitchen. Unless . . .” he trails off, a mischievous grin on his face as Hunter cackles in delight. It's that giddy sort of laughter kids get, and I feel my own mirth rise up to join in.

Nova leans over and kisses Dixie's cheek in greeting. “How's my favorite mother today?”

Dixie hooks her arm around Nova's neck and traps him in a hug. He chuckles as he wraps her up in an one-armed hug. It's an awkward position with Hunter between them and Nova hunched over. But it doesn't seem like any of them mind.

“Is there a party at my house no one told me about?”

“Uncle Bane!” Hunter exclaims.

Bane's voice booms from behind me, startling me. I press a hand to my chest. “Jesus.”

“Nah, just me, baby,” Bane murmurs next to my ear. I look over my shoulder and he's already crossing the kitchen to bend down to Hunter's level. They exchange a five-step handshake that ends with Hunter bent over in giggles.

Nova steps in front of me, planting both hands on either side of the counter, next to my hips. He leans down, pausing a few inches away from my face. “Sweetheart.”

The smirk slides off my face when I get a good look at him. Dark

shadows underneath his bloodshot eyes, faint bruising along his jaw.

“Are you okay?” I let my finger hover over his jawline.

His expression relaxes into something more serious. He captures my hand and places a kiss in my palm. “I'm with you, sweetheart. I'm perfect.”

“What happened?” I keep my voice low, concern tightening my gut. “I half-expected you to show up here last night. Or, I don't know, text me.”

He places another soft kiss along the inside of my wrist. “I'll make it up to you. Starting now.”

“Wha—”

Nova drops his shoulder, and the next thing I know, I'm airborne. He tosses me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry with such ease, I'd be more impressed if I wasn't fighting all the blood rushing to my head.

“Oh my god, Nova, put me down,” I hiss, pushing against his back to try to situate myself.

“Alright, alright. Time to go, Hunter. You guys have fun, and make sure Evangeline gets some rest, yeah?” Dixie calls out.

I miss whatever Bane says next because Nova bounds across the room. It's so jarring against his hard muscles that my vision goes out of focus for a second.

“Jesus, Nova. Why are you so hard,” I mutter.

He smooths a hand along the back of my thigh as he climbs the stairs two at a time. “Oh, Evangeline, you have no idea.”

EVANGELINE

“WHERE ARE WE GOING EXACTLY?”

“I'm stealing you away, of course. Somewhere I can plunder you,” he quips, smoothing his palm over the back of my thigh as he carries me down the hallway. It's distracting as hell.

My brows furrow as I press against his lower back again, pushing myself up. “Did you watch *Pirates of the Caribbean* last night or something? Or do you have a pirate affinity I don't know about?”

He laughs, the sound vibrating against my lower abdomen. “I dunno, sweetheart. How do you feel about stripes and swashbuckling?”

He slowly lowers me to the ground inside Bane's room, allowing plenty of time for my body to slide against his.

I grab onto his shoulder as all the blood flows back where it's supposed to. “I happen to love a good colorful stripe.”

His hands stay rooted on my hips as he gives me a once-over, one of those slow perusals that feel like a physical touch.

“I'm not surprised. You'd look good in anything, sweetheart. Though, I gotta say, I'd much prefer you in my tee than Bane's.”

“Yeah? Such a shame you weren't here to offer yours then,” I murmur, dragging my palms over his inked skin.

He flashes me a wolfish grin and reaches one hand behind his head to

grab the collar of his shirt. In one stupid-hot, fluid move, he tugs his white tee over his head. His dark blond hair flops over his forehead and I think his smile widens, but honestly, I'm too distracted by the absolute work of art in front of me.

Swaths of color and intricate design cover his chest and upper arms. The lines of ink emphasize every ridge and plane of his sculpted muscles. My lips part on a quick inhale, and my fingers twitch to explore.

“Jesus Christ,” I murmur without thinking.

He chuckles, this distinctly masculine laugh that screams confidence. His index finger curls underneath my chin, tilting my face up and effectively closing my mouth. If I weren't in some sort of lusty fog, I might feel embarrassed about my blatant ogling.

“Eyes on me, Evangeline.”

My gaze flies to his. His green eyes look darker in this light, moody and intense. It's the kind of look that I'm powerless against.

Or maybe it's just the St. James men that make me feel weak.

Warmth pools in my lower belly as awareness pricks against my consciousness.

I swipe my tongue across my bottom lip. “What are we doing in here, Nova?”

He holds my gaze as he toys with the hem of my shirt, letting his fingers brush against my bare thigh.

“I wanted to talk to you, see how you're feeling.” His voice is low, like this is a private conversation and he doesn't want to be overheard.

My gaze strays to his abs almost without conscious thought. I have to actively push down the growing cloud of lust inside of me. “And you have to do it shirtless?”

He grins, flashing his dimple, and my traitorous body clenches instantly.

“Nah, but then I can't do this,” he says, slowly pulling up the hem of my tee.

My hand flashes out, landing on his and stopping his progression. “I’m not wearing anything underneath this.”

His gaze flicks down, pauses, and then sears me with the same intensity as earlier. “Hm, it seems like you’ve forgotten you’re wearing his boxers, sweetheart.”

My eyes widen at the insinuation before I roll them so hard, it gives me flashbacks to when I was younger. And sassier.

“I’m not getting naked with you in your cousin’s house,” I mutter.

He nods, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Carter, no one said anything about getting naked.”

The use of my last name surprises me. It feels playful, but he hasn’t called me that since the first day we met. Maybe I’m reading too much into it though.

I leave my hand on top of his wrist, but I don’t stop him when he continues his ascension.

“Whatever you say, Casanova,” I mumble, my gaze tracking his hand.

He stops, his knuckles skimming the underside of my right breast. Goosebumps erupt over my skin, a shiver racing down my spine at the contact.

“Not with you, yeah?”

I peel my attention off his frozen fingers and look at him. “What?”

“I’m not him—*Casanova*. Not with you.” His mouth twists to the side when he says his nickname, like the very word tastes bad.

My face relaxes with understanding. I may not know the origins of his nickname, even though I can hazard a guess. But what I can understand is wanting to create distance between who you were and who you are.

“Okay.”

He dips his head once. “Arms up, sweetheart.”

Butterflies stir inside of me, their delicate wings tickling my stomach. Am I really going to get naked with him while Bane and Silas are just a floor

below us? I might've said I wanted to have fun this summer, but I'm not sure if I'm ready for that kind of fun.

If Silas blew a fuse when he heard I was dancing on the counter at the clubhouse, I can only imagine what kind of tantrum he'll throw if he hears the noises of pleasure Nova wrenches from me.

He reads my hesitation instantly. "Trust me, Evangeline."

I nod, a small jerk of my head, and let my hand fall away from his wrist. I raise both hands in the air and watch his face as he slowly pulls the tee up.

"Good girl," he murmurs.

My thighs clench at the praise. Cool air caresses my nipples as the fabric is maneuvered over my head. I force myself not to cross my arms over my chest as I lower them to my sides.

His expression is locked down tight, but his eyes give him away. They're wide and dark, his pupils blown with desire. I watch in fascination as his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows.

"Goddamn, Evangeline. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I could look at you a hundred times a day, for the rest of my life, and it would never be enough. It would never satiate my hunger for you."

His voice is a deep rumble, and it hits me like a shot of lust straight to my core. I forget all about where we are and who could overhear us.

He drops the shirt to the ground, his gaze fixed on me, studying me like I'm a piece of art. I don't hate the attention. In fact, it feels sort of empowering to have his attention like this. Like an alarm could go off, and he'd have a hard time pulling his focus from me.

I swipe my tongue over my bottom lip. "Are you going to stand there looking or are you going to do something about it?"

He tsks, a smirk blooming across his handsome face. "As much as I'd love nothing more . . ." He trails off as he steps closer, easing fabric over my head.

I feel a moment of confusion before realizing he's helping me into his

shirt. I push my arms through the sleeves and pull my hair out of the collar, and his smirk turns into a salacious grin.

He takes a step backward, regarding me from head to toe. “Much better, sweetheart. Now we can talk.”

My heart stutters inside my chest at what feels like a near-miss situation. I can't decide if it's relieved or disappointed.

I tilt my head to the side, amusement fluttering inside my chest at the almost strange possessive move. “And we couldn't do that in the kitchen? With Silas and Bane?”

He rakes his teeth along his plump bottom lip. “Nah, Evangeline, we couldn't do that with them.” He pauses, his eyes narrowing, but it's directed inward. I blink and his expression smooths into something distinctly sly. “Well, maybe I'll let 'em watch sometime. Not this time.”

Wait a minute.

Now it's my turn to narrow my eyes, and I'm definitely shooting the look at him. He only chuckles and slides one of those big palms up along my ribs, between my breasts, and curving around to palm the back of my neck.

He applies a little pressure on his hold, and my head tips toward him all too easily.

“I've missed you, sweetheart,” he breathes out, voice low like he's sharing a secret.

I slide my palms over his arms, curling my fingers around the slope of his biceps. “I just saw you twelve hours ago.”

His eyes close and he leans his forehead against mine. “I feel like I've lived twelve years in the last twelve hours.”

Concern freezes my muscles, and my fingers dig into his muscles. “What happened?”

“Nothing, sweetheart.” He pulls away from me, a flicker of something darker crossing his features. “Club business.”

“I don't know what that means.”

He runs his hand through his hair and smiles, but it's all wrong. It's forced and strained. "Nothing that you need to worry about."

The words are innocent enough, except they elicit a ripple of unease through me. I know there's more to it than that, but I don't feel like I can press him on it. We haven't been around each other long enough to push those kinds of boundaries.

I fold my arms across my chest to give myself something to do. "Got it."

He exhales a long breath and glances away, his expression unreadable. "Trust me, sweetheart. It's nothing you need to worry about right now."

I glance at my feet, distractedly thinking that I need to paint my nails a new color. "Sure."

He steps closer, his palm coming up to cradle my face. "Hey," he says, turning my head toward him. "I mean it. You don't need to worry about anything. I've got you, yeah?"

"Alright," I murmur, nodding in his hold.

He grins, placing a kiss on the corner of my mouth. "We gotta get downstairs and catch everyone up, but first, wait here. I brought something I thought you'd like."

He brushes his lips against mine in the briefest kiss before he pulls away and jogs out of the room. Still shirtless.

BANE

“YOU GONNA LET him take her upstairs like that?” Silas says. It honestly sounded like it was painful getting those words past his clenched jaw.

It's the only thing he's said since I came back into the house. It was either walk Aunt Dixie and Hunter out and grab the to-go tray of coffees on the hood of my truck or storm up the stairs behind them and pull my girl off of him. I'd end up coveting her in my room like some kind of dragon hoarding its treasure.

Make no mistake, that woman is an absolute treasure. She's also the only thing that's ever made me feel alive.

Evangeline Carter isn't just a prize, she's the prize. There was no light at the end of my tunnel, there was only her.

There was always only ever her.

Even now, after all these years. I'd given up the idea of finding her, accepting her role as the catalyst and nothing more.

But now she's back.

And I'm going to do whatever I have to in order to keep her. If that means sitting my ass in my kitchen while my cousin drags her upstairs, then that's what I'm going to do.

For fifteen minutes, at least.

Because at minute sixteen, I make no promises. A man can only weather

the jealousies churning inside his gut like imitation butter for so long. And a quarter of an hour is my limit.

I lean my ass against the counter behind me, keeping my gaze on the staircase and doing my best not to actively listen for any kind of noises.

“Well?” Silas snaps.

“Here.” I hand him one of the to-go coffee cups from the tray next to me.

He folds his arms across his chest and looks down his nose at the coffee cup like it's personally offended him. “You know I don't drink that frilly crap.”

I arch a brow. “Drink this and I'll pretend you didn't just insult me.” I pause, bringing my black coffee to my lips and pitch my voice higher. “*I don't drink that frilly crap. C'mon, man.*”

He takes the drink from my outstretched hand with a scowl. “What? I *don't.*”

I huff and roll my eyes toward the ceiling. My ears strain almost involuntarily. But I don't hear anything, not even a light thump.

“It's a dark roast, no sugar, no cream. Because you're a masochist,” I droll. “You know it is insulting to assume I don't know what kind of coffee you drink. Like we haven't grown up together and worked alongside one another for a decade.”

He shifts his weight, shuffling back a step to lean against the counter on the other side of the sink. He looks down at the black lid on his cup and grumbles, “Well now I feel like an asshole.”

I smirk and nod. “You are an asshole.”

“Fuck you,” he snaps, but there's no heat to it.

I chuckle and take another sip, willing the caffeine to work its magic. My couch is comfortable as hell, but I still slept like shit. Knowing she was upstairs, tossing and turning in my sheets fucked me up a little.

He jerks his chin toward the other two drinks in the to-go tray between us. “What did you get for them?”

“Lattes.”

His gaze strays toward the staircase once more. “How'd you know we'd be here?”

I look at him over my shoulder and deadpan, “Evangeline's here.”

His shoulders stiffen, and he grunts.

“Just enjoy your coffee and chill out, man.”

I knew they'd be here for two reasons: we need to debrief on what happened last night and Evangeline.

There's no way they can resist her pull. She's like the fucking sun, we're all mere planets in her orbit.

Silas is fucking Planet Nine though, an elusive force that's so far on the outskirts, it refuses to be acknowledged. But that doesn't change the fact that he's still there.

But that's fine. He doesn't have to believe it yet. And it's not like I'm trying to pawn my girl off and split her time even further.

Who knows, maybe I'll be wrong and this won't turn into some fucked-up version of *The Vampire Diaries*.

“I can't chill out when my little brother is upstairs fucking my nanny in your guest bedroom.” He sounds petulant and obvious as fuck.

“Guest bedroom's occupied.” I don't know why I feel the need to point out something we both already know. Maybe I enjoy riling my cousin up a little too much sometimes.

But the man's soul is begging for a little shit-talking every once in a while, if only to force him to not take everything so fucking seriously. Ninety-five percent of his life can be controlled and cautious. But Nova and I make sure that other five percent is bullshit.

Consider this part of that five percent.

He glares at me over the black rimmed cup. “So, they're fucking on your bed. Does that really make it better for you?”

I cross one ankle over the other, folding my arms across my chest and

facing him as he gives me his profile. He's too busy glaring at the staircase, eyes tense and shoulders stiff.

“You done?” I ask.

“How the fuck are you so calm?”

I shrug. “I'm not, but I'm not going to charge upstairs either. This is her choice, man, and I'm trying to respect it. Besides, I'm not trying to see Nova balls-deep inside my girl.”

He shakes his head with a scoff. “I don't fucking get you, Bane. You know some girl for a couple of weeks and bam, you're laying claim—*after* Nova laid claim? Have the two of you even talked about that yet? I don't know if you noticed, but Nova never shared when he was five, and he sure as fuck isn't gonna share starting now. Definitely not with his woman.”

“My woman,” I correct calmly.

His head flies toward me. “That's exactly what I'm talking about. She's gonna tear this family apart, and you assholes are gonna make me watch it happen.”

I take another drink. “My house, my woman.”

“What?” He pushes off the counter and tosses his free hand into the air, like he's so exasperated with me he can't find adequate words.

“We're in my house, so she's *my* woman.”

His face settles into that scary blank look he gets sometimes, but I'm not worried. I'm honestly amused by his big reaction. Squeaky wheels and all that. Plus, it's a great distraction from me imagining what's happening upstairs.

“Let me get this straight: when she's at our house, she's Nova's girl and when she's here, she's yours? What about when she's at The Slice or the beach? Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds?”

I lift a shoulder, my lips tugging to the side in a smirk. “Outside of these walls, she's still mine. But she's his too.”

“I love you, man, but I'm going to tell you what I told my brother: you're

going to let a *stranger* tear this family apart.”

“Nah, see, that's where you got it wrong. Evangeline and I didn't just meet. We met years ago. Eight years ago, to be exact.” I take a sip of my coffee, letting the bold flavor wake up my senses as I wait for him to piece it together. The man's too smart not too.

He shakes his head a few times, his gaze going distant like he's traveling into the recesses of his mind.

“What? When?” His voice is low and measured, like he's slowing down to avoid a collision.

But it's futile. We both know that.

“Summer.”

“No,” he breathes.

“August twenty-first.”

“Fuck me.” He tips his head toward the ceiling and drags his hand down his face.

“Yep.” I inject some pep into my voice.

August twenty-second was the day I threw myself into the Rosewood Reapers. Like Silas and Nova, I'd grown up in the life. But unlike Silas, I didn't want to stay.

I had one goal: get the fuck out of Rosewood.

And I was gonna do it too. I had it all worked out. It was senior year, and I'd already accepted a full ride to Lakeside University to play football.

One dirty play during the last game of the season took a match to my dreams of leaving and burned them until only ash remained.

Chad Plimpton got what was coming to him, the Crestview fuck, but the damage was done. There would be no scholarship.

There would be no escaping Rosewood.

I was trapped.

“Is she the reason—”

“Yep,” I interject.

You could say I didn't take the change well. I was in my nihilist phase, and I was all too happy to burn everything down with me.

“Does she kn—”

“Nope.”

“Would you stop interrupting me,” he snaps.

I chuckle, and that seems to fan his anger further. “Just trying to catch you up, brother.”

“Still doesn't explain why you're fucking all-in so quickly though. People change, Bane. All the time and definitely over eight years. For fuck's sake, look at how different you are than eight years ago.”

I tilt my head toward the staircase. “Thanks to her.”

Nova runs down the stairs, his eyes bright with mischief and his mouth curved in a wide grin. “Forgot something.”

“Your fucking shirt?” Silas deadpans.

He bends down and scoops up a floral-printed duffle bag, tossing the straps over his shoulder. “Hey you don't mind if we use your shower, right?” He totally ignores his brother.

“We?” I arch a brow, my muscles tensing.

“I think she'd feel better if she could wash off everything that happened yesterday. Don't you?” He sends me a pointed look.

“Of course. I told her to make herself at home, and I meant it.”

He grins and walks backward toward the staircase. “I knew you wouldn't mind.”

“Oh, and Nova?” I call out, stopping him at the bottom of the staircase. “If you fuck my girl in my shower, I'm going to pay you back tenfold. And I might kick your ass just for the fuck of it too.”

He tips his head back and laughs as he jogs up the steps. “Fucking worth it, bro.”

EVANGELINE

I HAVEN'T MOVED from the spot Nova left me in. I thought Silas was bad with his swift changes in mood, but now I'm starting to wonder if it's a familial trait. A few minutes ago, his gaze was heated like he was imagining all the things he wanted to do to me.

And then it's gone at the drop of a hat, and he's dashing out of the room.

I was practically naked for goodness' sake. And the man barely kissed me.

Am I wrong for feeling a little miffed by that?

I mean, I guess it would've been weird if we started fooling around right now. The circumstances are messy at best. But still. I expected him to at least attempt to make a move. It makes me think there's something else happening.

Actually, the longer I stand here, waiting for him to grab whatever he just had to get at that moment, the more the confusion and anger rise. They swell together, folding into one another until I've convinced myself that I have no idea what actually happened.

Nova bounds into the room, a noticeable pep in his step and his trademark smile on his face.

I scowl and point my finger at his distractingly handsome face. "Put your dimples away, Nova. I think I'm mad at you."

He halts a foot inside the doorway and splays his palm on his chest. His

inkless fingers are a sharp contrast to the colorful pieces covering most of his chest. “Me? But I come bearing gifts.” He lifts his free arm up, a black familiar floral duffel bag hanging from his fingers.

“Is that my bag?”

He steps into the room, nudging the door closed with the back of his boot. “Sure is, sweetheart. I swung by your place this morning to grab you a few things.”

My heart squeezes inside my chest, it's a pleasurable sort of pain. I feel my entire body exhale and settle. “Oh. Well, that was nice of you.”

His dimples taunt me as he tilts his head to the side. “So, you're not mad then?”

“I'm not really mad. I'm just . . . confused.”

He nods as he heads for the en suite bathroom, asking over his shoulder, “I can understand that. Did Bane tell you we need to have a little debriefing this morning?”

“Oh, sure. With the cops, right?” I murmur, following him into the small room. It's painted in shades of cream, and like the living room, it doesn't feel like Bane at all.

He drops my bag on the yellow shag rug in front of the sink and leans his ass against the counter to face me. “Not exactly. But I figured you'd want to freshen up or whatever. And while I love you in my clothes—”

I snort and pluck the fabric between my thumb and index finger. “Exhibit A.”

He chuckles. “Exactly. But I thought you might want to have something familiar while we walk through what happened.” He lifts his shoulders and drops them slowly, the barest hint of pink coloring the apples of his cheeks.

“It was really sweet of you to think of that,” I whisper, my voice quiet with gratitude.

His gaze warms as he nods a few times.

“I probably need a suit of armor for that conversation, or y'know, pants.”

I punctuate my poor attempt at a joke with a chuckle. Surprisingly, he doesn't laugh along with me. My gaze strays to the dark shadows under his eyes. "You sure you're okay?"

"Just tired," he answers quickly—too quickly. "How was it last night—here?"

"Good." Better to keep it short and sweet. No need to tell him that Bane carried me inside his house with such care that it made my stomach tilt.

"And Bane?" he asks. "He treat you okay?"

I look at him, trying to read between the words unspoken. "He was a perfect gentleman."

He clenches his teeth hard enough that a little muscle pops along his jawline, and he glances away. "Of course he was."

"I don't understand. Did you want him not to be a gentleman?"

"No, of course not. Then I'd have to kick his ass," he says with a chuckle, running a hand through his hair. "I'm only sorry I wasn't here to help you."

I suddenly feel very awkward standing in the middle of Bane's ensuite bathroom dressed in Nova's shirt and Bane's boxers. Like I mis-stepped somehow and just now realized it.

What's Nova going to say when he finds out about my history with Bane?

I shift my weight a little and lean against the doorframe once more. "Oh, well, you came to the hospital last night. Thank you for that. You didn't have to."

He scoffs. "Of course I did. I'm your fucking man, Evangeline."

His possessive words float over me and skate down my spine to settle low in my belly. It's not the first time he's spoken to me like this, but something about right now feels different.

Or maybe there's something different about him.

Or maybe it's the fact that I have this developing interest in his cousin too. Maybe that's the difference.

"Okay."

He cocks his head to the side. “*Okay?* That's it?”

“I mean, we just started this”—gestures between us—“whatever this is, so I don't expect the marriage treatment.”

“Really, sweetheart?”

His smirk widens and he tips his chin up, and my heart does this stupid clenching thing at the image. Honestly, my pussy does the same thing.

I fold my arms over my chest, a weak barrier between us. “What?”

“Strange way to propose, sweetheart, but okay.”

My mouth drops open but no words come out.

He laughs, and it's carefree and light. It transforms his face into something so alluring it's almost painful.

I narrow my eyes and bite the inside of my cheek. “Is that the only thing you got from all that?”

He leans forward and hooks a finger into the hem of my shirt, tugging me until I'm between his legs with barely an inch separating us. From his perched position not quite sitting on the counter, he's closer to my height.

He arches a brow and looks at me from underneath his dark lashes. A dimple pops out to taunt me, and I hate how easily it disarms me.

“I got a lot from that. Like how I need to make sure you know how serious I am. About you—*us*. I already told you, I don't need the labels, Evangeline. I'm all in, baby.”

“Then why haven't you kissed me yet?”

I want to stuff the words back in my mouth the moment I say them. I honestly don't know where those words came from or why the hell they sounded so petulant.

He chuckles then, all smooth and low like melted caramel. “Ah, why didn't you say anything earlier, sweetheart? If I'd known you were left wanting, I would've thrown you over my shoulder the moment I walked in.”

“You did,” I deadpan. “And then you took my shirt off and basically ran away like you were afraid of getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar.”

“See, when you say cookie jar,” he says, smoothing his hands over the curve of my hips. “I think of something else entirely. Something sweeter and far more delicious than a cookie.”

My breaths come in quicker at his insinuation and the feeling of his thumbs brushing against the crease of my thighs.

“I don't know, you haven't tasted my chocolate chip cookies yet,” I tease him.

He digs his teeth into his bottom lip and looks up at me while his fingers explore the tops of my thighs. “You're right, I haven't. But sweetheart, your pussy . . . “ He groans, closing his eyes like he's remembering the drive-in. “This pussy is the best thing I've ever tasted.”

My cheeks heat with embarrassment at his blunt words, and the warm flood of desire that washes over me only makes them burn hotter.

I shift my hips in a silent invitation for him to touch me. But his fingertips remain elusive, leaving trails of featherlight touches closer and closer to where I've started to ache.

He drops his head to the crook of my neck, breathing me in deeply as he continues tracing patterns. “Does my girl need a reminder? Is that it, Evangeline?” He leans in and runs his lips along my jawline, murmuring against my skin, “Do you need a demonstration of how much I crave you?”

God damn him though.

He knows exactly what he's doing, and if I wasn't so turned on, I might be frustrated by how quickly and easily he got me here.

“I don't think I want to be teased right now, Nova,” I breathe out.

“Are you sure, sweetheart? You make the most exquisite noises when I tease you. Like this.” He brushes his lips against the corner of my mouth at the same time he runs a finger along the center seam of the borrowed boxer briefs.

I make some noncommittal noise in the back of my throat, my hand flying to his forearm for balance. He does it again, applying a little pressure

when he skates over exactly where my clit is. My mouth parts on a gasp and my hips arch toward him as sparks of pleasure prick at my consciousness.

“Exactly like that.” His voice is a low groan against my throat, lips coasting against my skin. “If I had to guess, I'd say you enjoy it when I tease you.”

“Not when we have people waiting on us.” Even as I say it, I'm not as horrified as I think I probably should be. Quite the opposite, in fact. I'm inexplicably excited by the idea. I tuck that little revelation away to examine later.

“Then you better be quick, sweetheart,” he says, his mouth hovering over mine.

“What—”

He swallows my question with a kiss, his mouth soft and possessive on mine. His tongue slides along the seam of my mouth, and I open for him, allowing him to deepen the kiss.

He tastes like mint and coffee and I'm so distracted by it that I miss the moment he pulls the boxers and my panties to the side. He palms my pussy with a groan, the heel of his hand barely brushing against my clit. He trails his fingertips through my arousal, dipping inside of me enough to have me close to begging.

“More,” I moan into his mouth. I lift my leg up, resting my foot on the countertop next to his hip and wrapping my arm around his neck for balance. “I need more, Nova.”

“More of what, baby? Tell me what you need.”

I pant into his mouth, my lips already feeling puffy from his drugging kisses. “I want to come.” I slip my free hand between us and flick open the button on his pants as he continues to torture me with pleasure. I slide my hand beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs and grasp his cock in my hand. “And I want you to come with me.”

We're a tangle of limbs, propped against a bathroom counter, and I feel so

connected to him, it's insane.

My hand slides down his entire length, and it takes me a second to comprehend just how big he is. "Oh fuck," I curse, my core clenching at the idea of having all of him inside of me.

Not here and not today. But definitely one day soon.

"Keep doing that, baby, your pussy is squeezing my fingers."

His words cause an almost Pavlovian response, and I clench around him again. I rock my hips against his fingers, gasping when his thumb circles my clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

My grip on his cock tightens and I start moving my hand up and down in earnest. The sensations are overwhelming in the best way. Tension coils in my core, and I'm so close, I know it's not going to take much more for me to come.

But I want him to come with me this time.

I speed up and match his rhythm as best I can without letting myself get swept away in the way my orgasm looms on the horizon.

"Nova."

He swallows my moan with his tongue. "That's it, baby. Let me hear it. Show me how much you like it when I play with your pretty pussy."

That's all it takes. I shatter around him, my orgasm short-circuiting all my nerve-endings and making my legs grow weak. Before I even come down from my high, he shoves his face in the crook of my neck with a groan and follows me over the edge.

NOVA

I JOG down the stairs to the first floor of my cousin's house, and it takes everything inside of me not to fucking whistle some jolly tune like I'm some lovestruck hero from a black-and-white film.

I licked my fingers clean after she rode my hand like it was my cock, and her taste still lingers on my tongue. I don't think I've ever come so hard from a fucking hand job in my whole goddamn life.

So yeah, I guess I'm feeling pretty fucking high right about now. Especially considering I found out a big fucking family secret last night.

I stroll into the kitchen, studiously ignoring the heavy glares from Silas and Bane. "Morning."

"Awfully good mood you're in," Silas says, his voice dripping with annoyance.

I grin at him and point to the drink tray on the counter between the two scowling statues. "I'm always in a good mood. One of these for me?"

Bane nods but doesn't say anything, just continues to drink his own coffee.

"Where's Evangeline? Some of us have shit to do today," Silas grumbles.

I scan the barista shorthand on the side of the cup, my brows rising with appreciation. "A crème brûlée latte? Thanks, man."

Bane lifts his eyebrows at me in acknowledgment.

Okay then. I don't have it in me to try and figure out what the fuck he's going on about. Bane's not exceptionally quiet, but he doesn't feel the need to fill the room with chatter like I often do. And he definitely doesn't go around snapping at people like Silas does.

Nah, my cousin will sit back and observe, stew over it, and then plan his next move. That asshole sees shit differently than the rest of us, able to calculate odds and draw conclusions from seemingly thin air.

Do I care if he realizes that Evangeline and I were fucking around upstairs? Nah, not even a little bit. As far as I'm concerned, he can watch the footage of us on one of the many cameras he has scattered throughout his house.

What I won't tolerate is either one of them making her feel ashamed of what we did.

I give Bane my attention. “We good, man?”

He sets his cup on the counter next to him, leaving his hand covering the lid. “I bought you coffee, didn't I?”

I nod a few times, moving around the island to pull out a chair at the kitchen table. “Yeah, but that was before I made her come in your bathroom. Twice.” I pause to let that sink in and take a seat at the end of the table. Besides, nobody ever said I wasn't dramatic. “And after you dressed her in your clothes last night.”

Bane regards me for a second, and for the hundredth time, I wonder what the fuck he's thinking. What clues he's picking up on that I'm dropping—unintentionally or otherwise.

I lean against the wooden chair back and spread my legs to get comfortable. This shit with her and us was gonna have to come out at some point. Might as well start planting those seeds today. Seems to be the week for revelations and secret-spilling.

“Do we have a problem?” Bane asks.

There's no malice in his voice, no provocation. But there is something

else. Something I'm not sure I like. Challenge maybe.

Huh. Okay.

I flash him a grin and force my shoulders to relax, adopting a carefree posture. “Nah, man. If you're good, I'm good. And Evangeline sure as fuck is good.”

“Is she coming down or are you two gonna continue whatever the fuck this bullshit conversation is?” Silas snaps, apparently exhausting his short supply of patience.

I smirk at his unintentionally witty question and take a drink. Damn, that's a good latte. “She'll be down in a few minutes. And I don't know, brother, maybe Bane and I don't think it's bullshit, yeah?”

Silas crosses his arms over his chest and glares between the two of us. “Then discuss it on your own time. I've got a garage to run.”

And I don't have time for you or your bullshit. That's what he really means.

“What else is new, man? Your lines are getting fucking tired.” I take another drink of my latte, letting the sugar rush even me out a little. It sounds counterintuitive, but somehow it works. It only takes moments, and already my annoyance is forgotten.

“Tell us about the cleaners,” Bane says, looking from me to Silas. “Have you gotten the final report?”

Silas shakes his head. “Nah, not yet. I met with them last night, later than I planned since I took Hunter to the hospital.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket, tapping a few times on the screen. “He's supposed to reach out in an hour or so.”

Bane nods. “Good. And you? You went to her place today?”

I spin the cup around slowly on the table, letting the soft scratchy noise fill the air. “Yeah, I grabbed her a few things to change into. And I wanted to scope the place out, see if there was anything the cleaners missed.”

“Was there?” Silas asks, leaning forward.

“Nah, they're efficient as always.”

“They should be fucking immaculate for what we pay them,” Silas says. “They upped their rates, despite the fact that they do less add-on options than they used to, and we rarely have to need them.”

“That's probably why they raised their prices,” Bane says. “They lost a lot of business from us when we left.”

Silas shrugs, a shadow crossing his face quickly. “Yeah, well, there are plenty of surrounding areas that still require their services often. I doubt they're hurting, not with the way Hell Hounds still run their shit. And now with Savage Souls apparently back and their fucked-up alliance with the Hell Hounds—yeah, I think they're well-fed.”

“Did you hear any chatter?” I ask, jerking my chin toward Bane.

“Not yet. It was too messy to be professionals, and amateurs always run their mouths. It's only a matter of time,” Bane says.

In between wallowing in my parentage bomb wreckage last night, I tried to figure out who would rob Mrs. Carter's house. “What are the odds that it was meant as a message for us? It seems too, I don't know, *small* for that. Not when the last message they delivered was a barrage of bullets.”

Bane shrugs, and Silas purses his mouth to the side. It's his tell.

I sit forward in my chair and look at him. “What aren't you telling me?”

Silas sighs, dragging his hand along the back of his neck. “Nothing, just something stupid someone said to me once.”

Bane whips his head to the side and looks at my brother. “Who? When?”

“Five or six years ago, Marcus Stockton promised retribution for his dad,” Silas says.

I toss my arms up in the universal *what the hell* gesture. “Well don't leave us in suspense, man. Who was his dad?”

“Richard White,” Silas says, holding my gaze.

I lean back into my chair with a thud. “No shit.”

Richard White is the motherfucker who shot me. Though technically, he

was aiming for my old man, but I stepped in front of him. It wasn't as altruistic as I sometimes let people believe. More of a wrong place, wrong time situation. I was trying to hustle Dad inside the gates, where he was protected, and he was too busy chatting up the package delivery woman.

My sixth sense kicked in, that feeling that washes over you and drowns you in intuition. You can't always tell what's going to happen, but you can feel the air shift.

Shit really shifted for me that day. And in the end, it was all a moot point, because Dad got taken out not long after.

“But I didn't kill his old man,” I say, working out the connection in my head.

Silas nods. “I know. I did.”

BANE

NOT MANY THINGS in life shock me. Sure, shit still surprises me—pleasantly and otherwise—but my ability to remain composed in the face of chaos is one of my best traits. Just ask any brother in the Reapers. They'll all tell you how I'm the eye of a storm, forever calm and unflappable.

Until today.

First, Nova actually fucked Evangeline in my motherfucking bathroom while I stood in the kitchen with my cousin like some fucking dumbass. I should've stormed up there and . . . I don't fucking know what. Demanded they stop? Watched her face as he finds her pleasure and then mentally compare it to the visions permanently etched into my soul? Neither of those sound like particularly good ideas.

Fuck, maybe I should've just punched him. It would've gotten some pent-up energy out, and then maybe it would be easier to weather this shitstorm that I can feel brewing.

