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CALLIE HART



RIOT REUNION

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PROLOGUE

PAX

JULY

“YOU’RE out of your goddamn mind if you think I’m letting you *marry* my daughter! She’s barely eighteen. She’s still a *child*—”

The last rays of summer sun cut through Robert Witton's living room in a shimmering blade of hammered gold and copper. The silhouettes of tree branches cavort up the walls, dancing. This place looks like something out of ‘*Farm and Table Magazine*.’ Rich, old money, country living. A home my mother would not approve of. It’s too plush. Comfortable. The couch Chase’s father perches on looks like a fluffed-up cloud. Meredith’s couches make your ass go numb after five minutes—the perfect way to ensure that no one gets too relaxed and outstays their welcome.

Chase’s dad blusters onward, his cheeks a weird, pallid color, but I’m too caught up on what he said a moment ago to keep up. She’s still a child? Presley Maria Witton Chase is *not* a child. Far, *far* from it. I keep that statement caged behind gritted teeth, though. A statement like that, with all

the filthy things it might insinuate, coming out of *my* mouth will not help my cause, and let's face it. Right now, I need all of the help I can get.

Pictures in frames hang from the walls. Scores of them. They're all Chase. Chase when she was five at T-Ball practice. Chase, seven years old or so, wearing a sparkly leotard, her hair fashioned into a prim bun on top of her head, holding up a pair of ballet shoes that look brand new. Chase at the zoo, her bright red hair popping against a blistering blue summer sky, a woman I assume to be her mother lifting her up so she can pet an elephant. Chase, in all of these pictures, grinning toothily at the camera; she can't be older than ten in any of them. It isn't surprising that her father still thinks of her as a kid. He's turned this place into a shrine to her childhood. I understand why. She was safe in the past. Robert Witton's son hadn't assaulted her back then. She was just a happy, carefree little girl with no sinister shadows lurking behind those pretty blue eyes.

If the guy accepts that his daughter is an adult now, he also has to accept the fact that she's suffered. That she'll suffer again in her lifetime, just as we all do. He fails to realize that I'm sitting here, telling him that Chase's suffering will be so much less than it could be, because I'm going to protect her. Until the day I die, I will defend and shield her against the harsh edges of the world that cut and scrape.

Or...maybe he does understand what I'm telling him, and it's a bitter pill to swallow. In many ways, I'm telling him that I'll do better at looking after Chase than he did. He failed her on his watch. It'll be a cold day in Hades before I make the same mistakes he did.

"There's just no way. I can't—" He shakes his head vehemently. "There's no way that I'll allow it."

"I don't want to marry her this second, Mr. Witton. I just want to *ask* her to marry me. We can wait for the actual ceremony—"

"I'm afraid the answer's no, Pax. You can't marry her. I'm all for you guys dating. *Casually*," he adds quickly. "But—"

My temper is a fist jackhammering at my bones; I float above it, presenting a steady, calm front. “There’s nothing casual about Chase and I,” I say coolly. “We’re not a high school fling. College won’t be a relationship killer for us. I’ll have plenty of time off with the training I’ll be doing in Virginia. I *will* be spending that time with Chase at Sarah Lawrence. She’s not just gonna forget about me—”

“You’re so sure of that, aren’t you,” Robert Witton says. The man is so...average. The slight dusting of grey at his temples is the only interesting thing about him. Everything else seems so *beige*. He tugs at the cuff of his maroon, cable-knit sweater, his eyes boring into me.

“I am,” I tell him.

“Then why the rush? If you’re so sure of her feelings for you, then why push for an engagement so soon?”

“I know myself. On a fundamental, molecular level, Mr. Witton. I’m not a fickle beast. Chase is for me, and I’m for her. There’s no negotiation. No doubt or uncertainty. Your daughter pursued me pretty aggressively throughout our time at Wolf Hall before I noticed—”

“Well, I’m not sure I want to hear about *that*,” Robert fidgets awkwardly. I carry on, regardless.

“I made her wait a long time before I gave her the attention she deserved. It kills me to think that she might ever doubt me or my intentions. I want her to know in no uncertain terms that I’m in this for the long haul —”

“But you *don’t* know that,” Robert objects. “Forgive me. I know what you did for my daughter outside the hospital. You looked after her in New York, too. I will always be eternally grateful to you for taking care of her. But I remember all too well what it feels like to be your age and think you’ve found the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Those emotions are all *very* fleeting—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there.” I have a stellar handle on my fury, but it *is* rising, and if it ascends any higher, there won’t be much I can do to prevent myself from boiling over. “You understand that this is a courtesy? Right?” I ask. “Chase is old enough to accept my proposal without your blessing. I’m here because I wanted to handle this in an honorable way,”—I’ve never handled *anything* honorably— “and I think it would make Chase happy, to know that you have given this whole thing your stamp of approval —”

“And I’ve told you, I can’t give it. I won’t. It’s too soon.” Twin spots of crimson stain Robert’s cheeks. By the looks of things, his anger is peaking too, but he’s fighting valiantly to keep it under wraps. Look at us, being grown-ups and shit, navigating a disagreement without shouting. Wonders will never cease. Just because I’m not screaming at the guy doesn’t mean I’ll let him turn around and say no right now, though; this isn’t *actually* a request for permission.

“And what’ll happen when I ask Chase and she says yes, huh?”

“She won’t marry you if I forbid her from doing it,” Robert rushes out. A startled look forms on his face even as he says this. He knows he’s crossed a line. And worse, he knows that he’s wrong. Despite the terrible things she’s faced—the kind of trauma that would break most people—Chase is still strong. Independent and brave. She knows what she wants, and she won’t let anything stop her from getting it. Even if that anything is her father, telling her she *isn’t allowed*. “That came out wrong,” he says quietly. “But Presley’s a smart girl. She respects my opinion. If I tell her that I have serious misgivings...”

He trails off, shaking his head, defeat carved into the lines of his face; he knows that he’d lose this fight. He takes a beat, releasing a soul-deep sigh that seems to echo with grief. After a long time, he starts over. “You say you want to ask her to marry you so that she’ll feel secure in you. So, she’ll know you aren’t going anywhere.”

“That’s correct.”

“It seems to me that the real reason you want to lock her down so quickly is because of you. *You’re* scared, Pax.”

“The fuck are you talking about? Why would I be scared? I have nothing to be scared about.” After doing so commendably, keeping my anger in check, it’s here that the cracks start to show.

“You’re the one who wants reassurance. You’re the one who wants to know she’s not going anywhere. She’s going off to college, right? She’ll be surrounded by all those new faces. Interacting with new people. Making new friends. Having new guys show interest in her—”

At this comment, my blood ignites. I want to leap up from my seat and throw a punch at Chase’s father for even mentioning something so inconceivable. Instead, I gnaw on the inside of my cheek, huffing down my nose as my tongue floods with the familiar coppery tang of blood. Apparently, my calming tactics aren’t fooling Robert.

“I can see that I’m right. I’ve struck a nerve and you don’t like it. The truth of the matter is that you’re going to be in Virginia, miles, and miles away, working hard at something you’re passionate about. I think that’s commendable, Pax, really, I do. But you know the age-old adage. Out of sight, out of mind. You’re worried that she’s gonna find somebody else, and *you* want that ring on her finger to prove to yourself that you own her—”

“Fuck you, man. I don’t want to *own* her.” This motherfucker is treading on thin ice. I want to keep things kosher between us for Chase’s sake, but there *are* limits.

“Prove it, then. Prove that everything you’ve said to me since you walked through that door is true. If Presley loves you so much, and you love her, you can hold off. If you aren’t trying to control her or assuage your own insecurities, then you can wait to ask Presley to marry you for one year.”

“One year isn’t going to change anything.”

“Precisely. If what you’re saying is the case, then it really won’t. But you will have put in the effort and made a long-distance relationship work for twelve whole months. That’s no mean feat. And you’ll have gotten to know each other properly. It won’t be so—so rushed, and—”

“All right! All right! Jesus fucking Christ!” I throw myself back into the armchair I’m sitting in, gouging my fingernails into the flesh of my palms. I *really* want to hit this bastard. “Fine. A year from today—”

“A year from the start of college—”

“I’m not haggling, dude. A year from *today*, I’ll be asking Presley to marry me. Just to prove to you that I don’t want this because *I’m* worried I’ll lose her. And I won’t be schlepping my ass over here to ask your permission next time. I’m just going to ask.”

“Fine,” Robert says.

“Fine,” I shoot back.

“A year it is. I’ll be looking forward to the good news then.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Ah! Here we are. Fresh pot of coffee.” The door to the living room swings inward, revealing Chase, carrying a tray with empty cups and a plate of cookies in one hand and a steaming French press in the other. With her hair falling in loose fiery red waves around her shoulders, her skin more sun-kissed and freckly than normal, she’s so fucking beautiful that it makes my goddamn teeth ache. She sets everything down on the coffee table, glancing between me and her dad, wearing a smile that could illuminate the heavens. “What are you two talking about?” she asks brightly.

I have never shifted my attitude so fucking fast. “The Yankees,” I answer.

“The Mets,” Robert says.

A feigned look of concern replaces Chase’s grin. “Uh-oh. I hope you guys haven’t been arguing.”

“No way,” I tell her.

“We would *never*,” her father lies.

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AN INVITATION

From: PACIFIC NORTHWEST INSTITUTE OF MUSIC
(outreach@pnwinstitute.edu)

To: DASHIELL LOVETT (dlovettIII@gmail.com)

Date: July 05, 5:31 PM

Subject: Seattle Summer Composition Conservatory

Dear Mr. Lovett

Greetings from the Pacific Northwest Institute. We hope that this email finds you well. We are reaching out to inform you that you have been shortlisted for our '*Contemporary Music Composition Conservatory*' next summer, here at our Seattle, Washington campus.

As you may know, the Pacific Northwest Institute of Music was founded by world-famous composer Tomlin Reminy in 1927 and has since had the distinct privilege of training some of the most accomplished international musicians of our age.

For nearly a century, our institute has practiced the time-honored tradition of actively seeking out talented individuals and inviting them to apply for our academic programs. In the past, between five and ten placements have been made available at our Seattle campus; however, only

one position will be offered for this extraordinarily exclusive twelve-week training program.

We are proud to announce that the conservatory will be led by none other than *Victor Blanc* award-winning composer Theodore Merchant, who will be joining us for one year only. In a truly unique offering, our placement recipient will work on a one-on-one basis with our conservatory master to fine-tune and hone their already impressive skills in the arena of musical composition.

As a musician of note, we are pleased to invite you to audition for this opportunity on Sunday, 12th of November, at 4:00 PM, here in Seattle. Should you wish to accept this invitation, please reply to this email no later than September 1st and confirm your intent to attend.