“You did what?” I keep my words measured and clear, even though the inside of me is rioting. Silas killed someone and didn't have help from us or ask us for cleanup afterward.

He shakes his head, his gaze going somewhere over my shoulder as he dives into the past. “He wasn't going to stop. He didn't care that Richard was a casualty of the all-out war. That it wasn't even a bullet from our side that

took Richard out. He was livid, on a warpath to destroy anything and anyone in his place.”

“So, you just what—took him out?” Nova asks a few seconds into Silas's long pause.

“It was us or them. And I chose us. I'll continue to choose us. Every single time,” Silas says. He's all casual like we're discussing what to make for family dinner and not the premeditated murder of a rival.

I nod my head slowly in understanding. “I get that. But why didn't you clue us in? That's the kind of shit you tell your second.”

It feels like a lifetime ago, but it wasn't. In the club's history, it's been a blink of relative peace in a lifetime of chaos. The club's always been one step away from war. One wrong move or one dirty cop with a conscience or one rival who gets tired of maintaining peace, and then it all goes to shit. And it did—often.

But Silas taking a guy out without telling me? That shit is unprecedented.

“We had bigger things to worry about at the time. I handled the problem, and then I didn't think about it again,” Silas says, glancing toward the staircase.

I follow his gaze, making sure she's not there. Some things are better left a mystery. The last thing I want is for Evangeline to overhear that Silas killed some guy and take it the wrong way.

There's definitely more to the story, but I'm not sure if it's worth my digging into it further. Some shit deserves to be buried in our past.

Nova makes a tsking noise and shakes his head once. “Little ironic coming from a guy who preaches about brotherhood and bonding and shit at the clubhouse, don't ya think? I don't know, man, this kind of secret seems like the kind you share with your family.”

“What do you want me to do about it now?” Silas presses.

Nova shrugs, and it's anything but casual. “I don't know, man, maybe start by cleaning the slate. The secrets are piling up faster than you can bury

them.”

Silas tenses, holding his brother's gaze. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Nova taps his fingers on the kitchen table. “How many secrets you got?”

“Everyone's entitled to their secrets, brother.”

Nova scoffs. “Right. What's another family secret added to the pile, yeah?”

“It wasn't a *family* secret. It was club business,” Silas says.

I run my hand over my face at Silas's tone. He's not wrong. That kind of shit is club business, which means he should've brought me in on it. But I don't need to point that out, not when Nova's riding the razor's edge right now.

“And I'm not included in club business? Is that what you're saying?” Nova asks, his tone deceptively calm.

Silas crosses his arms slowly, staring at his younger brother. “Not then you weren't.”

Nova glances toward the ceiling with a sarcastic laugh. “Nah, man, see that's where you're wrong. Club business has always been my business, which is something that you somehow forget.”

“Don't worry, brother. You'd never let anyone forget it,” Silas says.

“You know what, *brother*, I used to think you were looking out for me when you all but pushed me out to go to school. But now I'm not so sure. Seems like maybe you just didn't want me here. Like I wasn't worthy of the patch.”

“Are you serious right now?” Silas says, voice brimming with that deadly combination of anger and disbelief. It's a special blend reserved for family. “I pushed you to go to college because you've got a God-given talent that shouldn't be wasted in a no-name town in the middle of nowhere.” Silas throws his arm out wide, toward the window. “And you're never going to fucking forgive me for it. For wanting the best for my little brother, are you?”

“Is that what I am to you, Silas? A little brother?”

There's an air of seriousness surrounding Nova that I'm more accustomed to seeing on Silas. It has the hair on the back of my neck standing up. I clear my throat and wade in like I've done a million times before. And I'll probably do it another million times before I die or they finally get their shit together and appreciate the fact that they even have one another.

“Let's table this, yeah? We have other things to discuss and a waiting audience.” I flick a pointed glance toward the ceiling.

Nova shrugs and lifts both hands, palms out like he can't be bothered. “Fine by me. I've said all I needed to about it. If Silas has more secrets to spill, he knows where to find me.”

“Yeah, down the fucking hallway,” Silas grunts.

These assholes never learn, do they? I stretch my neck from the left to the right and will the universe to give me strength to be patient with them.

I sigh. “Good because we don't have time for your brotherly squabbles right now. We've got a plate full of shit to deal with and the longer it takes us to get a lead, the less prepared we'll be for next time.”

“So there will be a next time then? That's our leading theory?” Nova asks, shifting his focus to me.

I dip my chin. “Better to keep us prepared and expect the worst, yeah? If nothing happens, then we can chalk this up to a refresher. The boys could definitely use it.”

“We can't move forward with any assumptions until we talk to Evangeline,” Silas says, his tone low. “She's the only one who can give us the details.”

“Did Evangeline's grandma have a safe full of diamonds in the living room no one knew about?” I ask even though I already know the answer. I heard a low creak, and I know she'll be climbing down the stairs any second.

“Not in the living room, no,” Evangeline says from the top stair. “What's going on? Did you catch the people who broke in?”

“Morning, Evangeline,” I greet her.

She smiles at me, the apples of her cheeks growing pink. And then I feel like some barbaric caveman one step away from tossing her over my shoulder and hiding her away from everyone.

That's a new one.

So yeah, I guess I get why Nova did exactly that when he walked in and she smiled at him.

I don't hate the feeling, but I don't love it either. And I'm not sure how I feel about letting someone have that much power over me.

“Morning,” she replies, heading toward the table.

I take it as my cue and push off the island, snagging her drink and the pastry bag from the counter. I place them both on the table and take a seat.

“Oh, thank you so much,” she says, reaching for the coffee immediately. I watch as she scans the label, her pouty pink lips curving into a grin. “You really did remember.”

“I told you I did,” I murmur, letting my gaze trail over her face. My attention snags on the shadowed bruise along her cheekbone. “You feeling okay?”

She looks at me, her expression melting into something so sweet it makes my gut ache. “Yeah, I'll be fine. Thanks again for letting me stay here last night. And giving me your bed.”

“Anytime, Evangeline.” *All the time. Every day. Preferably with me in the bed next time.*

“Tell us what happened,” Silas says, taking a seat across from Evangeline at the other head of the table.

“Don't leave any detail out, no matter how small or silly. It all helps paint the picture for us,” I tell her.

She takes a deep breath and nods. She looks around the table at each of us before she begins. I disconnect my feelings about her from the words she's saying, telling myself that it's some fucked-up story and not the events of last night.

Fuck how was that only last night?

Her voice wavers when she tells us about one of them holding a gun to her head. How they didn't seem to be looking for any specific thing but expected a big pay day.

When she's done, she takes a healthy drink of her iced latte. I'm sure the ice has melted, but she doesn't seem to mind as she downs half of it in one go. Her shoulders drop like she's a wilting flower, like the emotion she kept under wraps in her retelling is too heavy.

“So what happens now? I call the cops and do this all over again?” she asks, looking at me.

I'm already shaking my head when Silas says, “No, no cops.”

Her brows sink together over her eyes. “But if I don't call the police, then I can't file a claim with my insurance.”

“So, it's about the insurance money then?” Silas asks. His posture is deceptively laid back. The man doesn't do bored and definitely not whatever faux-boredom bullshit is pinching his face like that. Especially not during club business. And like it or not, what happened at Magnolia Lane is club business.

At least until we can prove otherwise.

Evangeline's back snaps straight. “What? Of course not. But these are *Nana Jo's* things. They're memories and keepsakes and reminders of her. And they're not just mine—they belong to my family.”

“We'll take care of it, Evangeline.” I infuse as much promise as I can.

She folds her arms across her chest and narrows her eyes. “How?”

“We have an understanding with the sheriff's department, remember?” I remind her. Something flashes across her gaze, too quick for me to discern it. “Sometimes they need us to help protect Rosewood. And sometimes we do that by not involving them unless we need to.”

“But you're not cops. You're mechanics and you're an artist,” she says, pointing at the three of us. “So how are you going to find them?”

My gaze ping-pongs between her wide eyes. “Trust me?”

She doesn't answer me right away, and I see Nova leaning toward her from the corner of my eye. She shakes her head slowly, regret tipping her beautiful mouth down.

“I don't know you well enough for you to ask me that.”

My gaze bounces to Nova, then Silas, before settling back on her. This could go either way, but something Nova said earlier struck a chord inside of me. We have too many secrets between us. We're just asking someone to pick us off and pit us against one another.

And this secret? It feels stupid to keep it from them now. My only regret is that I should've given her a heads up first.

I tip my chin up and hold her gaze. “Eight years should be long enough.”

EVANGELINE

I FEEL the air leave my lungs as I look at him. It's not like it was some big secret, but I was hoping to have time to process everything on my own first.

Shit—*Nova*.

My gaze flies to him, and I can feel myself tense up, bracing for whatever his reaction is.

Nova's brows pull together, and he leans back in his chair. It's hard to tell what he's thinking, but I'm certain it's a sharp turn from his usually happy disposition.

“We're putting it all out there now, are we, Bane?” Silas asks.

I spare him a single glance. It's hard to tell, but he doesn't seem all that surprised. My gaze strays back to Nova like some kind of gravitational force.

“Eight years? Explain.” He looks at Bane, his jaw hard like he's clenching his molars together.

My gaze drops to the table and I shake my head. I don't think I want to sit here and listen to Bane tell them we hooked up. That I gave my virginity to a virtual stranger on the beach one night.

I can't decide what would be worse—Bane brushing it off like it wasn't a big thing or him making it sound like an event. The former would probably make me feel like burying myself in a pint of my favorite ice cream—and I hate being cliché.

But the latter might hurt Nova and damage the fragile truce between Silas and I.

“Evangeline and I met eight years ago,” Bane says.

“Just like that?” Nova asks.

Bane spins his coffee cup around on the table, keeping his gaze on his cousin. “If you wanted all the details, you're gonna be disappointed. It was a long time ago.”

My gaze cuts to him as soon as the lie rolls off his tongue. There's no way a man who remembers my coffee order after I mentioned it *once* can claim he doesn't remember anything.

“So, eight years ago, and then now? Nothing in between?” Nova asks, eyes narrowing.

I reach over and place my hand on his wrist to gain his attention. I keep my voice low and say, “I met Bane at a bonfire on the beach the summer before I left for college. It was one night.”

Nova opens his mouth like he's about to say something but quickly closes it again without uttering a word. His expression is still unreadable, but the fluttering muscle in his jaw gives him away.

“He only just admitted it was him last night, and with everything that happened and the hospital, I didn't have time to tell you. But I was going to. I wasn't hiding it or anything, okay?” I scan his face, looking for the small clues that he's still with me.

His gaze softens and he gives me a small nod. The tension in my chest loosens immediately. It's not gone, but I didn't realize I was so nervous about his reaction until right now.

And I guess that answers any questions I might have about my feelings for the St. James men. Well, some of them. I studiously avoid Silas's gaze, even though I can feel it burning into the side of my face.

But whatever is happening here, between me and them, it's something worth exploring. Worth nurturing and protecting. I can't deny the pull I feel

toward all of them—even if one of those strings is pretty superficial.

“What a tangled web you've spun, butterfly,” Silas mumbles.

Bane cuts him a sharp glare, confusion pinching his mouth into a frown.

Nova flips his arm over, dislodging my hand so he can thread his fingers through mine. It's a statement of acceptance, one I'm more than happy to make.

Determined to get back to the matter at hand, I look at Bane. I watch the way his eyes flick from my face to my hand in Nova's grip and back to my face again.

I internally sigh. Okay, so this little triangle is going to be trickier to navigate than I realized. Though, to be fair to me, I haven't really put a whole lot of planning or thought into it. I was cultivating my carefree, spontaneous side, which means I was out to just have some fun.

And I still am. But I might catch some fucking feelings for these men if they're not careful.

“I'm sorry, but one night doesn't hold the same weight as a lifetime when it comes to trust.” I try my best to convey my regret, but I stand by it.

Bane's brows raise toward his hairline and he nods a few times. “If Nova asked you to trust him, would you?”

I rear back a little, shock parting my lips. I pull my hand from Nova's and sit back in my chair, leaving my hands in my lap. “What? No. This isn't about him or you or even Silas. But this is a big ask. I don't even know what they took. What if it's priceless family heirlooms? What am I supposed to tell my family?”

“Tell them the truth,” Silas says.

“You were robbed and we're taking care of it. Your family is generations-deep in Rosewood. They'll understand,” Bane says.

“And if they don't?” I press.

“Be persuasive,” Silas drawls. “I think you can manage that just fine, yeah?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Nova snaps, sending Silas a dark look.

Silas just shrugs and glances to the side. “We about done here? I got a garage to open.”

I take the opening and scoot my chair back, the noise jarring in the quiet kitchen. It's the kind of absence of sound that you experience after a storm.

“I'm going to get going. It seems like you guys need to talk about a family thing. Or a club thing. Or—I don't know. I'm going to go though.” I trip over my words a little, but I'm trying to give myself grace.

Bane pushes to his feet at the same time Nova does.

“I'll drive you,” Nova offers, taking a step toward me.

“Oh.” I pivot to look at him, offering a small smile. “I have my car here, since Bane drove me last night. Besides, I have to meet Cora soon anyway. But thank you.”

I don't hesitate as I rest my hand on his forearm and lean in to brush a kiss across his cheek. I'm not sure about the etiquette here, so I'm going with whatever feels natural. Nova turns his head toward me, catching the corner of my mouth. I grin into the accidental kiss, lingering for a few seconds before pulling away.

Bane lifts his chair and tucks it under the table. “I'll walk you out.”

I dip my head in acknowledgment and pull away from Nova. I snag my latte, my purse, and my duffel bag and walk toward the door off the kitchen.

I pause by Silas, glancing at him. “See you tomorrow?”

“Eight o'clock,” he says, doing that head tilt thing that men do.

I exhale a quiet breath of relief. I half-expected him to tell me to fuck off and find a new job. Honestly, I think I'll probably always half-expect him to tell me that, so I might as well get used to it.

Bane trails me outside, quiet until I reach my car. I unlock the doors and toss my things inside, keeping my latte in one hand.

“Thanks again for letting me stay here. And for the coffee. I appreciate it.”

He nods a few times. "I'm sorry I told them without letting you know."

"It wasn't a secret. I'm not ashamed of you or what we did." Even as I say it, my cheeks heat a little. I can't help it. There's part of me that does feel a little embarrassed that my employer knows about my sexual history. With his cousin. *And* his brother.

"Good," he says, his voice softening. "But still, I should've talked to you first."

"Yeah, it's okay though. This is new for me, ya know? And I don't know, I don't want to hurt anyone."

"We're grown men, baby girl. We can handle a little competition."

I bite the inside of my cheek, feeling my brows wrinkle a little. "I don't want anyone to compete, remember?"

The corner of his mouth hooks into a smirk. "I know but we still will."

"I won't choose, Lincoln." I lower my voice, worry taking hold inside my chest.

He just nods, the smirk still in place. "I'm not asking you to."

I sigh, feeling a little overwhelmed all of a sudden. I just want to go home and forget for a little while.

"I should go," I say, my voice soft.

He steps toward me, his hand lifting to cup my cheek. He brushes his thumb over the sore skin on my cheekbone in a move so tender, my heart aches.

"You call me if you need anything, yeah?"

I nod, unable to speak with my eyes locked on his intense gaze.

He leans in and places his lips against my forehead, murmuring, "I'll see you soon, baby girl."

EVANGELINE

I DRIVE HOME IN A DAZE, my head spinning. I'm so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I barely even notice the drive. When I pull into my driveway, I'm surprised to see it looks the same. I don't know what I expected, but it feels different.

Or maybe it's me who feels different.

Be brave, Nana Jo's voice whispers in my mind.

I expel a sigh and grab my things from the car and make my way inside. I mentally brace myself for the destruction and mess, but when my feet carry me to the living room, shock holds me immobile.

Nothing's broken or messy. In fact, it almost looks cleaner than it did before. My brows furrow in confusion, and I step closer to inspect the room. There are obviously things missing—several garbage bags' worth. But there are no signs of the chaos that happened here last night. The chaise is in its right position and the broken pieces of Nana Jo's vases are gone, like someone swept them up.

Jesus, it's been a hell of a day.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out without looking, my gaze still on what's left. I can't remember everything, my memory of it all is a little blurry.

Cora: I'm off work and I'm coming over.

I love my cousin, and I'm going to fill her in on everything, but I need a nap and another coffee before I tackle the hundreds of questions I just know she's going to have.

Me: I'm in the middle of something. Tonight instead? We can get takeout

Cora: Is it dick? omg you better not be texting me while you're hooking up with Nova! Ily, babe, but I don't need all those sex cooties, yano?

Laughing, I respond immediately.

Me: oh my god Cora. Who even says cooties? What are you, five?

Cora: You're avoiding the question

Me: I'm not hooking up with Nova or anyone else as I text you. Can you even imagine? If I'm of sound mind to hold a texting conversation with someone, then I need to find someone else to satisfy me

Cora: of sound mind—what are you, eighty? Who even says that

Me: Me, clearly.

Me: Come over in a few hours

Cora: Fine, but just so you know, I'm getting Thai because you're making me wait

I huff. The little brat is doing that on purpose. It's not that I don't like Thai food, but Cora likes her dishes so spicy. And I'm a total wimp when it comes to super spicy food. I always end up ordering one of their kid combo meals, because then I know they don't drown it in spices.

Me: Fine, get me one of those kids meals

Cora: Whatever you want, babe, you're buying, remember

Me: I am?

Cora: Yep. Consider it amends for not inviting me to the Reaper party last night

Me: oh my god, you don't even like Reaper parties, remember?

Me: Wait. Are you hooking up with that guy again?

Cora: Jagger? Puh-lease. He couldn't handle me then, he definitely can't handle me now

Me: His friend then? I don't remember a lot of the people I met, there were too many new faces

Cora: I know how you get Miss "I have to meet someone several times before you can commit their face to you memory"

Me: I can hear the sarcasm in your text

Cora: Good, then my work here is done. See you later, babe

Me: See you tonight

"OH, holy shit. Eve, I mean this with all the respect in my heart: but what the fuck?" Cora stares at me, eyes comically wide.

She's been gasping so much during my recalling of the last twenty-four hours that I was genuinely worried she was going to choke on her noodles at one point.

I chuckle, but it's half-hearted. "I know. It's crazy, right?"

She shoved her food away and scooted close enough to sit practically in my lap, throwing her arm around me when I got to the staircase part of the story. She's backed off a little now, our knees touching each other as we sit on the crushed velvet chaise in the living room.

"Crazy? Try *insane!*" Her voice rises in pitch, like she's gearing up for something.

"I know." I roll my lips inward, deciding not to point out that insane is just a synonym for crazy. I fiddle with the hem of my shirt, a little hesitant on

how to broach my question. “Don't you think it's weird that they told me they'll take care of it?”

She glances at me and lifts her shoulders slowly. “Nah, not really. I've told you how it is here. The Reapers are like vigilantes. Real Robin Hood types, ya know?”

My brows lift swiftly, imagining all of the St. James men in green tights and tunics. “Eat the rich?”

She snaps her fingers and nods. “Exactly. I don't know if they're quite as altruistic as the fable, but they do keep Rosewood pretty safe.”

“Hm,” I hum.

She whips her head to look at me. “Shit. I'm sorry. I should've worded that differently. It's not like they can prevent all crime, but they do more for the town than the sheriff's office. That's all I meant.”

“No, I know. It's fine,” I assure her.

“Jesus, Eve, how are you not, I don't know, a sobbing mess right now?”

Excellent question. I guess I sort of detached myself from it. I'm sure the trauma will resurface somewhere and probably soon. But I've always been amazing at compartmentalizing things, so maybe I can tap into that.

I shrug my shoulder, the fabric of my tee making a whooshing sound against the velvet chaise. “I don't know. This is like the fourth time I've talked about it.”

She nods a few times, and I swear I can see the gears of her mind turning. “Wait—how are you even here?” She sits up, placing her hand on my knee. “Shit. Do you need me to stay here with you tonight?”

Her offer warms my heart. Even though I shouldn't be surprised, considering she's always had my back since day one. But I've been looking out for myself for so long that having someone offer to help still takes me by surprise.

“Oh, no, you don't have to do that. I'm fine.” I wave a hand in the air, like I can scatter her concern.

She scans my face, no doubt looking for signs that I'm not being honest. "Are you sure? Because I don't mind. I'll have to wake up extra early since the bakery is on the other side of town from here. But I can sleep down here or something so I don't wake you. Or fuck it—I'll call in."

A laugh tumbles out of me. "Please, the bakery would implode without you there. You're essential to Sugar and Spice."

She sits up and centers her face in front of mine. "No, babe, *you're* essential to me. And you're more important than a day of work. I could use a day off anyway."

"Won't your boss mind?"

Cora shakes her head and leans back again. "She's gonna have to get used to it sooner rather than later."

"So, she knows about your plans then?"

"Yep," she says, hitting the p sound hard. "Not like you can keep much secret in this town." She lifts her shoulders, her mouth curving down in the corners. "I told her I wasn't going to leave her hanging. We're a ways away from opening the doors on my place anyway."

"Let me know if you need anything from me. I'm happy to help in whatever way I can."

She cuts me a sly look, her frown turning into a smirk. "Like hand over your secret recipes?"

I shake my head with a smile, my hair falling free from behind my ear. "No way. I promised a certain little boy that I'd bake with him this summer. I can't give over my prized recipes."

"Win a couple of blue ribbons and all the sudden *it's my prized recipes,*" she says, her tone playfully mocking.

I lift my brows and look down my nose at her, doing my best posh impression. "Well, they won, didn't they?"

I don't see the pillow until it bounces off my cheek. Something hard digs into my cheek—thankfully not my sore one, and I rear back in surprise.

“Ow.” My hand flies to the point of pain, covering the dull throbbing area instantly.

The crimson, crushed-velvet pillow hits my lap before tumbling to the floor with a muted thud.

Cora sits forward and reaches for me. “Shit, I'm sorry, Eve. I was just messing with you. Did it hit your cut?”

“No, no, it's fine. It's just . . .” I trail off, dropping my hand and reaching for the pillow. “There was something hard in here.”

Cora scoots over, twisting until she's facing me. “Maybe the zipper?”

Nana Jo has an impressive selection of throw pillows, and because she was always the thriftiest person I knew, she decided to have a dozen naked throw pillow inserts and about a hundred different throw pillow covers. The linen closet upstairs has two big linen boxes of washed and folded covers, all color-coordinated.

I twist the pillow around until I see the little metal zipper. Sure enough, it's not zipped closed all the way, so it's sticking out at a weird angle. I tug it closed, but it catches on something. It takes me a few times of working the zipper back and forth, until I finally get it open.

And a small, leather-bound notebook falls into my lap. There's a black ribbon tied around it, and it looks old, worn. Like it's been opened and closed so many times, that the leather broke in years ago.

“What is that?” Cora murmurs, taking the pillow from me and dropping it on the floor next to her feet.

“I don't know. Is it weird that I'm scared to look inside?” I look at my cousin, holding back a grimace. “What if it's like dirty letters from Grandpa Dalton or something?”

“I don't think she'd keep that in a throw pillow in the living room. Those are probably in some fancy box underneath her bed, next to her vibrator.”

My head whips to the side, and I stare at her. “What the fuck, Cora?”

Her cheeks pinken. “What? Sex is normal, Eve. I'm surprised I have to

tell you of all people that.”

I bristle at her insinuation. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She arches her brow, her expression expectant. “You're bagging an entire generation of St. James men.”

My mouth falls open in shock. “It's not like that and you know it.”

Her face pinches together. “Relax, I'm not judging you, babe. I'm just saying, we shouldn't judge Nana Jo for her box under her bed either, ya know? I hope we're still *finger painting* when we're in our seventies too, ya know?”

I stare at her, and she only grins.

“Paddling the pink canoe?”

“Oh my god seriously?” I say with a laugh.

“Dialing the rotary phone? Diddling your skittle? Downstairs DJ? Or my personal favorite: buttering your muffin.”

I look at her. “Are you done yet?”

She shrugs, her face painted with pride. “The girls at the bakery like to gossip worse than the old ladies in this town. One day they dared each other to interject all the random masturbation euphemisms into casual conversation. Some of them stuck with me.”

“Do you want to see what's inside or do you want to continue?” I wiggle the leather notebook in my hand.

She rolls her wrist, her hand circling in front of me in the hurry up, continue gesture. “Of course I want to see what's inside.”

I blow out a breath and pull one end of the ribbon free. I open the notebook to a random page, and my jaw nearly hits my chest.

“Oh, I'm definitely calling into work,” Cora mumbles.

SILAS

I DRAG my hand across the back of my neck, wiping the sweat that's gathered. Hunter and I have been outside for almost an hour, and it's hot as fuck. Every year I say that I'm going to go on vacation somewhere cold as hell this time of year to escape the heat.

And yet, year after year, I'm still here.

When Hunter was a baby, it was an easy excuse to stay here. Traveling is hard enough without adding a toddler to the mix. But he's five so that excuse doesn't really work any longer.

I keep one eye on my boy and pull out the burner phone I snagged from the guest room closet earlier. We keep a healthy amount of burner phones around, because no matter how removed from the game we are, we still need them.

Hunter runs around the backyard, periodically stopping to bend down and grab “a treasure” as he calls it. He sets it inside his pale blue beach bucket and then jumps up and runs to find the next thing. Twenty minutes ago, he told me in his most serious voice that Eve told him he should start a backyard collection of all the things he finds interesting.

When the fuck they had that conversation, I have no idea.

But whatever, he's happy and it helps him burn off some energy. I love my son more than life itself, but that child is like one of those wind-up toys

that never runs out of battery.

And there are some days where I feel the weight of single parenthood so acutely, it feels like someone slipped a knife between my ribs.

Nova, Bane, Ma—they're all family, and they love Hunter something fierce.

But it's not the same. At the end of the day, I'm his father. And his momma couldn't be fucked to stick around.

Not that I ever wanted her to, but there's going to come a day when Hunter starts asking about his momma more seriously. I won't be able to brush off his questions of where she is and why she isn't around.

And I fucking hate that for *him*.

I expel a sigh and push thoughts of her out of my mind as I open a new text thread with the cleaners. I checked in with him yesterday, and he assured me everything was in order. But I can't shake this nagging feeling that I'm missing something. I type out the usual message.

Me: I'm thinking about picking up some food. You want anything?

I wait a few minutes, letting the hot breeze roll over me as I watch Hunter skip to the big tree on the left. It's the only big piece of landscaping in our backyard. It was too big to just cut down, and since the rest is basically open land, we left it.

Unknown Number: Double cheeseburger, ketchup and mustard, no onion, no tomato

Identified, running his prints, no official affiliation tattoos or markings.

“Motherfuck,” I bite out.

Me: Fries?

Does our guy have connected friends?

Unknown Number: Small

Okay, so small level criminal shit.

Me: When you wanna eat?

Unknown: 8

They already got rid of him. Good. I don't ask him anything else, deleting the text conversation, and popping the sim card out of the back. I drop it in the glass of water on the patio table next to me with a sigh.

“Here, thought you could use this,” Ma says from behind me.

A second later, a beer is in front of my face. I reach up and take it from her automatically.

“It's only eleven o'clock,” I grumble even as I take a long pull from the bottle.

“I'm having surgery soon. I'm allowed to indulge in a cocktail with lunch,” she says, smirking at me over the top of her own beer bottle.

I arch a brow as she sits down in the chair next to me. “Liquid lunch?”

She waves her hand in the air between us as she takes another drink. “Don't be ridiculous. I have fried chicken keeping warm in the oven.”

I sigh, sinking into the chair. “You didn't have to do that, Ma. I took the day off so *you* could take the day off.”

She purses her lips and gives me her signature cut the bullshit look. “Oh? Do I need your permission to bring my boys some lunch now? Is that it?”

“Jesus,” I grumble, running my free hand over my face. “Of course not. I just meant that you don't need to feel obligated to be here. I've got it.”

Her face smooths into her other signature expression: the ice queen. She mastered that look decades ago. Somehow, she manages to look expectant, disappointed, and annoyed while projecting the air of confidence.

The boys and I used to know shit was gonna go down every time she had that look on her face. We weren't spared from it, but it usually wasn't directed at us.

Unless we fucked up, which we've all done our fair share of during our late teens.

“I don't do anything I don't want to, son.” She pauses, and I watch the look slide off her face like it was never there. “Now, why don't you tell me what's wrong. I can tell by the little wrinkle between your brows that you're stressed.”

I relax my face instantly and shift in my seat to cover it up. “I'm fine. Just trying to figure some shit out.”

She nods a few times, turning her attention toward the backyard. “Like who broke into Evangeline's house, and was it one of those assholes from Crestview.”

“You gotta let that go at some point, Ma. It's been ten years.”

The corners of her mouth pull down. “If someone hurts Hunter one day, then you'll understand. There's no forgiveness for intentional pain inflicted on your children.”

Ten years ago, some bitch set Nova up to get jumped by a group of Hell Hounds. She wasn't the mastermind behind the plan, but she played her part to a fucking t.

My brother got nine stitches. And my ma stormed their favorite bar in Crestview and slashed all their tires.

And then took a tire iron to the girl's father's bike.

She didn't give a fuck who saw her. She was like a Valkyrie, backed by the entirety of our club.

We were at odds with the Hell Hounds for years before that, and it seems like our moment of respite might be over.

I watch my son sing to himself as he digs in the dirt, and my chest tightens at the idea of anything touching him. I can't imagine a world where I wouldn't burn it down to protect him.

“Yeah, I get it,” I say quietly.

I can feel her stare on the side of my face, but I keep my gaze on my boy.

“No, honey, you don't. And I hope to god you never do.”

I nod a few times because I hope for the same thing.

“Where is your brother, anyhow? I haven't seen him much lately.” Her gaze shifts too much.

There's definitely something going on with her. Shit. Maybe she is freaked out by surgery?

“Dunno. Locked in his studio, if I had to guess.”

She hums. “How long?”

“Not too long.” I clear my throat. “It wasn't Crestview who broke into Evangeline's house though.”

“You know that for sure?”

I shrug and take another drink. It's going down a little too easily today. “Cleaners said he's got no affiliate ink, and you know Hell Hounds all have ink.”

“Well then who was it?” she asks, a bite to her tone.

“As far as we can tell, some low level criminal. Unaffiliated to any nearby clubs.”

“This wasn't a smash and grab, Silas. This was an armed robbery in her *home*. In our town. That kind of stuff doesn't happen in Rosewood. You boys see to that. So why is it happening now? And to her?” she presses.

I roll my neck from one side to the other again. It doesn't do shit to alleviate the knot of tension along the side.

“I don't know yet, Ma,” I tell her, exhaustion making my voice heavy.

“Well figure it out. Josephine Carter was a friend to the family, and we owe her the respect of making sure her granddaughter is safe in her home.”

Something feels off. Ma's tone was normal, but her word choice feels . . . I don't know. Different.

I squint my eyes as I look at her. “Owe her how exactly?”

Ma shakes her head, her lips twisting to the side. “It was a long time ago, Silas. Just look out for her, yeah?”

I toss my free hand in the air, exasperation buzzing around my head like a swarm of mosquitos. “I hired her to nanny Hunter for you. What more do you want from me?”

She reaches over and places her hand on my forearm. “No, honey. I suggested her because I know she’ll be good for my boys.”

I sniff and finish the rest of my beer. “Yeah, well, we’ll see how she does. She’s gonna sink or swim in just a few days now.”

Truthfully, I don’t need the reminder. It’s all I’ve been able to think about for days. And that was long before she got hurt.

The memory of her sitting in that hospital room might just haunt me for the rest of my life. She looked so vulnerable and sweet.

She looked like she could be mine.

I shake off the alarming thought as soon as it crosses my brain. It’s probably the beginning stages of heat stroke or some shit. There’s no other reason I’d ever have such an insane thought like that.

As if the nanny could ever belong to me.

Ma pats my arm a few times before she withdraws it. “She’s great with Hunter, and we both know it. You have a few more days to get used to the idea.”

I jerk my chin in acknowledgement and switch topics. “I wish you would let me take you to your surgery.”

“Your brother already said he would, and I don’t need everyone fussing over me. I’ll be back home that night,” she says.

“Yeah, well, expect us to *fuss* over you then,” I grumble.

She turns her attention to the backyard once more, but not before I see the smile spread across her face.

After a moment, I add, “And I’ll look out for the girl.”

This time, Ma looks at me and flashes her signature smile. “I knew you would, honey.”

EVE

I SIT down on the chaise next to my cousin with a sigh. “Thanks for helping me with this today.”

She throws her arm around my shoulders and pulls me into an awkward side hug. “Of course, babe. I should've been over here helping you sort and clean already. So that's on me. But I'm here for whatever you need, okay? You're not alone in this.”

I lean my head on her shoulder and look over all the progress we made. Boxes of knickknacks on the table, a mountain of pillow covers in the corner, towering stacks of frames with family photos I thought my aunt and her family should have.

A lifetime of memories reduced to piles scattered around the room.

I gesture weakly to the room. “It's kind of sad, ya know? Like this somehow feels more real than her celebration of life thing last year.”

She rests her cheek against the top of my head. “It's sad as hell, babe. But this is how we can honor her too.”

I nod and pull away, rolling the kinks out of my neck. Spending half the day bent over funny sorting through what's left pulled a muscle in my back.

I sigh, my body aching in more ways than one. “Thank you for staying over last night. You didn't have to, but I appreciate it.”

She knocks her shoulder into mine. “Please, like I was gonna leave you

here after everything that happened. You want me to stay tonight too? I kinda feel like I can push Shelbi a little further.”

I grin at her. “I think I’ll be fine. Thank you though. And didn’t you tell me how she once assigned you sugar cookie work for a week when you called out to go on vacation?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I still have nightmares about drowning in a pool full of pastel-colored royal icing,” she says with a groan.

I giggle a little despite her pitiful expression. “That’s right. It was around Easter, right?”

“Yeah and I’ll never look at decorative eggs the same again. But it was worth it,” she says, flashing me a sassy grin. “Abby and I spent the weekend on the beach in Mexico.”

I nod a few times. “I remember.” I wish I would’ve gone with them when they asked, but I was focused on my fledgling career and convinced that if I worked hard enough and put more hours in, then my parents would respect me.

She sighs, getting comfortable in the chaise. “But I do have a few big orders to fill, so I *should* go in tomorrow. I can sleep down here again so I don’t wake you when I have to leave.”

We ended up setting up the family room like we used to when we were kids and slept over here. Even though Nana Jo had guest rooms that we could’ve used, we would always use the featherbeds and soft foldable mattresses and make makeshift beds. We’d watch movies until we passed out. Usually with a handful of chips still in our hands.