Kind Regards,

Sheila Richards,

Director of Academic Programming

Pacific Northwest Institute of Music

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WREN

SEPTEMBER

I WONDER if this counts as murder.

“We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Jason Andrew Stillwater. A highly decorated Colonel in the United States Army, Jason signed up to serve his country at the tender age of just seventeen—”

Elodie’s father aspirated on his own vomit. That’s the *official* cause of death. For a while after his 'accident,' Jason Stillwater sat staring off into eternity in a fugue state, but then the fucker dipped back into a coma and refused to rejoin the land of the living. He threw up because his stomach began producing too much bile about a month ago. The reflux caused GERD, a condition where bile rises up the back of the throat when a person lies down—which, given his catatonic state, Jason Stillwater had been doing a lot of recently. The bile had seeped into his lungs. His gag reflex was non-existent. The nurses were overworked and hadn’t checked on the poor ol’ Colonel in a while. By the time he’d coded, there wasn’t much they could do for him. He was already half-drowned in his own stomach acid. His system was so weak from being on a respirator for so long that he’d

slipped away and died without putting up anything that could remotely be classified as a fight.

“Beloved by friends and family alike, Jason was a pillar of his community. When not deployed overseas, fighting for the rights and freedoms of his fellow countrymen, Jason could often be found volunteering —”

Apparently, the stomach acid issue wasn't related to the shit-kicking that put him in a coma. According to the medical report I 'procured' when news reached Elodie that her father had died, her old man had been struggling with reflux and a pretty nasty stomach ulcer for twelve months prior to his run-in with the denizens of Riot House. Yes, it could be argued that Jason's inability to breathe by himself contributed to the fact that he couldn't clear his lungs. But fuck it. Semantics. As far as I'm concerned, Jason Stillwater's life ran its course. The evil motherfucker died of natural causes.

“—a rare breed of man. Fiercely dedicated to his work, Jason always made sure to spend time with his family. A devoted husband and father—”

Seated in the front pew beside me, my sole reason for existing goes rigid, her palm turning clammy in mine. I regard Elodie out of the corner of my eye, and a possessive fire blazes to life behind my ribs. Her hair, once blonde but now a dark, beautiful chocolate brown, falls in lush waves to the small of her back. In profile, her face looks perfect as always—her slightly upturned nose is cute as a fucking button. Her eyes are crystal clear and wide, framed by long, ink-black lashes. Her full mouth, painted a respectful shade of plum this morning, is distracting beyond measure. She's troubled, though. A tiny wrinkle mars her brow. Her cheeks have lost their color. Her knee bounces up and down as she stares straight ahead. She avoids looking at the priest in full vestments, standing at the head of the packed church, or at the obnoxiously large, framed picture of a grim-looking Jason Stillwater, that has been placed on a stand in front of the elaborate black coffin.

“Wanna leave?” I hiss between my teeth.

Elodie’s eyelids shutter. She blinks rapidly, giving a short shake of her head. Swallowing hard, she doesn’t look at me. I think if she does, she might just break and bolt out of the church—something I’ve been encouraging her to do since we got here—but she’s better than me. Thinks it wouldn’t look good if she didn’t pay her respects.

There are too many eyes on her right now. Sympathetic eyes, full of pity, wondering how poor little Elodie Stillwater is going to cope now that she’s lost her father as well as her mother. She doesn’t want them to know what the monster lying dead in that coffin did to her. The secrets she insists on keeping from the world are a poison, gradually eating away at her. Somehow, my feisty Little E has concluded that her father’s actions reflect poorly on *her*. As if there are people sick enough in this world to assume or believe that she must have done something to encourage her father to assault her in such a disgusting way. To abuse and degrade her so badly that she still wakes up in a cold sweat some nights, gasping for breath and tearing at her clothes like she’s trying to claw off her own skin.

Such vile and vicious thoughts flood my mind when I think about what that man did to her. I swear to God, if the piece of shit hadn’t just died, I would have murdered him with my bare hands eventually. I was waiting. Elodie might have been dreading the day that her father awoke from his coma, but I’ve been anticipating it with an unhealthy level of excitement.

See, I had big plans. The moment that psycho had opened his eyes, I was going to pay him another little visit. It would have been poison this time. Something undetectable in an autopsy. Something with very few symptoms to give it away. I would have let him watch me slip it into his IV, and then I would have explained in vivid detail what was happening as his body began to shut down.

I would have explained in no uncertain terms *why* this was happening to him. And then I’d have taken immense pleasure in standing over his cooling

body, as his filthy soul had oozed out of his body and slithered down into the blackest pits of hell.

I'd planned on enjoying the whole process very much indeed.

It feels like Jason's gotten away with something, dying the way he did. He should have felt his veins on fire. He should have felt his body convulsing, the final death rattle taking hold of him. I would have paid to see it in his eyes: the knowledge that he was dying as a punishment for what he did to his own child, the girl I love. The girl I would raze the entire world to its foundations for, regardless of the cost.

I tighten my hold on Elodie's hand, exhaling down my nose so long and so hard that it feels like I'm breathing fire. My whole wardrobe consists of black clothing. My shirts, t-shirts, pants, jeans, socks, underwear: all black, or some faded variant of grey, having once *been* black. But today I wanted to wear bright fucking pink. Orange. Lime green. Electric blue. I wanted to look so colorful and happy that anyone who saw me would think I was leading a Mardi Gras parade. If it were up to me, the Catholic Church, and every last bigwig from the U.S. Army in attendance here today would know that I am *celebrating* this motherfucker's death.

Elodie begged me not to, though. And whatever my Little E wants, she gets.

We're both stiff as boards in our mourning clothes as the priest drones on about what a commendable family man Jason Stillwater was. Elodie's fingernails drive so deep into the back of my hand that they almost break the skin.

I focus every molecule in my body, drawing strength from myself and channeling it to the point where our hands meet, as if I might be able to transfer it to her, to give her as much of my own strength as possible. If it meant that Elodie would be able to make it through this charade without suffering any ill consequence with a smile on her beautiful face, I'd give her every last scrap of energy in me until I fucking died.

Forty agonizingly slow minutes drag by. The severe-looking man with a pinched face and rigid posture stands by the lectern, waxing lyrical about what an amazing guy Jason Stillwater was, while I seethe inside. I want to put my fist through something. The urge commands every muscle in my body to leap up out of the pew and fucking fight someone. Given that the priest is the closest person to me, I doubt that'd go down very well. Even in most Atheist circles, it's considered bad form to assault a man of the cloth. And let's be fair—this guy was probably sent an email by someone who actually *liked* Jason Stillwater; they clearly fed him a bunch of horseshit about what a stand-up dude he was. The priest has no idea that he's saying such amazing things about a man who, according to the Catholic church, is one hundred percent burning in hell at this very moment.

We stand. We recite a bunch of shit the priest says. We sit down. We sing a fucking hymn. The seconds refuse to turn into minutes. An eternity passes before the priest closes his Bible and clutches it to his chest, smiling benevolently down at the surprising amount of people who have turned up to celebrate the life of Elodie's father.

“As is custom with military members, we shall now relocate the service to the service members' cemetery, where Jason Andrew Stillwater will be laid to rest with full military honors.” He sniffs, and I catch the glimmer of annoyance in his eyes; he's irritated that he can't just cart out back and bury this bastard with the normal members of his parish. Instead, he has to drive twenty minutes out of the city and plug his ears up while the U.S. Army fire their rifles into the air a bunch of times.

And, yeah, of course. There's the weather. “Just as a reminder, the rain is particularly bad this morning, everyone, so please take care while traveling to our next location.” It's surreal as fuck when the guy pulls a cell phone out of somewhere inside his white alb and starts tapping on the screen; since when are priests allowed cell phones?

“Jefferson Boulevard is currently flooded, and District Way has also been blocked off. It looks like there has been a major accident, so for those of you who will be joining us at Roosevelt Cemetery, you might be better off taking—”

The guy starts mapping out a route to the cemetery like he’s fucking ‘Waze’ or something. Everyone filters out of the church, chattering in that low, respectful way that people do in churches. I wait for a sign from Elodie that she’s ready to move. She remains seated on the pew, staring straight ahead, unblinking. Whereas before she looked everywhere but at the coffin, now it’s all she can see.

“I couldn’t move in that box he put me in,” she whispers. “It was so small. My back and my arms and legs...every single part of me *screamed* in pain. *I* screamed. I cried and sobbed and cursed for him to let me out, but he never would. My joints hurt so bad that I prayed for death.”

My blood ignites. I almost detonate from the fury that explodes in my chest. “I should have been there—”

“How could you?” Elodie looks to me at last. “You didn’t even know I existed. You were on the other side of the world.”

“I should have *known*—”

She squeezed my hand. “Don’t. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. *He’s* the one in the box now. It’s finally over. He’s never getting out. I can live my life without having to worry that he’ll suddenly get better and come and find me. He’s gone. I’m fucking *free*.”

She’s poised when she gets to her feet. It’s as if a giant weight has been lifted from her shoulders—one I didn’t even know existed—as she steps toward her father’s coffin. Regarding the glossy black wood, she reaches out and places a tentative hand against its’ surface, exhaling a long breath down her nose.

“I’ve dreamed of this moment,” she admits, her tone hushed. “I prayed that he’d just die. That I’d get a call one day, and they’d tell me that he’d

been hit by a bus or something. That he'd fallen asleep at the wheel. That someone had kidnapped him on his way to the base and he'd just... vanished into thin air, never to be seen again. Even before he killed my mother. I—" She trembles with a sudden rage. "I fucking *hated* him as much as I loved her, and he knew it." She leans over the coffin...and *spits* on it.

It's oh-so-fucked-up that the sight of her doing it turns me on.

My dick doesn't know the difference between right and wrong, though. It sees something it likes and reacts accordingly, which is why I find myself sporting a growing erection. Something dark and twisted stirs in the pit of my stomach. Something primal and possessive. Her father might be dead, but he *is* still hurting her. The memory of what he did turns her insides to jelly even as she stands there looking down at his casket. I want to take that horror away from her. If I could, I'd surgically remove those memories from her mind altogether and make it so that, as far as Elodie's concerned, they never even happened. But I can't.

Instead, I roughly grab the back of her neck and spin her around. Her eyes are clear as glass; liquid and bright. Her lips part in surprise, but it's a token expression: I think a part of her knew I was going to do this. Has my Little E been waiting for me to finally act on my deviant urges? I watch her pupils blow out, knowing she *needs* this from me. Her bottom lip trembles.

"Don't you *dare* cry," I growl, lacing my fingers around her throat. "He doesn't get any more of your tears. Not even if they're angry tears. You hear?"

She swallows hard, her throat working beneath my palm. A sick part of me wants to tighten my grip, to feel the thin rush of air traveling in and out of her body. She's magnificence personified, this girl. I'm obsessed with every detail of her; her eyelashes; the tiny beauty mark above her top lip; how petite and delicate her hands are; the paleness of her perfect skin, the *smoothness* of her perfect skin; even the pale little half-moons beneath her

fingernails. Lunulae: I'm so obsessed with *those* that I actually looked up what they were called.

I doubt there's a psychologist out there that would call my obsession with Elodie Stillwater healthy. I will *never* give her up. I will *never* forsake her for another. I will forever be attuned to her wants and needs, and I'll go to the ends of the Earth to make sure she gets whatever she desires. I will not tolerate another man's gaze to land on her; I'll gouge the offending eyes straight out of a dude's head before I allow him to appreciate what's mine. My love isn't '*Gen X Simp.*' It isn't '*Rich Boy Arrogant.*' It isn't '*Teenaged Fixation.*' It's '*Victorian Fucking Villain,*' and I claim that energy with no small amount of pride, knowing that the girl standing opposite me wouldn't have it any other way.

I angle my head, studying Elodie, marveling at the pure venom in her eyes when she looks back up at me. "You *are* angry, aren't you, Little E." This is a rather redundant statement, what with the way she's vibrating like she might explode any second now, but I say it anyway. She's never been more beautiful than she is in this moment, with the depths of her hatred spilling out of her.

"Yes," she grits out. "More than I know what to do with."

"Why?"

Her brows pinch together. "What d'you mean, *why*?"

"You heard me. Why?"

"Because my father hurt me, and I didn't deserve it."

I dig the tips of my fingers into her skin. "Millions of innocent people get hurt every day. None of *them* deserve it, either. Try again."

Elodie's eyes flash blue murder, and I mean, fair's fair. I'm being a dick. But she needs to see... If I can just get her to admit...

She works her jaw, scowling at me, eyes hard as flint. "Fine," she chokes out. "I'm angry because this death was too good for him. They keep telling me not to worry, that he didn't suffer. That he wasn't even awake,

and he had no way of knowing what was going on. Well, that death was too *good* for him,” she spits. “He *should* have suffered. I wanted him to feel pain. I wanted him to be scared. I wanted him to go to his grave, full of terror over what a fucking shitty, awful life he’d lived, and that he was probably going to pay for it. I wanted—” She gasps, pulling in a deep breath. She struggles with the remainder of her confession. “I wanted—”

“*Say it.*”

“I wanted to hurt him back. I wanted to humiliate him in front of all of his precious Army buddies. I wanted to see the look on his face when they realized what a sick, perverted psycho he was. *I* wanted to make him pay for everything he ever did to my poor mom and me, and then I wanted to hold a gun to his head, right between the fucking eyes, while he pleaded with me to show mercy.”

“And would you have shown him that mercy?” I lower my voice an octave, keeping my tone as close to a caress as a man can manage.

My darling Little E shakes her head, the lush waves of her hair swaying, her eyes all steel and hate. “No. No. Fucking. Way.”

I bring my mouth crashing down onto hers. Her body sags against me. She’s so overwhelmed all of a sudden that she becomes a lead weight in my arms. It’s as though she has no control over herself whatsoever. I’d *think* that was the case, at least, if her lips didn’t part, and she didn’t return my kiss. As it happens, she returns it to the biting point of aggression.

Yes. Fuck yes. Take all that anger and give it to me. I can take it. I want it. It can’t hurt me.

Elodie isn’t like me. She’s strong, and wild, and perfectly capable of looking after herself, yes, but she’s also sweet, and kind, and tenderhearted. She’s *good*. This fury has been eroding her, leaving an ugly patina on her vibrant soul. It’s been happening since the day I met her, and I’ve had to watch it happen, knowing what it’s costing her. I’ll be damned if I let it go on any longer.

Her father is dead, and this pain inside Elodie? It doesn't leave this fucking church.

My insides are blacker than the pits of hell. I'll take this darkness from her and swallow it down like honey. I won't even bat an eyelid.

I hold her up, crushing her tight against my chest, but that's not good enough. I want a better grip on her, want to be even closer to her, so I swiftly pick her up, lifting her off her feet. She huffs against my mouth but doesn't object as I wrap her legs around my waist and press her up against her father's lacquered casket.

"God, Wren," Elodie pants. "We...we shouldn't. Not...here."

"I can't think of a more appropriate place." I nip her neck, less careful than I should be. Her delicate flesh marks easily. For weeks after we first started fucking, she walked around Wolf Hall covered in my handprints and teeth marks; the school administration was starting to raise eyebrows, like the contusions beneath her skin were evidence of some kind of abuse rather than multiple orgasms. I smirk against her skin at the memory. "People believe they're closer to God inside churches." I suck her ear lobe into my mouth, clamping it lightly between my teeth. I give it a rough tug before leaning back and taking Elodie's face in my hands again. "It's only right that I show you Heaven *does* exist in a place like this."

Her eyes—full of swirling emotion a moment ago—are now unfocused and distracted. She looks high, lost in the grips of euphoria. Grasping my shirtsleeves, she fists what she can of the material, clinging hold of me as she vacantly nods her head. "Anything. Yes. So long as I don't feel like... *this*."

I need no further instruction. Moving quickly, I grab the hem of her black dress and guide my hand beneath it, immediately finding the smooth, silken skin of her bare legs. Elodie gasps as I trail my fingers up the inside of her thighs, and a taut, hot pressure sparks to life in my chest. "So beautiful. You're fucking *breathtaking*, Little E."

Her fingernails dig into my biceps through my shirt, as she unhooks her legs from around me. Slowly, I pluck at the material of her panties, lifting them away from her core and maneuvering them to one side, all without touching the wet heat of her pussy.

She *wants* me to touch her there, though. She's desperate for me to do it. Leaning back against the coffin even more, she spreads her feet apart, opening her legs wider, giving me better access to her. Her right hand slides up my arm, over my shoulder, up the back of my neck, until she's winding my hair around her fingers. She attempts to pull me down to kiss her, tipping her head back in order to let me know that her mouth is mine, that I can take it whenever I want.

This is a truth I already know.

Every part of Elodie Stillwater has been mine since the moment I laid eyes on her, getting out of that car outside Wolf Hall all those months ago.

I smirk, open-mouthed, as I jerk my head back, moving back just enough that her lips can't reach mine. "*Stop*," I command.

"Stop what?" Her voice is breathy and distracted. She tries to pull me down to kiss her again, but I resist.

Fuck, this girl is the most fascinating creature I have ever laid eyes on. I trail the pad of my thumb along the line of her jaw, imagining all of the monstrous ways I could defile her. Some other time; though. Not today. Today doesn't lend itself to drawn-out, deviant sexual acts. Elodie needs to come quick, and she needs to come hard. "You feel helpless," I murmur. "You aren't. But don't try to control *this*," I say, gesturing between our chests. "I'm in control right now. I've got you. Let me take care of you."

Gently, I rub my fingertips over her pussy lips—a glancing contact, just a graze, but it makes Elodie's eyes widen. She lets out a pained whimper. "Oh fuck, Wren. I need..."

I nuzzle my nose into the crook of her neck, breathing her in. "What do you need, baby?"

She sighs, all frustration. “I don’t know. I—”

She stops dead when I part her with my fingers and dip them into her slickness. Her body buzzes with pent-up energy; she shudders when I slide my middle finger back and carefully rub it over her clit, applying just enough pressure to coax a shaky moan out of her.

“That,” she whispers. “I need *that*.”

I’ve never fucked anyone in a church before. I’m sure there will be other opportunities. My old man’s so agitated all the time that *he*’s bound to drop down dead one of these days; I’ll get my dick wet with Elodie then. Right now, she doesn’t need me railing the shit out of her. She needs something focused. Something to help ease her nerves. I roll the pebbled little bud of her clit a couple more times, stroking my fingers over her, the way I know she loves, and Elodie shivers, falling forward, resting her forehead against my shoulder. Her beautiful hair cascades down my arm, concealing what I’m doing from anyone who might happen to pass by.

Our discretion ends a second later. There’ll be no mistaking what’s going on if someone comes across us now as I slowly sink to my knees.

Elodie tries to slap my shoulder. “No! No way! You’re not—”

I catch hold of her hand, pressing my lips to the inside of her wrist, looking up at her. Can she see it in my eyes? All of the nasty, debauched shit I want to do to her? I really fucking hope so. “I *am*.” I tap her left foot, silently ordering her to lift it up.

Defiantly, she shakes her head.

“I’ll have it, one way or another,” I warn her.

Her eyelids shutter: I can just imagine what’s running through her head: the scene, where she tries to deny me what I want, and the moment when I throw her over my shoulder and carry her to the podium behind us. Where I lay her down on her back and drive her legs apart, ignoring her pleas...

If she wanted me to stop, I’d stop, of course. I’m not about to force myself on the girl that I love. But Elodie has a way of fighting the things

she wants. Her mind tells her no, something isn't appropriate. It isn't polite. It isn't clean. It isn't proper. And she knows exactly how I feel about appropriate, polite, clean and proper. I am the antithesis of every single one of those things, and she craves *me* more than air. She'll relent. She'll let me have her, one way or another. She knows it might as well be here.

Gingerly, she lifts her left foot from the floor. I take her ankle in my hand, absolutely fucking thrilled for the fifteen millionth time that *I* get to close my grip around the circumference of it. She's fucking perfection. Swiftly, I guide her leg over my shoulder, so that her thigh is flush with my ear. Staring up at her, I enjoy the way her chest frantically hitches up and down as she watches me slide her skirt up high enough so that I can lean forward and flick the apex of her thighs with my tongue.

"Oh...holy *shit*," she whispers. Her panties are still drawn to one side. Pressing forward, I grab hold of her by the hips, and I bury my face into her, inhaling deeply. "You smell fucking amazing," I growl. Something happens to me when the unique, sweet scent of Elodie's pussy hits the back of my nose. I turn fucking feral. I can't explain it. It's never happened with anyone else before. In the space of three seconds flat, my dick could break concrete, and I'm awash with the need to claim her.

Elodie drives her fingers into my hair, letting out an uneven breath as she holds me to her. I glide the bridge of my nose upward, using it to part her, to apply pressure to her clit, following it with the flat of my extended tongue, and Elodie's right leg damn near buckles. Her startled cry bounces off the bare stone walls of the church, amplified as it echoes around the cavernous space.

She'll never understand how much I enjoy this shit. How much pleasure it brings me to feel her body tremble and quake beneath my hands. She thinks that I'm obsessed with fucking her, and shit, I am. I really am. But there's something so satisfying about eating little Elodie Stillwater's pussy.