Last night we recreated the same scene. Only instead of potato chips, we had ice cream and takeout. And I made sure to put the melting tub in the freezer when Cora fell asleep during the second half of the second movie.

“No, really. I’m fine. You’ll probably sleep better in your own bed anyway. I’m just going to keep going while I have the free time. Dixie has her surgery soon, so I’ll be nannying Hunter full-time for the rest of the summer.

I want to get as much done now, ya know?”

“I get it. I'll drag Mom with me when I come over next, make her help and take what she wants so you can move on. I know you're eager to decorate the space,” she says, tipping her head toward the living room and reclining on the chaise once more.

“I guess. I kind of like it with Nana Jo's touch on it though,” I murmur.

“I know. I love this house too. But I don't think you should memorialize her or Magnolia Lane. She wanted you to live, which means putting your own style in here. It's too beautiful of a house to be stuck in the 60s anyways,” she says with a chuckle.

I laugh along with her, the edges a little watery. “God, she did love the shag and jewel tones sometimes, didn't she?”

Cora nods solemnly. “She really did. Thank god she had to replace that burnt orange shag area rug a few years ago. Can you imagine the amount of dust that thing collected?” Cora shudders like she's disgusted, and it only makes me laugh harder.

“Oh my god, you should see your face. You look like someone just told you that you have a giant family of rats in your bedroom—not a dusty rug.”

Her face scrunches up even more. “What? I hate dust, okay? It always makes me sneeze.”

My laughter dies off, and I roll my eyes playfully. “Dust makes everyone sneeze, babe.”

She tips her chin up and looks down her nose at me. “Well, I don't like it. Everyone has their thing, ya know? Like how you don't like jellyfish.”

I run the pad of my index finger across my arched brow and stare at my cousin. “What? Jellyfish are transparent blobs of electric shock that free-float in the ocean. It's not even close to the same thing.”

She flicks me with the back of her hand playfully. “Whatever, you know what I mean.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I guess so.” I pause, trying to find the right words to

phrase my next question. “So, are you going to tell me who you were trying to see at the Reapers' clubhouse the other day or . . .?”

Okay, so my finesse is a little off. But to my credit, she had all night to tell me.

“I told you: no one.”

“Bullshit,” I say immediately.

She huffs and looks away from me, toward the ceiling. “Fine. So I was curious about what Jagger's been up to these days. Sue me.”

I roll my head along the back of the couch to face her. “Babe, I don't care if you want to hook up with Jagger or anyone else.”

She looks at me now, pivoting her body so we're facing one another. “Not even one of the St. James men?” She waggles her brows.

I shake my head, biting the inside of my cheek. “You already know I have some interesting . . . feelings about them.”

“It's called fucking, babe,” she says with a laugh.

“It's not. Not yet at least,” I protest.

“But you want to?” she presses. When she notices my hesitancy, she throws her hands up between us, palms facing me. “Hey, no judgment. If given the opportunity, I'd let all three of them park their shoes under my bed.”

Laughter peels out of me and I lean over. “Oh my god, you're too much. That's something straight out of Nana Jo's mouth.”

She's laughing with me, her eyes bright and sparkling with mirth. “I know. Abby and I say it around Mom and Dad all the time, just to watch their reactions. Dad always cringes, but we got Mom to start using it too. Now she trolls Dad when he's been watching football all day, a running commentary of all the football players she'd let park their *cleats* under her bed.” She slaps her knee to emphasize her mirth.

“I can't wait to see that. We should pull out some other Nana Jo sayings, try to revive them.”

“We totally should. What are some other good ones? Oh, I know: busy as a bee in a tar factory! I don't even understand what that's supposed to mean,” she crows through giggles.

“What about: I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating crackers,” I say through my own snickers.

“Yes! She had a lot of them relating to men and or sex now that I think about it,” she says, looking at the ceiling and relaxing further. “God, I miss that woman.”

I look at the ceiling too and reach over and clasp her hand. “I know. I do too.”

“Are we going to talk about Nana Jo's little black book of secrets?” Her voice is low, devoid of the usual humor.

I squeeze her fingers, my heart speeding up at the mention of the notebook. “I don't really know what to make of it.”

The leather-bound notebook that fell out of the pillow last night was full of Nana Jo's elegant handwriting. Page after page of little observations and facts in varying degrees of incriminating and criminal. There were numbers, short ones that could be some kind of sequencing system. But also, long ones that I'm not convinced aren't monetary. Nana Jo is from the generation that grew up with parents not trusting the banks, so it wouldn't surprise me in the slightest to learn she has nest eggs hidden all over her property.

But I sort of feel like that would've been addressed in the will. She wasn't likely to forget if she planted thousands of dollars in her yard.

“If I didn't recognize some places and gossip I've heard before, I would think she was keeping a journal for a long-standing TV show or something,” Cora murmurs.

“It's just so strange. I don't understand it or why she has it either. Has she ever mentioned it to your mom?”

Cora shakes her head. “Not that she ever told me, but I'll ask her again.”

I look around the room, trying to view it with a different lens, looking for

hiding places. “She must have more around here.”

“Like what does it matter if someone sold Delilah her apple pie recipe if Nana Jo didn't write down who sold it?” Cora muses.

“I don't know. Maybe it's more about the fact that Delilah won the summer picnic awards on someone else's recipe?”

I flick my hair off my neck and we descend into silence, both of us undoubtedly contemplating this little surprise of information. I think about how I could verify it, or even if I wanted to.

I always loved a good mystery, but it's not like I can walk up to Delilah at the festival in a few weeks and flat-out ask her who she bought her infamous recipe from.

“I don't care, you know,” Cora says, breaking the silence after a few minutes. “About who you date. Or how many of them you date.” Her voice is uncharacteristically low, serious.

I tilt my head toward her. “Thank you. I'm afraid of catching feelings, to be honest. They're just so . . . I don't know. It sounds cliché to say perfect. Especially because I've barely known them, but . . .” I trail off, shrugging my shoulders again. “I don't know. There's a lot of potential there. It could be like the love story of my life, ya know?”

“An epic love story,” she says, nodding. “I love this journey for you.”

“An epic unconventional love story,” I murmur.

EVANGELINE

THE SUN BEATS down my back as I walk down Main Street toward the coffee shop. I needed to get out of the house for a little bit, and an iced chai latte sounds like the perfect pick-me-up.

The air conditioning rolls over me in a blissful wave when I enter the quaint store. It has a charming storefront, with large windows that let the natural light flood the space. The walls are painted a soft, bright yellow with a beachy decor aesthetic. Framed local artwork hangs on the walls, small little plaques with the artist's information and asking price underneath.

The far wall has open shelves displaying coffee mugs, assorted coffee beans, and the shop's merch. Low murmuring voices blend with the soft indie music playing overhead. And the smell of freshly-roasted beans permeates the air.

I wait in line and order myself a large iced chai, looking at the sign behind the counter with all the different latte specials they have this month.

The barista is nice enough when he takes my order, but I wouldn't call him friendly. I pull a ten dollar bill out of my back pocket and hand it to the guy behind the cash register. His name tag says Trevor, Barista of the Month, and *ask me my favorite drink*.

I nod toward his name tag. "What's your favorite drink?"

"A special k," he answers without really looking at me, too busy getting

my change.

“Oh. I don't know that one. What's in it?” I don't even know why I'm asking, other than polite conversation, I guess. I always like the idea of trying new drinks more than I actually like the new drinks.

“One pump white mocha, one pump regular mocha, one pump peppermint. Served in a small cup, over ice with skim milk,” Trevor says in a tone of voice like he's already recited it twenty times today and hands me my change.

“Oh, sounds fun.”

“Name?” he asks, his attention focused on pulling a cold-drink cup from underneath the counter and grabbing a marker from his apron.

“Evangeline. E-v-a-n-g—”

“Wait. Like Evangeline Carter?” he interrupts me, giving me a wide-eyed stare.

I tuck my hair behind my ear and lean forward a little. “Uh, yeah.”

“Oh shit,” he mumbles. “Shit, shit, shit. He's gonna kill me. Shit.” He's talking under his breath, hurried whispers drenched in anxiety.

The back of my neck starts to sweat a little and I pitch my voice low. “Is there a problem?”

His head snaps up to look at me now, like he forgot I was standing there. The fakest smile I've ever seen spreads across his face, but the edges are pinched with worry. “Problem? No problem. Just shit—hold on.”

He presses some buttons on the cash register, the till popping open a second later. He pulls out a ten and hands it to me. “Please don't tell him.”

My brows crash together as my hand closes around the bill. “Tell who?”

He takes a hasty step backward, his hand outstretched. “Nothing, no one,” he says, his words tumbling together. “I'll be right back with your drink.”

“Wait,” I say, shaking my head. “I haven't paid.”

He takes two steps to the left, placing him in front of the big espresso machine. “Yeah, I, uh, forgot that the person in front of you wanted to pay.”

One of those pay-it-forward things, ya know?" He forces a laugh, puts his head down and busies himself.

"Okay." I drag the word out slowly, letting my confusion bleed into the sound.

I glance over my shoulder, raising my brows at the woman behind me. She doesn't react, her attention glued to her phone. I turn around to face the barista again, but he seems determined to ignore me.

I shuffle down to the end of the counter with a strange sense of unease settling in my stomach. I don't know what all of that was about, but it feels off.

I shake my head and lean my shoulder against the wall. I shove one hand in the back of my jean shorts, crossing one ankle over the other. My phone vibrates inside my other back pocket, and I slip it out.

My worries melt when I see a text from Nova on my home screen. I flick open my phone, my smile growing when I see what he wrote.

Nova: What are you wearing

Amusement and adrenaline ignite, one after the other, my body remembering what happens when Nova sends flirty texts. Fuck it, I played then, and I'll play now. I have a sneaking suspicion I'll always play when it comes to Nova.

Me: Clothes

His reply is instant, like he was watching his phone and just waiting for me to respond.

Nova: Take them off

A laugh burst from me, startling the woman next to me. She lifts her gaze from her phone to glare at me.

Me: Didn't we play this game before?

Nova: Wasn't it fun?

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, reveling in the feeling of ten pairs of butterfly wings tickling the inside of my stomach.

Me: The movie was fun

Nova: Say the word, sweetheart, and I'm there.

Me: Word

My fingers fly over my screen before I even really think about it. It feels a little silly to admit it, but he has a way of making me feel confident and aware of my body in a sexual way that I've never really experienced before. I don't know anyone that *doesn't* have insecurities, but when I'm with him—with Bane too—it all just sort of melts away.

It makes me feel reckless and foolish to even think these things. But that doesn't make the feelings any less real.

Nova: Strip, sweetheart

Nova: Then video call me

I imagine his smirk and his infuriatingly charming dimple winking at me, and I shake my head to stifle my grin.

Me: Can't. I have company

My phone vibrates in my hand with an incoming video call from Nova. I hit decline just as the barista calls my name.

Nova: Don't tease me, baby. I know there's no Charlie

I snag my drink and murmur my thanks, but the barista is already helping the next person in line. Flipping my sunglasses over my eyes, I leave the coffee shop, one hand holding my drink and the other texting my boyfriend.

Me: That's your first mistake, baby. Charlie will always be number one

Nova: Charlie's a dead man, sweetheart. Say your goodbyes

I'm giggling, absentmindedly sipping from my straw, texting one-handed, and walking down Main Street without really paying attention.

Me: How am I supposed to build my menagerie of men if you keep threatening them?

Nova: There is no menagerie

Me: A collection then

Nova: A collection of dead men. It has a nice ring to it

Me: What about Bane?

He doesn't answer right away, and I worry my bottom lip. My heart thuds inside my chest, a pitiful thump. My eyes feel dry as I refuse to blink, keeping my gaze trained on my phone. Someone shoulder-checks me, jerking my entire body to the right. I stumble a few steps, tripping over the raised crack in the sidewalk. I accidentally squeeze my coffee cup, and chai sloshes out of the top. Thankfully, I keep my grip on my phone.

I expect the person to apologize, but instead, all I see is their retreating back, covered in a black leather jacket with some kind of grim reaper on the back. It doesn't look like Nova's or Bane's though. The shape is all wrong and there's no scythe.

I stare in disbelief, looking around me to see if anyone else noticed it, but the only other people on the sidewalk are engrossed in their own conversations.

I sigh and resume my walk back to my car, opening my text thread with Nova to see if he responded.

Nova: I'll allow it on one condition

Me: I don't need your permission, you know

Nova: Shh, baby, let me pretend a little longer

I roll my eyes with a laughing sort of scoff, eager and nervous to see how this plays out.

Me: Alright, what's your condition

Nova: Next time I see you, you'll sit on my face until I've had my fill

Nova: And baby? I'm starving

A waterfall of lust rolls over me slowly, cascading down my body until I swear the skin on my ankles is covered in goosebumps.

Me: That seems like it's more for my benefit

Nova: Trust me, baby. If I had it my way, I'd eat your pussy morning, noon, and night

Me: Jesus, Nova. I'm in public

Nova: So you don't want me to tell you how you turn the prettiest shade of pink when you come?

Nova: Or how you make the sweetest noises when you ride my face?

Nova: Maybe you want to hear how I stroked my cock in the shower this morning while I was thinking about the way your pussy clenched around me?

Oh. *Oh*. Fuck.

Me: You're not playing fair

Nova: Is my girl turned on?

Me: Yes

Me: But don't worry. I can take care of myself

Nova: Nah, baby, that's my job

My breaths pick up as my arousal grows. Who knew that a few dirty texts

were enough to turn me on?

Me: Are you coming over or what?

Nova: I wish I could, sweetheart. I'm working on a job. But as soon as I'm done, I'm coming for you

Disappointment sours my arousal, my lips tugging down in the corners. All that flirting and he's gonna edge me? I guess I'll have to find a way to return the favor.

Me: promises, promises

Nova: Don't worry, baby, I always keep my word

My lips curve into a coy smile, excitement sparkling in my veins as I reach my car. The good feeling continues the whole way home, enough that I've nearly convinced myself I can nail that solo from Hamilton I've been working on for weeks.

EVANGELINE

THE SUN SET HOURS AGO, and I have nearly every light turned on inside Nana Jo's house. My house. God that's going to take some getting used to. I put one of my favorite records on, just to have some noise filter through the quiet space. I didn't realize just how big this house is until tonight.

It's one of Grandpa Dalton's old vinyl records from a few decades ago, before they became popular again, so it's a little weathered. I make a mental note to see if there's a place in town that can clean the record player. I bet it hasn't been cleaned in too many years. Grandpa Dalton would be horrified if he knew Nana Jo left it to collect dust as often as she did.

Though I suppose he's over the moon to just have her with him now. I imagine him twirling her around in the middle of some field, surrounded by music and food and laughter.

And love.

I imagine them so full of love to be together once more.

I sigh, grief pressing against my breastbone with persistence. It's the kind of tenacity I haven't felt in months. Or maybe it's always been there, pressing against my bones and muscle, weakening me until I'm too distracted to notice it filling my chest with heartache.

I shake my head, a literal attempt to dislodge the bleak thoughts, and continue going through the last of the things in the living room and great

room. I thought I was almost done, but I seriously underestimated just how much Nana Jo liked her *things*. I'd never call her materialistic, because she never acted like things were more important than her family.

But the woman loved to collect, that much I'm sure of.

Thank god Cora came over to help this afternoon, because I think I'd still be clearing out the credenza in the other room. Nana Jo had an impressive collection of ceramic knickknacks stuffed in there. And as tempting as it was to just toss them all in the pile for everyone to go through, I don't know, I felt like I had to look at each one.

It sounds stupid even thinking it, but it makes me feel close to her. Like she's still here with me. And god, do I miss her.

“Shit,” I whisper as my eyes start to water. I blow out a breath and look toward the ceiling, trying to calm myself down. No need to start crying for the third time today. But I've always been like that, like once you open that can of emotion, it's super easy to reach it for the rest of the day.

Once I've wrangled my emotions back, I get back to work. My aunt and uncle are stopping by tomorrow night to pick out whatever they'd like to take home, and I want as much of the first floor done as possible. Then I'll work on the second floor and the garage storage over the next few weeks.

And whatever is left can be boxed up and donated. Though I'm already planning to ask Bane and Nova to help with the heavy lifting on that one.

I'm bent over a basket of lace doilies when I hear a noise. It sounds like it's coming from upstairs. I freeze, straining to hear it again. It's an old house, and it makes random noises all the time. I don't want to freak myself out for no reason.

I hear it again. *Thump. Thump, thump.*

And the anxiety I'd been working on quelling for the last twenty-four hours tears through my mental barriers like tissue paper, flooding my system instantly.

My hands shake as I stand up too fast, the sudden rush of blood to my

head making me feel lightheaded. I take a deep breath, but it does nothing to ease the panic that's taking over.

Thump.

It-it's coming from upstairs. Oh my god—someone's in the house.

I spin around, looking for anything that can be used as a weapon as I yank my phone out of my back pocket. Are those guys back? Is it someone else? Someone who wants revenge for what happened to that third guy?

They didn't tell me, but I remember bits and pieces of it. Flashes of memory. And I know the guy that stayed, the one who promised he was going to hurt me, he didn't just walk out. The details are fuzzy, but it's like this intuitive, gut feeling.

And now his buddies are back for their revenge. And I'm sitting here like a side character in the first five minutes of a horror movie.

Biting down on my lip, I bend down and snatch the closest thing: one of Nana Jo's silver candelabras. I wrap my hand around the end, using the heavy base like a club.

My heart pounds so hard inside my chest, that I swear it's vibrating my whole body. I have to forcibly swallow over the ball of fear lodged in my throat as I creep around. I pause in the doorway, glancing at the stairway and straining my hearing again.

Once I go into the hallway, whoever is upstairs will see me. The hallway seems like it's a million miles long, and I glance toward the upstairs five times, forcing myself to waste precious seconds to make sure I'm in the clear. When I can wait no longer, I dash down the hallway, my socks sliding on the hardwood floor as I round the corner into the kitchen. My breaths heave in choppy pants, and I quickly run into the back hall. There's a deep coat closet in there that I can hide in while I call someone.

With one hand tightly gripping the candelabra, I hit his contact without another thought. He answers on the first ring.

“Evangeline?”

“I think there's someone in my house,” I whisper.

“Where are you right now?” His voice is sharp, demanding.

“Hiding in the back hall closet.”

“That's good, baby girl. That's good. Stay there and stay on the phone with me, yeah?”

His reassurance eases the knot of anxiety inside my chest fractionally, and I find myself nodding along with him like he can see me.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Did you see anyone?” There's rustling on his end of the line, and I imagine him pulling shoes on and hustling through his house. Or maybe that's just me projecting.

“No, but I heard noises. A lot of thumping like maybe someone's walking around upstairs.”

“It's good you called. I'm on my way, yeah?”

I exhale, the instant relief a balm against the rough scrape of anxiety. “Okay. And Lincoln? Can you hurry please? I'm scared.”

BANE

I KEEP THE LINE OPEN, listening to the comforting sound of her quiet breaths. If she's breathing, then she's alive. The sound of her voice when she called, the hushed whisper of fear is going to stick with me for a long, long time.

Visions of that faceless asshole on top of her with a gun to her head flash before my eyes, and I pick up my speed, running toward my bike. I switch my phone to my earbuds, popping them in to keep our line open and throw my leg over.

“I'm coming, baby girl. Just stay there, yeah?”

Her response is swallowed by the sound as the engine roars to life. In two heartbeats, I'm flying toward the compound gates. I rev my engine, the only warning that they're going to get to open them up and fucking fast, or I won't be held liable for what I do.

I feel the seconds tick by like knives pricking my skin, each one hurting a little more than the last.

The streets are dark but not empty as I head toward Magnolia Lane. I'm every stereotypical motorcycle-driving asshole right now, weaving in and out of traffic, zipping down the center lanes, and generally breaking every traffic law I can. My sole focus is getting to Evangeline as quickly as possible.

Trees whip past me in a blur, and soon enough, the huge house looms into view.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter when I see it. She must have every single light turned on. I bet you could see Magnolia Lane from a mile away, the way it's lit up right now.

I should've realized she'd be scared. I never should've let her go home on her own. And if I wasn't so preoccupied by whatever the fuck is going on with Nova, Silas's information bomb, and the possible impending war with the neighboring MCs, I would've noticed. Would've insisted I come with her today.

I don't see any unfamiliar cars, but that doesn't mean shit. There's nothing but open land for acres around these houses. They could be on UTVs or fucking walking for all I know. I should've called in some boys to canvas the area, but I was operating on autopilot. And yeah, maybe I wanted to mete out my specific brand of justice for targeting and scaring my girl.

As soon as I come to a stop in front of her garage door, I jump off my bike and sprint up the walkway. I pull my gun from the back of my pants, and exhale a breath. It doesn't do shit to control my mounting dread, but I do it again anyway.

“I'm here, Evangeline. But I want you to stay hidden until I come to you, yeah? Don't come out for anyone else but me,” I murmur.

“Okay. Be careful, Lincoln.”

“I always am.” I use the spare key I made when she wasn't paying attention the other day and let myself into the house. The element of surprise is probably lost considering my bike is loud as fuck, but I'm not trying to break down Evangeline's door if I can help it.

My chest tightens with worry as I step inside her house. The low hum of a record after it's over fills the space, but I don't hear anything else. I keep my gun up and aimed and I slowly, methodically clear her house.

There's comfort in doing something I've done so many times that I can largely rely on muscle memory to execute.

I go upstairs first, then make my way through the first floor, leaving the garage for last. Finally, I wrap my knuckles on the closet door inside the back hall as I flip the safety on my gun and tuck it into the back of my pants.

“It's me, Evangeline.”

The door opens without a word, and then she's jumping in my arms. I catch her easily, relief washing over me.

“Lincoln,” she breathes, wrapping her arms around me.

And it might be the single best thing I've ever heard in my life.

“Hey, baby girl.” My voice is thick with emotion, my blood pumping double-time from adrenaline.

I close my eyes tight as I hold her against me, one arm wrapped around her middle and the other underneath her ass to hold her up. She's trembling in my hold, and I can feel every inch of her pressed against me.

Finally, she pulls away just enough to look at me. In this position, we're nearly nose-to-nose, our mouths only inches apart. Her dark brown eyes are wide, pupils blown out with fear, and two tears roll down her freckled cheeks.

Without thinking about it, I lean forward and brush away her tears with

my lips. "It's alright, I've got you."

EVANGELINE

EMBARRASSMENT SLINKS into our moment like a thief in the night, stealing the relief and replacing it with shame.

I clear my throat, sniffing a little. “Are you sure there's no one here?”

He nods. “I'm positive. I cleared the whole place, closets included.”

“Okay.” I worry my bottom lip, my nerves frayed and residual fear thick on my tongue.

“Come on. We can do it again,” he says, threading his hand in mine.

Relief sags my shoulders. “You don't mind?”

“Nah, baby girl. I don't mind.”

His hand envelops mine, big and warm, and I instantly feel safe. I bet there's some irony in the fact that he's *always* made me feel safe. We make our way through the first floor, going from one room to the next until we circle back around to the staircase.

He moves upstairs, me trailing a half-step behind him. I do my best to squash the persistent thrum of anxiety in my chest. I feel like I'm one untimely spider away from jumping on his back.

My heart trips over itself as we go through each guest room, Bane opening each closet and checking under the beds. He even moves the blinds aside, and double-checks that the windows are locked.

By the time we reach the primary bedroom, I've calmed down

considerably. My anxiety is still high, which I expected, but it's not earth-shattering. It's manageable. Mostly. I still low-key feel like I might spook myself on something and casually embarrass myself by jumping and yelling.

I tighten my grip on his hand, my free hand wrapped around his wrist like a lifeline. I'm so close to him that I have to do this little half shuffle just to keep up with his long strides. But it's a concession I'm more than willing to make.

"It's not that I don't trust you, you know," I murmur, keeping my voice low as if there really is someone still here.

Like we wouldn't have already given ourselves away by our footsteps and Bane's quiet assurances that everything is okay. I want to poke fun at myself, but adrenaline is still coursing through my veins. It just started to come down, that twitchy, nauseated sensation beginning to prickle against my awareness.

"I get it," he says, reassuring me. "I never took it as a trust issue anyway."

"Good, because I do trust you. Even though it seemed like I didn't this morning. It's just . . . a lot of people in my life have abused my trust before. And I-I struggle sometimes." I glance at him to find his eyes already on me as we pause in front of the doorway to the primary bedroom. "It's just, I feel . . ."

"Violated," he supplies after I pause for too long.

I blow out a sigh and nod, shuffling even closer to him. "Yeah, I guess that's it. Nana Jo's house was always the safest place I've ever been, and now . . ." I trail off, slipping my tongue across my bottom lip. "Now it doesn't feel all that safe."

He shifts so he's facing me directly, his height crowding me against the wall a little. It only reinforces the safety I feel with him.

"I promise you will feel safe in this house again." His voice holds a level of intense sincerity.

"Can you teach me how to shoot?" I ask before I even give myself permission to think about it.

He stares at me for a moment, his gaze ping-ponging between my eyes, no doubt looking for a clue as to where that question came from.

But it can't be that hard of a leap. How many people have thought the same thing after a similar incident? Too many probably.

“I know it's cliché, but I just don't ever want to feel like that again.”

He nods once. “Okay.”

My brows arc toward my hairline. “That's it? No twenty questions? No *are you sure* or telling me everything will feel better tomorrow?”

He tilts his head to the side as he regards me. “Do you want me to ask you those things?”

I shift my weight to my other foot. “No, not really. I feel like that's what most people would ask me though.”

“Well, that's your first mistake, baby girl. I'm not most people. Don't worry, you'll get used to it.”

He pushes the door open with his index finger like he didn't just drop some panty-melting line like that. It was the confidence, the intensity and eye contact. And his looks sure as hell didn't hurt either.

Bane St. James looming over me in a dark hallway after he literally rode in to save me, telling me I'll get used to him?

I feel like I need to fan myself a little bit.

“Is this where you've been sleeping?” He asks, walking inside the room, oblivious to me having a minor heat flash over here. I let go of his hand and wander inside the room behind him.

“Only the last few nights. Well, last night, but not the night before that. But then maybe like two before that?” I ramble like it really matters. “Mostly because it has a nice en-suite bathroom. Nana Jo loved a good soak, and she had a killer clawfoot bathtub put in there. It's like straight out of a home and garden magazine or something.”

I feel like I'm walking that line of being a little too chatty. I'm blaming the adrenaline.

“This yours?” He jerks his chin toward a box in the middle of the bed.

It's a pale-blue rectangular box, about the size of one of those small fancy decorative boxes at gift stores. I stop in front of the bed and see the white design etched across the top, and I recognize it then.

“Oh, yeah. That's mine, but . . .”

“But what?” Bane prompts, standing next to me.

My brows crowd together on my forehead and I curl my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching out and grabbing it. “But I left it in my storage unit when I packed up my stuff. Before I came here a few weeks ago.”

I tilt my head to look at him, noting the way his mouth is pinched at the corners.

“You sure you didn't pack it?”

I nod slowly, looking back at the box. “I'm sure. It was a stationery set my mother regifted me for Christmas. I hated it but I couldn't bring myself to throw it away.”

I give in to temptation and reach over the end of the bed to flick the top of the box off. The lid pops up, exposing a single letter inside the box. Without thinking, I pluck the letter from inside the box. It's folded into thirds, my name scrawled on one side. There's something familiar about the handwriting, and for a split second, I wonder if I did pack this in my car and take it with me.

I shake my head, dismissing the thought as soon as I have it. I know I didn't bring it with me to Rosewood. And even if I did, it would still be tucked away in one of my many boxes in the garage that I haven't unpacked yet.

“Maybe I should read it?” Bane offers, extending his hand.

“It's fine,” I say, shaking my head.

I unfold the letter, and the scent of gardenia wafts out. “Did someone spray the paper?” I murmur.

The mystery of the scent is long-forgotten as I scan the letter. It doesn't

take me long, only a few sentences. But I stare at that piece of stationery with its pastel floral cluster on the bottom right corner for several minutes, trying to understand what the hell is happening.

Evangeline,

One, two, three, four.

I won't be ignored.

My eyes flicker to Bane's, seeing the same confusion and concern etched into his features. The letter feels heavy in my hands, the handful of words so much more ominous.

“What the fuck is this?” I whisper, shaking the paper a little.

“I don't know,” he murmurs. “When was the last time you were in here?”

I drop the letter in the box and wipe my hand down my leg, like I can physically rid myself of the bad vibes it gave me.

“Uh, I don't know. I ended up crashing on the couch earlier, and I went into town this afternoon.”

“Last night?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No, Cora stayed the night and we camped out in the living room.”

“So not at all today then.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from spiraling. I don't even know if I have enough adrenaline left inside of me at this point.

“No, I don't think so. But I was definitely in here the night those guys broke in.”

“You sure?” he asks.

I nod several times. “Yeah, I am. Because I had the water running when I heard them. I thought it was Nova. Or you.”

“Do you recognize the handwriting at all? Any guesses what it means or who it's from?”

“There's something so familiar about the scent. It kind of reminds me of —goddammit.”

“Who?” he asks, instantly catching on.

“My sister,” I grit through my teeth. “She's been on me about giving the house to her, and I bet this is her passive aggressive way of threatening me to do what she wants.”

He nods slowly, his eyes narrowing on the offending letter. “It's possible. I can have the sheriff's office run it for prints in the morning.”

“Don't bother,” I tell him, putting the lid on the box. I cross the room and drop it in the trash can by the dresser with a deep breath. “I don't even want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she got to me.”

“If you're sure,” he says, watching me.

“I'm sure. I don't know how she got in, though. So I guess I might need to change the locks.” I push the end of my thumb against my teeth, adding it to my mental to-do list.

“I'll take care of it for you.”

“Thank you,” I breathe out. “I guess I better start turning off some of these lights.” I tilt my head toward the doorway, and he dips his head. But not before I see a small smile tug at the corners of his lips.

“Yeah, I thought you might be trying to signal someone on the moon or something,” he quips, following me downstairs.

BANE

I FLICK the lock on the front door and peer out of one of the side windows. Shadows dance against the cone of light cast from the streetlights on the road. Her house is set just far enough back, and the neighbors' houses are just far enough away. Her house is a logistical nightmare from a security standpoint.

Most people would assume that having nothing but open acres of land surrounding your home is a good thing. For entertaining, sure. But for defense? Hell no.

I was already going to install a few security cameras, but I'm going to have to amend that order for a few upgrades.

I step back from the door and look behind me, startled to find Evangeline so close. She looks so small right now. Not meek or fragile, but like something precious. Something to be protected and cherished.

She's twisting her fingers together, her hands clasped in front of her. Eyes wide and darting around everywhere, never staying on one thing for too long.

I let instinct take over and envelop her in a hug. Her cheek presses against my chest and she wraps her arms around me. And I sort of idly wonder if she can feel my heart hammering, because it feels like it's close to pounding free from my ribcage.

The fact that a fucking hug is making my pulse race like some kind of preteen should be embarrassing, but I'm too busy enjoying the way her body

fits so perfectly against mine.

I lay my cheek against the top of her head and breathe her in. Vanilla and sweet cherries fill my senses. It reminds me of the cherry floats I got as a kid at Uncle Harry's downtown.

We stand in her foyer for what feels like too long and not long enough before she breaks the silence.

“Thank you,” she murmurs against my shirt.

I lightly run my palm over the back of her head. “Anytime.”

She tips her head back from my chest, hitting me with those dark brown doe eyes, and I think for the first time I might be in serious trouble.

“Did you find out who broke in yesterday?”

I shake my head. “No, not yet. But I will.”

She hums under her breath a little. “Will you stay?”

I brush the hair off of her face, tucking it behind her ear and give myself a moment to memorize the slope of her nose and the curve of her cheek, to commit every stroke of beauty on her face.

“Was already planning on it, sugar.”

Her nose wrinkles a little and I'm not sure how to feel about the fact that I find it adorable. Since when do I find something like a *nose wrinkle* an attractive quality or feature on a woman? It's a good fucking thing no one's privy to my internal thoughts, or I'd never hold onto my rep with the boys.

“What?” I murmur, reveling in the feeling of her being close.

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip. It lasts a second, but I feel the spike of arousal all the same.

“Oh, it's just . . . *sugar*?” She kind of winces when she repeats the word I casually tossed out.

My cheeks feel hot, and I clear my throat, but I don't take my hands off of her. I don't know if I could. Unless she asked, obviously. But I'll just continue to pray to a god I don't know I believe in that she doesn't. That she'll never ask me to leave her alone. I'd fucking hate to add stalking to my list of skills.

“I’ve heard Nova call you sweetheart, so I just thought I could—”

“No, no, it’s okay,” she interrupts me, her hands smoothing over the leather on my shoulders. “It just took me by surprise, that’s all.”

I make some noise of acknowledgement and stare at this little cluster of freckles underneath her right eye. They sort of form a triangle shape with the fourth little freckle off to the side.

“I didn’t take you for a sugar kind of man,” she says, a smile playing around the edges of her mouth.

“Just trying it out, but I’m not married to it or anything,” I grumble, my cheeks still feeling warm.

I grit my teeth at the existence of embarrassment. I’m not accustomed to experiencing it, and I can’t say that I enjoy it much.

She laughs, and it’s this light musical sound that makes my heart clench almost painfully in the most confusing way. I’ll take it though, because it clears out the other pesky emotion.

She pushes onto her tiptoes, tipping her head back so our faces are only a few inches apart. A distance I could close in half a second flat. But I’m curious enough to let her take the lead here. I’ve waited years for her, I can wait until she’s ready to make the first move.

“I like it,” she murmurs. “And I like you, Lincoln.”

Her hands slide along the back of my neck, one of them sinking into my hair. The light pressure sends prickles of awareness cascading down my back.

“Thank you for saving me. Again. My white knight,” she says, her lips brushing against mine in a soft, almost painfully sweet kiss.

It’s not enough.

But I don’t think it’ll ever be enough. I had one night with her all those years ago, and that was all it took to start my addiction, an almost everlasting obsession. The need has waned over the years, but never dissipated fully. She was always there, just under my skin. I spent years in the shadows looking for her.

“Kiss me,” she pleads against my mouth.

Who the fuck am I to deny my girl?

I crash my mouth against hers, tasting the sweet honey of her lips. Our tongues dance together, entwining and exploring each other in a way that seems familiar and yet new.

She uses her grip on my hair to haul me closer, crushing her tits against my chest. A sensation my cock approves as it throbs against my zipper.