I lick, and suck, and I swirl my tongue around the pressure point of her clit, and I relish every single second of it. Elodie's grip on my hair increases as I quicken my speed. She doesn't realize that she's pulling my hair, or that she's rocking her hips up to meet my mouth now. She's lost in the bliss shuttling up and down her body, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I want her to ride my mouth. I want her to pull me down to meet her, so that she takes the pressure she needs from my mouth. I want her to ride my fucking face and grind her cunt into my mouth as hard as she damn well pleases. It's the sexiest thing in the entire fucking world to me.

“Holy fuck, Wren. Yes! Oh my God, that feels so good.”

Fuck, her voice is a breathy rasp. The sound of it makes the skin at the back of my neck prickle. So, so fucking sexy. She grinds her wetness against my lips, and I dig my fingers into her bare ass cheeks, urging her to take even more. I'd spend all day doing this to her if I could—until my tongue cramped, and my jaw locked and refused to close properly. It'd be worth the pain. Even if I had to eat my meals through a goddamn straw for the rest of my days, it'd be fucking worth it.

She tastes like raw honey. I savor the sweetness of her, swallowing her down, drinking her like nectar. I'm drunk on her. Ravenous for her. Desperate for all that I can claim.

“Wren. Wren...” She pulls my hair harder, and I revel in the pain of it, wishing for more. I'd ask for it if I could, but that would require me to stop what I'm doing, and no way that's happening. “Ah! *Wren!*” Elodie chants my name with a reverence that makes her sound ten times more pious than the priest who just left the church. The sound of her panting the name my mother gave me is music to my ears. It fills me with a savage satisfaction that spills out and overflows into my blood, turning me into a bonfire of need.

Even faster now, I flick the tip of my tongue over her clit, gouging at her flesh with my nails. Releasing her right ass cheek, I slide my hand up

the inside of her thigh and dip my fingers into her heat; she's dripping wet now. Her slickness, coupled with my saliva, has drenched the insides of her thighs, and the feeling of her arousal coating my skin forces an overly aggressive rumble to scorch the back of my throat. I sound like a rabid dog, deranged and ready to attack. She's *mine*. This small, fiery, magnificent girl is all mine, and I will slit the throat of any man who tries to take her from me.

Sliding my finger inside her—just one at first—I smirk like the ruthless bastard that I am as Elodie convulses against my mouth. I'm barely in up to the second knuckle of my middle finger but my sweet girl is tighter than hell and ready to blow. It won't take much—the slightest amount of pressure applied in a stroking motion against the inner wall of her pussy will tip her over the edge. Under normal circumstances, I'd drag this out and torture her a little. I'd make her beg for it, to plead with me for her release. We *are* in a church, though, and there is such a thing as pushing our luck. If this weren't the day of Jason Stillwater's funeral, it wouldn't matter to me if we were caught.

I curl my finger inside her, slowly sliding myself out of her as I continue to lick and suck at her clit, and when I reinsert my finger, driving it up slowly inside her, I make sure to pay special attention to the area that I know will drive her insane. Elodie's guttural cry ricochets around the inside of the church like a gunshot. At the sound of it, my cock twitches, hardening to maddening degrees, begging to be released from the constraints of my dress pants. I can't allow that to happen. If I even think about unzipping my fly and taking my dick out, there'll be no turning back for me. I won't be able to stop myself...

Swiftly, I plunge my fingers in and out of Elodie, a wildfire burning in my blood. She is so wet. So, fucking wet and tight, and she tastes so fucking good. I can't fucking take it anymore. I break away from her with my mouth just long enough to look up at her, drinking in the sight of her—

flushed cheeks; swollen, pouty lips; eyes half closed, pupils blown to drowning pools—and I spit a curse against the gods through my clenched teeth. They created a creature of incomprehensible beauty when they forged Elodie Stillwater. Nothing and no one will ever be able to compare to her.

I'm lost.

I'm lost.

I'm so fucking lost...

She softly strokes her fingertips down my cheek, along the edge of my jaw, sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, wetting it so that it comes out glossy and shining. Her breath saws in and out of her, her chest pumping up and down almost as fast as my fingers working their way in and out of her.

“Come,” I command. “Come for me right fucking now.”

Elodie’s eyes go wide—she looks half-panicked for a second, but then I understand what's happening: she's obeying. She's coming, falling, diving headfirst off a cliff from a very great height. The wall of ecstasy has taken her by surprise. Her eyes roll back into her head. Her hands find my shoulders, and she holds onto me for dear life as she splinters apart.

“Oh, God. Oh, fffffffuuuuuck! Ohgodohgodohgod!” Her words run into one another, becoming a blur of unintelligible noise as her orgasm crests. I bury my face deeper into her pussy, reveling in the way her hips buck and jump against my mouth. I circle her with my tongue, flicking, working her clit faster and faster, thrusting my fingers in and out of her, quickly sliding my index finger inside to join my middle finger, filling her up as the walls of her pussy spasm and contract around me.

She reaches the pinnacle of her climax, throwing her head back, letting out a strangled cry that can probably be heard out on the street, it's so loud, but I do not stop. I keep going, even when I can tell her orgasm has reached the point of sensitivity. Even when she's scrambling at my shoulders, writhing against me, desperately trying to close her legs. All she succeeds

in accomplishing is clamping her toned thighs around my head, locking me in place as I continue to draw her pleasure to a screaming peak.

Oh, wait. That's *Elodie* screaming. "Wren! Fuck! Oh shit, please, please, please! Stop!"

The sensation has become too much for her. Every time I lave at her with the flat of my tongue, she yelps like she's about to leap out of her own skin.

"Oh my god! You just wait, Jacobi. I swear to God, the next time I make you come, I won't stop riding you until you're *begging* for mercy."

Grinning like a cold-blooded fiend, I sit back onto my heels, staring up at her. She looks so fucking beautiful like this, her hair tousled, her cheeks flushed, her eyes alert, an electric energy dancing within them. If I could make it so that this girl walked around looking like she'd just been fucked twenty-four-seven, you can bet your ass I'd do it. Of course, I'd have to lock her away somewhere. If every guy she encountered had the honor of witnessing her post-coitus glow, I'd have a fight on my hands. A fight I'd win, but still...

"You look mighty pleased with yourself," she says, running the pad of her thumb along my bottom lip. When she dips that thumb into my mouth running it over my bottom teeth, I realize she was wiping away the wetness she left behind on my mouth.

I catch hold of her by the wrist, stopping her when she tries to do it again. "Don't even think about it, Stillwater. I want to be able to smell you on my skin and taste you on my lips for the rest of this shitty day and half of tomorrow, too."

She quirks an amused eyebrow at me, the left-hand side of her mouth lifting up into an approximation of a smile. "Oh yeah?"

"*Yeah.*"

"That might not be such a good idea given that we have to spend the rest of the day with a bunch of military personnel."

“As if any of those dried up fuckers know what pussy smells like,” I counter, setting Elodie’s leg back down on the ground. Rising, I brush my hands down the front of my shirt, straightening myself out. Elodie lets out a small chuckle, also straightening her dress out, smoothing it down. She stoops, wriggling her right foot back into her black patent pump; it must have fallen off when I had her leg over my shoulder. The lightness of her laughter eases the tension that’s been bubbling away behind my breastbone since I woke up this morning. She’s going to be okay. She really is. She’s so fucking strong, and resilient, and amazing. No matter how difficult things might get, she always picks herself back up and dusts herself off. This day is about as awful as they come, but it’s just a day. We’re going to get through this. Tomorrow, we’ll wake up and this whole mess will be in our rearview mirror. We—

“Whoa, sh—*OH MY GOD!*”

Before I can reach out and grab her, Elodie stumbles backward, unbalanced...*and slams into Jason Stillwater’s coffin*. Like all disasters, it happens in slow motion: Elodie’s shocked expression, transforming from surprise to dismay; the sound of her back hitting the extraordinarily shiny black wood; the horrifying moment when the coffin that houses Elodie’s piece of shit father skates across the surface of the polished marble plinth that it sits upon...and goes crashing to the floor.

The sound of splintering wood is deafening.

For a moment, Elodie and I stare at one another. Neither of us looks in the direction of the coffin. Neither of us dare. Elodie’s post-sex glow is gone, traded for a bloodless, ashen expression of horror. Damn, I think she’s about to throw up. “What do we do?” she whispers.

“What do you wanna do?” I hiss back.

The casket definitely broke. It is, in the very least, cracked wide open, if not in a thousand pieces on the floor. I risk a glance over the other side of the marble plinth, and oh shit. Yeah. That’s not good. Jason Stillwater, grey

and puffed up like a bloated, beached whale, has tumbled out of the plush, luxury casket, and is sprawled across the cold church flagstones in a very undignified manner. He's dressed in full military regalia, of course. His hat is missing, though. It takes a moment for me to spot it, lying on the ground over by the lectern. It must have rolled away when Jason was unceremoniously ejected from the coffin.

"How bad is it?" Elodie asks.

I turn back to her, folding my arms tightly across my chest, nodding furiously. "Yeahhh, on a scale of one to ten, it's pretty bad."

Elodie tries to step around me, to take in the scene for herself, but I block her path, stopping her. She doesn't need to see this. Her father was a grim man to behold when he was alive. Now that he's dead, he looks like something out of a nightmare. I don't want the image of him, with his sallow flesh and the dark hollows under his eyes haunting her forever. "Don't," I say. "It's probably for the best if you...*don't*."

She swallows thickly. "Well, we can't just leave him there." She blinks, as if rethinking the whole dilemma. "Wait. *Can* we?"

"Go outside. Wait for me by the car. I'll deal with this."

Elodie meets my gaze, chewing on her bottom lip. She doesn't want me to have to deal with this at all. She feels bad, but she has the foresight to know that she shouldn't witness whatever lies on the other side of this plinth. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." I plant a quick kiss on her forehead, then urge her towards the church's exit. "Go."

Her heels make a loud clicking sound as she hurries away. The nine-foot-high wooden doors to the church groan mournfully as Elodie swings the left side open and disappears through them, out into the grey rain beyond.

A blast of frigid air howls through the church, as if the ghost of Jason Stillwater crept in while the door was open and is now making its

displeasure known at the undignified treatment of its remains. I mean, I get it. I'd be pissed, too, if my Earthly remains were dumped out of my coffin onto the cold floor of a Catholic church.

I'm the world's biggest asshole. I allowed Elodie to think I was going to fix this situation. Put Jason back in his coffin. Like hell I am, though. I'd rather rip off both my own balls than touch this sick pervert, five days postmortem. Instead, I nudge the fucker's body with the toe of my polished Italian leather shoe, baring my teeth at the cunt as I flip him over onto his back.

Death makes fools of us all.