There's urgency in our kiss, a desperate sort of need that pounds against my limbs, begging me to leave her so thoroughly sated that she'll never be able to look at another man again without comparing them to the way I feel against her—inside of her.

It's irrational and possessive and probably a touch psychotic given our current relationship dynamic, but our basest desires don't give a fuck about family politics.

And right now, I've never wanted anything as much as I want to claim Evangeline Carter.

We break apart, both of us nearly panting for air. Her lips look cherry-red and swollen, and this perverse sense of pride blooms inside my chest.

“Jesus Christ, Lincoln,” she says with a breathy laugh. “How the hell am I supposed to go to sleep now?”

“Hmm,” I murmur, a bit distracted by the way the amber flecks in her eyes seem like they're almost lit from within.

She takes a step backward, and I let my hands slide down her arms slowly, savoring the last vestiges of her embrace.

The back of her calves hit the bottom stair, a few feet of space between us now. I tilt my head, clocking the sly curve of her mouth.

She walks up the first step, still facing me with her hand on the railing. She angles her head, her hair falling over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

I reach her in two steps, grabbing her by the sides of her thighs and hauling her into my arms. She laughs and throws her arms around my neck to

hold on, but she shouldn't worry. I'm not going to drop her.
I don't think I'm ever going to let her go.

EVANGELINE

I TIGHTEN my hold around Bane's neck as he takes the stairs two at a time, laughter spilling from my lips despite the residual fear lining my limbs.

His scent surrounds me, that clean woodsy smell, and I feel safe. Like no one can get to me while he's here.

He carries me down the hall and into the bedroom, stopping at the end of the bed. His palms slide from the backs of my thighs, over my hips, and settle against my waist. A second later, I'm flying as he tosses me into the middle of the mattress.

I laugh, the weightless feeling ending abruptly when my back sinks into the bed, bouncing a little. Pushing up onto my elbows, I look at him. The smile slides off my face, awe sinking its claws into my consciousness.

Dressed in all black and standing at the end of my bed. Muscles bulging and hands flexing loosely at his side. Backlit by the light in the hallway and tattoos standing out against his sun-kissed skin. The gun I know is tucked into the back of his pants and the motorcycle in my driveway.

He looks like an antihero plucked from the pages of my favorite romance novels.

I close my legs together, shifting them a little and letting them fall to the left. He palms my ankle, his grip light and loose, just firm enough to stop me from wiggling around.

“What're you doing, sugar?” he murmurs, voice smooth and low.

His new nickname tips up the corners of my mouth and I tilt my head to the side. My hair falls over one shoulder as I regard him.

“Waiting for you,” I answer, my voice equally quiet.

He stares at me for a beat, his gaze burning with intensity, before a slow smile spreads across his face. His gaze never leaves mine as he tightens his grip on my ankle and pulls me across the comforter, toward him. He doesn't stop until my ass is close to the edge, my one leg hanging off the bed and the other still in his grip.

He coasts his hand up my leg, his touch somehow both light and possessive as he rests my heel against his chest. His fingertips ghost over the top of my thigh, curving around to rest at my hip. His thumb smooths a line down the crease between my leg and pelvis. It's close enough to send my mind floating to dangerous places.

My breath catches in my throat and I swallow, my tongue gliding over my bottom lip. His gaze zeroes in on the movement, and he swipes his tongue across the swell of his own bottom lip. Almost like he couldn't help it.

His fingers explore further north, curling under the waistband of my cotton shorts. Everything inside of me tenses—including the breath trapped in my lungs.

His lips twitch and he murmurs, “Breathe, sugar.”

I exhale quietly, allowing myself time to get lost in his dark eyes. They look endless and rich.

He drags the waistband down, and I lift my butt off the bed to help him. His other hand grabs my other ankle, placing it against his chest. Now both of my legs are up, and I have no idea what's going to happen next.

Okay, that's not entirely true. I mean, I kind of know what's going to happen. Or at least, what I want to happen.

He slides my shorts off my legs slowly, dropping them on the floor at the foot of the bed.

With a sigh, I let my legs fall to the left side of the bed, my knees bent and feet hanging off the edge. He trails his fingertips along the outside of my exposed leg, sending shivers down my spine.

In one swift movement, he palms my waist, picks me up, and moves me toward the head of the bed. I land with a gentle bounce on the pillow, and he follows me, crawling up on his hands and knees until he's hovering over me again.

My heart races and my skin feels electrified, like little sparks of anticipation dance underneath the surface. My gaze drifts to his lips, parted slightly as he stares down at me with dark intensity.

He dips his head down and whispers against my lips, "Time for bed, sugar."

It's barely a touch, definitely not a kiss, and I want more. He starts to back away, but I curl up and hook my arm around his neck, pulling him to me. I capture his mouth with mine, deepening the kiss immediately.

He tastes like decadence and smooth whiskey. Like the promise of a sleepless night.

He groans into my mouth, dropping some of his weight on me in the most delicious way. I feel his cock, hard and thick, pressing right against the apex of my thighs.

"Jesus," I mutter against his kiss-swollen lips.

His answering chuckle is dark and knowing. And fuck me if it only turns me on further. My hands find their way underneath his shirt almost on their own, my fingertips exploring every dip and curve of his abs. I push his shirt up as I go, silently asking him to take it off.

He waits until my hands are brushing his pecs before he sits back on his heels. He slides his kutte off and sets it on the other side of the bed while I let my fingers continue their exploration of his stomach. Jesus this man is ripped though. My mouth waters just looking at him. Tattoos cover both of his arms, colorful pieces of art brought to life on his skin.

He reaches behind his head and grabs the collar of his tee, pulling it off in that stupid-hot move guys do. It's so similar to how Nova does it that it gives me the quickest flash of déjà vu.

I thought it might give me pause, but ironically, the opposite happens. I imagine how it would be if both of them were here, undressing for me.

I feel my eyelids droop, arousal thick and sluggish in my veins.

He grins at me and it's the single most carnal smirk I've ever seen in my life. My breath gets trapped in my chest, and it's all I can do not to squirm too much.

Like the man knows exactly what he's doing, he ever so slowly rolls his hips into me.

A low moan is torn from my mouth, and he swoops down and swallows it with his tongue.

We stay like that for what feels like an eternity, kissing and touching. His hands tease and caress, his touch never quite where I need it, and never with enough pressure. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was teasing me—edging me.

My desire swells into something close to desperation. I roll my hips into his, longing for friction as my arousal soars.

He pulls back, and I take a gulp of air. “Stop teasing me, Lincoln.”

I feel his smile bloom against my skin. He skims his lips across the line of my jaw, nipping his way down my neck until he reaches my ear.

“Time for bed, sugar.” His voice is water-roughened stone.

“What?” I murmur, distracted by the way his scruff feels against my neck.

“It's time for bed, baby girl.” He punctuates his words by dragging his teeth along my earlobe.

“Are you kidding? I don't want to go to sleep. I want to come.”

I'm too far gone to care about how whiny I sound. I feel whiny.

“I know you do,” he murmurs. “But you're going to wait until I tell you

to.”

I huff and stare at the ceiling, letting my hands fall to the bed beside me. But I keep my ankles locked around his waist. I feel the intrusive thought sink into my consciousness, and I'm just frustrated enough to let it slip free.

I slowly bring my gaze to his, defiance pouring from the tilt of my chin. “Maybe I should call Nova. He wouldn't leave me wanting.”

He chuckles, but it's not carefree or dripping in lust like earlier. It's all hard edges.

“You could try. But he's not who you want right now, is he?” He slowly rolls his hips into me. With my legs still wrapped around his waist, he ends up grinding his cock against my pussy, hitting my clit with just the right pressure.

I cave immediately, my lids closing on a gasp. He does it again, and I open my eyes. “Please, Lincoln.”

He swipes his thumb along my bottom lip, one hand planted next to my head as he rocks into me again and again. “I do love to hear you beg, baby girl.”

I strain against him, lifting my hips as much as I can to meet him. I look at him from underneath my lashes. “Please, Lincoln. I'm so close,” I murmur.

He leans down onto his elbows, burying his face in my neck. “Do you remember what my cock feels like, Evangeline? For eight years I've thought about the way this perfect pussy felt,” he says. He slides one hand between my ass and the mattress, angling my hips so his cock hits my clit every single time he rotates his hips. “I'd take my cock in my own hands, fantasizing about how tight you were. How you were fucking dripping for me that night. Your taste lingered on my lips for days. Do you remember that night, baby girl? Do you remember the way you clawed my back as you shattered around my cock?”

It's all too much—his words and admissions and his cock against my clit. I can't stop.

My orgasm slams into me, and I'm panting for air as I free fall into the most exquisite oblivion. I come back to myself, chest heaving and muscles sluggish with pleasure.

I reach for his pants with both hands, and he grabs my wrists with one of his. We look at each other for a moment, and I can see the battle he's having internally.

I hold his stare as I slip one hand free from his hold and slide it underneath the waistband of his jeans. I wrap my hand around the base of his cock, and it's the exact moment he gives in.

He sighs, his eyes fluttering closed. His grip on my other wrist slackens, and I unzip his pants, giving myself some more room.

I start to move my hand up and down his length, careful to keep a slow and steady rhythm. I kind of want to make him beg for it like he made me.

“Fuck me.” His hips jerk into my hand, and he groans again, the sound low and guttural.

I slide my hand over the head of his cock, tracing circles around the tip before I start to move it back down. Over and over again, I tease him with long strokes and just enough pressure.

“More, sugar,” he grunts, his hips thrusting into my hand.

I watch his face, clocking the little flutter in his clenched jaw and the way his lips part when I flick my thumb over the tip. He pushes my shirt up, exposing my stomach and the bottom of my bra.

And then his hand wraps around mine, applying more pressure. I tighten my hold as much as I can around his cock, the ends of my fingertips just touching. He guides me up and down, faster and faster. I expect him to pull his hand away, but he doesn't. Together, we stroke his cock, and I'm so turned on that I almost think I could come again from just watching him.

His breaths turn ragged, hips thrusting into our hands. And then he comes with a long groan, his eyes pinching closed and his head tipping back toward the ceiling.

I slow my movements, softly stroke his length until he's spent. He tips his head to look at me, his expression intense. He releases my hand from around his cock and presses a kiss to the inside of my wrist.

And then he spreads his come around my stomach, almost like he's pressing it into my skin. It's the single most unexpected thing from him, and I just watch.

“That's my girl,” he hums in satisfaction. “That's my good fucking girl.”

SILAS

I START the coffee maker and pull out ingredients for omelets for breakfast, mentally going through the to-do list of all the shit I have to get done today. Evangeline will be here soon, and there's an underlying amount of anxiety she causes by just being in my house.

I don't know if I trust her, despite her somehow bamboozling the rest of my family. But I know I trust her enough. There's no way in hell I'd leave my kid in the hands of someone untrustworthy.

I guess that's something.

I grab coffee in my favorite coffee mug, something Ma helped Hunter make last year, and pad across the kitchen to look out into the backyard.

The sun hasn't even risen yet. Hunter will be sleeping for a few hours still, and Nova never came home last night. He could've stayed with Evangeline, but we're going on forty-eight hours of radio silence, so I'm betting he's holed up in his shop.

He gets these creative streaks sometimes, where he hyper-focuses on something, and he can't stop until he's done. Sometimes it's work, but more often than not, it's another creative outlet.

My brother has more talent with a paintbrush in his pinkie finger than I'll ever have in ten lifetimes.

So when he gets into these moods, I try not to disrupt him.

I take a sip, enjoying the burn as it slides down my throat. It helps ease the cowardice I feel knowing I'm about to call Ma and ask her to come over now.

I pull up her contact and call her. She answers on the second ring.

“What's wrong?”

I scoff. “What? Nothing's wrong. Can't a son call his mother?”

“Not at this time of day,” she replies.

“Please, Ma, you're probably on your second cup of coffee already.” I take a sip and set my mug on the table.

“I'm still on my first. Are you offering to bring me a cup of coffee?”

I tilt my head to the side, surprised by the turn of conversation. “Do you want me to bring you coffee, Ma?”

“I wouldn't turn down gifts from my sons.”

“Okay,” I drag the word out, shaking my head a little. “I was calling for a favor.”

“Of course, honey. What do you need?”

“I need to go into the garage early today. Can you come over early? I don't want to make Evangeline come two hours earlier than she usually does.”

She's quiet. It lasts long enough that I pull the phone away from my ear and glance at the screen. Every so often, we drop all service out here for reason. Something about the cell towers and weather interference.

“Ma? You there?”

“I'm here. You're not avoiding her, are you, Silas? Because that's not going to work after today.”

I grit my teeth, irritated that she saw right through my shit already. And over the phone too. I feel like that's just adding insult to injury.

“I know that. It's just for today. They're behind since I took a day off this week.”

She sucks her teeth, the noise sharp in my ear. “Alright, honey. I'll get

ready and head over.”

“Thanks, Ma. I made omelets. And there's one for you in the warming drawer.”

“You didn't have to do that.”

I run my hand over my head. “It's the least I can do. You've been a godsend this summer.”

“Hanging out with my favorite boys is hardly a hardship,” she says with a chuckle.

I clear my throat. “Well, I appreciate it.”

“I know you do, honey. I'll be over soon, yeah?” she says, ending the phone call.

I hit the home screen on my phone and blow out a breath, letting my cheeks puff up a little.

I LIFT up the hem of my shirt and drag it across my face. If Tune doesn't fix that fucking air conditioner soon, I'm going to lose my fucking mind. We had more cars in our bays today than usual, because someone fucked up the scheduling today. I didn't have the energy to deal with it, so I grabbed my shit and took off as soon as the last car was done.

Anxiety and annoyance twine together as they curl around my spine. I don't even know why I was so fucking worried about Evangeline coming over this morning. She's been watching Hunter with Ma for a couple of weeks without a hiccup.

Something about her being in my house, maybe.

Or more likely, it's the knowledge that Ma's got one more day with them, and then Evangeline's on her own. And Ma goes in for surgery.

I sigh as I trudge up the front steps. The only thing keeping my legs moving is the promise of cool air conditioning, a cold shower, and seeing my

boy's smiling face. For the past three days, he's talked nonstop about her.

Eve's going to teach me how to tap dance.

Eve's going to take me to the beach.

Eve's going to build blanket forts with me.

To say he was excited to see her today is an understatement. It took three bedtime stories and the promise of chocolate chip cookies to get him to settle down and fall asleep. And even then, it was almost eleven o'clock.

“Hello?” I call out as I step inside the house.

Someone shushes me, and Ma comes hurrying into the foyer where I'm toeing off my boots. “I didn't want to wake them until you had a chance to see,” she whispers.

“See what?” I mumble. “Can it wait? I need to clean off and cool down.”

“No, it can't.” She wraps her hand around my bicep and tugs me toward the living room.

I let her pull me along behind her, stopping next to her when we're at the mouth of the hallway leading into the living room.

Evangeline sits in the middle of my charcoal gray sectional, her head tilted to the side and her eyes closed. And there, laying with his head on a throw pillow on her lap, is my boy. Asleep with his little lips parted. He's always slept like that, and when he was a baby, he reminded me of a baby bird with his mouth just barely open.

And just like that, some of my annoyance and frustration melt away. I give myself a moment to appreciate the image.

A fluffy green blanket is thrown over both of them and some kids movie is playing on our TV, the volume a low murmur.

A ball of emotion lodges itself in my throat, and I have to forcibly swallow past it.

They look so peaceful, so content. It's a moment I want to capture and keep. I slip my phone free from my back pocket and walk slowly into the living room. I avoid the known-creaky floorboards and stop right in front of

the couch, and then I open my camera app and take a photo of them.

And then I lean down and run my palm over Hunter's shoulder to wake him up. "Hey, bud. We gotta get up now, or you're never going to sleep tonight."

Evangeline startles awake, blinking those long lashes of hers a few times. She sits up a little, her brown eyes a little glassy with fatigue.

"Silas. You're home already?" Her voice has that sleepy rasp that feels a little like a punch to the dick. But in a way that feels good too.

My annoyance creeps back in, mostly at myself but also at her for being so . . . so *her*. I expel a sigh through my nose and look at her.

"It's four o'clock," I tell her, eyeing the cut along her hairline.

Her hand rubs up and down Hunter's back, almost absentmindedly. "Oh. Oh. Shoot. I'm sorry. He said he was tired, so I put on a movie thinking he might rest a little. I guess I fell asleep too."

"It's fine," I grumble, avoiding her gaze. "But don't make it a habit or he'll never sleep at night."

"Yes, of course," she murmurs, sitting up further. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize."

There's a beat of silence, and I brush Hunter's hair off of his sweaty forehead. His lashes flutter, and he looks up at me. He's got that half-asleep glazed-over look, like he's not really awake yet.

"Hey, bud, time to get up, yeah? We gotta have dinner soon."

He stays on Evangeline's lap, wiggling his body a little. "And chocolate chip cookies."

I chuckle. "That's right, chocolate chip cookies."

"Well, I better leave you guys to it. Thanks for a great day with me, Hunter," Evangeline says.

Hunter pushes up and looks at her, both brows raised expectantly. "You'll be here tomorrow, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it. I have a surprise for us tomorrow," she says, sending

him a bright smile.

“Yes! I love surprises,” he says, fist bumping the air. He leans forward a little. “Is it a present? I love presents.”

“Evangeline doesn't need to bring you presents, bud,” I murmur.

Hunter glances at me, his little brows furrowed low over his eyes. “You don't give back presents, Dad. Nan says that's rude.”

I look over my shoulder at the woman who passed on another little nugget of wisdom, but she's not in the hallway anymore. If I had to guess, she's probably in the kitchen, warming up her fifth cup of coffee for the day.

Evangeline taps her chin with her index finger. “Well, I suppose you could call it a present. But it's more of an activity.”

Hunter lifts his shoulders and drops them down. He hops off the couch and stands next to me. “Sounds like a present to me. Can't wait, Eve!”

She laughs, and some of the tension in my shoulders dissipates. “Me too. I'll see you guys tomorrow then.”

I nod and gesture for Hunter to head toward the kitchen. “Go see if Nan needs any help in the kitchen.” He races out of the room at the same time Evangeline stands. “Everything go okay?”

“Yep,” she says, dusting off imaginary lint on her shorts. “He was a perfect angel.”

“Hm.” The side of my mouth hooks into a grin. My son is a lot of things, many of them amazing, but I'm not sure if I would call him an angel. His curiosity gets him into trouble sometimes.

“I'm planning cookies tomorrow, so I hope it's okay to use your kitchen,” she says, keeping her voice low as she heads toward the front door.

“Oh, he'll love that,” I murmur. “Help yourself to anything you need.”

She pauses in front of a big rectangular bag with thick straps. A popcorn maker, a bag of popcorn kernels, and some of those white and red striped rectangular popcorn boxes.

I jerk my chin toward the bag. “You guys make popcorn today?”

She bends down and picks it up, tossing the straps over her shoulder. “Oh yeah. Hunter did a great job with it. I tried to save you some, but he was like a popcorn-eating machine,” she says with a laugh.

“Maybe next time.”

She grins, and her face looks lighter somehow. We exchange a look, and the air around us feels almost electric. My heart kicks inside my chest as the silence stretches.

“Alright, I'm off. Have a good night,” she says, opening the front door.

“Night,” I murmur, palming the edge of the door and holding it open for her. The hot air rolls over me, a reminder that I'm in desperate need of a shower. But I wait, letting the hot air in the house, until she gets into her car.

She does this little wave, a flutter of her fingers really, before she slides behind the wheel. With a sigh, I close the door and head upstairs toward my bedroom. My mind races with thoughts of Evangeline.

She's been a constant for me lately, and I can't seem to shake her. Some days I'm not sure if I want to.

EVANGELINE

I ARRIVE at Silas's house with a tote full of ingredients, my recipe book, and a few tools we'll need. Silas offered anything in his kitchen, which I definitely plan to use. But I wasn't sure if he had everything we needed.

Before I can even knock, the front door swings open and Hunter stands in the doorway.

“Eve!” he cries out, running and wrapping his arms around my legs. “You're here! Did you bring my present?”

I laugh, my free hand wrapping around him on instinct. “Hey, Hunter! Well, remember it's not a present exactly.”

“An activity,” he says, pulling away and nodding. “I remember. I ate breakfast and brushed my teeth, so I'm ready for the activity now.”

“Let's let her in the house, honey,” Dixie says from the doorway. She's dressed in a loose black tank racerback tank top and a black maxi skirt with her hair twisted into a clip at the back of her neck. She always looks so put together, and she's mastered the art of casual chic.

He skips backward into the house. “Come on in, Eve!”

I follow him inside with a laugh. Dixie squeezes my bicep and together we walk into the kitchen.

I set my tote bag on the kitchen table and look over at her. “How are you doing, Dixie? Ready for tomorrow?”

She smiles, nodding a little bit. “I’ve got a few errands to run today. I was hoping I could persuade you to help me out and push your special activity with Hunter until this afternoon.”

“Oh, of course. Whatever you need.”

She smiles. “Thanks, honey. I knew you wouldn’t mind.”

“When do you want to go?” I ask her, casually looking around the room. I don’t expect to see Silas, not with the long hours Dixie told me he frequently works. But I am getting a little curious about Nova and why the hell he’s been radio silent for days now.

“Now,” she says with a laugh. “There’s a farmer’s market at Lockwood Park that opened a half hour ago. If we wait much longer, all the good stuff will be gone.”

I slide my purse over my head, settling the crossbody against my chest. “Alright, Hunter, time to go on an adventure,” I call out.

THE SOFT COOLER bag Dixie brought to store her produce is tossed over my shoulder. I had to wait until Hunter distracted her when we got out of the car to toss it over my shoulder. I’m not going to stand back and watch as the woman who has shoulder surgery tomorrow afternoon carry a heavy bag on said shoulder.

But since she pushed back when I offered to carry it the first time, I knew I had to be a little sneaky.

Hunter’s sticky hand tightens on mine, and I regret not tossing a pack of hand sanitizing wipes in my bag before we left. I’m still getting used to just how messy five-year-olds are. I don’t even know *why* they’re sticky—we haven’t even sampled anything yet. But that’s about to change because I spot a homemade jam booth.

“Ooh, anyone want to try some raspberry jam?” I look from Hunter to

Dixie, my brows raised.

“You two go ahead. I'm going to grab some rainbow carrots from the booth next door,” Dixie says, crossing the pathway.

“Alright, it's me and you, bud.” We walk hand-in-hand toward the booth in question, stopping in front of the table.

Little wooden crates are propped up, showcasing mason jars full of jam in a variety of sizes and flavors. Raspberry, lingonberry, strawberry rhubarb, blueberry honey, peach ginger, and a few savory flavors too.

Hunter's eyes widen as he takes it all in. “Wow.”

“I know,” I say with a nod. “Have you ever had jam before?”

His face scrunches together like he's thinking really hard. “I don't think so. How do you eat it?”

“Toast, English muffins, pancakes, with peanut butter in a sandwich. You really can't go wrong with jam, bud. I think you're going to like it.”

He nods and looks at the jars again. “If you like it, I'll like it too.”

I chuckle, and ruffle his hair with my free hand. I set the cooler on the ground between my feet and lean over so Hunter and I are eye-to-eye. “Okay, so this is the fun part. We get to pick which flavors we want to try, and then use these little spoons to spread it out on a piece of bread.”

I hand him a little white plastic spoon and put a few pieces of bread on a cocktail napkin in front of us.

“Got it. Which one should we try?”

I point to each jar as I read the flavors, and his lips purse as he listens carefully. He reaches out and points to apple cinnamon and apricot. Maybe my two least favorites, but if he wants to try them, then that's what we're going to do.

I help him get the lid off and hold the napkin so he can spread his jam on a little piece of bread. Right when I open my mouth to toss my bite in, I hear a nasally voice right behind me.

“Oh my god, Hunter!”

It's so high-pitched and loud that I flinch, pinching my fingers together and smushing the piece of bread. I ignore my jammy fingers and slide a step to the right, effectively blocking anyone from approaching Hunter.

I look over my shoulder at the woman. Big, bouncy waves of platinum blonde hair, tiny jean skirt, and a white tee that's definitely partially see-through. Wearing platform flip flops with legs for days and sunglasses that cover half of her face.

I don't recognize her, but that's not saying much.

“Hunter, it's me,” she sing-songs, leaning around me.

I mirror her movements, curving my jam-free hand behind me to hover over Hunter's shoulder. “Can I help you?”

The woman sneers at me, her upper lip curling in a way that reminds me of a snarling dog. “Who are *you*?”

I arch a brow, my irritation spiking at her disrespect. “And who are you exactly?”

She props a hand on her hip, looking down her nose at me. “Hunter knows who I am. I'm going to be his new mommy. Ain't that right, Hunter?” she coos, bending at the knees and tilting sideways in a strange move. It kind of reminds me of one of those prehistoric birds—some kind of crane.

I scoff. Or at least, I meant to, but it comes out as more of a mocking laugh. “I'm sorry, it's just . . . come on.” I grab her by the bicep, not unkindly, and tug her up. “Don't embarrass yourself.”

She jerks her arm out of my grip and snarls at me, “You're going to pay for that when I'm Silas's old lady.”

I tsk and shake my head. “I seriously doubt that.”

I might've believed her for half a second if she'd picked one of the other two St. James men. But it'll be a cold day in hell before Silas picks someone like that to mother his child. I don't know much about him, but of that, I'm sure.

“Whatever, bitch. We'll see,” she snaps, jerking forward a little like she's

trying to intimidate me. I hold my ground, and look at her.

“Get lost, Cath,” Dixie says from somewhere close by.

I don't take my eyes off of the woman in front of me—Cath. She feels unpredictable in the worst way, and I don't like those kinds of surprises. I watch the change ripple over her almost instantly. Her glare cuts to Dixie, and she visibly wilts in front of me.

My mouth parts in shock as her face transforms from indignation to chagrin.

“Whatever, Dixie. I'm already gone,” Cath says, holding her hands up, palms toward me, and walking backward a few steps.

I turn around and immediately bend down, my ass hitting my heel as I look into his eyes. They never lie and they can't deceive. Not easily at least.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yep. And I decided on the apple cinnamon flavor,” he says with a nod and some hiccups.

I look from the little pile of plastic spoons to his adorable little face. His eyes twinkle from all the sugar, I'm sure, but I find myself nodding anyway.

“Apple it is, bud. Great choice,” I tell him.

Once I pay and tuck our new jam into the cooler, we continue down the path. Thankfully, it's a loop so it'll bring us back to the car soon.

We pass a custard truck on the way, and I stop to get Hunter a mini cone. It's one of those bite-sized ones for adults, so it's just about the perfect amount for a kid.

“Your kindness, while admirable, won't win you the respect you'll need, honey,” Dixie murmurs as we meander down the pathway.

I look at her, my lips twisting to the side. “What do you mean?”

She tips her head behind us. “With the girls.”

I shake my head, trying and failing to follow what she's saying. “I don't understand.”

She nods, slowing her pace and lowering her voice. “There will be girls.

Lots of girls. Some of them become bunnies and some of them just normal girls. All of them will act stupid. Most of them kick that act like the bad habit it is, and those who don't get kicked to the curb.”

“Okay,” I say, dragging the word out slowly, finally understanding what she's saying. Kind of.

“My boys need someone in their corner, someone who won't fold at the first lie from a random woman's lips,” Dixie explains, her tone serious. “Someone who can weather the bunnies and the girls. And still go home to them every night.”

My head spins at the implication. My face feels hot and the back of my neck pricks with awareness. “Oh, it's not like that. I—”

She holds out a hand, and I stop talking immediately. “Don't lie to me, honey. We both know there's something happening between you and my boys. That's none of my business, yeah? I'm just helping you out, throwing you a few tips I learned in my many years inside the club.”

“Yeah, okay. Thank you.” I swallow roughly, thankful that Hunter is wholly engrossed eating his chocolate ice cream cone. I don't even mind that it's dripping down his hand and landing in little chocolate splatters on his shoes. As long as he's not paying attention to this awkward conversation, I'm good.

She dips her chin in acknowledgement. “Of course, honey. Club life isn't for everyone. Our club is nothing like you see portrayed on TV or in the movies. But these girls? They don't want to be part of the club. They don't want to be a Reaper. They covet the *idea* of being on the back of a Reaper's bike. So they approach my boys at the grocery stores or the farmer's market. They one-up each other, climbing over friends to get to the imaginary finish line.”

“And what's that—the finish line? Being an old lady?” My nose scrunches up at the term. It never sounded appealing to me, but I know that it's different for them. The title is about respect.

She looks at me. “A family.”

EVANGELINE

“IS IT ACTIVITY TIME NOW, EVE?” Hunter asks, jumping down from the stool at the island. He twists to grab his plate and cup from lunch, and does this little hop-run to the sink.

“It sure is,” I answer, a smile on my face as I watch him carefully set both dishes in the sink.

He's so responsible, and he definitely acts older than his age. I've been around kids his age before, and they can be little vehicles of chaos.

Not that Hunter couldn't wreak a little havoc when the mood strikes, because at the end of the day, he is only five. But he just seems so much older than he is.

Dixie's laughter echoes in the kitchen as she scoots her stool back from the island counter. “I'm going to head home for a bit,” she says, brushing a few stray strands of her hair off her face. “I've got a few things to take care of before tomorrow.”

I straighten up and take a step toward her. “Do you need us to help you with anything?”

Dixie's eyes crinkle in the corners as she smiles, shaking her head. “No, honey. Thank you though.” She opens her arms wide, beckoning her grandson over. “Come give Nan some love, Hunter.”

Without hesitation, Hunter runs around the island and throws his arms

around Dixie's legs, smushing his smiling face a little.

Her hands fly to his back as she stumbles back a step from the force of Hunter's hug. She runs her hand through his hair. "Be good for Evangeline, yeah?"

He tilts his head up to look at her, an innocent smile pasted on his face. "I'm always good, Nan!"

Her fingers gently comb through his messy waves as she bends over, planting a loving kiss on the crown of his head. "I know you are, sweet boy."

Hunter pulls away with a wide grin, and climbs onto his stool once more. He sits on his knees, bouncing a little bit like he can't contain his excitement. His bright eyes lock onto mine, eager and expectant.

"Alright, someone's excited," I murmur with a chuckle.

An impulsive urge sweeps over me, and before I can second guess myself, I cross the kitchen and throw my arms around Dixie. She returns the embrace instantly, pulling me into her warm embrace. There's a small piece of me that feels that sweet pang of nostalgia, the too-hot spark of maternal affection.

God, when was the last time I was hugged like this?

I don't have to think about it, not really. There's only ever been one person who's hugged me like this before.

Nana Jo.

Cora and I hug all the time, but it's not the same. It's a sisterhood bond, one of mutual affection and respect. I can't explain it except to say that a maternal hug just feels different than any other kind.

And Dixie gives maternal hugs.

I sniff back the sudden thick taste of grief and pull back. I clear my throat and glance over her shoulder. "I don't know the proper thing to say to someone heading into surgery," I murmur. "Best of luck? Sending positive vibes? Break a leg is theatre, I know that much," I ramble with a nervous chuckle.

She squeezes my hand, a small smile playing with the corners of her lips. “Thank you, honey. Any of that is good, and I appreciate it. I’ll be right as rain in a few days.”

I nod, feeling heat rising to my cheeks. I clear my throat and push down the swell of embarrassment for just hugging her like that. I reason with myself that it’s a normal response to someone going into surgery. But there’s a layer of awkwardness around my shoulders now.

“I’m sure you will. I’ll make sure to send some cookies from today with Silas for you. I think you’ll like them.”

“We’re making cookies? Yes!” Hunter exclaims, thrusting his fist into the air and bumping it twice.

I don’t know where he picked up this mannerism, because so far, I haven’t seen anyone around him do it. But it makes me laugh every time.

I pivot on the ball of my foot, raise my arms up, and wiggle my fingers in what I’m sure is an excessive amount of jazz hands. Okay, so I’m just piling on the awkwardness at this point. Maybe I can claim heatstroke and everyone will forget about it.

“Surprise. We’re making chocolate chip cookies today,” I say, wiggling my fingers once more.

“Oh my god, Nan! Did you hear that? Eve’s going to make chocolate chip cookies with me!” He’s nearly yelling now, his excitement too much for him to contain.

Dixie’s laugh joins Hunter’s enthusiasm, and she walks over to plant another kiss on the top of her grandson’s head. “Have fun, buddy. I’ll see you for dinner tonight, okay? Don’t let your dad eat all the cookies either.” Her voice is warm and playful, brimming with affection.

His expression grows serious and he nods. “I won’t. I don’t think he found my secret hiding place last time.”

She pats him on the shoulder with affection and grabs her purse off the back of her stool. She tosses it over her shoulder and sings, “Have fun.”

As soon as she's out the door, I pin Hunter with an arched brow and ask, "So where are you hiding cookies from your dad?"

"HEY, EVE," Hunter murmurs as he stirs the flour, baking soda, and salt together.

"Yeah, buddy?" I glance from the mixing bowl to his face. The tip of his tongue peeks out the side of his mouth, his eyes focused on his spatula turning inside the bowl.

I brought my favorite ceramic baking bowl set from Nana Jo's to use today. It's heavy, so the bowls don't slip when you use the hand mixer.

"If you were a type of dessert, what do you think you'd be?"

His question is so out of left field, that I don't answer right away. "Hm, I'm not sure. Maybe a banana cream pie? My grandma used to make the best pies. This is her cookie recipe, you know." I tilt my head to the side, my lips twisting. "Well, kind of. I made some adjustments, so I guess it's mine now."

He nods, working hard on combining all the dry ingredients together. "I don't think you'd be banana pie."

"What would you be?" I ask, prepping the rest of the recipe.

"That's easy. A chocolate chip cookie." He says it like duh. Which, I suppose, I should've known.

"Of course. What about your dad and uncles? What would they be?" I ask, adding all the wet ingredients into a different mixing bowl.

"Hm," he says, stopping with his hand on the spatula. He looks at me, his face scrunching up a little. "Dad's probably a cookie. One of those plain ones because he'll eat anything—even those sugar cookies without icing. Uncle Nova's easy. He'd be ice cream because it's his favorite. He likes to throw all kinds of things in his ice cream." His expression smooths out, his eyes wide. "Did you know you can add potato chips to ice cream?"

I nod a few times. “Yep. It's pretty good. Have you ever tried it?”

He leans over the bowl, planting a circle-shaped flour print on his shirt. “Uncle Nova always shares his desserts with me, but it's a secret.”

“That sounds like your uncle. And don't worry, your secrets are safe with me, buddy.” I'd be willing to bet that Silas knows all about Nova's dessert sharing already.

“Uncle Bane is pecan pie!” he crows.