In life, Jason was a behemoth of a man. Strong. Broad and tall, with hands the size of shovels, the guy could inflict some serious damage on pretty much anybody he had a mind to. There was certainly no contest when it came to overpowering his daughter and shoving her inside that box; Elodie didn't stand a chance. Now, Jason looks like some kind of wax figurine. Pathetic. Small. Insignificant. For a brief second, I consider going to get Elodie. Maybe she *should* see him like this. It might reinforce the knowledge that he can't harm her anymore. The thought is fleeting.

Someone will be coming for Jason soon. He needs to be transported to the cemetery, after all. Someone *else* can find him and stuff him back into his box. And, yeah, they'll wonder who had the audacity to disrespect the dead like this. But that's me to a tee, right? One disrespectful asshole. And Jason Stillwater deserves to be robbed of the last shreds of his dignity before he goes into the cold, hard ground.

ELODIE

OCTOBER

BEFORE MY FATHER shipped me off to Wolf Hall, I'd bounced around the world with my parents, fated to be swept along on the tides of my father's career. Home was a foreign concept. There were beds that I slept in more than once. Cities and towns and schools that became familiar. But the moment that happened and I made the mistake of settling in, everything that felt safe and comfortable and *mine* was ripped out from underneath me.

Wolf Hall was the first time I put down real roots anywhere in a very, very long time. Then, after graduation, I'd panicked. For an unsettled week or two, I'd waited for the fear to set in. To feel like I was unmoored and adrift again, being pulled along in the ebb and flow of someone else's tide. Wren wanted to travel with me, wanted to show me all of his favorite places, and while the prospect of sharing the things that delighted him lit me on fire, I'll admit that I *was* worried. I never stopped to wonder what I wanted to do. Where *I* wanted to go. In Paris, sitting outside a cafe, with the bursts of autumnal color setting the world ablaze down the Rue Saint-Dominique, I'd mulled over this thought, drinking a cup of hot, bitter black

coffee, tearing apart a flaky croissant with my bare fingers, dipping it into the black liquid. Where did I want to go? Of all the places in the world, where did I feel like I needed to be? Horrifyingly, my mind came up blank. Not even the faintest flicker of a suggestion came to me. Not a single place where I felt like I might be at peace.

And then something happened. A flutter of motion had caught my attention out of the corner of my eye, and I'd turned to find Wren emerging from the café, shrugging his shoulders into his thick wool jacket, popping the collar as he'd emerged into the cool fall air. A great cloud of fog had bloomed on his breath as he'd exhaled. His cheeks had been flushed pink from the already wintery temperatures. When our eyes locked and he flashed a broad, heart-stopping smile at me, something had clicked into place.

I didn't need to wrack my brain, searching for the perfect place that I wanted to go next because my home wasn't a place; my home was a person, and his name was Wren Jacobi. I haven't worried about being swept along with his plans since that moment—I haven't needed to. It isn't even a case of, *'wherever Wren goes, I go.'* It's a simple matter of, *'We go together.'* When I started school at Harvard, so did Wren. And when he decided that he would live in the penthouse suite of a hotel until the perfect place to buy came along, it wasn't even a question that I would be living with him, too.

After months of living out of suitcases, studying at a too-small table, and feeling generally unsettled, however, things are about to change.

"I *do* love the light." I trail my fingertips over the living room wall, walking towards the massive picture frame windows that overlook Central Square. The view is quaint as hell. On the 5th floor of the old, historic building, Wren is devoid of emotion as he paces from room to room, his bright jade eyes skipping over the features of our potential new home.

My heart still somersaults whenever I see him. It's cold as hell out today, but he walked from the hotel in nothing but a black button-down

shirt, the sleeves cuffed to the elbows, and his regular black jeans. His hands are spattered with paint—slate-grey, morning frost, winter steel, deepest black. There are even tiny flecks of it on his cheek and temple. Even while staying in a hotel, Wren hasn't put down his paintbrushes. It didn't take long for me to realize that without his art, my dark-haired prince passes beyond a veil of shadows where even I cannot follow; the moody landscapes he paints give him an outlet for something too dark and heavy to process in any other way. They depict a bottomless pain without a need for words, and somehow, they are beautiful.

He moves with a practiced ease, curls of his hair shielding his pensive expression from the cold, assessing eyes of the realtor who let us into the apartment fifteen minutes ago, and out of nowhere, I feel like I could split open like over-ripe fruit from loving him so much. It takes my breath away.

As if he can sense what I'm thinking, the tiniest, knowing smile toys at the corners of Wren's mouth as he walks past me. His fingertips graze the back of my hand, the lightest of contacts, as he passes by.

The place is drafty and massive for an apartment. Twenty-foot-high ceilings. A small sunroom with quaint black and white tiles on the floor. Parquet flooring throughout the rest of the space. Gorgeous original features that give the place the kind of character that can't be found in newly constructed high-rise apartments. I haven't even asked how much the place costs. Even with the impressive life insurance payout I got when Jason died, I wouldn't be able to justify spending the kind of cash that this place is worth. Wren, on the other hand, seems to have a bottomless well of money that he doesn't appear to be worried about exhausting.

Our realtor doesn't know that, though. Standing in the corner of the kitchen, she shifts, huffing impatiently, annoyed by the fact that two first-year Harvard brats are wasting her time. She has that polished, well-dressed vibe that implies she's very, very good at her job. The commission she makes on renting out these high-end Cambridge residences must be

astronomical. Nothing compared to the amount she must make if she actually *sells* a place. The moment she laid eyes on Wren and me and realized how young we are, she evidently concluded that we were trying to amuse ourselves by playing grown-up, touring apartments and penthouses that we have absolutely no business touring. But Cambridge is full of wealthy families with spoiled, incredibly wealthy progeny. Surely, she must have dealt with other loaded eighteen-year-olds before?

“I do have five other showings across town soon,” she gripes, glancing down impatiently at her watch. “If you guys are having a difficult time deciding, it isn't a problem. You can always call the office and reschedule another viewing time with another realtor, who—”

“Don't you like making money, Celia?” Wren throws her a sidelong look.

She balks, sighing loudly. “I *love* making money. It's my favorite thing to do, which is why I'd like to get to my other showings. I get the feeling you guys might be in a little over your heads. I honestly don't have time for —”

“Call your office.”

“Excuse me?”

Wren cracks his thumb. “You're excused. Call your office.” He walks over to the doorway that leads out into the hall, looking to his left and to his right, up and down the length of the wide walkway that leads off into the apartment's two bedrooms and the huge room at the end—my personal favorite. The room which, without a shadow of a doubt, would be our library. The bright, open space is wall-to-wall bookshelves, with a large open fireplace and two huge windows. Below, the street is a wide boulevard lined with Live Oak trees. Their leaves are a stunning wash of burnt amber, oranges, and crimsons. I can imagine the battered, comfortable armchairs that we'd place here by those windows, and how peaceful and safe it would feel to curl up in them with a good book, the rain pattering comfortingly

against the glass, a fire burning in the grate and thunder rumbling off in the distance. It's so strange to be able to envisage that so clearly. Not just how it would look to glance over and see Wren sprawled out on his back, legs thrown over the end of a battered leather sofa, the spine of a dog-eared, well-worn copy of *'The Fall of the House of Usher'* resting on his solar plexus as he lazily thumbed his way through the pages. But how it would *feel*, too. In my bones, I already know what it would be like. How beautifully familiar, and perfect, and timeless it would be to share this space with him. I want to exist here with him in perfect synchrony, whiling our days away, studying, reading, falling asleep each night together, tangled up in our sheets, tangled up in each other, dreaming our blissful dreams.

Nothing could be more heavenly.

What a *life* that'd be...

"*Ms. Stillwater.*"

The clipped sound of my name drags me out of my reverie, pulling me away from an imaginary future that feels as if it's hovering right at my fingertips. I look up and the realtor, Celia, is glaring at me. Wren's nowhere to be seen. "Why is your boyfriend telling me to call my office?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "I honestly have no idea."

"I must insist that we wrap things up here now. Traffic's even worse than normal today, and I have to stop by Reggie's. If I don't pick up some Italian wedding cookies before they sell out, there's no chance I'll close on what promises to be a very lucrative deal. Please. Hurry him along so that we can get out of here."

"I'm afraid my boyfriend has a mind of his own. He's not very good at being...*hurried along.*" I lace my tone with just enough snark to tell her how much I disapprove of her request. "If he told you to call your office, I'm sure it's for a good reason. Perhaps you should do as he asked and find out for yourself?"

“Elodie!” Wren calls my name from somewhere in the apartment. His voice bounces around the vast space, echoing through the kitchen. “Come check this out!”

Before Celia can kick up more of a stink, I sidle past her, out of the kitchen, on a mission to find my boyfriend. I locate him in an east-facing corner room with paned windows so large the drapes would have to fall from the ceiling to floor to cover them. There's a warm, cozy feel to this room, even though the space is empty, and the walls are bare. It sounds ridiculous, but it feels like a *happy* space.

“Master bedroom,” Wren states. “The bed would go here.” He gestures to the back wall that faces one of the massive windows. “A dresser here, for you. A vanity here, next to it. And *this*,” he says, spinning around, facing the other window. “This is where I’d put my easel. A drafting table, maybe. The light here will be like liquid honey in the mornings, right before the sun comes up.”

My imagination runs away with me again. I can totally see it now: waking up in the pre-dawn hours to find Wren, shirtless and ruffled, his thick hair a halo of black waves, his bare skin spackled with streaks of blue, and black, and white paint. I love watching him work when he thinks that I'm sleeping—the deep, focused concentration on his face. His brows banking together, his right hand swinging wildly from one side of the canvas to the next in a moment, only to hover over a single square inch of space the next, as he pours all of his attention and skill into the tiniest of details.

Back in the kitchen, Celia is talking, presumably on the phone. Wren hid his excitement from her, the same way he hides all of his emotions from the rest of the world. He hides nothing from me, though. His eyes dance, alive, as he takes three giant steps toward me and cradles my face in his palms. A foot taller than me, he towers over me as he quirks an eyebrow,

studying my features. “What do you think? Tell me the truth. Is it a shit hole?”

“I love it.”

He grins. “You do?”

“I adore it. I adore everything about it. It's spectacular.”

“You'd be happy here?”

“*Insanely* happy.”

“I was hoping you'd say that.”

Behind him, a floorboard creaks. Celia lurks in the doorway, tapping the back of her phone with long, bright purple-manicured nails. She smiles peevishly at Wren, her lips drawing into a thin line. “We have some paperwork to take care of, Mr. Jacobi,” she clips out. “I’ve just been informed that the owners have accepted your offer, and the funds have already been cleared. All that's left to do is sign on the dotted line.”