My brows rise as I add the last ingredient to my bowl. “Really?”

“Yep,” he says, popping the p a little. “Nan makes him his own pecan pie for Christmas every year. And she let me help last time!”

“I bet you were a big help. Did Uncle Bane share any with you? It's important to taste our food when we're baking and after, when it's finished.”

“I know, Bobby told me,” he says, stirring again.

My brows crinkle in confusion. “Bobby?”

“Yep, I watch his cooking shows on TV with Nan. Sometimes Dad will watch it with me too, but he always falls asleep.”

It takes me a minute to connect the dots, that he's talking about a famous chef like they're friends. It's maybe the cutest thing I've seen, and I have to roll my lips inward to stop a goofy smile from spreading across my face.

“Gotcha. Ready for the next step?”

I push his mixing bowl aside and slide mine in front of him. “We need to mix all of this together, but instead of a spatula, we're going to use one of these. Ever used this before?” I hold up the pale teal hand mixer.

He nods quickly. “Yep with Nan. But she helps me sometimes because it gets heavy.”

“Okay, you let me know when it's getting heavy, and I'll take over.” I help him situate the beaters in the bowl, adjust his hold, and then turn it on.

About halfway through, I take over and finish mixing.

“Great job, Hunter. Two more steps, and then we can bake.”

“Chocolate chip time?” he asks, leaning forward on his elbows.

“Almost. We need to combine our two mixtures into one. Do you think you can lift the flour bowl and add a little at a time into this one?” I ask, tapping the bowl in front of me.

“Absolutely.” He leans across the counter and wraps his hands around the little handles on the bowl, pulling it toward him. He clutches it against his chest and lifts it up, balancing it on the side of the other bowl. The flour mixture trickles into the big bowl, and I turn on the beaters again.

When it's all combined, Hunter dumps the entire bag of mini chocolate chips into the batter without any direction. He uses the same spatula to stir them in.

He looks at me with raised brows. “Like this?”

“Yep, just like that. You're doing a great job.”

I reach around him and grab the half sheet baking pan I brought from Nana Jo's house and spray it with nonstick cooking spray.

“Now, we're going to use the spatula to spread the batter in this.”

He looks at me, his little nose wrinkling. “Eve, cookies go on a cookie sheet in little balls.”

“Normal cookies do, yes. But these are special ones.”

His head falls to the side. “Special how?”

I pull out the container of cookie cutters I brought with me, plucking the big heart-shaped one. “Because these are heart-shaped chocolate chip cookies. We bake them in this pan and then cut them into shapes afterward.”

Hunter's eyes light up with excitement. “That sounds cool! Can I help cut them into shapes?”

“Of course. I'm going to need some help. But first, we need to bake them.”

He nods eagerly, taking his spatula and helping me spoon batter into the pan. I pop it into the oven and we get to work on cleaning up our mess.

The front door slams closed and then a moment later, someone calls out, “What is that delicious smell?”

EVANGELINE

MY BACK STIFFENS IN SURPRISE. I didn't know he was here—or just getting here, I guess. I slip my phone from my back pocket and scan the home screen.

Nova: What are you wearing?

I don't feel like flirting right now. I'm a little annoyed that he went silent on me again after he said he would come for me. And maybe I don't have any right to be disappointed, but I'm not perfect. I make a snap decision and reply.

Me: three days ago, I was naked and waiting for you to come
and get me like you said you would

It's a lie. I wasn't naked and waiting. But I also feel like rubbing it in a little.

“We're in here, Uncle Nova,” Hunter tips his head back and yells.

“Hang on a sec, buddy,” Nova yells.

Nova: Fuck

Nova: I'm sorry

Nova: I got held up with something

Nova: I'll make it up to you

Nova: I promise

Nova: Where are you?

“And we're making cookies!” Hunter says, projecting his voice a touch louder than he really needs to.

“Cookies? My favor—” Nova cuts himself off as he comes into the kitchen, his gaze zeroing in on me. His face transforms as it spreads into a slow smile. “Well, if it isn't the girl of the hour.”

I press my hand to my chest in mock surprise. “Me?”

His grin hooks into a smirk as he strolls toward me. “Of course. Who else would it be?”

I slip my phone back into my pocket and continue to wipe down the counter. “Tough to say. It's been so long since I've seen you. I was worried you wouldn't recognize me anymore.” I make sure to put enough sass in so he knows I'm just teasing him. Mostly anyway.

“Hey, Hunter?”

“Yeah?” His little head pops up from the other side of the island, a washcloth clutched in his hand.

“Remember that prank we like to play on your dad when he comes home from work?” Nova asks.

Hunter's face breaks out into a grin, and he holds back giggles. “Should we show Eve?”

Nova nods, that goddamn dimple popping out and taunting me. “We should definitely show her.” He jerks his chin toward the front of the house. “Go get into position. Your dad's on his way home.”

Hunter tosses the washcloth on the island and sprints out of the room, his giggles leaving an audible trail behind him.

“Do I want to know what that's all about?” I keep my voice low and concentrate on scrubbing the counters.

“You'll see,” he murmurs as he steps in behind me. He molds his front to my back and plants his hands on the island on either side of me. His nose runs along the shell of my ear. “Ah, I get it now.”

I stop wiping, holding my position as my heart kicks up a notch. “Get what?”

“You don't need to be jealous, sweetheart. I wasn't stepping out on you.” His breath coasts over my neck, sending shivers down my back.

I flick my gaze toward the front of the house, where I saw Hunter disappear to, half-expecting him in the doorway. But it's empty.

“I'm not jealous,” I murmur.

He presses in closer, the heat of his body warming my back. “You sure? You'd look great in a little green, baby. I'd let you take it all out on me too—I can take anything you wanna give me.”

I turn my head to the side. “Your nephew is here. You can't talk like that.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, sweetheart,” he chastises. It loses its effect when I can feel his grin against my neck. “You smell delicious, by the way. I could just eat you up.” He nips at my skin. “I've missed you, baby.”

I back up a little, his cock bumping into my ass. “I've missed you too. Where have you been? Bane and Silas have both been here.”

He sighs, dropping his head to the slope of my neck. “Sometimes I have to go solo, sweetheart.”

I nod, some of my frustration easing. “Well maybe you can give me a head's up next time. I don't need all the details, but a quick text letting me know you're busy for a few days? I was getting worried.”

He turns his head and brushes his lips along my skin. “I'm sure my cousin helped ease that for you.”

The timer goes off, saving me from coming up with a reply. He steps back, giving me space to get our cookie tray from the oven. I slide it out carefully, setting in on the cooling rack.

I hear the front door shut, the click loud in the house. And then I'm not sure what happens. It feels like I'm having an out-of-body experience.

A grown man yelp, a peal of little boy laughter, a loud thump, and a hot

dog running through the house.

“Goddammit, Nova,” Silas yells.

“Swear jar, Dad,” the hotdog exclaims, tearing around the house.

Laughter bubbles up inside of me like one of those wishing fountains in the courtyards of malls. It spills out of me in a waterfall, only increasing after I piece together the puzzle.

I cup my hands around my mouth and say, “Hey, where'd that hot dog come from?”

Squeals of laughter from somewhere by the front of the house is the only reply.

“We gotta get a dog to chase that hot dog down,” Nova says, projecting his voice so Hunter hears him over his own giggles.

“I spilled my fucking coffee in the foyer, asshole,” Silas grumbles, glaring at Nova.

Nova is totally unbothered, hands shoved in his front pockets, leaning his hip against mine. “Serves you right, old man. You know you'll never sleep tonight if you keep mainlining caffeine.”

“Fuck off,” Silas says, but there's no conviction in it. It's like a throwaway statement. He gives me his attention. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“I'll make sure this is all cleaned up before I go. It's nearly cooled,” I say quickly.

He drags his hand across the back of his neck. “Yeah, it's fine. I'll take care of it. But I, uh, need a favor.”

I rock onto my toes. “Oh, sure. What's up?”

He glances from Nova to me. “We're going to be out of town for a few days. And I need someone to watch Hunter.”

“We are?” Nova asks, lifting his brow.

Silas looks at him, and they're having one of those internal dialogues again. Nova tips his chin up and nods a few times, but he doesn't say anything.

“Sure, no problem. When?”

“In a couple days. Through the weekend. I'm not sure how many days exactly, but I'll let you know before we leave.”

“Okay, that shouldn't be a problem.”

“So that means you have to stay here,” Silas hedges, bracing for my reaction.

I bite the inside of my cheek at his nervousness. I don't think I've ever seen him quite like this. “Yep, I figured as much.”

“Alright. Ma will be around, but she'll be fresh in her recovery, so I don't want to lean on her. If there's an emergency, obviously go to her. But otherwise . . .” He trails off.

“Let her rest, got it.”

“Thanks.” Silas wraps his knuckles on the counter twice. He looks at Nova then. “You good if I go take a quick shower?”

Nova lifts his shoulders, a smirk tipping up the side of his mouth. “Dunno, brother. Gotta date with my girl as soon as she's off work.”

Silas gives him a deadpan stare before he looks at me, his expression softening. “I'll be back in five minutes.”

“Don't worry about it. I have to wrangle a hot dog and cut out some cookies still. Then I'll get out of your way.”

“You're not in our way here, Evangeline,” Silas says, his voice quiet. He turns on his heel and stalks out of the room.

Coming from him, that might as well be a love letter written in the sky from one of those rent-a-message airplanes. I'm sure he's feeling generous because I just agreed to a favor, but I don't care. I'll take it.

“Alright, Hunter, time to cut our cookies out!”

Footfalls pound throughout the house, and a few moments later, a sweaty, red-faced Hunter skids to a stop across the island from me.

“Cookie time?”

“That's right, time to cut out our hearts.” As soon as the words are out of

my mouth, my gaze cuts to Hunter, my eyes wide. His expression mirrors mine, and as if we planned it, we both lean forward and burst into laughter.

I recover quickly, handing out heart-shaped cookie cutters to Hunter and Nova. The three of us are quiet as we strategize the best places to press out cookie cutters.

“Hey, Eve?” Hunter calls.

I look at him with raised brows. “What's up, my little muffin?”

His lips curve into a wide grin with the nickname, just like I'd hoped they would. He leans forward, hands clasped in front of him at the island, like he's telling me a secret.

“You're not a banana pie.”

I slant my head toward him and lower my voice like we're conspiring together. “I'm not?”

“Nope,” he says, shaking his head. “You're a heart-shaped chocolate chip cookie.”

Affection blooms like a bouquet of wildflowers inside my chest, vibrant and full of life. My shoulders sink and my expression softens as I look at the little boy across from me, feeling grateful for his childhood perspective.

“Thanks, muffin,” I whisper.

“That's silly, Eve. I'm not a muffin,” he says with a giggle, his eyes crinkling up at the corners.

“Not even a chocolate chip one?” I ask, tilting my head and squinting at him.

His expression flattens with surprise. “There are chocolate chip muffins?”

“Sure are. Wanna make some together?”

“Dad!” he yells, sliding off the stool and running out of the kitchen. “There are chocolate chip *muffins!*” His voice carries all the way back to the kitchen, but Silas's tone is too deep and muffled. I can't make out his response.

Nova's hand slides across my lower back as he leans down next to me.

“Ready, sweetheart?”

I straighten up and give him my best mock-glare. “Depends. Are you ready to make it up to me?”

He inclines his face to mine, dragging his teeth across his bottom lip. “All night if you let me.”

I push him away with a gentle shove at his chest, laughter bubbling up despite myself. “You're a terrible flirt. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Nah, baby, never.”

NOVA

THE SUN IS SETTING, painting the sky in thick swaths of pink and orange. I can't believe how hot and humid it is at this time of day. I don't know why I'm surprised, it's the same every year. But somehow, I'm always surprised by just how thick it gets in the summertime.

“Where are we going?”

I swing our clasped hands together a little as we walk hand-in-hand from our house toward Southern Steel, the studio garage I've been holed up in for the past several days.

“You'll see.” I grin at her raised brows, ticking my smile up a notch so it showcases my dimples. I know they make her a little weak in the knees, and I'm not above using that shit to my advantage.

She rolls her eyes at me, but I can see the faint blush rising on her cheeks. “You're incorrigible,” she says, mock-scolding me. Her sly little grin sort of detracts from the whole thing though.

I chuckle and tug her closer to my side, swinging our clasped hands up and brushing a kiss along her knuckles. “You love it.”

“Maybe,” she concedes with a shrug, her deep brown eyes sparkling as she looks up at me.

It's insane how just being in her presence changes shit—changes me. She brings me a semblance of peace, a bright spot of something good in a world

that can seem pretty fucking gray sometimes. Around her, I feel like I can finally breathe again.

Or fuck, maybe it's because I spent the last few days creating shit inspired by her. Either way, I'm pretty sure I'm a fucking goner.

“So how was your day with the greatest nephew in the world?”

She smirks. “He is pretty great, isn't he?”

“I mean, it's well documented that he takes after me,” I tease her, bumping my shoulder into hers.

She flashes me a wide smile. “Obviously. It was a good day. We went to the farmer's market with your mom. I introduced Hunter to jam and he got some questionable flavor combos, so you're welcome for that,” she says with a chuckle.

The sound fucks me up a little, and I think I might do just about anything to keep hearing it.

“How was your day?”

I bite my lip as I feel the weight of her question. It's innocent enough, but it feels loaded. “Busy. I had some stuff to work through.”

“And did you? Work through it, I mean.”

I nod, my eyes focusing on the ground as my boots scuff over loose gravel. “Yeah, I think I did.”

“Good,” she responds, her tone soft.

I look over at her profile. The slope of her nose and the curl of her long lashes. Her cheekbone and her full, pouty lips. She's so beautiful it makes my chest ache.

Finally, we reach the back entrance of my garage. I let go of her hand to unlock the door. I hold it open and gesture for her to go in first. “Welcome to Southern Steel.”

“Oh wow,” she murmurs.

“Not what you expected, yeah?” I go in behind her, flicking the lock.

She looks at me over her shoulder. “It's very . . . white.”

White walls and white vinyl floors. Ornate gold and black frames with colorful art in white mats.

I chuckle, wiping my hand across my mouth. “Yeah. I like to see the way colors look, and the white sort of makes it pop. But that's not what I wanted to show you. C'mon, sweetheart.”

I lead her through the garage half of the studio to the art space in the corner of the building. It's decorated in the same way—white walls and white vinyl flooring for easy clean up.

Waning sunlight filters in through the half-opened blinds in front of the large floor-to-ceiling corner window. I leave the lights off, watching her as she slowly walks into the room. My gaze glues itself to her face without my permission, vulnerability sinking its poisoned talons into my flesh. I wonder what she's thinking as she looks around the space.

The drafting table against one wall, sketch paper covering every available inch of the table. Canvases leaning against the other wall in various sizes, some incomplete with layers of paint, others blank. Art supplies on the shelves against the wall next to me. An empty easel in the window corner. And a six-foot-by-six-foot drawing taped in the center of the wall on my left.

It's the best thing I've ever created in my life.

And with fucking charcoal of all mediums. It's my least used, and I still don't know why I was drawn to it.

But I exorcized some demons in this room, many of them this week. And this—this is the product of the journey.

I force myself to lean against the doorway, instead of getting too close to study every minute change on her face when she finally notices the paper on the wall. Nerves eat the lining of my stomach like hungry little piranhas.

She slowly walks toward it, stopping when she's a few feet away. She gasps, this quiet inhale of shock, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

“Nova,” she says, her voice catching. She looks over at me, her big eyes sparkling with unshed tears. “This is—this is”—she cuts herself off, shaking

her head quickly in disbelief—incredible. “It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.”

It's her. Head tilted back with her hands lifting some of her long dark hair, the soft waves tumbling over her bare shoulders. Eyes closed and her perfect lips parted the way they do right before she comes.

“Nah, Evangeline. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on,” I tell her, my voice quiet but firm.

Her fingers ghost the lines of her jaw, a good six inches away from the actual paper. I already started the process of preserving it, so it'll be easier to move soon.

She pivots on the ball of her foot, turning around so quickly that I don't realize she's running toward me until she's nearly on top of me. She launches herself at me, wrapping her legs around my waist, and I catch her instinctually. My hands find her ass, and I hold her to me.

She's shaking her head, her gaze flying over the features like she's at a loss of what to say.

“One little drawing, and my girl loses her words?” I tease, squeezing her round ass.

“Shut up and kiss me,” she demands.

I crash my lips to hers in the next heartbeat. Possession beats against my veins as our tongues tangle together. She moans into my mouth, wiggling forward like she's not already pressed up tight against me. Her hands sink into my hair, flicking my hat off without missing a beat.

She pulls back, panting and cheeks flushed with arousal. “I can't believe you did that.”

“This is where I've been, what I've been doing for the last few days.”

Her eyes widen. “You've been doing this for days?”

I run my palms over her curves and nod. “Art is more than a job for me. It's . . . therapeutic. And sometimes when I need to work through some shit, or figure out a problem for the club, I come here. Sometimes it takes a day,

sometimes a week.”

Her fingernails scrape against the nape of my neck as she regards me. “You're incredible, Nova. This kind of talent,” she pauses, shaking her head absently. “It's rare.”

I shrug, smoothing one hand up her spine. “I'm happy here though.”

She leans in and sweeps her lips across the corner of my mouth, whispering, “Thank you, baby. It's the best present.”

“You wanna know the best present you can give me?” I run my tongue across my bottom lip, catching the swell of her bottom lip.

“Hm, what's that?” her voice is low, sultry without even trying.

“If you sit on my face.”

She chuckles, but it's more arousal and less humor. “Right now?”

“Right here, sweetheart. Right now. I want you to ride my face, and don't stop until I tell you too.”

“Jesus Christ,” she swears on a gasp a second before she captures my mouth in a heated kiss. I feel the intensity of her desire, the possession in the way her hips roll against mine. Or maybe I'm fucking projecting my own overwhelming need for her.

A loud thudding pulls me out of one of the hottest kisses of my life. Who the fuck am I kidding? Every time my girl's mouth is on me is the hottest fucking time of my life.

I glance around, seeing someone waving outside the corner window. I walk over to it, still holding Evangeline, and raise the blinds.

Silas stands on the other side, holding up his phone. “Answer your fucking phone, Nova.”

Irritation pierces my scalp, and I yell, “I'm busy.” I lift her up a few inches, telling my brother exactly what I'm busy with.

His eyes narrow on me. “Club business. Now.” He doesn't say anything else as he stalks away.

I tip my head back and let out a sigh.

“Hey, it's alright,” she says, her fingertips coaxing my face back to hers. She places a soft kiss on my lips. “To be continued.”

I chase her lips when she pulls away. “Count on it, baby.”

I reluctantly put her on her feet, letting her body slide down mine. Reaching over her, I snag the handle and drop the blinds back down. “Can you imagine if he came ten minutes later and saw you sitting on my face?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her eyelids drop and her lips part.

“Can you imagine,” she says quietly.

NOVA

I ADJUST MY HAT, spinning it to face backward as I walk inside the clubhouse. I haven't been in here since that night all that shit went down.

Fuck me, that feels like ages ago.

Quince pops his head out of his room, holding out his hand to do the bro handshake. “Hey, man. Haven't seen you all week.”

I jerk my chin in greeting. “Yeah, man. Been busy.”

His grin gets a little leering and nods a few times. “Been busy with your girl, I get that, man. She's a nice—”

I plant my hand in the middle of his chest and lock eyes with him. I feel the violence simmering as I glare at him. “If you have any common sense left in that head of yours, you'll shut your fucking mouth about my girl. Yeah?”

He raises both palms up. “Yeah, man. I got you.”

I shove him a little. “Good. Don't fucking forget it.”

Some bunny calls for him from inside his room, and I leave him to it. I find Silas in the kitchen, standing on one side of the island, arms braced on the counter. He lifts his head when he hears the scuffle of my boots on the floor.

“What's up that you couldn't wait until later to tell me?”

He shakes his head. “Bane'll be here any second. I don't want to repeat myself.”

I sigh through my nose and pull out a chair at the table along the wall. I sink into it and look around the room. “Who's with Hunter? I watched Evangeline leave.”

“Yeah, he's with Ma for a little bit. She had us over tonight, a night-before-surgery dinner.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Is it just me or is she taking this a little too easily?”

Silas shakes his head. “Maybe. She told me she's made it through far scarier situations than, and I quote, a little shoulder pain.”

I scoff. The woman is never fazed by violence or blood or debauchery. I shouldn't be surprised that she isn't scared of surgery.

Bane strolls in, stopping in the middle of the room. “What's up?”

I shrug and jerk my head toward my brother, pushing back to balance the chair on two legs. “Ask him. He pulled Evangeline off of me to drag me in here.”

Bane's head whips to Silas. “You put your hands on her?” His voice is sharp enough to cut flesh from bone, a shimmer of something brutal in the air around him.

Silas pushes off the counter, his chest puffing up as his face smooths into a scowl. “Are you fucking kidding me, Bane? Of course not.”

Bane exhales, and it's like someone let the air out of a tire. I see him visibly relax. He shakes his head a little. “You're right. Sorry. I'm just a little fucked up from the possible break-in at Evangeline's the other day.”

The front two legs of the chair slam down. “What possible break-in?”

Bane rolls his shoulders back and pulls out a chair across from me. “The one from the other day. A second one. Maybe.”

I lean forward and stop myself from baring my teeth at him. But the urge to find her and protect her is loud and demanding. “Why didn't anyone tell me.”

“You weren't answering your phone, remember?” Silas says, pulling out

the chair at the head of the table.

I lean back and fold my arms across my chest, my knee bouncing a little. “Nah, man, see that's bullshit. You both knew where I was. Either one of you could've walked in at any time.”

Silas scoffs. “The last time I interrupted one of your creative sessions like that, you nearly broke my jaw.”

I clench my jaw together. “Don't be so dramatic, brother. It was a measly black eye, and you fucking deserved it for the shit you said.”

My brother isn't what you would call an art connoisseur, so I try not to let the fact that he doesn't have any taste offend me. It's also why I work mostly alone. I don't want a running commentary about everything. Sometimes shit looks weird, but you have to trust the process.

“Can we move on to the reason we're all here?” Bane asks, widening his legs and getting comfortable.

“Right. Blue Knights called. Diesel's cashing in their favor now,” Silas says.

“Should we be worried that they're calling it in so early?” Bane asks.

“And before we even used ours?” I ask immediately after.

Silas shakes his head. “We don't really have a choice. We're not swimming in allies.”

I drag my teeth over my bottom lip and try to figure out if we're about to get fucked. “Not even the Vipers?”

“Nah,” Bane says, shaking his head. “They're still too green. It'd be more work than less.”

“So, who do we have?”

“Blue Knights. Horsemen. Widows. And Diamond Pythons, but only if we're desperate.”

Bane whistles under his breath. “That's it?”

“That's all I can get now. That shit Savage Souls and Hell Hounds did on Three Crowns scared people. Which was probably the whole fucking point

—”

“Which means that they have someone much smarter than Rucker, the Savage Souls old prez,” Bane interrupts.

I nod a few times. “Which makes them the most dangerous. They're running on a false high, and they'll do anything to keep chasing it. And these motherfuckers were already certifiable high-stakes junkies. They never cared much for their own welfare or the destruction of their town.”

“So we go where? To New York? Because that ride sounds long,” Bane says.

“They need backup helping one of their brothers. He's in a situation about five hours away,” Silas says.

“So we're playing bodyguard then?” I ask.

Silas nods. “Pretty much. It's us, two or three days. We leave in a couple of days.”

Bane narrows his eyes on my brother. “Why are the three of us going?”

I pick up on his train of thought. “Who's gonna hold shit down here?”

“It's us three or no favor. And yes, before you ask, the thought crossed my mind that this is a trap. But it's too elaborate. There are far easier ways to take us out if that's what their goal was,” Silas says with a shrug. “We'll take it to a vote though.”

“We don't have much of a choice. We might need them sooner than later,” Bane says, running his hand across his mouth.

I lean forward, my heart pumping faster. “Why?”

“Savage Souls and Hell Hounds hit three more businesses in the neutral territory. And I've heard rumors that they made a deal with the Outlaws.”

“Fuck,” Silas and I curse at the same time. Our gazes snap to one another, and I shake my head.

The Outlaws are an aptly named gang that mostly keeps to their territory to the west. It's high desert, low tourists, and full of all kinds of shit to fuck someone up. In all the years they've been around, they've never waded into

anything. And not because they don't have the manpower, they just can't be fucked to get involved.

Resolve loosens the tight grip of dread around my ribs. “If the Outlaws are buddying up to the duo from hell? Then, yeah, we need to do the fucking bodyguard thing. Because we're sure as fuck gonna need them soon.”

EVANGELINE

I'VE GOT my head in the refrigerator when I hear the knocking. It sounds like someone's slamming their fists against my front door hard enough to break the glass panes. I should've known something was going to happen soon. I've gone nearly a week of quiet contentment.

My heart kicks into overdrive, fear sluicing through my veins quickly behind it. I didn't realize how jumpy I'd become. Probably because I don't have the same feelings when I'm at Silas's house. There, I feel safe and secure.

And even though Rosewood is a safe town all things considered, I guess I do feel a little bit out in the open here. There's just so much *space*. The property lines are huge in this area of town, and outside of a few clusters of trees in the backend of the property, it's basically wide open.

I glance toward the sliding glass door, comforted by the last vestiges of the setting sun outside. I don't know why when just as many bad things can and do happen in the daylight, but I'm sure my cousin would have some opinions on the whole thing.

“Coming,” I yell as I hustle down the hallway.

I see two shapes through the frosted glass, and confusion draws my brows in tight. Maybe it's the neighbors or something. I haven't seen Mr. and Mrs. Johnston who live to the right yet.

“Hello?” I pull the door open a foot or so.

“Evangeline,” my mother greets me, her voice flat.

“Mother?” My grip on the doorknob slackens and the front door sways open further. “What are you doing here?”

Dressed in a navy pantsuit worthy of any one of her A-list events. A cranberry red handbag rests in the crook of her elbow. She holds her sunglasses and phone in one hand, and the other tucks a perfectly coifed strand of hair behind her ear.

Virginia Carter is a gorgeous woman, there's no denying that. Not that she would ever let anyone deny her anything.

She flicks her hand in the air, a graceful arc. “What? I can't come to my mother's house now?”

“It's my house, actually.”

“Hm. Yes, well, I heard about your recent homeowner's troubles, so I brought someone with me who could help.” She presses her index fingers against the front door, her pale pink polish a sharp contrast to the dusty painted door.

The implication is clear. She wants to come in, but she won't outright ask. That would be considered beneath her, because she expects everyone to adhere to whatever arbitrary etiquette guidelines and rules she's placed on herself and everyone who's in her orbit.

Which I guess means me.

I bite the inside of my cheek and regrip the door handle, not allowing her to push the door open. She notices immediately, because of course she does. The woman isn't called a shark for her fashion sense. She never misses anything.

“Now's not a good time, Mom.”

I mentally pat myself on the back for how even my tone was.

She leaves her finger pressed against the door as she sizes me up. I hate the way my shoulders pull back and I stand up taller on instinct, like some

sort of Pavlovian response. It makes me want to slouch just to prove I can.

Baby steps, I remind myself.

“Yes, I can see that. Are you heading to the gym? Does this town even have a decent gym? Perhaps you could raze this down and build one here,” she says. “It'd definitely improve the quality of life in this town.”

I'm shaking my head before she even finishes talking. “What? No. I'm not tearing down Nana Jo's house—*my* house. And I'm not building a gym or going to the gym.”

“Hmph.”

It's the most judgmental noise I've ever heard come from someone, and it's probably Mom's most-used word in her vocabulary. There was one winter, when I was really young, that Lizzie and I kept a tally of how many times Mom made that noise in a week. I don't remember what the number ended up being, only that she used it for everything, all the time. Every time she was displeased about something, and Mom is often displeased.

The chef's dinner. Dad's beard. Lizzie's violin performances. My inability to play a sport or a real instrument because *singing is something children do when they're not good at anything else*.

I hate how that one syllable from her transports me back to the scared girl, the one who was fearful of forever being a disappointment to her mother. Who was so hard on herself for never measuring up. Who only had failed relationships because she didn't know how to ask for what she needed and go after what she wanted.

I hate the way she made me feel, the way she continues to make me feel.

But underneath all of that, I think I might actually hate her.

And that—that is the scariest thing I've ever admitted to myself.

Her perfectly sculpted brows rise. “You're not? Why are you dressed in gym clothes then?”

My lashes sweep closed in a prolonged blink, and I do my best to let her dig roll off my back the way droplets of water rolled down Bane's abs last

night. That man doesn't believe in closing the door when he showers. The reminder of him centers me quicker than anything.

And when I open my eyes again, I feel calmer.

I look at the guy standing next to my mother. He's dressed in a navy suit, white shirt, and a dark blue tie. Dark hair slicked back and sunglasses perched on the top of his head. He has the kind of face that looks like he shaves every morning only for his stubble to come in thick by dinner time.

"Who's your friend, Mom?"

She drops her finger from the door and gestures to him. "Oh, this is a friend of mine. Evangeline, Detective Barry Wallace. Baz, meet my youngest daughter, Evangeline."

My back snaps straight, and I nearly strangle the doorknob in my grip. I stare at my mother, suspicion oozing from me in thick, syrupy waves.

"Why did you bring a detective to my house?"

"My mother's house," Mom corrects me.

"Why did you bring a detective to Magnolia Lane?" I amend, the only compromise I'm willing to make right now.

"I already told you. My sister called to tell me you let our mother's house get robbed. So I brought a proper detective to investigate." She sighs through her nose, conveying just how put out she feels right now. "I can't believe you're making me air our family's private business on the porch like this."

I scoff and roll my eyes without thinking. And then I feel the familiar sharp sting across my cheekbone.

My eyes well with tears, and I blink them away quickly. I don't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing me upset. Even physical weakness is unacceptable to her.

I've spent too much time in Rosewood I think. Too much time expressing myself freely around the St. James men, because if I'd been thinking clearly. I never would've rolled my eyes at her like that.

I cover my cheek with my left hand and clear my throat, keeping my gaze

trained on the lapel of my mother's suit jacket. Shame rolls over me like a blanket of chainmail—heavy and sharp. I feel like I can't catch my breath under the weight of it.

I clear my throat and take a step back, pulling open the door with me. I open my mouth to invite them in, but the words get stuck in the back of my throat, emotion holding them hostage.

I chance a glance at my mother, catching the gleam of triumph in her gaze. She takes a step inside the house, turning to motion Detective Wallace in with her.

Then I feel it.

The shift in the air a second before his warmth blankets my back.

Bane.

He's been sneaking into my bed every night and leaving before I'm awake. If he didn't leave me sticky notes and iced coffees every morning, I'd be tempted to think I'd dreamt him up every night.

But he's real and he's here, and I've never been more grateful for his timing.

Relief hits me so hard, I feel faint with it. I sag into him instantly.

“Who the fuck are you?” His voice is a low rumble against my back.

I see the shift in Mom immediately. Her upper lip curls toward her nose in disgust and she glares at him—well as much of him as she can see given the way I'm practically plastered to him.

“Excuse me? Who are you and what are you doing in my mother's house?” She turns toward the man next to her, the dismissal clear. “Detective Wallace, perhaps you can escort this person off our property so my daughter and I can have a chat. Family business.”

The detective clears his throat. “Wanna come outside, sport?”

Bane stills behind me, and I'm ashamed to admit that I find myself almost eager to see what he's going to do. Because I just know he's going to handle them and this whole situation.

Mom stares at him, eyes narrowed. I can practically see the gears turning in her mind as she tries to figure out the best way to handle him and this situation now.

But Bane doesn't give her or the detective a chance to think. He places his hands on my shoulders, squeezing them briefly before letting go and stepping around me. Effectively putting himself between me and them. He folds his arms over his impressive chest, and I glance up to see the Reaper patch grin at me from the back of his kutte.

“Get the fuck off Evangeline's property before I escort you.”

The threat hangs in the air for a few seconds before the detective whistles low and under his breath.

“Your call Mrs. Carter,” Detective Wallace says.

“Are you going to let this—*this thug* talk to your mother that way, Evangeline?” Mom tries to lean around Bane to look at me.

Bane shifts to the side, blocking her view of me. “No. You don't get to talk to her. Not after the way you put your hands on her. In fact, I have half a mind to ring the sheriff's office and file an official report for assault.”

He delivers the second threat in as many minutes so effortlessly that I truly think my mother is shocked speechless for the first time I can ever remember.

But nothing good ever lasts.

“You always were an embarrassment to this family, Evangeline,” Mom says, her voice even like she's reciting her grocery list. “But this? Shacking up with some common criminal out of spite? It's unoriginal and uninspired. But you've always lacked talent, so I'll just add this to the long list of infractions. I'm warning you, Evangeline, this little stunt of yours is going to cost you.”

“Get the fuck out of here before I forget that you birthed the woman I care about,” Bane seethes.

“I'll be seeing you soon, daughter,” Mom practically sing-songs as she

leaves. The sound of her heels clicking on the cement punctuate her parting words far more ominously than they have any right to.

EVANGELINE

“FOR SOMEONE who insists you don't have a savior kink, you sure do ride in on your white horse often.”

He leans into me, backing me up against the wall in the middle of the stairs. “You want to ride me, sugar? Is that what you're saying?”

I smirk up at him, letting my fingers toy with the hem of his shirt. “Sugar's sticking, huh?”

He bends down, ghosting his lips across my jaw. “I like it. It reminds me of the sweet way you taste.”

My head bumps against the wall when I tip it back in laughter. “I expect those kinds of lines from Nova.”

His hands roam over my hips, smoothing down to the bare skin of my thighs in long, slow strokes. “Nova, hm? Do you often think of my cousin when I've got my hands on you?”

My laughter simmers into something far more sensual than I've ever heard come from me before. I drag my teeth over my bottom lip to buy myself a moment.

His lips brush against the underside of my jaw as he murmurs, “Your silence speaks for you, baby girl.”

I lift my shoulders in a haphazard shrug, tucking my fingers into the waist of his jeans and tugging him closer to me. “And if I did?”

“Then I'm not doing my job right.”

I swipe my tongue across my lip. “Maybe I think of both of you. At the same time.”

He pulls back to look at me, a single brow raised. “Ah, so my girl wants to do some exploring?”

He says exploring like we're talking about going to the park and hiking through the woods and not me telling him I want to fuck around with him and his cousin at the same time.

I cover my face with both hands, feeling my cheeks warm under his attention.

“Hey, you don't need to hide from me,” he says, pulling my hands away from my face.

My gaze is flighty, dancing around his face and beyond his shoulders to look in the hallway. “I'm not hiding.”

“Baby girl, you literally covered your face,” he says with a small laugh. “But you don't need to be embarrassed around me. Ever. Yeah?”

I twist my lips to the side and look at him, holding his gaze. His dark eyes seem otherworldly right now, the ring of amber bright and intense. Like if I dive into them, I'd never reach the bottom of their depths.

“You're not mad to hear that I think about . . . that?”

“C'mon, Evangeline, tell me what it is you think about.” He slides his hands up along my arms, over my shoulders, and up to sink into the hair at the nape of my neck. It's such a slow possession, if I wasn't hyper aware of every inch of him, I might've mistaken it for a casual touch.

But Bane's touch is anything but casual. There's intention and precision in every single movement.

I wet my lips again, sinking into his hold a little. “I think about what it would feel like to have you and Nova touching me at the same time.”

“Touching you how? Like this?” He hums appreciatively, his fingers spreading wide before tightening his grip on my hair.

A quiet gasp slips free as my head tugs back, exposing my neck to him. And he takes full advantage. His lips are on me in the next instant, blazing a trail of fire across the delicate skin of my neck.

“Yes,” I murmur, my fingers clutching the waistband of his jeans.

“That can't be all. Tell me what you want, Evangeline. I wanna hear you say it.”

“I want to feel both of you at the same time.”

“C'mon, sugar, you can do better than that.”

I close my eyes and focus on the way his mouth moves over my pulse point. And I pray that my honesty won't end up fucking me over in the end. “I want to suck your cock while Nova eats my pussy.”

He chuckles against my skin, dragging his mouth to hover over mine. My chest heaves like I just ran around the house a dozen times and not just gave truth to my fantasy.

“And Silas? Where does my big cousin factor into those dirty fantasies of yours?”

My heart skips a beat. A single second of panic as my eyes widen at his insinuation.

“Wh-what? I don't—it's not—”

“It's alright, sugar. Your fantasies are safe with me. I will never hold them against you.”

I stare into his eyes, my heart beating so hard, I'm afraid it's going to pop out of my chest.

“And I fantasize about Silas watching,” I breathe into his mouth before I seal my lips to his.

He breaks the kiss before it heats up too much, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I pout. He chuckles, the sound like balm to my frayed nerves.

“As much as I want that, it's not why I'm here,” he murmurs, still crowding into my space.

I raise both brows, feeling the sassy expression slide over my face. “I am

surprised to see you in the daylight. I was beginning to think you got turned into a vampire or something. You only come over in the dead of night now.”

“Cute,” he says, smoothing my hair back over my ear. He lets his fingertips trail down my arm until he links our fingers together. “C'mere. I brought you something.”

Curiosity lightens my steps as I practically skip into the living room next to him. He sends me a sly grin over his shoulder before he stops me in the middle of the room.

“You trust me?”

He's teasing, but I'm nodding without a word.

“Close your eyes,” he commands quietly.

I feel his lips brushing against the back of my eyelids then. I imagine little cartoon hearts exploding above my head right now. The familiar crackling of the record player hits my ears.

“What are you up to, Lincoln?”

“Just this,” he says a second before the soulful crooning voice of Otis Redding fills the air.

My eyes fly open as my heart clenches so tightly inside my chest, it feels like he's squeezing it between his fists.

“This is my grandparents' song.”

“I know,” he says, grabbing my left hand and placing it on his lower back. He palms my right hand in his, and we begin to sway.

I lean my head against his chest, in this perfect little notch in his muscles. “How did you find this record? It's like a million years old and they don't sell it anymore. I know because I set up an alert for it on those buy, sell, trade groups years ago for Nana Jo.”

“I'm a resourceful man.”

“You are,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

We continue to sway, the music and the moment so perfect that I don't want it to end. I close my eyes and let the world melt away.

BANE

I OPEN the door before he has a chance to knock or ring the doorbell. Or knowing him, just fucking walk in.

“She's already asleep. And she's got Hunter all weekend soon, so don't wake her up.”

“So you get to wake her up, but I can't?” Nova snaps from the driveway.

I fold my arms across my chest. “I'm not waking her up, am I?”

“What the fuck are you doing here, anyway? You spending the night at my girl's house, man? Or you just here for your nightly sneak-in to watch her sleep like some fucking psycho,” he says, walking toward the porch.

I tip my head back, enjoying the burst of jealousy from him. I don't bother denying it, because I get the speculation. Objectively, it is a bit of a strange habit. But I can't help it. She's like a siren song, and every single night I think about sleeping in my own bed. And yet, I always end up here. Most of the time well after she's in bed. But not tonight. Tonight, I spun her around her living room, watching the way her face lights up as she danced.

“So you hacked into the security system I set up. Took you long enough. I set that shit to easy so you and Silas could have peace of mind.”

Nova rears back, his brows crowding low. “Why the fuck would Silas check in on her cameras—you know what. Never mind. I already know why.”

I just nod. “Not to mention your brother has quite the hidden affinity for watching.”

Nova's gaze narrows on me. “What the fuck does that mean?”

I give him a deadpan stare. “He still uses a video baby monitor for Hunter.”

“Oh,” Nova says, shaking his head. “Yeah. I thought you meant something else. Whatever, I'm here because I just saw tonight's footage. I came over right away.” He climbs the concrete steps and stops in front of me.

I block the doorway, stepping onto the porch and pulling the door partially closed behind me.

Nova reads the move instantly, pulling up short. We're practically the same height, which makes this an even fight, so to speak. Except I'm not feeling like playing clean. Not tonight and not with her.

He rocks back on his heels and assesses me, his gaze narrowing on me. “So, it's like that then, huh?”

I look at him, keeping my face intentionally blank. “Like what?”

He tips his head back for a second before he looks at me. “C'mon, man, you know this isn't how we're going to solve anything.”

His perception is fucking annoying. “Nothing to solve.”

He chuckles, the laugh so caustic, I flinch. “Are you fucking kidding me, Bane? I'm not some punk kid anymore, yeah? You and me—we're equals. In so many more ways than you even realize. And I'm not going to be cockblocked by anyone, least of all you. And whether you like it or not, she”—he jabs a finger toward the house—”chose both of us. So let me in her fucking house.”

I shrug, projecting the very essence of unaffected. “Maybe next time you'll think twice about fucking my girl in my house.”

This time when he laughs, it's more genuine, even if it's dipped in notes of hysteria. “Oh my god, man. That's what this is about? You're fucking jealous so you're going to pull this shit?”

I don't say anything, because yeah, I know it's childish, and I also don't fucking care. I told him I'd pay him back one day, and it's on him if he took it as I'd fuck around with her in his house.

Which I'm *definitely* going to do.

But I'm also doing this too.

“Consider it payback.”

“She's gonna be pissed tomorrow when she realizes that you refused to let me come in,” he says, his eyes lighting up a little too much with his revelation.

“Nah, she won't even know you were here.”

“The fuck she won't. I'm not about to lie to cover your ass.”

I take a step forward, letting my arms fall to my sides. He doesn't move, and I didn't expect him to. “Then tell her the truth, Nova. Tell her you fucked up and tried to take something that didn't belong to you.”

His face hardens and he squares his shoulders. On any other guy, I'd be readying for a fight. But I know Nova, and I know when he's gearing up to throw down, and this isn't it. He's fucking pissed, but he's not about to throw punches. Not yet at least.

“You don't get it, do you? You're not going to win her over. She's not going to wake up tomorrow and suddenly forget she has feelings—real feelings for me. All you're gonna do is push her away if you make her feel like shit for wanting both of us—”

“All of us,” I interrupt.

He narrows his eyes on me before reluctantly nodding. “Yeah, sure, all of us.”

I exhale, hating him a little bit in this moment. He's not wrong, and I'm fucking annoyed about that. “And I'm not going to make her choose. But we need fucking boundaries, bro. And tonight, I'm in her house and in her bed, so you can fuck off.”

He nods, rolling his bottom lip inward for a moment. “The detective

gonna be a problem?”

My lips twitch because, yeah, I already started looking into the detective and the mom. She doesn't deserve the possessive pronoun of being Evangeline's.

“Not sure yet. Seems like he's some cop-for-hire, which makes him difficult to disappear.”

“Difficult but not impossible,” Nova says, a glimmer of something dangerous lurking in his gaze. “And the mom? Because if she puts her hands on our girl like that again, we're gonna have problems.”

“Don't worry so much, cousin.” I grin at him, pretending not to notice the grimace that flashes across his face. “I made that quite clear earlier today.”

Nova dips his head in agreement. “Good.” He walks backward down the step, holding my gaze the whole time. “Don't forget, man. She'll be staying at my house all weekend. So I'm gonna apply the same rules, yeah?”

My jaw hardens as I stare at him, annoyed that he's turning my own game against me. “We won't even be there, asshole.”

He lifts his shoulders as a smile spreads across his face. “We'll see about that.”

I'm already shaking my head. “You can't bail or we'll lose our alliance with the Knights.”

He throws his leg over his bike. “Who said I'm bailing? I'd never do that to you guys.”

His engine roars to life, and he leaves me on her porch, wondering what the hell he's planning now.

SILAS

ANOTHER BEAD of sweat rolls down my back, the sun a relentless beast in the sky. I take another drink from my water bottle, setting it on the seat of my bike, looking across the horizon. Sandy dirt hills stretch as far as the eye can see on either side; sparse green shrubbery scattered randomly.

It's appealing in its own way, I guess. But I much prefer the landscape in Rosewood.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, sending a spike of anxiety through my gut. There are only four people who call me on this phone and two of them are standing five feet away from me.

I slip it out of my jeans, my shoulders relaxing at the text message notification from Evangeline. She sent me a text the last two nights, letting me know when Hunter fell asleep.

She doesn't know that I have Ma sending me updates too.

Evie: omg look at what I found

Evie: *image loading*

We're only a handful of feet away from a dead zone, so it takes a minute for the photo to come through, and even then, it's a blurry mess. I sigh and shake my phone because I'm an idiot.

“What's wrong?” Bane asks.

“Nothing, just this stupid fucking photo from Evangeline won't load,” I mutter, staring at the screen as if that will make it load faster.

“You getting nudes, man?” Griz, one of Diesel's most-trusted guys, says with a salacious grin.

I cut my eyes toward him. “It's my nanny.”

His brows hit his hairline, his messy hair flopping underneath his backwards baseball hat, and his whistles under his breath. He flashes me a grin and says, “Banging the nanny, a little cliché for my tastes, but you do you, man.”

“Fuck you,” I grit through my teeth, annoyance surging.

Diesel wanted us on this job, and then he gave us a fucking babysitter. That shit grates on my nerves, even if I do understand it. Trust between clubs is fragile on the best of days, especially when you're usually a thousand miles away from one another.

Griz chuckles. “I can't tell if that's a confirmation or a denial, but—”

“Drop it, man,” Nova says with a sigh. “How much longer? I thought your guy said an hour. It's been almost three.”

The four of us are sitting on our bikes an hour outside the nearest town. It's one of those one-stoplight towns with a single road in, ending in a lake. In the middle of fucking nowhere. We're on the side of the road, in the poorest excuse for a rest stop I've ever seen. Two portable toilets sit against the tree line twenty feet off the road and a weathered pergola with a single metal picnic table.

“What are we even looking for, man?” Nova asks. He fiddles with the brim of his hat, his attention focused on his phone as he fingers fly across the screen.

I bet that asshole is texting my nanny while she's busy looking after my boy.

It's the reminder I needed, and I check my phone again.

“Dunno,” Griz says nonchalantly. “Prez needed to secure a package, and

we're here as assurance no one gets out.”

Bane narrows his eyes at the Blue Knight next to me. His expression is seemingly passive, but it's all an act. One he perfected years ago. He looks like a casual observer, maybe even a reluctant participant in any given conversation.

But inside? Inside he's a riot, a chaos tornado, just shoring it all up until it needs to be unleashed.

“So, you're telling me you have no idea what your club is even here for?” Bane asks, his tone even and measured.

Griz grins, his smile widening too much. “I didn't say that, did I?”

Bane looks from Griz's phone to his face. “You sure you got service?”

He leans forward, draping an arm over his handlebars. “Yep. This is the spot, so this is where we'll be until Prez tells us we're clear.”

Bane sucks his teeth and looks down the road in a clear dismissal. But I'm too fucking overheated to bother wading in. Evangeline's photo finally loaded.

“This woman,” I force out through a strangled laugh.

“What?” Nova asks.

I ignore him, giving all of my attention to the photo on my screen. My son's round cheeks. Her big brown eyes. Their matching wide grins. Evangeline sent me a selfie with her and Hunter.

In fucking hotdog costumes.

Amusement brushes against my skin, as light as the wing of a butterfly. It makes the corners of my mouth pull upward.

Their faces, in little cutouts inside the hot dog costume, the buns, the little squiggles of ketchup on one side and mustard on the other. The longer I look at it, the bigger the swell of laughter rises, and before I can stop it, it tumbles out of me in such a surprising flood of joy, I have to bend over a little to withstand it.

“Jesus Christ, are you okay?” Nova asks, a note of alarm in his voice.

“What's wrong with him?” Griz asks, hooking his thumb toward me.

“He's fine,” Bane grunts.

I straighten up, blinking a few times and swallowing down the last vestiges of laughter. “Oh fuck, I needed that.”

Bane strolls toward me, all forced casual with his hands stuffed in his pockets. He stops next to me and jerks his chin up. “What did she send you?”

I stuff my phone in my pocket and glare at him. “Nothing.”

He arches a single brow, the look loaded as hell. I pretend to ignore it and walk a few feet toward the road. I don't know if I've ever been away from Hunter for this long before. I don't think I've been on a job like *this* since before he was born.

My fingers tap against my thigh, a random rhythm that doesn't alleviate shit.

“You good?” Bane asks, pitching his voice low.

I roll my shoulders back and still my fingers. “I'm fine.”

“Well, I'm ready for this shit to be done,” Nova drawls.

“Fuck,” Griz curses under his breath, staring at his phone. “Time to go.”

I look over my shoulder at him. “Why?”

“Shit went sideways,” Griz says, stalking toward his bike with his phone clenched in his fist.

Well, that's not fucking good, is it. There are too many different reasons for shit to go sideways and none of them are good.

“How?” Bane barks.

Griz lifts his shoulders and pockets his phone. “Dunno, man. Prez sent word they didn't get the package they came for. No one in or out on this end, so your guess is as good as mine.”

“We good, then?”

“Yeah, man. See you next time. Maybe I'll get to meet your nanny, yeah?” Griz says with a leering grin. There's no malice in it, but I bristle all the same.

“I don't fucking think so.”

Griz tips his head back and laughs before the sound of his engine growling drowns him out. The three of us watch as he peels out of the rest stop, flying down the street toward the little town.

“Let's go home.”

I OPEN MY FRONT DOOR, and the scent of baked goods hits me in the face. Warm chocolate and vanilla waft through the air, making my stomach growl. We made the decision to ride straight home, only stopping to piss and gas up. There's been a persistent itch of anxiety against my ribs the whole time I was gone.

I feel like I haven't slept in days, and I know once I lay my eyes on my boy, I'll be able to breathe again. The only thing keeping me somewhat sane was the daily text updates from Evangeline.

And that fucking hotdog selfie today.

God, where did she even find that? It's probably a good thing they're not around the corner in those costumes. I might do something reckless and fucking kiss her.

“Hello?” I call out from the foyer. I half expect to see them hiding in the front hall closet as is the classic hotdog prank. But when I hesitantly open the door, only coats and the vacuum greet me.

My boots are muted thumps as I walk through my house, finally hearing the low hum of the TV. I round the corner into the living room, and my feet freeze.

The entire living room has been transformed into an epic fort. Every throw blanket, a couple comforters, and several sheets are draped over the couch, kitchen table chairs, and the island stools. It's a sprawling mess of fabric that covers every inch of the room.

It looks like a fucking blast. I can only imagine how much fun Hunter had playing in this fort today.

I grip the edge of a cream-colored sherpa blanket that hangs open. It must be Evangeline's, because I've never owned something this soft in my life. I pull the fabric back slowly and peer inside, blinking a few times to let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

In the middle of a nest of blankets is my son, fast asleep and curled into Evangeline's side. He looks so young, so small and sweet like this, with his favorite stuffed bunny tucked under his arm.

Love so potent and visceral pours out of me, fills every fiber of my being before it winds itself around my heart. It's overwhelming, suffocating even.

And somehow it's the single greatest emotion I've ever felt. I love my son with such ferocity that it's bordering on uncontrollable.

There's nothing I wouldn't do for him. Nothing.

I stare at the woman who's been responsible for him for the last several days. The slope of her eyebrows and the soft wave of her shiny dark hair as it spills over her shoulders and the way her laugh lines deepen when she smiles.

And the way she's with Hunter.

Her mouth curves into a grin and she whispers, "Hi."

I kneel down and shuffle inside, ducking my head. Carefully, so I don't wake Hunter, I sit along the edge.

Amusement twinkles in her eyes as she watches me try to get comfortable. But this fort was made for a five-year-old, so the ceilings aren't tall enough for me.

I duck my head a little and whisper back. "Hi."

Her grin grows wide. "I sent your mom home a couple hours ago. She wouldn't admit it, but she looked tired and in some pain."

I swallow and nod. "It's fine. How was he?"

Fondness softens her face as she gazes at Hunter. "Your son is an angel, Silas. He was perfect. We made chocolate chip muffins this morning if

you're hungry.”

I run my hand over his hair, pushing it off his sweaty forehead. I know I should wake him up soon, or he'll never sleep tonight. But I can't make myself break this little bubble.

“I thought I'd find a pair of hotdogs waiting for me when I got home.” I can't even say it with a straight face, the corners of my mouth tugging into a grin.

Her smile matches mine. “That was hours ago. Besides, we couldn't fit inside here with them on.” She spins her index finger in the air.

“Now that I would like to see.”

Her grin turns coy. “I'm sure Hunter would show you, but that means you'll have to recreate this castle fort. Which might be difficult.”

I arch a brow. “What? You think I can't make a fort?”

She shrugs and glances toward Hunter for a moment. “He already told me that Nova used to be the best fort builder. But I dethroned him today.” Her lips curl into a smug smile as she glances at me from underneath her long dark lashes.

Silence falls between us for a moment as I take her in. She really is beautiful.

After a minute, she says, “How'd the job go?”

The question catches me off guard. “Has my brother been spilling our secrets, Evangeline?”

“Do you not tell your girlfriends when you leave town?” she counters.

“I don't have girlfriends.” My answer is automatic, and I cringe. But I don't take it back. “And if it's club business, yes.”

“Okay,” she says with a shrug. “I don't even know what *club business* means, so.” She uses air quotes for club business like it's not a real term or something.

“That's probably better for you. It's safer that way.”

Her expression freezes. “Do I need to be worried about my safety?”

“You should always be thinking about your safety,” I murmur, holding her gaze.

“Hm. Any news on who broke into Nana Jo's house?”

My heart kicks inside my chest, an idea forming like a lightbulb exploding above my head. I swipe my tongue across my bottom lip.

“Not yet, but until we do, we think you should stay here.”

She stares at me, blinking those long lashes slowly. “Where?”

The back of my neck gets hot, and I'm blaming the fleece oven I'm inside of right now. “Here. In one of the guest rooms upstairs.”

“Okay,” she says slowly, dragging the syllables out.

“Don't overthink it, Evangeline. I don't want to have to go through the hassle of finding another nanny if something happens to you.” I shift a little, my ass starting to fall asleep in this position.

Her lips part, and I see the tip of her tongue drag across the bottom of her front teeth. “For how long?”

I drag my hand along the back of my neck. “Not long. I'm not asking you to move in.”

“Good because I have a house,” she says quickly. “And on my days off?”

I grit my teeth together, feeling a muscle flutter along my jaw. I can't remember why I thought this was a good idea now, but I'm too fucking far in now to backtrack. “Your nights and days off are still your own.”

She nods a few times, and I can practically see the gears turning inside her brain. “Yeah, okay.”

I exhale a quiet breath, and that persistent itch of anxiety dissipates.

EVANGELINE

“WHAT’RE YOU DOING, SWEETHEART,” Nova drawls from the doorway.

I glance up from my paperback and take in the sight of him. Hand propped up on the top of the door frame, muscles popping in the most delicious way, his dark blond hair tousled.

I’ve been staying at their house for a few days now. I don’t know what I expected exactly, but so far it’s been okay. I thought Nova might be angry, but he only grinned, threw me over his shoulder and ran up to the guest room I’m staying in. But truthfully, I haven’t seen much of him since then.

I know I should go home to work on some more of Nana Jo’s things, but I’m just not feeling it today.

I bite my bottom lip, still feeling the thick slow burn tension from the book I’m reading. “Just reading.”

“You watching Hunter this afternoon?”

I shake my head. “Silas took him to your mom’s house for a visit.”

He nods slowly, like it’s the answer he expected.

“Why? What’re you doing?”

He grins, flashing those dimples at me. “We have a date.”

“We do?” I close the book but stay reclined on my bed.

He presses forward, his biceps straining against the sleeves of his white

tee. “We do. I was coming to steal you away.”

I grin. “To *plunder*?”

His grin turns wolfish. “Exactly. To plunder and to sauna. Dress in loose clothes—or nothing at all. Up to you, sweetheart,” he says, giving me one of those slow once-overs.

I sit up, my head tilting to the side. “Wait. Like a real sauna?”

“Yep. A real one. Meet you in the basement in five.” He taps the doorframe twice and pushes off, walking backward down the hall.

I slide off the bed and flick the door closed with a chuckle. I take two steps to the dresser and pull out a pair of blue cotton short shorts and a loose skinny-strap tank top. I've done a handful of sauna sessions before, but it's usually at a spa after a massage—and alone.

A few minutes later, I find Nova waiting for me outside the sauna. He's dressed in a pair of black swim trunks and nothing else, his skin kissed golden by the summer sun. He grins when sees me, his gaze languidly roaming all over me.

“Ready?”

“It's been a while since I've done this,” I murmur, stopping in front of him.

He nods, his hand skimming down my arm. “Don't worry, sweetheart, I'll be gentle.”

The teasing glint in his eyes hints that he's not only talking about the sauna temperature. I let the smirk curl upward and murmur, “Promises, promises.”

He chuckles and pulls open the glass door, ushering me inside the four-person infrared sauna. Warmth wraps itself around me, soft and subtle, and I sit on the bench closest to the glass corner. Nova closes the door behind him and takes a seat on the bench perpendicular to mine.

“I started warming it up a few minutes ago when I got down here. It's pretty quick, so it shouldn't take long.”

I nod, looking around and breathing in the scent of eucalyptus. My muscles start relaxing on instinct, the gentle warmth already working its magic, and I exhale a deep breath.

“I can't believe you guys have this in your basement.”

“After Bane's injury, he needed physical therapy. Silas convinced himself and everyone else that infrared sauna therapy would help him. And one of the guys knew a guy who sold 'em wholesale, so he hit us with a nice discount.”

“And did it? Help, I mean.”

He nods several times, his gaze fixed straight through the thin pane of glass. “Yeah, I think so. Either way, this”—he raps his knuckles on the bench next to him—“is a new model. We kept using it long after Bane didn't need it anymore, and it became a routine.”

I tip my head back against the wooden slats behind me and let my body relax further. “Who knew the Reapers were into self-care? Better not let the rest of the town know, or you'll soften your rep,” I tease.

“Baby, we did a calendar with puppies a few years ago for the animal shelter fundraiser, and we're still the same assholes that run this town.” He says it so nonchalantly, like all those little information bombs he just dropped in one sentence aren't even worthy of a pause.

I can feel how wide my eyes are as I stare at him. “I'm sorry, did you just say you posed with puppies for a *calendar*?”

“Yeah, me and some of the boys. I think I still have one around here somewhere.” He lifts a shoulder in a casual shrug like it's no big deal, but I see the way the corner of his mouth twitches, like he's trying to curb his grin.

I arch a brow, my smile wide just thinking about the possibilities. “Your brother? Bane?”

“Don't get too excited, sweetheart. It wasn't that kind of calendar,” he says around a laugh.

“Oh my god, I gotta see this.” I can't even get the words out without a giddy laugh. “Also remind me to yell at my cousin for neglecting to inform

me that such a calendar exists. To think I could've been looking at all those Reapers this whole time.” I mock-tsk and heave an exaggerated sigh.

He reaches over and snags me around the waist, hauling me across the small space and depositing me on his lap. I let out a startled laugh as my hands fly to his shoulders for balance. He wraps his arms around my waist, locking me in place.

“I changed my mind. I don't think I have any around to show you, not when you're going to drool over those assholes instead of me,” he grumbles into the crook of my neck.

“So possessive.” I drape my arms over his shoulders and settle against his lap, my legs resting on either side of his hips.

He drags his palms down my back and brushes his lips against my pulse point. “Only for you, baby.”

His lips ghost over my skin in a light caress, setting off little sparks of electricity. A shiver works its way down my body, settling somewhere low in my belly.

His possessiveness shouldn't be such a turn-on, and logically, I do understand that. But I can't help the way my body reacts when he touches me with such reverence. Or the way my mind plays with me when he murmurs dirty words in my ear.

I tilt my neck to the side to give him better access. “I guess I'll have to settle for the real thing then, yeah?”

He runs his nose along the line of my throat. “You can have the real thing anytime you need it.”

My breath catches when he scrapes his teeth along my collarbone. “What if I want it right now?”

He looks up at me, his lashes dark and long, framing his mossy green eyes perfectly. “You want me, baby? You got me. Just say the word.”

I hesitate for only a moment before nodding. His lips curl into a satisfied smirk, like he knew that's what I was going to say. As if he knew that I

wanted him. I mean, it's not a secret. But I don't know how I feel about being a foregone conclusion either.

But that's something to ponder later, when I don't have Nova's lips and hands on me.

I tip my head back and let my eyes close, feeling the hard length of him beneath me. The warm air presses against every other part of my body, and it feels comforting in a way. Sweat starts to bead along the back of my neck, and I breathe into the heat.

I feel his fingers tugging on the straps of my tank top, letting them slip off my shoulders to drape against my inner elbows. The fabric droops, exposing the generous curve of my tits.

He hums appreciatively as his gaze roams over every inch of exposed skin. I can feel it, like a heated caress.

“God, you're fucking perfect, Evangeline,” he breathes as his hands cup my breasts.

EVANGELINE

I CAN'T EVEN APPRECIATE his compliment because his fingers are circling around my nipple, and it's too distracting. The cotton fabric is so thin, it might as well not even exist. I arch into his touch, urging him on. He reads me instantly, his fingers toying with me and sending sparks of pleasure straight to my core.

He captures my mouth in a passionate kiss as he continues to play with my nipples, tugging and rolling them between his fingers until they're tight peaks, begging for more attention. His tongue finds mine, and we reacquaint ourselves like it's been months since we've seen each other and not hours. I lose myself in him, embracing the way he makes me feel desired and in control.

“Are you sure no one is home?” I force myself to ask once more even though I'm the one that told him we had an empty house. And it should remain empty for several more hours.

He stands up, taking me with him. “Let's head up to my room. Where there isn't a glass door.”

I wiggle my hips in a silent request to let me down. Except it backfires dramatically when all it does is rub my pussy against his hard cock through our thin layers of clothing.

We groan in unison.

“Fuck me,” Nova grunts. His grip on my waist slips down to hold my hips. He tightens his hold, tilting and dragging me over the length of his cock.

“Jesus.” The plea comes out in a hushed whisper when my eyes slam closed at the euphoric feeling.

He thrusts his hips up to meet me at the same time I rock into him. I clench my thighs around him, desperately trying to keep him in place. He makes this low noise of approval in the back of his throat, his hands slipping down to palm my ass.

“C'mon, baby, let's go before I forget all the reasons it'd be bad to fuck you in the sauna,” he rasps against my neck.

He takes a step forward and sets me back on my feet. His hands linger on my ass, rounding the curve and slipping his fingertips underneath the hem of my shorts. He drags his touch along the swell of my asscheek toward my pussy, groaning as he feels my arousal.

It's the thing that breaks the little thread of my restraint. I don't want to wait until we're upstairs in his room—or mine. And yeah, maybe I do enjoy the idea of Silas seeing glimpses of what I'm about to do on the camera footage if he reviews it.

“Fuck it,” I murmur.

And then I sink to my knees.

He looks almost drunk with lust, eyes halfway closed and swaying toward me. I hold his gaze as I curl my fingers around the waistband of his shorts. I take my time, running my hands along the length of his toned thighs as I inch them down.

“I want you to have your fun, baby, I really do. But you have to know that you're torturing me,” he says with a groan.

His cock springs free, and his shorts fall to the floor. I can't stop the gasp from slipping free. Feeling it and seeing it up close and personal like this are two very different things. A flicker of worry skitters across my consciousness, because how the hell am I going to fit all of him in my

mouth?

I grip his cock around the base, slowly dragging my hand up and down his impressive length. His chest rises and falls quicker, and he sways forward when I run the pad of my thumb over the head of his cock. I lean forward, lightly running my tongue along the underside of his cock before taking the tip into my mouth.

“Fuck, baby,” he grunts, his hips twitching almost reflexively.

I wasn't expecting the rush of power I'd get. Even though I'm the one on my knees, I hold all the power right now. I'm the one making him feel this way.

It's a heady realization.

I shift my thighs, brushing against my clit. It's not enough, but I do it again.

I drag my tongue over his length once more before taking him fully into my mouth. I swirl my tongue around him, sucking and gently nipping. He groans, and I swear to god, I can feel it. His hand finds my hair, loosely gathering it in a fist on the top of my head.

I take him as deep as I can, using my hand to cover what I can't take. But I'm nothing if not determined, and I'm just turned on enough to think I can actually take all of him. I bob up and down, increasing the pressure with each stroke. But still, I can't take him further.

“Shh, relax, sweetheart,” he murmurs, his free hand trailing down my jaw. “You're doing so well.”

I breathe through my nose and try to relax, shifting my thighs again. The small burst of pleasure against my clit sends a shock of warmth through my body. And it gives me an idea.

I spread my knees wider to balance and take my free hand from his thigh straight to my pussy. I don't fuck around, sliding two fingers deep inside and moaning around Nova's cock.

“Goddamn, Evangeline. Are you touching yourself? Are you playing with

my pussy?” His voice is low, a commanding tone I'm not used to. But it only adds to my arousal.

I nod and look up at him.

“Good girl. We've got an audience, sweetheart. Show my brother how well you can take me,” he murmurs.

I feel it then. The second pair of eyes on me, crawling over my skin with possession. It's not what I expected to feel. I thought I might be ashamed or vulnerable. But I don't feel either of those things.

I feel emboldened, powerful. And so fucking turned on, I think I'm going to come soon.

I drag my fingers from my pussy to my clit, circling it over and over again. At the same time, I relax my throat and take Nova in as deep as I can. His fingers tighten in my hair, and his hips thrust. It's just once, and it wasn't forceful, but that moment of helplessness sent a flood of arousal.

I lose myself in the journey, letting myself give him some control and allowing him to set the pace as I toy with my clit. His murmured words wash over me in waves, each one increasing my pleasure more and more.

“That's it—just like that.”

“You look so beautiful with my cock in your mouth.”

“You're taking me so well, sweetheart.”

“Do you like it when he watches you take my cock, baby?”

I'm close, closing in on that euphoria when I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I expect him to slam his fist against the glass or yell or something. But he doesn't do anything other than let me know he's there. Somehow, that's enough to push me off the ledge.

My legs flex and my toes curl as the first moments of bliss soar through my body.

“Ah, fuck. Your mouth is too good, sweetheart. I can't hold back any longer.” Nova's grip on my hair holds me still as he comes down my throat. He pulls out slowly, dragging his thumb along my bottom lip and holding my

gaze as he whispers, “You're absolutely perfect, Evangeline.”

I preen under his praise, tilting my head at the perfect time to catch the flash of tanned skin outside the sauna as he walks away. I recognize those tattoos instantly.

That wasn't Silas.

It was Bane.

EVANGELINE

IT'S the silence that wakes me up. When I came to Rosewood at the beginning of the summer, it took me nearly a week to get used to the new noises here. Sure, I drowned it out with my favorite white noise machine the best I could, but I wasn't used to the other noises. Magnolia Lane settling, the loud exhaust pipes from motorcycles flying down the street, the choir of cicadas.

And now I'm here. Staying with Silas and Nova and Hunter. And Lincoln, more often than not. It should be weirder than it is. It should've taken me longer to adapt to the sounds of this house.

My eyes open to darkness so thick it feels suffocating. I blink a few times, the first kernel of panic sprouting too easily from the fear that's always lived inside of me when it comes to the dark. Slowly—too slowly—my eyes adjust.

It's dark, but I can make out the familiar shapes of the room I'm staying in. I reach for my phone, tapping the screen awake to find it's nearing three o'clock in the morning. Zero bars are present in the top right corner. In fact, there's a symbol there I haven't seen before. SOS.

“Shit,” I murmur, hoping that's not some kind of omen.

The next thought shifts across my brain a split second before I hear it.

“Dad! Eve!” Hunter yells, panic threading through his sleepy voice.

I toss off my comforter and jog across my room. Pulling the door open, I yell, “Hang on, bud. I’m coming.”

The hallway is even darker than my bedroom. With all the doors closed, the only light that filters in is from the big picture window above the front door. But even then, it’s muted, gray. Thankfully, Hunter’s room is only three doors down from mine.

The wood floor is cool on my bare feet as I hustle down the hallway. My eyes are glued to Hunter’s door, my heart racing with adrenaline and urgency to reach him.

I don’t notice anyone until my shoulder collides with something hard.

“Jesus,” I hiss, the impact sending me backward at an angle and heading straight toward Hunter’s doorframe. I brace for the inevitable pain, but it never comes.

Instead, big hands curl around my waist, steadying me. I look up, my lips parting on an inhale, but before I can say anything, Hunter yells again.

“Eve! Dad!”

Silas lets go of me at the same time I turn toward his doorway. He twists the knob, throwing open the door and eating up the distance between him and Hunter. He flips his phone’s flashlight app on and twists the beam to face the ceiling. “I’m here, bud. It’s alright.”

I hang back a couple steps, giving myself a moment to take a few deep breaths. My adrenaline is surging, and that shakiness has started. It feels like popping candy lines my stomach.

“It’s alright. It’s just a storm. We get these sometimes, remember? Let’s try to go back to sleep, yeah?” Silas says, kneeling down and running a palm over Hunter’s back.

“Dad, where’s Eve? Did we lose power?” His voice is shaky, soaked in fear. And it does something to my gut. Tightening and twisting it.