I keep my surprise in check, if only to save it for when Celia's sour face isn't spoiling the mood; for a woman who likely just made fifty grand, she sure as shit doesn't look very happy. I guess it sucks to be embarrassed by your own prejudices. With her Red Bottoms and her Versace pantsuit, she thought she was higher up the food chain than we could ever be, but now she's realizing that she's the lowest rung on the freaking ladder...in comparison to *Wren*, at least. That old Jacobi money *talks*.

He could be smug. Nothing is stopping him from laying it on thick and making her feel even stupider, but instead, he affects a bored tone and says, “We'll be by later on this evening to sign the title deed. If you could make sure everything's drawn up and ready to complete by seven, that'd be wonderful.”

Even I know that that's a lot of work. There must be a lot of legal documentation involved. No way she'll be making it to Reggie's for those Italian wedding cookies. Celia wants that commission check, though, and she wants it bad. Not to mention that the sooner she crosses the T's and dots

the I's on this sale, the faster she can be done with the likes of us. "Naturally, Mr. Jacobi. Leave it with me. I'll call as soon as I'm—"

"We'll be over at seven sharp." Wren's jagged edge smile is sharp enough to cut. His tone, cold as ice, brooks no argument.

Celia inclines her head. "Of course. Seven it is."

"You can leave the keys on the kitchen counter on your way out."

"Oh, I'm sorry." In direct contradiction to her words, Celia looks pleased as punch. "It's against the law for me to officially hand over keys to a prospective owner until all of the associated paperwork has been si—"

"We're not *prospective*. We're the new owners of this apartment. Bryant assured me we'd walk away with the keys after this viewing. Bryant *is* your boss, right?"

"Mr. Coleridge is my boss's boss," Celia says in a frosty tone.

"Great. I think he said he was playing golf this afternoon, but if you need to interrupt his game to confirm—"

Celia's cheeks almost match the vibrant hue of purple painted on her nails; it's not a very healthy look. If I were a betting girl, I'd lay down good money that Celia's going to scream at the top of her lungs the moment she walks through her front door this evening. She smiles brightly, as if all of this is no big deal, but I can tell by the way her nostrils flare that she's putting up a front. She's fucking *hating* this.

"No, no. Not a problem at all. Again, as you wish, Mr. Jacobi." Celia flees, darting back into the hallway, headed back toward the kitchen. Wren's frigid expression cracks and melts the moment she's out of sight. I don't think I've ever seen him this happy. It's a subtle change in his very serious demeanor. Most people wouldn't even notice the shift in him, but I sure do. "You're not lying? You really do love it?"

"I really do. I swear it on my mother's grave. It's going to be so, so perfect. But...you went ahead and bought the place before you even knew if I'd like it?"

Wren trails his fingers over my cheek, humming softly under his breath. “You’re not my prisoner, Elodie Stillwater. I wouldn’t have made you live here if you hated it.”

“If I’d hated it—”

“We would’ve found something else. Something you loved. I had a feeling you’d fall for it, though. I hoped that I was right. Mostly because I’ve already ordered the most important piece of furniture we’re ever going to own, and it should be arriving in about an hour or so.”

“Our bed?” I guess.

Nodding, he leans into me, inhaling deeply as he buries his face into my hair. “I’m gonna fuck you raw in it all weekend. You’re gonna have to clear your schedule for the next three days, Little E. I’ve got *big* plans for you.”

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WREN

IT WAS A GAMBLE FOR SURE, but it was a risk I was willing to take. I could have rented the place out if Elodie hadn't been obsessed with it. Sure, it would have sat vacant for a while before I found tenants; the rent on the property would have been so high, it would have taken months for someone looking to spend that kind of money to come along. I wouldn't have felt the loss, though.

The inheritance my grandfather left me has made me a millionaire. And not just a couple of million. Sometimes, it feels like I could purchase a small nation with the amount of money the old boy bequeathed me; It just keeps rolling in from so many different angles that it's hard to keep track of. Stocks; Bonds; commercial investments; residential portfolios that continue to crop up all over the world—thirty or forty houses and apartments in cities I've never even visited, all filled with tenants, managed by property groups I've never even heard of. When they say property investment is a smart way to invest your money, they are not fucking wrong. I could easily have eaten the cost of the apartment I just purchased without blinking, but making the decision without her? That could have been a *very* costly mistake.

I wanted it to be a surprise, but I didn't want her to think I was leaving her out of important decisions. Luckily for me, she seems more excited than annoyed. Hopping from foot to foot, she fires questions at me about

decorating as we emerge from our new building's ancient elevator and cross the building's understated, quietly classic foyer. "Can we have a feature wall?" she asks.

I laugh. "Yes."

"And a mango wood dining table?" She looks at me hopefully, as if there is any realm or reality in which I might turn around and say no to her.

"If that's what you want."

"And when we go grocery shopping, we can use the dumb waiter?"

I've never seen someone get so excited about a dumb waiter before. She'd squealed like a five-year-old when she saw it there at the entrance to the apartment.

"We could just bring them up in the elevator like normal people." I nudge her with my elbow as we exit through the buildings revolving doors, out into the delightfully brisk afternoon. The smell of woodsmoke and sugar hangs thick in the air—it takes a second to locate the source of this sweet scent, but then I spot the bodega on the corner of the street selling fresh, hot donuts.

"*You* aren't normal," she accuses. "I can't even imagine you grocery shopping in the first place."

I steer her in the direction of the donut stand. "Rude. I've grocery shopped more than anyone you've ever met in your entire life."

"Oh, yeah? Name one grocery store."

"What do you mean, one grocery store?"

"One grocery store chain. Tell me the name of one if you've shopped at so many." She beams with satisfaction, fully aware that I won't be able to answer her question. The truth is, she's right. I don't know the first thing about fucking grocery shopping. I wouldn't even know where to go—an embarrassing fact that I *won't* be admitting out loud.

I pull a face at her to let her know in a roundabout way that she's won, and she crows with delight, giving me a little push as we near the end of the

block. “God, you're so sheltered. Tell me you didn't have *servants* to collect the food for you when you lived with your parents.”

“*I* don't know who bought the food. I came down when they rang the dinner bell, and there it was on the table, prepped, plated, and ready to eat.”

Elodie shakes her head, her beautiful long hair swaying from side to side. She laughs at me some more, then it dawns on her that we're standing in front of a vendor, and the heady smell of sugar wafting out of his bodega is strong enough to bring her to her knees. I turn and address the middle-aged guy wearing the little paper hat. “Six, please.”

Elodie punches me in the arm. “Shut up. You are not buying me six powdered sugar donuts right now.”

“You're damn right. I'm not. I'm buying two for you and four for me.”

Pouting, she snakes the little paper bag of donuts the vendor offers to us before I can, and the old man laughs. “Always buy twice the amount you think you need when there's a young lady around. The prettiest girls never like to share.”

I wrap a possessive arm around Elodie's shoulders, handing over a ten-dollar bill to him as I do. “Actually, *I'm* the one who doesn't like to share.”

Let him make of that what he will.

I tell him to keep the change.

As we walk across the street and make our way toward the hotel, Elodie does her best to play keep away with me, attempting to hold our sugary treat at arm's length, but her arms are comically short in comparison to mine—*she* is comically short—and I managed to snatch the bag out of her hands before we've even walked ten feet. I take one of the small sugar-encrusted donuts out of the bag and smash the entire thing into my mouth in one go.

Elodie gasps in horror. “That was *mine!*”

It's difficult to talk around the warm, melt-in-your-mouth dough. I find a way, though. “Mmm. *Delicious.*”

“You'd better hand over that bag this instant.” Elodie's expression is adorable—an angry little kitten, throwing a tantrum because it can't get its own way. I take another donut from the bag and hold it high over her head. She tries to reach it but can't. “If you eat another one of those donuts, I am never letting you touch my boobs again,” she warns.

“Don't make threats you can't follow through on. You love me touching your boobs just as much as I love touching them. You'll only be punishing yourself.”

“It's a price I'm willing to pay!”

I tear a tiny piece off of the donut and pop it into my mouth. “*Lies.*”

Elodie gasps, infuriated. She scrunches her nose, then her entire expression transforms as something clearly occurs to her. I know I've made a very grave error, holding both arms over my head, when she lunges forward and tickles me. It's all over in a matter of seconds. I've relinquished the donuts, and Elodie is happily munching away on them as I attempt to recover myself from the assault.

“Low blow,” I growl into her ear.

She glows, pleased with herself. “You should never keep a girl from sugar when she's excited about moving into her new home. It'll end badly for you every single time.”

Her head is down, her attention fixed on her food, which is why she doesn't see the tall guy in the black bomber jacket step into her path up ahead. I lunge to grab her and guide her around him, amused that she's so obsessed with sugar that she's blind to her surroundings, but she's *just* out of reach. The tall guy, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, sporting an impressive beard, takes her by the arms, scaring the ever-loving shit out of her. She nearly drops the donuts. “Ahh! Shit, sorry! I didn't see you.”

“That's okay.” He smiles at her kindly. “Happens to the best of us. Hey, wait.” He frowns, and I immediately do *not* like the look of false

recognition on his face. It seems disingenuous and comes out of nowhere. “You’re...Elodie Stillwater, right?”

Alarm bells go off in my head, loud as a claxon. I’m beside Elodie in a split second, putting myself between her and this stranger. I clench my jaw, gunning him down with a murderous stare. “Who the fuck are you? What do you want?”

The guy shrugs, giving me that plastic, fake smile of his, lowering his voice an octave as he addresses me, like I can be soothed by a few placating words. “Easy, buddy. I just want a few words with the young lady. Won’t take a second, I promise. Then you lovebirds can be on your way.”

Buddy?

Where the fuck does he get off, calling me *buddy*?

“Back the fuck up right now, my man, or you’re gonna find yourself eating your own fucking teeth.”

The guy’s expression shutters: he processes my tone and the look of pure violence I’m wearing. He thought he could cow me because he’s older than me? Because he’s a fraction taller? He knows better now. One more wrong word from him and he’ll be on his way to the fucking ICU. “Look. I don’t want any trouble. I just need to ask your friend a question or two—”

A low growl builds in the back of my throat. “She’s not my *friend*. She’s my girlfriend. She keeps me polite. She doesn’t like it when I hit people in public, which is the only reason why you’re still standing on your own two feet, breathing the same air as her. Now, tell me who the fuck you are and what you want with her before I become *less* polite.”

He’s annoyed. He slides his hand into the pocket of his bomber jacket and pulls out his cell phone. I assume, like any sane person would, that he’s about to call the police, but he moves fast, holding his phone up, aiming the lens of the camera at Elodie, his thumb quickly hitting the button on his screen—

“Hell no, motherfucker!” I swat the phone out of his hand, knocking it to the ground. From the loud cracking sound, his screen smashes on impact, which brings me no small amount of joy. I’m even happier when I bring the heel of my boot down onto the back of the device’s metal casing. The stranger, whoever the hell he is, tries to grab it, but I shove him back hard enough to send him sprawling out onto the ground. He goes down hard.