“I’m right here, buddy,” I tell him, crossing the room to his bed. I stop next to Silas, my hand reaching out to smooth Hunter’s hair back. I curl my

fingers into my palm and drop my hand to my side. “Your dad's right. It's just a storm.”

Hunter nods, but I can see the tremble in his lips. He's scared, and I find myself wanting to do something to ease his fear.

No, not wanting. *Needing.*

“Will you stay with me?” Hunter asks, his dark brown eyes so wide. He clutches his stuffed bunny, Flopsy, tight to his chest.

“Of course, my little muffin.” I kneel on the floor next to Silas, sitting my butt against my heels. “As long as your dad doesn't mind. He might want to snuggle you to sleep,” I tease.

Hunter's lips twitch into a smile and he darts a glance at his dad. “Sorry, Dad, but you're too big for my bed.”

Silas's brows raise and his mouth falls open in a faux outrage. He won't be taking home any acting awards, but his son giggles.

“Me? I don't know, bud. I think I can still fit in your bed. You might have to sleep on the floor though,” Silas says with a teasing grin.

A staticky alarm shrieks from Silas's phone, startling everyone. Silas flips his phone over, plunging the room into near-darkness. I look over his shoulder and see the emergency alert text on his screen.

National Weather Service: TORNADO WARNING in this area until 3:45 AM CST. Take shelter now in a basement or an interior room on the lowest room floor of a sturdy building. If you are outdoors, in a mobile home, or in a vehicle, move to the closest substantial shelter and protect yourself from flying debris.

“SHIT,” I murmur, fear tightening my gut.

Silas clears the message, stopping the alarm abruptly. He pushes to his

feet and reaches for Hunter. “Alright, bud. Time to go to the basement.”

“What? Why?” Hunter asks, his voice high-pitched with fear.

“I guess we're having a sleepover in the basement tonight,” I tell him, trying to project that everything is okay.

Hunter raises his arms, and Silas scoops him up effortlessly. I scramble to my feet behind them, and the three of us hustle into the hallway.

“I'm going to get Nova.” I'm only a little surprised he hasn't come out yet. He's a hard sleeper, especially since he's been pulling these long hours in the studio lately.

No sooner than I say that, he appears in his doorway down the hall.

“Tornado?” he asks, dragging his hand across his tattooed chest.

“Yeah, basement,” Silas says.

Nova beelines for me, hooking an arm around my neck and pulling me in close. He plants a kiss on my temple and murmurs, “Are you okay?”

I look up at him, and he brushes his lips across mine. “I'm fine. I spent a lot of summers here, remember? I know all about the tornado sirens.”

“I keep forgetting that,” he murmurs as we jog down the stairs.

“Should we call Bane? Your mom?”

“Nah, I bet Bane will be here any second if he's not already in our basement. But yeah, we should probably check in on Ma as soon as we get down there,” Nova says.

I bite my bottom lip, wishing I had brought my phone with me. It should've been the first thing I grabbed. I was just so focused on getting to Hunter.

I already know Bane isn't waiting in the basement. There's no way he wouldn't come to get me first. He takes his role as my white knight very seriously.

We follow Silas into the basement, the flashlights from his and Nova's phones guiding our way. Nova shoves his face into my hair when we pass the sauna, and I feel his breathy laugh. Warmth sinks into my cheeks and I toss

an elbow into his stomach. He grunts good-naturedly, because we both know my little jab didn't really hurt.

Once we're in the rec room side, Silas sets Hunter down on one of the couches and taps a few of the battery-powered lamps around the room. Soft, yellow pools of light brighten the room up.

Footsteps thunder down the basement stairs. Nova and I turn as one to see Bane jogging toward us, a flashlight in one hand and his phone in the other.

My lips twitch at the sight of him. He's wearing a sweatshirt and shorts, because of course he wouldn't be caught unprepared like the rest of us.

“Everyone good?” he asks, but he's only looking at me.

I nod. “We're fine.”

Bane nods, heading straight for me. He all but ignores Nova as he slides his hands on either side of my face, tunneling his fingers into my hair. He angles me toward him at the same time he lowers his lips to mine. “You sure, sugar?” His voice is low, a caress against my parted mouth.

I swipe my tongue across my bottom lip. “I'm sure. I woke up when the power went out.”

He nods, pressing his lips gently against mine. It's too brief, but I always feel that way. Nova chuckles under his breath, but the sound is all wrong. It's forced nonchalance and zero humor.

“Really, man?” Nova drawls. “She's literally in my arms.”

Bane pulls back, sliding his gaze from me to Nova and back again. “Relax, Nova. She doesn't mind, do you, sugar?”

Warmth coats my skin as our conversation from earlier comes to the forefront of my mind. My lips twist to the side and I regard the man in front of me.

“You trying to cause trouble during a tornado, Lincoln?” I tease.

“Enough,” Silas snaps. “Anyone heard from Ma?”

The three of us turn toward the broody man in the center of the room. He's agitated, running his hands through his hair and staring at his phone.

“I’ll go get her, bring her back here,” Nova says, sliding his arm slowly across my shoulders and placing a kiss on the top of my head. “I’ll be right back, yeah?”

I nod, turning my face toward him and placing a kiss against his chest. “I’ll be here.”

“And our backup generators didn’t kick on at the clubhouse,” Silas says, brows furrows and lips pressed into a firm line.

Admittedly, I don’t know a ton about generators, but I feel like that’s probably not a good thing. I thought that’s the whole reason you have one—so it kicks on when the power goes out.

“Shit,” Bane curses, sharing a look with Silas. “I’ll check it out.”

“Be careful,” I warn both of them.

Both of them smirk at me, the corners of their mouths tipping up in exactly the same way. It’s almost unnerving really.

“We’ll be right back,” Nova says as he and Bane walk backward toward the stairs.

I nod and head toward Hunter on the couch. I snag a blanket from the basket next to the end table and wrap it around him. He looks up at me, his dark brown eyes wide with fear.

Sometimes it’s hard to remember that he’s only five, he spends so much time around adults that he’s picked up these little mannerisms and speech patterns.

But then he sends me one of these looks, and it’s like all these maternal instincts I didn’t even know I had kick in. No, not kick in—they bleed from my skin.

It’s why when he leans into me, his voice tight and brows pinched together, my heart thumps almost painfully.

“Eve, I forgot Flopsy,” Hunter whispers. His eyes widen, fear keeping his little face drawn tight. “He’s all alone upstairs, and he’s so scared. I just know it.”

I'm nodding and pushing to my feet immediately. "It's alright. I'll go get him."

"No," Silas says, startling me. I was so focused on Hunter I didn't realize he was standing next to me. "I'll go get Flopsy. You stay here with Evie, bud." Silas bends down in front of me and kisses the top of Hunter's hair, squeezing his shoulder once.

The nickname falls from his mouth so effortlessly, like he's been calling me Evie for years. And my traitorous heart skips a beat inside my chest, letting me know exactly how that little affection nickname affects me.

EVANGELINE

“I’LL BE RIGHT BACK,” Silas tells me, turning around and hustling toward the stairs without looking at me. His attention is glued to his phone.

“Just one second, okay, Hunter? I gotta ask your dad to grab me some pants too.” I flash him my most reassuring smile.

Hunter looks at me, probably not really understanding that I don't want to be caught literally pantless in the slim chance that we get some truly bad weather. Nana Jo always taught me to be prepared, but somewhere along the way, I've forgotten the weather component to that particular tidbit of wisdom.

Hunter eyes my oversized tee. I thought it was Lincoln's, the one I've been sleeping with since I snagged it from his house. But I'm only now realizing that the material is all wrong. It's black and big, but it's a little longer, hitting me closer to my knees. It's soft and smells like fresh laundry though.

“It's not a sleepover anymore if we put on real clothes instead of our pjs,” he says.

I nod, my face matching his serious one. “Okay, maybe I'll ask him to get me sleep pants.”

Hunter tips his head to the side and nods a couple times. He looks like a little snowman bobble head wrapped up in the fleece blanket like that. “I'll allow it.”

“Be right back.” I pat his knee and push up from the couch. Jogging to catch up to Silas at the bottom of the stairs, I reach out and rest my hand on his shoulder. “Wait.”

He stills, his gaze dropping to my hand sliding over his bicep. “What do you need, Evangeline?”

“Just a couple of bunnies.” I deliver the line perfectly, the opportunity too good to pass up.

He turns to face me, his expression as closed off as always. “Cute,” he says, his tone saying he thought it was anything but.

I lift a shoulder and let my grin unfold. “I thought so. But I'm serious. Grab Bingo when you get Flopsy.”

“Don't act like you know my son better than I do,” he snaps, folding his arms across his chest.

I rock back on my heels and roll my eyes. “Chill out, Daddy St. James. You're still the alpha here. But seeing as Bingo is a rather new obsession for him, I thought I'd save you a trip if he wanted him too. And pants, please. And my phone. Oh, and maybe a sweatshirt.”

His gaze travels along my face, down my neck, and over my chest to settle on my very clearly hard nipples. “Clearly.”

I almost hate how my body betrays me under his attention. They harden further, and I resist the urge to cross my arms to hide them. I'm not ashamed of my body's response, and if he would just stop looking at my tits like that, they would stop aching for him.

“Hey it's not my fault you keep it at the arctic setting down here.” As far as clapbacks go, it wasn't my best. But to be fair, it's like three o'clock in the morning.

“Maybe you should sleep with more clothes on then,” he says, though it sounds more like a grunt.

“I can't sleep with pants on. I don't like the way the fabric tangles around my legs,” I say, shifting my weight. “Also, you're literally shirtless right now,

so I don't really feel like you have any room to talk about nipples.”

He steps into me, his hand covering my mouth so quickly I don't have time to react. “Will you keep it down? That filthy mouth of yours is going to get you into trouble.”

I grin behind his hand, swiping my tongue out to flick against the base of his finger. I expected him to pull away, but he only grunts. We're on the other side of the basement, I'm not worried about Hunter overhearing us.

“Oh good. You're already down here. I brought my emergency kit,” Dixie yells from the top of the basement stairs.

Silas stares at me like he's trying to communicate something, but whatever it is, it's lost on me. I don't understand his quiet demands yet.

“I've got my own emergency kit, Ma. You didn't need to bring it,” Silas yells over his shoulder, never tearing his gaze from me.

He drags his hand from my mouth, his fingers lingering on my lips too long to be anything but intentional. My breath picks up inside my chest, and now I'm the one silently communicating to him. I don't know what I'm saying exactly, but I'm certainly feeling all sorts of things.

“Everything okay, sweetheart?” Nova asks, standing behind Dixie.

“Everything is fine,” Silas snaps.

I move to the side, and it's like the movement snaps Silas from whatever trance he was in. He spins on his heel and jogs up the stairs.

I switch my gaze to Dixie. “Need any help?”

“I'm fine, honey. How's my grandson?” she says, moving down the stairs slowly, one arm in a sling and the other on the handrail.

“He's a little freaked out, but he's okay,” I murmur, waiting for them on the bottom stair.

The three of us walk together back to the rec room, where Hunter looks half asleep, still snuggled up in a fluffy blanket. Dixie sits on one side, tugging Hunter into the open space underneath her good arm.

As I go to sit on Hunter's other side, Nova slides in first, causing me to

land on his lap. He wraps his hands around my waist immediately, and my sleep tee rises a little. I'm not about to flash his mom and his nephew, so I wiggle in his lap to shimmy the fabric down.

His hands fly to my thighs, holding me still. "Stop moving like that, sweetheart, or the power outage is going to be the least of our worries."

I turn my head away to hide the smirk forming. "Are you flirting with me during a tornado warning?" I keep my voice low, angled away from Hunter and Dixie.

"You love it," he murmurs against my hair, his nose dragging down the curve of my neck.

I hum, nodding a few times and leaning back into him.

Dixie whispers soothing words to Hunter as he asks for his bunny again, and Nova checks his phone a few times. But with every minute that passes without Silas and Bane, my unease grows.

The air conditioning continues to pour over me in a steady wave, goosebumps taking permanent residence.

Finally, when I can't take any more air or waiting, I slide off of Nova's lap. "I'll be right back."

"I'll come with you," Nova says instantly, moving to stand.

I set my hand on his shoulder, halting his movement. "No, stay, I'm just running up to my room to grab something quick. I'll be right back."

"Can you get Bingo, Eve?" Hunter asks, his arms wrapped tight around Dixie's free arm in a sort of hug.

"Of course, bud. Anyone else?"

He shakes his head. "Dad's getting Flopsy already."

"Okay, I'll be back in a couple minutes." I hustle across the basement and jog up all the way to my room on the second floor. The wind howls outside, the trees in the front yard swaying back and forth in a chaotic ballet.

I slip on a pair of leggings and throw a crew neck over my shoulder in record time, snagging my phone on the way out. I check the screen as I head

to Hunter's room—still no service.

“Shit,” I murmur. Anxiety sparks in my stomach. I know Cora's been here her whole life, but I can't stop the little kernel of worry worming its way into my head. I wish I could call her and make sure she's safe. Living in an apartment has its downsides, and not having a basement is definitely one of them.

I find Flopsy and Bingo in the middle of his bed, right where Hunter left them.

Which means Silas hasn't been in here yet. But he's been gone for ten minutes, so where the hell did he go?

My heart pounds, and I dart down the hall to his bedroom. The door is open but I've never been inside here before. It always felt like an invasion of his privacy, and the man covets his space. “Silas?” I call out, tapping my knuckles on the doorframe.

When only the howling wind answers, I stick my head inside the dark bedroom and call his name again. I check his ensuite bathroom, fearing he somehow fell and hit his head. I have no idea why my mind went to that place exactly. But regardless, it's empty.

I jog down the stairs and go toward the kitchen, both rabbits tucked under my arm. “Silas?”

Movement in the backyard catches my attention, and I creep closer to the glass. It feels strangely vulnerable to look outside when it's this dark. I don't know what I was expecting to see, but it wasn't Silas wrestling Nana Jo's wicker patio furniture away from the wind. My heart kicks inside my chest, skipping a beat or two before restarting again.

I drop my sweatshirt, phone, and the two stuffed bunnies on the counter, and I'm out the patio door and into the backyard in a flash. The wind whips at my shirt, tugging it away and then molding it against me as I heave the sliding glass door closed. My hair tangles in front of my face, and I yell for Silas once more.

He turns toward me, his arms full of gray cushions. “Evangeline, what are you doing?”

Even with the sound of the wind hollering in my ear, he still somehow manages to sound disapproving. Like me checking up on him is not only a foreign concept but definitely frowned upon.

“Me? What are you doing risking your life for some couch cushions?” I pitch my voice loud and shove my hair away from my eyes with one hand. The wind is gusting so fast, that I have to brace myself a little bit to cross the patio toward him.

He tightens his hold on them, his face shadowed but I imagine a scowl painted across his handsome features. “Hunter was looking forward to painting this furniture. It's all he's talked about for weeks.”

I step in front of him. “It's nothing, Silas. Just a silly project we're working on. You don't need to be outside in a tornado for goodness sake,” I yell, throwing my hand up in the air, like that conveys just how ridiculous I think this is.

Hunter and I were going to hand-paint the couple of pieces of wicker patio furniture in a couple of days. I'm teaching him about color theory, and I had this bright idea that hands-on experience is the best way to learn. But I didn't account for five-year-old attention spans.

“These belonged to your grandma. I'm not going to leave them out here to get ruined in this,” he says, gesturing to the side with a cushion. His voice is so loud, I wouldn't be surprised if Bane heard it all the way at the clubhouse. Anger drips from his words, his lips pinched into a frown.

I glance in the service door and see the three white pieces of wicker furniture already safely tucked in the garage. My eyes fill, the emotion so swift and unexpected that I feel ill-prepared on how to handle it. Anger comes quickly on its heels, just as powerful.

“Why, Silas. Why?”

He stares at me for a second, before he skirts around and stalks into the

garage through the service door without answering me. I follow behind him quickly, determination filling my bloodstream. He doesn't get to just walk away.

“Why are you so hot and cold, huh? You're giving me fucking whiplash, Daddy St. James, and I don't know how much longer I can take it.” It doesn't even sound like me, my tone sly and edged in destruction.

“Well, no one asked you to stay,” he snaps, heading deeper into the garage.

I follow behind him, never leaving more than a foot between us. I don't know what possessed me, but I can't take this back and forth anymore.

“No? Then tell me to leave. Tell me to leave and never look back because you don't give a fuck about who I fuck.”

“What did I tell you about that filthy fucking mouth of yours?” His voice is a low rumble, but he still won't look at me.

I stop in my tracks, realization washing over me. “You can't do it, can you? You can tell me you don't care, but it eats you up inside knowing your brothers have both been inside of me. That Nova fucked me with his tongue and Bane—”

He drops the cushions and advances on me in an instant. His hand zeroes in on my neck, resting right against the hollow of my throat. Not hard, just a slight pressure to remind me what kind of power he holds. I match his steps backward, one for one, until my ass hits the workbench behind me.

He leans his forehead against mine, breathing heavily but not saying anything. Not doing anything. And my temper flares once more.

“Is that it? You don't want me but you don't want anyone else to want me either?” I grit my teeth, straining against his hold just a little. The pressure is doing weird things to my brain, sparking arousal low in my belly. “No. That's not it,” I say, shaking my head. “Then you must not think I'm good enough for them.”

“Quiet, Evangeline,” he hisses, almost baring his teeth at me.

“That's it, isn't it? You don't think I'm good enough for them. And every time I wrap my lips around their cocks and take them as deep—”

He slams his mouth to mine, stealing the rest of my words. I don't move for a second, quite literally stunned into silence.

EVANGELINE

HE PULLS BACK. “JESUS FUCK.”

“What the hell was that?” I mutter, swiping my tongue along my bottom lip to chase the taste of him.

He's breathing heavily, like he just ran a race and not simply kissed me. I see it then, the instant regret flashing across his face. His eyes shuttering, his features closing down.

Panic claws at my chest at the idea of him retreating. And so, I push him again.

“Is that all you got?” I taunt, looking at him from underneath my lashes.

“I know what you're doing,” he grits out between his clenched teeth. “And it's not going to work.”

I don't even know what I'm doing, so I find that very hard to believe. All I know is that this can't be it. That single kiss isn't nearly enough to satisfy my curiosity and craving of Silas St. James.

I arch a brow, leaning forward to remind him that his hand is still around my throat, his thumb running lazy strokes of affection over my pulse point.

“Kiss me, Silas,” I demand softly.

He doesn't answer me or move, his dark brown eyes almost black, wild in the limited light inside the garage. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest, beating a wild rhythm that belongs to him alone.

“Fuck it,” he murmurs before he slams his lips to mine.

This kiss is different, deeper and hungrier. It's exactly how I imagined. His lips are hard and demanding as his tongue explores my mouth with an expertise I wasn't expecting.

It feels like so much more than a kiss. It feels like a primal declaration. A claiming.

His grip on my throat tightens, and I shift my thighs together as I feel myself start to get wet.

From a goddamn kiss.

He tilts my head, adjusting the angle to deepen it. I moan into his mouth, my hands finding their way to his hair, gripping it tight. His free hand slides between my ass and the edge of the counter behind me, curving around to palm my asscheek. He tilts my hips toward him, pressing his thickening cock against my stomach.

Jesus Christ he feels big though.

I make some noise in the back of my throat, a cross between surprise and desire.

He pulls back suddenly, keeping his hand around the base of my neck but putting distance between us. His eyes have this wild look in them, like he's on the precipice of something.

“Fuck. That—that was a mistake,” he says, his voice low and gruff.

I shake my head slowly, disappointment thick on the back of my tongue. I sigh, still panting to catch my breath from that kiss—that mistake of his. I look over his shoulder and sink into the counter behind me.

“Don't worry about it, Silas. Nova and Bane will take care of me later. Maybe even together.”

I watch his expression change as he takes in my words. He looks almost pained, like he's struggling. I know I might feel bad about it later, for pushing him so far. But part of me feels justified. He's short and cold one minute, and then the next, he's saving my grandmother's furniture.

He cocks his head to the side and shuffles forward a step. The thin athletic shorts he's wearing do absolutely nothing to conceal his hardening cock. He steps into my space, sinking his face into my neck to whisper, "You're going to let them take care of my mess?"

"What mess?" I murmur, keeping my hands fisted at my sides.

"C'mon, Evie. Playing dumb doesn't suit you." His words float across my skin a second before I feel the blunt edge of his teeth as he presses them into the patch of skin below my ear.

There's that goddamn nickname again.

I shake my head, feeling the ends of my hair brush against my shoulders.

"I have two men who satisfy my every need, Silas. It takes more than a kiss to get me wet," I lie through my teeth. "You should know that just from the camera footage of the sauna."

He clicks his tongue before he drags it up the line of my neck. "Ah, that's right. I forgot you're a visual learner, my poisonous little butterfly."

A shiver coasts down my spine, and I can feel heat pooling between my thighs. Despite his hand around my throat, there's tenderness in his voice, a fondness maybe. Whatever it is, it makes my knees weak.

I tilt my head to give him better access, and he rewards me. The sensation of his teeth on my skin sends sparks shooting through my body, and I let out a soft moan.

His hand slides from my throat down, between my breasts, and right into the waistband of my leggings. His fingers slip underneath my panties and I gasp, his touch like a jolt of electricity. He slides his hand up and down, teasing me before he finally dips a finger inside me. I moan again, louder this time, my eyes closing as pleasure radiates through me.

He withdraws his fingers, and my eyes fly open. I watch with bated breath as he slips his fingers inside his mouth, licking them clean.

"I always clean up my mess."

"Oh, holy fuck," I mutter, my core clenching at the sight.

He sends me an intense look. “What did I say about that filthy mouth of yours?”

I push onto my toes and get as close to his face as I can. “That you want to fuck it.”

He grips the waistband of my leggings and yanks them. The fabric tears instantly, and he discards them with a flick of his wrist. My panties are gone before I even register what happened. He slams his lips against mine, his tongue demanding entrance as he picks up my right leg, resting it in the crook of his elbow.

I open my mouth to him, my hands flying to his shoulders for balance. He doesn't waste any time, pulling his cock free from his pants and sliding inside of me in the next breath.

“Jesus, Silas,” I say on a groan against his lips, my fingers digging into his skin and my eyes squeezing shut. “You're so big.”

“You can take it, Evie.” He pulls out, thrusting back in slowly once more.

I whimper, pleasure shooting through me faster than I can keep up with. His free hand slides between us, his thumb brushing tight circles over my clit.

“Hold on,” he murmurs. His grip tightens a little as his thrusts become more erratic, his hips slamming against mine as I start to ride out the wave of pleasure.

I was wrong before. His kiss was a powerful drug, designed to lure me to this moment. This is the claiming. A statement of possession so powerful that it can never be undone.

“Oh fuck.” I can't believe it, but I think I'm going to come already. I feel my pussy start to flutter around his cock, and I'm so close I can almost taste the euphoria.

“Come, now,” he demands as he pinches my clit between his thumb and index finger.

And if it didn't feel so good, I might've held out just out of spite. But my body has other plans, and she's not going to pass up an orgasm. I crest that

wave, plummeting into oblivion as I yell his name.

He follows me immediately, tipping his head back to expose his throat as he comes with a long moan. His chest heaves, sweat coating his bare skin. I have the strangest urge to lick it off.

Aftershocks ripple through my body, and I feel like I'm looking at him with new eyes. Heart-shaped rose-tinted glasses.

I wince as he pulls out of me, so I miss it at first. The change in the air. He lowers his arm, and my foot settles back on the ground once more.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, the sweet taste of bliss turning sour. I shake my head, like I can somehow stop him.

He tucks his still-hard cock beneath the waistband of his shorts and rolls his shoulders back. Finally, he gives me his eyes.

“Thanks.”

My mouth drops open and my body pulls tight. Disbelief wraps its claws around my throat, stealing my words for a second. “Thanks?”

“I needed that,” he says, moving the stupid patio cushions over to the side of the garage.

While I stand here with his fucking cum sliding down my thigh.

“You're an asshole,” I seethe quietly. Tears prick my eyes, and I blink furiously. I will not let him see me cry.

“You got what you wanted, didn't you?” he asks, looking over his shoulder at me.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I whisper.

He sighs, running his hand over his face. I can't tell if it's my imagination playing tricks on me, but it almost looked like there was a fine tremor in his hand.

“Look, is this going to be an issue? Are you still good to watch Hunter?”

I shake my head and look at my feet before I remember that I'm trying not to let the tears fall. “Get the fuck out of here, Silas, before I forget that I love your son.”

He stills, his gaze snapping to me. “What did you say?”

I open my mouth, but then the side door to the house opens. Bane fills the doorway, his expression thunderous. His gaze flies from me to Silas, and I have no idea what expression is on my face. My feelings are too jumbled together right now.

“What?” Silas snaps.

“We got a problem,” he says.

BANE

I NOTICE a ball of dark fabric next to her bare feet, following the long line of her legs and pausing when I realize she's not wearing my shirt like usual. Instead of the nearly faded logo of some punk band, it's an old school Reaper logo.

It looks exactly like the shirt Silas used to wear years ago.

My gaze slices toward the asshole in question, and I fold my arms across my chest and wait. He might think he's patient, but he folds when it comes to me. He always has.

He finishes fucking around with whatever he's doing with the patio furniture and looks at me. "What kind of problem?"

"Something going on here?" I ask instead of answering. He should know better than to ask me to spill club secrets in front of her. I'd never willingly put her in danger. And I'm not going to tell her about this unless I have to.

There's a low pit in my stomach that warns me that shit is about to get very bad again. My intuition sending smoke signals to get my attention.

"We're fine, ain't that right, Evangeline?" Silas says, his voice dry and caustic.

"Yep, all good, Daddy St. James," she chirps with entirely too much bite for her forced enthusiasm.

Instead of the smirk I expected, Silas scowls. And that right there tells me

everything I need to know.

Something happened. And Silas fucked up.

I sigh, stretching my neck from left to right and blowing out a breath. “Alright, we’ll deal with whatever this is later, yeah? C’mon, sugar, let’s get you inside. There’s still a few minutes left on the tornado warning. Don’t know what the hell you two deemed so important you had to go outside during this storm,” I mutter, stepping into the garage holding it open for them.

Silas goes first, not bothering to look behind him, so he misses the way she glares at his retreating back.

“You alright, baby girl?” I reach out for her, threading my fingers with hers when she gets close enough.

She looks up at me, her teeth denting her bottom lip. “Are you mad?”

“Course not. What’s there to be mad about?” I pull her toward the house, but she digs her heels in, her other hand gripping my wrist. I look over my shoulder at her, my gaze falling to the nervous way she’s fiddling with the hem of her shirt.

“Silas and I . . .” she trails off, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“It’s alright, Evangeline. We can talk it out later if you need to, but as long as you’re good, I’m good, yeah?” I squeeze her hand reassuringly.

She nods, but she doesn’t look that relieved. Her gaze flicks inside the house before coming back to me. “What happened at the gate?”

I tug her inside next to me. As soon as we step through the door, I close it with the toe of my boot. “Club business, sugar. I don’t have all the facts yet, anyway. But we gotta go down and check it out. You can stay here and look after Hunter and Aunt Dixie, right?”

The storm is raging outside now, rain pounding against the windows and thunder rumbling with menace in the distance.

“I don’t think Dixie needs a babysitter, but yeah.” Evangeline shivers a

little, and I pull her toward the bathroom down the hallway.

I pull a flashlight from my pocket, flick it on, and set it on the counter in the bathroom. “Wait here. I’ll go grab you some warmer clothes.” Silas keeps it cold as hell in here, and I don’t want her freezing in the basement.

She nods and I pull the bathroom door closed. I jog up the stairs, ignoring the way the wind beats against the siding, and hoping I don’t lose too many shingles during this storm. My house needed a new roof a few years ago, but I pushed my luck and put a third layer on.

I push thoughts of home repair out of my mind and try to get my head in the game.

“WALK ME THROUGH WHAT HAPPENED EXACTLY,” Silas says from behind the wheel.

The three of us piled into his truck for the usually-short drive down to the clubhouse. But the rain and lack of light makes visibility less than zero, so we’re practically crawling down the road. My internal clock ticks like it’s a timer or a countdown, and I have to remind myself that for now, everything is fine.

“Came down to check the gate like I said I would, and the prospect was huddled in the guard booth, trying to call me. He said someone drove up fast, opened the door, and pushed someone out on the sidewalk.”

“And it was Ace?” Silas asks. “You’re sure?”

I incline my head. “Saw him myself.”

“How’d he look?” Nova asks from the backseat.

I glance over my shoulder at him. “Someone fucked him up, man. So get your head straight before you see him, yeah?”

Nova squints, his mouth settling into a line. “Don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

I nod a few times before I face forward again.

“What'd he say?” Silas asks.

“Did the prospect see who it was? What kind of car? Anything useful?”

Nova asks at the same time.

I shake my head, running my fingers over the scruff on my chin. “Nah, the power went out, our generator didn't kick in. We're fucking lucky they didn't try to storm the gates. Without power, it could've gone much worse.”

“Not for Ace,” Nova murmurs.

“Better than Quince.”

“Fuck,” Silas grunts. “You sure?”

“Goddammit,” Nova snarls.

“Ace wouldn't talk until we're all there, but he did say he and Quince were snatched. And they sent Ace back to us to deliver the message.”

The low bubbling brook of rage that sits largely untouched starts to move, sluggish but still as potent. I wasn't especially close with those guys, but it doesn't matter. We're a fucking family. A hit against one of us is a hit felt by all.

We pull around to the back entrance of the clubhouse, the tires squealing at the sharp turn. The three of us jump out of the truck and duck inside. It's dark as hell in here, only the track lighting along either side of the floor offers any light in the hallway.

We find Ace in the kitchen with a battery-operated industrial light on either side of him. A few bunnies are tending to him, cleaning his cuts and applying some bandages.

I look at them and jerk my head to the doorway. “Get out of here. Club business.”

“Sure thing, Bane,” they mutter practically in unison. A few of the brothers hang around the island, their expressions drawn tight.

“Jesus, fuck,” Nova swears. “You alright, man?”

Ace grimaces. “I'm alive.”

Silas stands in front of him and folds his arms across his face. “We'll get you taken care of, so don't worry about it, yeah?”

Ace nods, his movement jerky and broken. “Thanks, Prez.”

“What's the message and who is it from?” Silas asks.

“This is courtesy of the Savage Souls. They send their regards and condolences.”

“Condolences for what?” Nova asks.

I step forward, standing shoulder to shoulder with Silas. “Was this before or after they killed Quince?”

“Before,” Ace says, his face scrunching up.

“Could've been shit-talking. Or foreshadowing since they knew they'd only keep one of them,” Nova murmurs.

“What else did they say?” Silas asks.

Ace licks his lip, sending fresh blood bubbling to the cut down the middle of his bottom lip. “Yeah. They said to start saying your goodbyes now while you still can.”

Well, that's not fucking good. My mind spins, too many different threads of possibilities. It's nearly impossible to know if they were intimidating Ace or talking out of pocket or actually giving us a warning.

I take a step forward. “Think, Ace. Did they say anything else? Even weird shit is worth mentioning. Did you actually see them kill Quince?”

He shakes his head, his face pale with pain. “I saw them take Quince out, man. They had us kneeling with our hands bound, and that motherfucker didn't even say anything before he shot him”

“Who?” I press. Urgency pricks my fingertips like it's a moving thing underneath my skin.

“Deran Masters.” Ace grunts and shifts in his seat.

“Motherfucker,” Silas swears. He turns around and sinks his hands into his hair and looks up.

Deran Masters grew up in Rosewood. Then he spent some time in

Crestview before ultimately becoming a Savage Souls. They're an aptly named club. They don't adhere to the general rules, the unspoken code of conduct we all follow: no women, no children, no elderly.

Everyone is fair game to the Savage Souls, and those motherfuckers are twisted. There's a reason we ran them out of the area all those years ago. Why that decision was backed by all the surrounding clubs, not just us—including Hell Hounds.

“Makes me wonder what the fuck they're doing partnering with the Hell Hounds.” What kind of promises were made.

“What else?” I ask Ace, watching the pain creep across his features, tightening his muscles. His adrenaline is waning, and he's gonna crash soon.

He shakes his head, his hand holding one side of his ribs tightly. “I don't know, man. Something about the Summer Festival here, almost like they were planning on going. I—I don't know. I'm sorry.”

I lean over and rest my hand on his shoulder. “You did good, man. You did good.” I jerk my head to the brothers hanging back and say, “Make sure he gets patched up, yeah?”

Silas and Nova flank me as I stalk back down the hallway and into the howling wind. “Let's go home. We have some favors to call in.”

EVANGELINE

THE FRONT DOOR slams and heavy footfalls thunder through the house. I spring up from my perch on Hunter's floor by his bed and run to his door. He fell asleep in the basement, and I carried him up here when the tornado warning expired. Dixie offered to carry him, but the side-eye glare I sent her was so fierce—her words, not mine—she threw her hands up and laughed before she went home.

I ease his door closed behind me and hustle down the stairs. Voices filter through the first floor, not loud enough for me to hear the words. But I don't need words to feel the shift in their demeanors.

Something is wrong.

My heart thunders inside my chest, fear making my skin feel tight. I press my fingertips to my bottom lip. Did Silas tell them what happened in the garage just now? Is that why there's violence simmering in the air?

I don't regret it, even when I maybe should.

Be brave, Nana Jo's voice whispers in the back of my mind.

I drop my hand, roll my shoulders back, and walk into the kitchen. All three of the St. James men are standing around the island, wearing varying degrees of anger on their faces. Almost as if they coordinated it, they turn to look at me as one.

I look from one to the other, waiting for someone to say something. Then

I wonder if they're waiting on me to say something. That familiar sting of insecurity curls around me like barbed wire.

Okay, so maybe this *is* about the garage. I bristle at the assumption, and decide to just rip the proverbial band-aid off.

“Is this about earlier, in the garage?”

Okay, so maybe it's less ripping and more dipping my toes in the water.

Bane's gaze sharpens on me as Nova asks, “What happened earlier in the garage?”

I'm at a crossroads now. I debate on backpedaling, brushing off what I said. But as soon as the thought crosses my mind, I throw it out. Relationships need trust, without it, they'll fail. And I like them too much not to be honest.

Besides, I don't think it'll happen again with Silas. I haven't had any time to process that whole thing yet. I need some Uncle Harry's custard and my cousin before I can make sense of it all.

Nova pivots to face the other two, narrowing his eyes on them. “What happened in the garage.”

Bane looks at Silas, a single brow arched, and apparently they're doing that telepathic communication thing again. Because no one says anything, and then the next minute, Nova turns on Silas.

“Are you fucking kidding me, man? What did you do?” Nova seethes. “What other secrets you keeping from me, huh, *brother*?” Nova spits the familial tie, shoving him again. “You gonna try to steal my girl from behind my back?”

“Our girl,” Bane adds.

Before it can escalate any further, I step into the kitchen. “He didn't do anything.”

All three of them look at me, and I don't hate all the attention if I'm being honest.

“Nothing, huh? So, the two of you disappear in the middle of a fucking

tornado to do what—play checkers in the garage?”

My brows furrow together and I shake my head. “What? No, we weren't playing checkers, we—”

“She found me grabbing patio furniture outside and told me I was an idiot and needed to get in the house,” Silas says, casually shrugging his shoulders. He looks to the side, like he's bored by all of it.

“Without her pants on?” Bane's brows knit together before they smooth out, his expression expectant.

“I was going to tell you both, but then you left to do club business, and I didn't get a chance.” I exhale and remind myself that I'm a strong woman. “Look, I've always been upfront about my interest in you guys.”

“In *Silas*?” Nova jabs his index finger at his brother's chest.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “Well, that was a bit unexpected but—”

“I fucked her in the garage,” Silas interrupts, avoiding looking at everyone. “And it was a mistake. So, get over it, man. I already have.”

My mouth drops open as I stare at the man whose cum is literally still dripping out of me. “What the fuck?”

“You son of a bitch,” Nova snarls, advancing on his brother.

But Bane beats him to it, his arm swinging out and connecting with Silas's face. He thrusts his finger in Silas's face and snaps, “Don't you ever disrespect her like that again, yeah?”

Silas leans over and spits into the sink, his narrowed-eye glare on Bane. “Yeah, whatever.”

“I'm sorry,” I whisper.

Nova shakes his head and blows out a breath. “It's fine, sweetheart.”

I glance at Bane, nerves swirling inside my gut like a pile of snakes. He dips his head toward me, a smirk hooking up the corner of his mouth. Something about the expression eases the tight coil of my muscles.

SILAS

MY HEART SLAMS against my ribcage, drowning out the feeling of my pulse thundering in my sore jaw. That motherfucker can pack a punch, and I know he pulled back on this one. It's fine, I can take it.

What I can't take is her in my kitchen, looking at me with those big doe eyes of hers. I can still feel the way her cunt hugged my cock, and it's fucking me up inside.

“Are we gonna talk about our shit now or are you two gonna make googly eyes at my fucking nanny all night?”

“Oh,” she says, startling from her perch in the doorway. “Right. I'll leave you guys to it.”

“Wait,” Nova calls, jogging across the kitchen to her. He leans down and cups her face, murmuring something too low for me to hear. I watch the tension in her body melt away, and I have to grit my teeth at the way it tightens my chest.

This is the fucking worst.

I push all thoughts of her away, focusing only on what I need to right now.

“We need to move fast,” I murmur.

“We lose recon,” Bane says next to me.

I keep my eyes on her and the way her lashes flutter closed when my brother kisses her. “Is the cost worth it to have the element of surprise?”

“I guess it has to be. The alternative is we wait for them to come at us. And we don't fucking know what that looks like,” he says.

I shake my head, my resolve hardening inside of me. “No. They can't come to us. Those motherfuckers don't protect their families, so they can't be

allowed access to ours.”

“Who do you want to bring in?”

My eyes lose focus, and I try to figure out our best move. I don't have the luxury of time or information, so we have to move quickly. “Everyone.”

Nova taps Evangeline on the ass she spins around and walks away, presumably heading upstairs. He strolls over to us, a smirk tilting his mouth up on one side.

“She good?” Bane asks, jerking his chin toward our girl.

Nova shrugs and slips his hands in his pockets. “She will be. So, what's our move?”

I tongue the inside of my cheek, feeling the sting of the cut. “If the Savage Souls and Hell Hounds want a fight, we're going to give them one.”

Nova's jaw sets with determination. “When?”

“We've got preliminary intel from our recon last month, and I already sent a few scouts to do some more. Rumor is they have a main warehouse on the north end of Crestview,” Bane says.

“Close to the old Savage Souls territory, makes sense,” Nova says with a nod. “So, when do we hit 'em?”

I lean my ass back against the counter. “They'll be expecting us to either fly off half-cocked right now or wait until we have everything we need.”

“So, when then?” Nova asks.

“Two days.”

“Fuck,” Nova sighs. “Alright. What do you need from me?”

“Grab a new burner, reach out to a few of your contacts, ask 'em to be on standby.”

“That's gonna cost a lot—favors and cash,” Nova muses.

“We've got plenty of both,” Bane says. “I'll know more in a few hours. Until then, prepare the guys.”

“One more thing. We're gonna go on lockdown, so get whatever shit you need today.”

“On it,” Nova says, pushing off the counter and leaving the kitchen without another word.

I look at my cousin. “How are you feeling about this?” It's the same question I ask him before every job and move we make.

His brows pitch forward. “Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.” It's the same thing he always says. And the familiarity gives me a glimmer of hope that everything will turn out alright.

EVANGELINE

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.” I shake my head a little, confusion tugging my brows low. It’s been two days of quiet chaos. The kind of frenetic energy swelling inside the house, big enough where it’s pressing against your skin. But no one says anything to pop it. Hushed conversations are happening between all three of the guys, but no one is really talking to me.

“We have to go now,” Bane murmurs.

“Where are you going?”

“It’s club business, baby girl.” His brows are furrowed, eyes downcast. Regret tugs the curve of his mouth down.

“You forget that my motorcycle club knowledge starts and ends with ten episodes of a TV show and a few romance novels. So explain it to me like I’m five.”

The corner of his lip twitches. “Well, I don’t think I would tell you this if you were five.”

I roll my eyes and fold my arms across my chest. “Okay, well just, I don’t know, give me something. The three of you have been acting weird as hell since the storm. I know something happened to one of the guys, but what I don’t understand is why you’re gearing up like you’re heading into battle.”

“Yes you do, sugar.” His voice is low, even. He’s always so steady. Even in the face of danger.

As I try to make sense of everything, my thoughts become a tangled web of confusion. My mind goes to the worst-case scenario, and my vision blurs. A lump forms in the back of my throat, and I shake my head, my hair tumbling across my shoulders.

He rushes to my side, his hands gently cupping my cheeks. He sweeps his thumbs beneath my eyes, and the relief his touch gives me is nearly instant. “It’s alright. Nothing is gonna happen to me.”

“You don’t know that. This—this is fucking crazy, Lincoln.” My voice gets high and my eyes feel a touch too wide. My hands latch onto his forearms, like I can physically stop him from leaving.

He doesn’t sugarcoat it or tell me platitudes, he simply nods. “It is dangerous. But I’ll come back to you, you hear me? And when I do, if you want out, then we’ll fucking leave.”

“What?” I can feel the space between my brows wrinkle as I look up at him.

His hands fall from my face, leaving a tingling sensation in their wake. I release his wrists with reluctance, immediately feeling a sense of loss. But his gaze never wavers from mine as he takes his kutte off.

And then he shocks the hell out of me when he drapes it over my shoulders. I’m pliant in his hold as he pulls my arms through the openings on either side. The leather feels warm and surprisingly soft, lighter than I expected.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, almost afraid of his answer.

“You know exactly what it means, sugar.” His deep voice sends shivers down my spine as he leans in close. He brushes his lips across mine in a kiss so achingly sweet it makes my heart clench.

“Why? Why, Lincoln?” I whisper against his mouth. Dread fills my belly like a bucket of fish out of water, heavy and flip-flopping around.

He pulls back just enough to look me in the eye, his own smoldering with something I can’t quite place. “You know why, baby girl,” he says calmly.

It's such a stark contrast to the way my heart is thumping wildly against my chest. It makes me feel like I'm losing my mind.

“Don't be ridiculous. You can't just give me your kutte.” I grab the side and try to shimmy out of it, but his hands land over mine, stopping me.

“It's already done.”

My mouth pulls into a frown and I look at him through watery eyes. The frayed edges of hysteria creep into my consciousness. Somewhere, somehow, my subconscious knows this isn't good. That him giving me this feels permanent in a way I never asked for. It feels like he's saying goodbye, even if his words aren't.

And that is unacceptable to me.

“Well, take it back. It's-it's disrespectful to your club,” I tell him, my voice doing that stupid high-pitched thing it does when I'm about to cry for real.

He nods a few times as he steps into me. I take a step backward and he follows until my back hits the wall. He plants his hands on the wall on either side of me. Bending down, he says, “I will burn it to the ground if it means I get to have you.”

My eyes well with emotion, the intensity and self-assuredness in his voice spearing my heart like an arrow. “But you love this club.”

“I do,” he confirms with a nod. He slides one of his hands up my neck, tilting my face up toward his. “But I love you more.”

My breath catches in my throat, and I clutch his shirt in my fist, holding him to me. “You barely know me, Lincoln. You've been in this club your entire life. And I'm not asking you to choose.”

“I know, sugar. That's why I am. And I choose you. Every single time.”

His lips crash into mine, kissing me with a desperation and passion I'm not used to from him. I kiss him back with equal fervor, trying to convey all the emotions course through me without words.

A knock at the door pulls us apart. “Time to go, man,” Silas yells.

Bane leans his forehead against mine. “I’m coming back to you, you hear me, Evangeline? And then all bets are off, sugar.” He presses a hard kiss against my lips and pushes off the wall.

I stay there, heart pounding for another minute before I slip off his kutte and drape it over the foot of my bed and follow him downstairs. It’s not a statement for him, but one for Nova.

I can’t go downstairs wearing Bane’s kutte and kiss Nova goodbye. For the first time, I feel a little unsteady on my feet in this relationship dynamic we have. My footing is hesitant and I’m afraid a misstep right now will cost more than any of us are willing to pay.

I don’t know what’s going on, only that most of the Reapers are leaving the compound today. And that—that’s alarming enough.

I find Nova waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. He’s dressed in a black tee and jeans, his black baseball hat turned backwards. He flashes me that lethal smile of his, and stupid tears well up in my eyes once more. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but this is not the kind of sendoff I wanted to give them.

So, I sniff and blink a few times, stopping two stairs above him. It decreases our height difference enough that I lean forward and jump into his arms without thinking. He catches me with a low chuckle, his hands gripping my ass as I press my mouth to his for a chaste kiss.

“Be careful, okay?”

One palm leaves my ass to slide up my spine. “I always am, sweetheart. You don’t have to worry. And when I get back, we’re gonna do that famous New York City kiss, yeah?” he teases, dragging his lips along the line of my neck.

It pulls a laugh from me, and I tighten my arms around him. “You mean the Times Square one?”

“I’m going to bend you backward and kiss the hell outta you in front of everyone, so be prepared, sweetheart.”

I huff a laugh. “Is that a tradition or something?”

“It is now.”

I pull back to get his attention. I wait for his gaze to snap to mine. “I don't know what you're doing other than it's dangerous. But I want you to come back to me, okay?”

His face softens, affection replacing humor. He brushes his lips against mine and says, “I'm yours, Evangeline.”

I pull back again, nervousness tightening my chest. “Promise me you'll come back to me.”

His gaze slowly crawls over my face like he's memorizing it. Finally, he nods. “I will.”

I eliminate the space between us and press my lips to his. Our kiss is tender and slow, sealing his promise. It was probably unfair for me to ask them to come back to me like that. I'm sure I'll look back on it and feel the hot flush of embarrassment later, but right now, it feels right.

Even if it is dramatic.

Engines rev outside, and I know he has to go. We pull apart and he sets me on my feet. He looks at me for a moment, and then like our serious moment never happened, his mouth hooks into a cocky sort of grin and he walks backward, toward the front door.

“Don't forget about my kiss later, sweetheart.”

I shake my head, biting the inside of my lip. “I won't.”

He nods and I watch him leave.

Two down, one to go.

I find Silas in the kitchen, hands pressed into the island counter and head bent low. I hover by the doorway, unsure what to say. Or if I should say anything.

We've been avoiding each other since the night of the storm. Or maybe he's been wrapped up in this—club business—and I . . . *I've* been avoiding *him*. I hate the insecurity that swims in my veins now.

I clear my throat quietly. “Where's Hunter?”

Silas lifts his head, and his expression freezes the air in my lungs. He looks wrecked. Eyes red, brows low, lips pinched into a straight line.

“I'm trusting you, Evangeline.” His voice is a low rumble.

I nod slowly, my expression falling into something serious. “I know. You can trust me.”

His gaze flies over my face, drags down my body with such heavy force that my skin prickles like it usually does. “You'll keep my boy safe.”

It's not a question. Maybe he's trying to convince himself or maybe he's already sure of it.

“I will. You have my word.”

He lets his head fall forward, but just as quickly, he straightens up. “Hunter's in the basement watching a movie. I told him you'd make popcorn today.”

“That's fine. I can do that. When should we expect you guys back?” I'm proud of the evenness of my voice.

He shakes his head, dragging a hand over his face. “I don't know. But keep your phone on you, yeah? The compound is going on lockdown for now, so don't go anywhere. Not even to your house or your cousin's.”

“Hunter and I will be fine here. We have plenty to keep us busy while you take care of . . . club business.”

He crosses the kitchen slowly now, pausing when he's next to me. “Take care of my boy, Evangeline.”

I look over my shoulder at him and promise, “I will.”

BANE

WE ROLL up to the warehouse a few hours outside of Rosewood. Silas, Nova, and I roll in on the warehouse's north end. Half of our guys surround the other sides. The remaining brothers and any friends of the club we pulled in are doing something similar on the other two warehouses.

We couldn't get confirmation of which one was their main location, since they've used all three frequently enough lately. We're stretched a little thin by splitting us three ways, but it's manageable.

And it sure as fuck is better than all of us hitting the wrong warehouse, tipping them off, and fucking our element of surprise. It's our best fucking weapon right now.

That and the fierce parental rage that fuels Silas.

I flip open the new burner phone and send the letter p to the group chat, so we can coordinate our attack. Hit all three places at exactly the same time.

It's the only way this works with minimal blowback.

“Go over the plan again,” Silas demands.

These unpredictable situations are his nightmare, so I don't take offense at his tone.

“Once we're in position, everyone takes down the warehouses at the exact same time.”

“We gave them mercy last time, and look where it got us. Quince is dead

and Ace is fucked up. Threats against our town—our families?” Nova shakes his head. “Nah, they don't get the chance to follow through on that.”

My phone vibrates in my hand, and a slew of p's fill the screen. “We're ready.”

Silas nods, his expression drawn up tight. “No mercy.”

The three of us ease out of the black SUV, guns drawn and carefully walk toward the warehouse.

The dull gray exterior is marred with graffiti and rust. All the windows on the first story are boarded up, and most of the ones at the top of the second story are broken. It looks like the kind of thing you'd see in a horror movie. Which I guess makes it a good hideout for assholes who do terrible shit.

Fresh tire tracks in the dirt around the outside inject some confidence inside me. Someone's been here recently. But something else feels off. It's quiet—too quiet.

Silas opens the side door, flecks of rust flying off, revealing a dark interior. The familiar dank smell of weed wafts out, and it seems like my intel was right. They've been using this location as a grow house.

“You good?” I murmur.

Silas takes point, first one inside the building while Nova covers him, and I cover us from behind. The three of us have done enough dangerous shit together that we naturally fall into this pattern. It's like riding a bike, some things I don't think I'll ever forget.

We carefully enter the warehouse, stepping over broken glass, cardboard boxes, and random pieces of metal. Dust swirls in the air, visible in the beams of sunlight from the upper windows. A few flickering fluorescent bulbs dangle from the ceiling, illuminating the space.

“What the fuck,” Nova curses.

“I'm going to find the other guys,” Silas murmurs, carefully weaving his way through all the shit on the ground to the rest of our guys.

I don't go with him. I don't need confirmation from them. I already know

there's no one here.

I pull out my phone and send the letter c. As far as code words go, we're going elementary today. It's the best I could do with so many different people on such short notice.

I keep my gun close as I impatiently wait for text to come in. More c's fill the chat, but it's only enough for one of the places.

“Fuck.”

“Which one?” Nova asks, picking up on it immediately.

“The one just over the city limits.”

“Give them time, yeah? Jagger will come through. He always does,” Nova says.

Chances are they drew the short straw, and they're in the thick of it now. But if Savage Souls and Hell Hounds are there, they might need our help. Sweat breaks out along the back of my neck. This is why I don't make a move before I have all of the fucking information.

“Goddammit.” I pace a little bit, indecision weighing down my shoulders like a fucking lead blanket. “He's got five minutes for one of them to check in or we're just fucking going there ourselves.”

It's part of the very simple agreement. Text h if your warehouse is crawling with psychopath assholes and the rest of us will come. If they're not texting it's clear or that they need help, it can only be one of two things: they're pinned or they're already dead.

My head swims with possibilities, exit strategies, and backup plans. Every second that ticks by feels like a gong going off inside my head.

Two minutes later, my phone vibrates. I open the screen.

“C,” I murmur.

All the blood drains from my face as I scan the warehouse, searching for clarity. I look past the garbage everywhere, the overturned crates, and the ripped up couches. At first, it looked abandoned, but now that I'm really looking, there are signs of recent activity. A flatscreen TV in the corner,

seedlings on the table, a half-full coffee pot.

This isn't an abandoned warehouse.

It's a carefully crafted scene. Something to keep us here, to distract us.

Adrenaline floods my veins as realization drowns me in its icy depths.

“It's a trap,” I mutter, horror strangling my voice.

Nova stills. “What did you say?”

I pivot toward him and raise my gun, looking toward the catwalk that wraps around the second story above our heads. We're like fish in a barrel here. “I said it's a fucking trap.”

“How?” Nova snaps, mirroring me and aiming up.

Once I'm sure there aren't Savage Souls hiding in wait to take us out, I lower my gun and lift my phone at the same time. I break protocol and send a text to the group.

Me: CODE RED. it's a trap

I pocket my phone, my eyes opened wide enough to hurt as I spin around, looking for threats. I don't see anything, but that doesn't mean shit. I didn't see this coming—which means I have no idea what's going to happen.

I feel like I don't know anything right now. Other than we need to get the fuck out of there.

I'm breathing hard, panic swarming me as I look for my cousin, my best fucking friend who saved my goddamn life. He cannot die in a shitty warehouse in the middle of nowhere because I fucked up. “Silas!” I bellow his name.

He pops up from a crouched position, his expression tight. Understanding bleeds the color from his face, and together, we start running.

Everyone makes it out of the warehouse in one piece. I'm jumpy and trigger-happy, expecting them to be waiting outside, surrounding us. It's what I would do if I were them. Hot air greets us, pressing uncomfortably against my skin.

“Everyone, get the fuck out of here,” Silas shouts as we run to the SUV. “Stay sharp.”

We reach the SUV when a loud boom reverberates in the air, sending ripples of pressure fanning out from the what's left of the warehouse. Big black smoke clouds billow into the air from the blown-out windows and flames engulf one half of it.

“Motherfucker,” Silas curses.

“Goddamn trap alright,” Nova says, slapping me on the shoulder.

But I don't respond. The dread in my gut hasn't died down—it's multiplied.

“Let's go before the cops get here. That was loud enough the next county heard it,” Silas says, sliding into the driver's seat.

I open the center console and snag my phone out, my intuition burning hot inside of me. I turn it on and see two missed calls from Aunt Dixie. “Check your phones, right now.”

Silas fishes his phone out of the cupholder next to him. “Hang on, Ma left a voicemail.”

He puts it on speaker as he peels out of the makeshift gravel driveway, and a moment later, Aunt Dixie's voice fills the air.

“Silas, they've breached the compound. Get home, son.”

My phone rings, and I flinch.

“Who is it? Ma? Evangeline?” Nova asks, leaning forward between the seats.

Unknown number flashes on the screen, and I answer it instantly, flipping it to speakerphone.

“Hello?”

“I'm looking for Lincoln St. James.” It's a woman, but her voice is muffled, like she's covering her mouth or something.

“Who is this?”

“Is this Lincoln St. James?” she insists, her voice lowering to a near

whisper.

I glance at Silas and brace. “Yes. Who is this?”

“This is Elizabeth Carter, and I messed up. I—I need your help.”

EVANGELINE

ANXIETY HAS BEEN my constant companion since they left. I tried to dance it out with Hunter in the living room, cranking up his favorite songs. It helped for a little while, but they've been gone for hours now.

I exhale and let the sunshine wash over me as Hunter and I play a rousing game of Simon Says. Mostly, I just have him do the silly dance moves.

“Alright, my little muffin, time for lunch.”

He smiles at me, his cheeks red and his eyes mischievous. “Chocolate chip cookies?”

“For *lunch*?” I twist my lips to the side to hide the smile threatening to break free.

“Dad's gone for the whole day, and he didn't tell me I couldn't have them for lunch, so.” He stares at me expectantly, his little brows raised and hopeful.

I can't help it, I laugh. I ruffle his hair, grimacing a little at the sweaty strands. “I like your logic, bud. How about we have pizza rolls for lunch and chocolate chip cookies for dessert?”

I curl my hand over his shoulder and steer us toward the sliding glass door. He leans into me, resting his head against my side.

“Deal,” he says, before he springs off of me and starts running toward the house. “Last one there is a rotten pumpkin pie!”

His laughter echoes around me as I start to jog. Naturally, I let him win. It's worth it to see the joy crinkle his eyes and puff up his cheeks.

“You're too fast, Hunter. You're like a cheetah,” I tell him when I reach the door, sliding it open. It's just heavy enough where it's hard for him to open it from the outside.

“I've been practicing,” he says seriously.

“I can see that. You might like to join track one day.”

He tilts his head to the side and beelines for his water on the counter. “Track?”

I start to close the patio door, still looking at Hunter. “Yeah, it's like running and races and—”

A booming thud next to me scares the hell out of me. My head whips toward the sound, and I jump. Dixie is standing on the other side of the patio door, her hand pressed against the glass.

I slide the door open immediately, adrenaline flooding my veins at the sight of her. It's the only time I've ever seen her not put together. “Dixie? Are you ok—”

“Time to go, honey. Where's my grandbaby?”

My body freezes for a moment, a single moment of confusion and terror colliding together.

“Right here, Nan!” Hunter calls, all smiles still.

But Dixie isn't smiling. This is the most serious I've ever seen her, and even though I haven't known her long, it's still freaking me out.

“Get your sneakers on, honey. We're going on an adventure. And hurry, Hunter. Fastest you've ever moved, okay?”

“Okay, Nan,” he says, taking off to the front of the house where his sneakers are.

“You too, Evangeline. Get your purse and shoes. We're leaving.”

I hesitate. “What happened?”

She shakes her head. “We don't have time for that now. We need to move.”

Now.”

“Shit. Shit, okay,” I mutter, spinning in a little circle, trying to figure out what I need and what's happening.

“Shoes, honey. Purse. And we need the keys to Silas's UTVs,” Dixie says, looking over her shoulder into the backyard.

“Okay, okay. Shoes, purse, keys,” I mutter to myself as I slip my sneakers on and grab my purse from the kitchen table. It's right next to Flopsy and Hunter's sunglasses. I grab both of those and stuff them into my purse before I throw it over my shoulder. I run across the kitchen to the key holder on the wall in the back hall.

“C'mon, honey. We gotta move,” Dixie yells. She's not being unkind, but her voice has this wobble I've never heard before. And that scares me more than I can let myself think about right now.

I grab both sets in my fist and run to the patio door. I hustle Hunter out the door, slamming it closed behind me when I hear the first rumble. It sounds almost like thunder in the distance, the ominous deep bass that raises the hair on the back of your neck.

“What was that?” I murmur, looking at Dixie.

Her lips pinch together and she shakes her head once. “Hunter, you're with Evangeline, yeah? It's hard for Nan to drive this with one arm.” She gets on the blue UTV closest to the backyard, and I toss her the blue keychain.

“C'mon, muffin. Let's go for a ride.” I put him on the red UTV and slide his helmet over his head. Adjusting my purse so it lays against my back, I swing my leg over and put the key in.

“You ever drive one of these, Eve?”

“Yep.” Once, but I don't tell him that. I'll figure it out.

“Ready?” Dixie asks, pressing the start button. The UTV growls to life instantly. She eases it away from the house slowly.

“Let's go,” I say, just as another rumbling boom rolls through the air. My adrenaline perks up at the sound, sending another wave of jitters through my

body.

I press the start button and nothing happens. I pull the key out, put it back in, and press the start button again. Nothing happens.

“What's wrong?” Dixie calls over her shoulder.

I expel a breath and try once more.

“Did Dad fix this one because he told me Uncle Nova broke, so that's why I couldn't go on any rides with him for a while,” Hunter says.

My heart stops. Just fucking stops beating right inside my chest.

“Okay, change of plans. You're going to ride with Nan, okay?” I hop off the UTV and help him down. I scoop him up and run him over to Dixie.

“What's going on?” she asks.

“The red one is broken, so Hunter is going to ride with you, okay?”

“No. You ride with him on this one, and I'll see if Bane has one,” she says, pushing to stand. But then we hear it.

The unmistakable sound of motorcycles.

Only I know it can't be our motorcycles, because I watched them all leave in cars and trucks this morning.

My eyes meet hers, and for the first time, I finally have one of those silent conversations that I actually understand.

You have to take Hunter, I tell her.

No, I'll stay here and you go with him. You don't understand what's happening, she says.

True, but I know something bad is happening, and your right arm is still in a sling. You can barely drive that thing.

Exactly, which is why you should take him instead, she says.

You're his grandmother, and he needs you, I tell her.

I place a hand on her shoulder. “Dixie, I need you to take Hunter.”

She shakes her head, but she sits down. “Then I need you to take this.” She reaches inside her purse and pulls out a handgun and a handful of ammo.

My hands shake as I accept it from her. I'm not that familiar with guns.

I've handled them before. I meant to make Bane teach me, but I didn't think I'd need that knowledge so soon.

I tuck it into the back of my pants like I've watched Bane do before, and then I settle Hunter in front of her, tucking him in tight and making sure he's safe. The red UTV is made for two people and the blue one really isn't. There's no way the three of us would fit on it together.

“Are you coming too, Eve?” he asks, his voice muffled behind the helmet.

“I'm right behind you, Hunter. Be a good little muffin for Nan, yeah?” I slip my purse off my head and put it over his, resting the front against his chest. “Flopsy is in here, so protect this, okay? And hold on tight.”

I lean forward and kiss the top of his helmet, wishing I'd thought to do that before I put it on him. I have this sickening pool of dread growing inside of me that I can't shake.

“Evangeline,” Dixie whispers, her lips trembling, and regret eyes swimming in her eyes. “I'm sorry.”

I take a step back and nod. “I'm fine. Everything will be fine.”

Maybe if I say it enough, it'll be true.

EVANGELINE

I THOUGHT I'd faced my moment. This illusive moment in time where you're faced with the toughest circumstances of your life. The stakes are the highest they've ever been and the crossroads have crossroads. I thought I'd done that already, that I'd come out on the other side. Chosen the right path.

But I was wrong. So, so wrong.

I watch Dixie's back, Hunter tucked safely in front of her, the knot in my stomach feels like a lead weight. Heavy and unmoving.

And I know this is it.

This is the moment where my choice will either be the best or worst decision of my life. I already know it was the best decision for Hunter, and that—that settles something inside me. The tight band around my ribs eases with that understanding.

And relief inflates me like an overstuffed balloon, almost uncomfortable in its pressure. If that's not a sign that I'm doing the right thing, I don't know what is.

I hear the loud hum of motorcycles, and I know my time is running out. I have precious moments left before I come face-to-face with the assholes responsible for terrorizing this town. These people—*my* people.

People I've come to think of as mine. I never understood the idea of belonging to someone before, not really. It always felt like a loss of identity,

something I'd be sacrificing my freedom.

But now, standing on the brink of losing them, I see it.

The connection and loyalty. The sense of family.

And I want to cry for the loss of all that potential. All because of some motherfuckers who want to own a town and all the people inside of it. I don't know exactly what's happening, but I overheard them talking to know enough.

But my indignation and moral rage won't protect me from their bullets. But at least I will have protected Hunter. And that . . . that has to be enough.

Regret slices across my chest so swiftly that I press a hand to my breastbone to ease the ache. I mourn the loss of them, of what could have been. I just know it in my bones that it would've been fucking epic.

An epic, unconventional love story. Just like Cora and I talked about weeks ago.

I glance at the notepad on the fridge, one of those grocery list ones, and it gives me an idea. I dash across the room in three steps, tucking Dixie's gun in the back of my pants. I rip the pen off the attached string and scribble out a note. I don't know what to say, everything seems trivial and big declarations feel insincere.

But saying nothing somehow feels worse.

I settle on four lines. The most important men in my life. Maybe luck will shine brightly on me today, and it's my bikes roaring down the pavement. Maybe it's not the enemy, and we'll all have a laugh about how Dixie and I overreacted over ice cream sundaes and chocolate chip cookies tonight.

My heart cries at just the mention of those cookies. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at them and not think about Hunter.

The rumbling is deafening now, loud enough to clue me in that it isn't my men outside. It sounds like there are fifty bikes in front of Silas's house.

My gut clenches at the thought. There's nowhere for me to hide safely, and there's no way for me to leave. Behind the houses are acres of

meadowland and exactly one tree. They'd spot me in a second, and I can almost imagine the way they'd spray bullets at me.

No. If I'm going down, at least I'm going to try to take a couple of them with me. Rage burns hot inside of me, pushing out the traces of regret. I cultivate it, feeding it sips of indignation and fury, fanning the flames.

There's a certain level of acceptance that simmers underneath my skin. It allows me to shut down everything I can't afford to think about right now and get into position.

I mentally recall all the couple of videos I watched. It wasn't a lot of information, and I know Bane would've taught me more if I hadn't distracted him in other ways. I vow to god or the universe or whoever is listening that if I make it through this day, I'm going to become the best shot in the state.

I take the stairs two at a time, gripping the banister and swinging myself around. Running into the room at the end of the hallway, I fall to my knees just to the left of the main window in the darkened office. I push it open a few inches and silently thank Silas for his random decorating because this specific window doesn't have a screen.

I glance outside and inhale sharply. The sheer number of men outside is terrifying. At least twenty men wearing leather kutties and shitty expressions.

My mental walls aren't thick enough, and fear pours over me like someone upturned a bucket. They slow to a stop in front of Silas's and Bane's houses, lining up in a few haphazard rows. They don't turn off their bikes, letting their engines idle which tells me they intend to send a message.

Well fuck them and fuck their message.

I adjust my position as much as I can on my knees and allow one moment to collect myself and exhale. I have to be quick. I have ten rounds before I have to reload.

The guy in the middle, the one with the long gray, scraggly-looking beard raises his semi-automatic, and I decide he has to go first. The guys on either side of him follow his lead, lifting their handguns and take aim. They're so

fucking casual about it, like they're outside watering the garden and not about the annihilate two homes.

They had to know someone would be home. I don't know if they expected it to be Hunter or me or Dixie. But it doesn't really matter at this point. They came here to destroy.

I can't stop them, but I can wreak my own chaos. Vengeance in real time.

I imagine Bane whispering encouraging words in my ear. I exhale and pull the trigger at the same moment they fire.

Gray beard jerks to the right, but his cry of outrage gets lost in the cacophony of gunfire. I flinch, my shoulders flying toward my ears at the noise. For as long as I live, I don't think I'll ever forget how maddeningly loud it is.

So I force myself to lower my shoulders, and I pull the trigger again. And again. And again.

Once for each of my men, for the disrespect and chaos, and for the ruination of their homes. One for Hunter, for scaring him so badly. I can only hope he's not traumatized forever. One for Dixie for having to make the choice that wasn't a choice at all.

And one for me.

I keep firing, getting lucky and landing a handful of shots. And then I'm out, and I have to reload. I scramble for the magazine clips stuffed in my pocket and reload just like Bane showed me.

My hands shake and sweat coats my body in a light sheen. My breaths sound loud in my ears, too loud, and I start to panic. I slam the magazine back in place and resume my position.

“Oh fuck,” I curse. Four guys are storming toward the front of the house. My determination falters for a moment, fear thundering through my veins like a goddamn herd of elephants. If they get their hands on me, it's game over.

I was wrong earlier. There is a fate worse than death, and I don't imagine

these are the type of men who are familiar with mercy.

I lean forward, hoping I can get an angle on any of them before they reach the front door—not that my aim is great, but it's better than nothing. But at this angle, there's a five foot blind spot in front of the porch.

Shit. That's not good.

Half of the men are still shooting at Lincoln's house, but the men in front of me have stopped. Some because they got shot, and even more have rushed to their fallen brothers' aid. Ha—if you can even call this a brotherhood.

They're wary now, looking around with guns raised but not shooting.

I look within myself, trying to come up with my next move. I don't have many options, and I find that my heart is too bruised and too bloody to offer them a reprieve. They came here with violence in their hearts and greed in their eyes.

I don't offer them kindness or reprieve.

I flick the latch and drop the empty, pulling the final clip from my hoodie pocket as fast as I can.

“Last one,” I murmur, my gaze flicking from what I'm doing to the men outside. They're looking at the second story now, suspicious, and I know my time is running out.

I swear I hear Nana Jo's voice in my ear whispering, *make it count, Eve*.

I exhale and get into position once more. I take aim and squeeze the trigger, my hands shaking from adrenaline. Time slows down as I watch one of the men jerk backward when the bullet hits his shoulder. He yelps in pain, causing the two guys around him to whip around and look at the house. I resist the urge to duck, instead firing toward them again. And again. And again.

I feel like I'm losing touch with reality, existing in this small space in front of the window. Where the only thing that matters is taking as many of them down, buying Dixie as much time as possible to get Hunter far, far away.

A loud boom pierces my bubble, and I realize with a start that someone kicked in the front door. A tsunami of fear floods my body, and I can't take an even breath anymore.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I pull the gun away, ducking next to the window with my back to the wall. I adjust my grip on the gun and switch my focus to the door across the room.

Shouting outside captures my attention, and I twist to look out the corner of the window. A tiny fissure of hope spouts against my will. Maybe it's my men, maybe they're here and this will all be over soon. It's uprooted a moment later when the road remains empty except for the enemy.

Another bang. My heart lurches into my throat when the door to the office is kicked in. I jerk toward the sound, my finger already moving before I give it permission.

And I pull the trigger.

To be continued . . .
in Midnight Salvation

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Are you still with me, bestie? I know, I know, two cliffs back to back like that is *rough* but y'all don't call me a cliffhanger queen for nothin'!

Slide into my DMs and let me know how you're feeling XO

Want more?

How about a bonus Bane scene?

[Sign up for my newsletter](#) to get the bonus scene a week after release day!

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