“Asshole! You’re gonna pay for that,” he hisses. “Those things aren’t cheap.”

“I’m not paying for anything, you sick fuck. It’s against the law to take photos of people without their permission.”

“No, it isn’t. We’re in public. It’s one hundred percent legal. I have every right to take a photo of her if I want—” He sees the look on my face and has the common sense to stop fucking speaking. If he’d been dumb enough to finish that sentence, I wouldn’t have been held accountable for my actions. Still sitting on his ass on the sidewalk, the guy holds up his hands, blowing heavily down his nose. “Look. Just stop, okay? Obviously, we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. My name is Archer McIntyre. I work for the ‘*New York Gazette*.’ With the news that Wesley Fitzpatrick’s verdict might be overturned in Texas, the press will be running all kinds of stories soon. I wanted to give the girl a chance to comment about Fitzpatrick’s upcoming release and what it might mean for her—”

A high-pitched ringing sound sets up in my ears, drowning out the bastard’s words. What the hell is he talking about? Fitz’s verdict is being overturned. No way. That is *not* possible. I don’t watch the news, though. I could easily have missed this if it’s just breaking now. Elodie had no idea, either. Turning to her, I see that her pallor has turned to ash; she’s even paler now than she was at Jason’s funeral, which is saying something.

I take her by the hand, drawing her close, shielding her with my body. To Archer McIntyre, I say, “Stay the fuck away from her. If you know

what's good for you, you'll drop this right here and now and forget her name entirely."

Behind me, Elodie is stiff, hands cold as ice as she clings to me. "I wanna go," she whispers. "Please, Wren. Let's just go."

It's all she needs to say. We move the moment the words are out of her mouth.

"I might have been the first," Archer yells behind us. "But don't be dumb enough to think I'll be the last. Let's handle this in a professional manner! You're gonna get sick and tired of people hounding you in the street. Telling your side of the story's the only way to make it stop. When you're ready for some peace and quiet, call me at '*The Gazette*.' We'll talk then!"

CARRIE

SEATTLE IS MUCH LIKE LONDON, or at least the weather certainly bears a striking resemblance. As the plane touches down at SEATAC, the wheels rumbling against the tarmac, a sheet of rain buffets the tiny window to my right, pelting the reinforced plastic, the city lights in the distance transforming into a kaleidoscope of yellows, whites, and reds.

It's late. I'm tired to the point of exhaustion, but I've never been able to fall asleep on a flight. I used to think that it was because the seats were too uncomfortable, the leg room too cramped, but I've recently learned that even in first class, with a fully extendable bed to actually lie down on, I still can't get any rest. Dash, on the other hand, does not have that problem. On the contrary. My boyfriend got onto the plane, ate dinner, had a glass of champagne, changed into some sweats, and then promptly knocked the fuck out. I've tried to wake him up multiple times over the past six hours, but Lord Dashiell Lovett did not appreciate being disturbed. Now, we've finally arrived at our destination, close to midnight, and the guy's had a full night's sleep. He'll only have himself to blame once the jet lag kicks in.

A flight attendant woke him an hour ago to tell him that he needed to be seated and upright for landing, and ever since then he's been making a mental list of all the things he's going to do once we get to the hotel.

“The Conservatory audition is first thing Sunday morning. They have a piano in one of their event spaces that they’ve said I can use. If I bust my ass on it tomorrow, I should be able to knock it out in a couple of hours.”

“You’ve been practicing for weeks on end. I’d say you’ve got it by now.”

“Okay. I’ll kick back for the next thirty-six hours and call it in then,” Dash says flatly. “That seems like a solid plan.”

“Jerk.”

“Sorry, love. It’s a miracle I even got an invite to audition for the placement, though,” Dash says, his voice laced with contrition. “There’s one position. *One*. If I don’t get it...”

“You’ll be fine,” I say. “It’s temporary. A summer conservatory. For *next* year. You’ll still have a place on an extremely competitive music program at one of the most highly recognized universities in the world.”

Dash nods thoughtfully, agreeing, but I can read what’s going on inside his head because it’s written all over his face. He’s nervous. He wants to win this placement so bad he can taste it. “If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t give a shit. But this guy is a *savant*, Carrie. The music he’s written...” Dash blows out his cheeks, shaking his head in amazement. For him to react this way over someone else’s music? Let’s just say the guy they’ve selected to teach the Seattle Summer Composition Conservatory must be a genius. Dash has been playing the guy’s music on repeat since we moved to England, one hauntingly beautiful piece in particular, and even I must admit it’s good. And I’m far from an expert on such things.

“He’s just so *young*,” Dash mutters. Is that a hint of *jealousy* I detect in his voice? Hah! “Twenty-five,” he marvels, ignoring my smirk. “You don’t understand. Before this guy was awarded the seat, the youngest composer to head the summer conservatory was sixty-three. *Sixty-three*.”

“If he’s so special, then why is he only taking the seat for a year?” This fact is the sole reason why we’re on our way back to Seattle right now. If

the guy was going to be teaching for longer, then Dash would have waited until he was done with his degree before trying for the conservatory. But no, this particular composer has agreed to head the twelve-week program just once.

“He’s studying himself. He’s finishing up a biology degree this year and then heading off to med school after that. He won’t have the energy or the availability to teach for years—”

“But why the hell is he going into *medicine* if he’s such a mind-blowing *musician*?” None of this makes sense to me.

“He was in some kind of accident. He used to play an instrument, but I don’t know, I suppose he has a passion for both now. Something like that. Anyway, missing this kind of opportunity would be...” Puffing out his cheeks, Dash adopts a grim expression, his sandy brows banking together. “I don’t think I’ll ever recover.”

“That is the most melodramatic thing I have *ever* heard you say.”

He grins. There’s something special about Dash. No matter how hard he works out, how long he sleeps, or how exhausted he is, one sweep of his hand through his thick, wavy, bright blond hair and he looks *immaculate*. I look like I just got confused for a pinata at a five-year-old’s birthday party. I try not to get distracted by how ridiculously hot he is—a task that requires monumental effort—casting a stern look in his direction.

“You’re gonna ace this audition. You know you will. And we *do* have another reason for coming out here.”

His eyebrows hike up. Turning to look at me, he feigns surprise. “Oh? Really? Must have slipped my mind.”

I *know* he’s fucking with me. “Tomorrow, we have lunch with Michael at his new restaurant. The *inaugural* lunch at his new restaurant, just for friends and family. Then we have the opening celebration in the evening.”

“I don’t see why we need to do both. A lunch *and* an opening event in the same day seems like overkill, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t think. The man’s been there for me through thick and thin. Giving him one full day of my time doesn’t seem like overkill at all.”

Dash’s stony expression gives away very little. “Yes. He has been good to you. I admire and respect the guy. You should definitely be there to commemorate his new venture. But the man hates me, Carrie. Straight up fucking *hates* me. Aren’t you even a little worried that he might try and murder me once the appetizers have gone out?”

“Come on. Michael’s a teddy bear. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Dash’s eyebrows inch higher. “Normally, I trust your judgment, but you’re way off base this time. That man *has* murdered people before. The corpses of his victims are buried all over the State of Washington. I’d put money on it.”

The melodrama, I swear to God. “Don’t waste your cash, Lord Lovett. I know Michael. He’s a hard ass, yeah, but what do you think will make him madder. Coming to his lunch and the restaurant opening, or staying at the hotel so you can practice for an audition? Did you miss the part where I said tomorrow’s lunch is for *family and friends*? Michael told me specifically that he wanted you to come. That *means* something.”

“That he wants to torture and humiliate me in front of his buddies?”

I could kick him. “It means that he considers you part of the family, dumbass. Michael isn’t the kind of guy who extends that type of invitation twice. Shun him now, and he’ll never offer out an olive branch again.”

The tips of Dash’s ears turn bright red; the first time I saw this happen, I thought it was due to embarrassment, but I know better now. He’s frustrated because he’s not going to get his way and he knows it. Huffing, he crosses his arms over his chest, back ramrod straight, staring ahead as the flight attendant moves down the aisle, retrieving people’s luggage for them from the overhead bins. “I guess we’ll talk about this when we get to the hotel,” he says stiffly.

“I guess we will.”

* * *

THE CRESTON IS AN UNASSUMING ESTABLISHMENT. From the outside, you'd be hard-pressed to guess that it even *is* a hotel. The red brick façade looks brand new, the pointing fresh. There are sculpted topiary bushes on either side of an entrance that bears no signage or indicators that this is one of the most luxurious hotels in the entire country. In the heart of Downtown Seattle, the building stands at a modest twenty-three stories tall. The large windows are impossible to see into, the glass smoked, casting off a subtle gold hue that, during the daytime, reflects the sky, gilding the ever-present mantle of clouds overhead.

At nighttime, The Creston is brought to life by countless up-lights that cast dramatic shadows up the building's façade, making the place look like something from a nineteen forties-era propaganda poster. Before I moved out to New Hampshire, I'd walk past The Creston and wonder what happened behind the closed doors of such a secretive, high-end establishment. I never dreamed I'd end up staying here. To gain access to their reservation site, you need to possess the kind of titanium credit card I *never* thought I'd qualify for. Being with Dash has changed all of that.

Don't get me wrong; Dash's money is the least interesting thing about him. I would have fallen in love with him if he was penniless and never once cared that we weren't rich. That isn't the case, though. He's a *Lord*, for crying out loud. His father threatened to cut him off when he found out he was heading back to England to study music, but after a while, the miserable fucker calmed down and agreed to reinstate his son's accounts. And those accounts? Let's just say Dash could decide to sit on his ass and do nothing for the rest of his life and he'd never have to worry about money. He has more cash than a person could reasonably hope to spend in one lifetime, even if they were actively trying to waste it.

The woman at the front desk is breathtakingly beautiful; there's a hint of Eva Green to her. Her black hair is swept back into a low bun, not a strand out of place. Her pouty, full mouth, painted matte blood-red, curves up into a distinguished smile as she comes around the desk to greet us.

"Lord Lovett. We're so honored to have you staying with us for the next four days. Welcome." She turns that radiant smile on me. She's the epitome of chic. Her black silk suit hangs from her body perfectly, accentuating the lines of her frame so elegantly that I immediately feel like a hobo in my airplane sweats. "And you, Ms. Ashford—"

"Ahh, actually it's Mendoza," Dash says, correcting her. "That's my fault. I made these reservations back when Carrie was considering reverting to her legal name. She's since decided to stick with Carina Mendoza."

Well, this feels awfully convoluted. Using a second name might be a red flag to a normal hotel, but not at The Creston. I bet half of the people who check in here do so under a fake name. Even so. It's strange, and having to explain this feels a little weird. Dash called me Hannah for a month before I asked if he'd mind going back to Carrie. It isn't as if I hated the name. I just couldn't get used to it. Hannah was the girl I used to be, before Michael found me and took me in. My life has changed so much since then. Trying to step back into Hannah Rose Ashford's shoes felt unnatural. They didn't fit anymore. And besides, everybody I care about knows me as Carrie these days; it made more sense to stay true to who I've become.

"Well, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Carina. Welcome to you both." Warmth radiates from the woman's words, her clear, forest-green eyes echoing her welcome, and a small stab of surprise catches me off guard. I've met beautiful women in this type of situation before. In my experience, they lord their power over you. Look down their noses at you. They're frosty bitches with major attitude problems most of the time, but this could not be further from the truth with...

“My name is Genesis,” she says, as if reading my mind. “I’ll be your personal concierge during your stay here at The Creston. If you require assistance, you can call me, day or night. I’ll happily oblige you with... *anything* you might need.”

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, *whoa*.

There’s a suggestive note to this. More than suggestive. The way she says ‘*anything*’ is downright sexual. She purred the word, smooth as silk. If she’d been looking at Dash when she said it, I might have been mad, but she wasn’t. She was looking at *me*. “I—uh—we—I’m sure we’ll be fine. Thank you.”

Her smile broadens, a dimple forming in her cheek. “It would be my pleasure to be of service to you,” she says in a husky tone. “Andrew will show you to your room now. He’ll take care of your bags. I know you requested access to the hotel’s piano, Lord Lovett—”

“It’s just Dash,” he says.

Genesis inclines her head. “*Dash*. We took the liberty of securing the penthouse for you, since there is a baby grand already in that suite. It will afford you all of the privacy you need while you practice. Our rooms are also perfectly soundproofed, so please, feel free to make as much noise as you like.”

For some reason, Genesis’s encouragement in the noise department doesn’t feel like it relates to Dash’s piano playing. She means sex. It feels like she’s encouraging us to have very loud, very aggressive sex. And it sounds like she very much wants to be part of it.

Dash doesn’t look fazed in the slightest by this overt flirting. I suppose he’s used to this kind of treatment from women. He’s insanely hot, not to mention incredibly rich and in line for the English throne. Women throw themselves at him every day. I, on the other hand, feel like my face is on

fire. My whole body. I can't even fucking think straight. What the hell is wrong with me?

"That's very thoughtful. I've heard how accommodating The Creston is," Dash says.

"That's very kind. We always make sure our guests are well satisfied. Is there anything I can do for *you* right now Ms. Mendoza?"

My blood sings in my ears. "Oh. No, I'm good. I'm so good. I'm already satisfied. Thank—thank you."

Dash doesn't make a sound, but he's staring at me, I can tell. If I were to look at him, I'm sure I'd find him smirking. Genesis has the decency to overlook my stammering, though. The woman is a consummate professional. "I'm happy to hear that," she replies. "I'm sure Lord Lovett has been very careful to make sure all of your needs are met while you've been on the road. But there are some needs that only a *woman* can understand. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Before my head can explode, Dash places a hand in the small of my back and gently guides me forward toward a sleek elevator on the other side of the expansive lobby. "She knows precisely what you mean, Genesis. I'll encourage Carrie to reach out to you if she finds she does need any help in a more feminine department." Behind us, a guy appears in a slick, all-black tailored suit—I'm assuming this is Andrew. He takes our bags, dipping his head in a stiff, formal greeting as he wheels them toward the elevator.

Genesis beams. "Wonderful. Sleep well. I'll be up in the morning with breakfast for you both at eight."

DASH

AS SOON AS the door closes behind us, I stalk after Carrie, winding my arms around her waist from behind, lifting her off her feet. She squeals, thrashing. “What the *hell*, Dashiell! Put me down!”

I’m not putting her down. I have plans for this girl, and I won’t be letting her go until I have executed those plans. Not unless she uses our safe word. “If I slid my hand down the front of your sweats right now, what am I gonna find?” I rumble into her hair.

She goes still. I can feel her heart hammering beneath her ribs, her breath coming in quick and shallow. “What are you talking about?” she whispers.

“*Genesis*,” I growl. “She got to you, didn’t she?”

“Hah! Got to me? What do you mean, *got to me*?” She tries to loosen my grip on her, but her efforts are half-hearted at best. I don’t even know why she’s bothering. I dwarf her. I’m way stronger than she is. The only way she’s freeing herself of me is if she says *the word*. Until she does, her ass is mine.

Burying my face into Carrie’s sea of curls, I breathe in the scent of her, my dick growing harder by the second. “You’ve never been hit on by a woman before, have you?”

The penthouse suite is massive. The high ceilings are at least twenty feet tall. The east-facing bank of windows are floor-to-ceiling, showcasing a stunning view of Downtown Seattle at night, the city churning like a machine down at street level. Despite its size and the sheer amount of glass, the suite is a comfortable temperature, though. There's no reason for Carrie's skin to break out into goosebumps the way that it is. Not unless she's having a very visceral reaction to my words. "Answer the question, *Stella*. You've never been hit on by a woman, have you?"

"No! Urgh! I don't—*how the hell am I supposed to know?*"

A furnace stokes to life inside me, raging out of control beneath my solar plexus. My reaction to this scenario is interesting. I'm secure enough in my masculinity and in our relationship that the idea of Carrie getting a little hot under the collar over a woman like Genesis isn't bothering me at all. It's driving me fucking *crazy*.

"You liked her flirting with you, didn't you?" I ask, sliding my hand up Carrie's body. I roughly palm her breast through her sweater, and her nipple is already piqued, hard and taut, as if it's already been squeezed. As if it's already been sucked. Her breath stutters out of her mouth in a choppy wave.

"She's a receptionist, Dash. She wasn't...flirting with me. She was just...doing her job."

"Oh, she was fucking flirting with you. You know she was. And she isn't a receptionist, love. She's our concierge, which is very—" I bite her neck, applying just enough pressure to make her cry out, "—*very* different. It is her job to flirt with us."

"You're making her sound like a hooker," Carrie pants.

I shrug a shoulder as I trace my tongue over the sensitive skin just below her ear lobe. "She wouldn't argue with that assessment. Though she might dislike the term. Genesis is our *concierge*. Sex work can be a part of that. There's no shame to it. If we want coffee, she'll bring it to us. If we want to drive all the way up to Canada, she'll find and rent an appropriate

car for us. If I need a suit, she'll get me one. If you feel like Ben and Jerry's at four in the morning, she'll get that for you, too. And if we call downstairs and tell her that we'd like for her to join us in our bedroom...so we could have her dip down and lap at that pretty little pussy of yours until you come, then she'll be at that door in less than five minutes, ready to make you purr."

"You can't be serious!" Carrie's voice cracks: it comes out as a high-pitched squeak. "I do not want a threesome with that woman!"

"Who said anything about a threesome? I don't wanna touch her. But watching her eat your pussy until you scream might be hot enough to give me a fucking heart attack."

"Jesus, Dash. I don't—I don't want her to do that!"

"Fine. Whatever you say."

"I'm serious!"

She shudders against me, leaning her weight against my chest as I stroke her nipple through her shirt some more, pinching it roughly, still licking and sucking and kissing at her neck, teasing her with such light contact that she keeps letting out these delicious little whimpering sounds. I chuckle darkly. "All right. You weren't flustered by her at all. Not even a little bit. And you don't want to fool around with her. That's cool. If you were completely unaffected by Genesis, then you won't mind if I just play through a little fantasy in your ear, then, will you?"

"I—I couldn't care—less what you do. I'm fine. I'm not—FUCK!" Her head falls back against my chest as I bite down on her neck again. "Oh my god! Dash!"

This woman has never been good at hiding her emotions. I know her body inside out. I know exactly how to touch her, how to caress her, how to kiss her, and how to *talk* to her to get her off.

"You're wearing that green silk dress I bought you," I murmur into her ear. "It's so cold outside. You're not wearing a bra. You know you can't

wear a bra with that dress, don't you, *Stella*?"

She lets out a staggered sigh, nodding. "Yeah, I know."

"Your nipples are so hard. They rub against the material of the raw silk every time you move, and it feels so, so good. They're so sensitive..." Tired of touching her over the top of her sweater, I roughly grab hold of the hem of the fabric and force my hand inside, up underneath the t-shirt she's wearing. In two seconds, I have the cup of her bra yanked down, exposing her breast beneath the sweater. I palm the warm, full swell of her breast, stroking and rolling her nipple between my fingers.

"I asked you not to wear any panties to dinner. And you're such a good girl for me, aren't you, Carrie? You're such a good girl. Always a good girl. You wanted to make me happy, so you did as I asked. You're not wearing any underwear at all." I groan at the very thought of it. The green silk dress I bought my *Stellaluna* makes her look so fucking beautiful. I have dreams about her wearing that dress. My cock hardens immediately, imagining her wearing that for me, knowing that her pussy is bare beneath the shimmering, clingy material.

"*Dash*," Carrie whispers.

"We go downstairs. It's raining outside. Genesis is there, wearing a black dress and that bright red lipstick. She could never look as good as you, but that doesn't matter. Seeing her makes you feel something—a heat building in between your legs. She's beautiful. You think she's maybe the most beautiful woman you've ever seen. The way that she looks at you makes you feel so confused. You love me so much. You'd never want to hurt me. Cheat on me. Lie to me. But the way Genesis is looking at you now makes you want things you've never wanted before.

"The weather is so bad now. The rain's torrential. Outside, a storm is brewing, and it's so cold. Genesis offers to have a romantic dinner hosted for us in a private dining room, so we can avoid trying to find a cab in the rain. You agree. I invite her to join us because I can see how much you've

been watching her. I can smell how much she turns you on, just like I can smell it on you now.”

Carrie bucks against this, her eyes snapping open. She arches her back, trying to pull away from me, but I laugh mirthlessly, wrapping a hand around her throat. I apply the smallest amount of pressure at first, gauging how hard she’s going to fight me on this. The moment my hand closes around her windpipe, she goes limp.

“We sit down together in the dining room. It’s quiet, small, and private. Genesis opens a bottle of wine for us while we wait for our food. She’s so easy to talk to. The dim lighting from the candles makes you both look so fucking stunning. She teases you for drinking your wine so slowly, so you drain your glass. She asks us how we met and how long we’ve been together. We tell her the story about Wolf Hall, but only the good, happy parts. She tells us how good we look together. How hot we are together. Do you think we’re hot together, Carrie?”

“God. Yes! We’re so fucking hot together.”

“Mmm. Good girl. I’m happy you think so.” I pause, releasing my hold on her throat, carefully running my hand downward, over the curves of her body. I don’t even hesitate when I reach the waistband of her sweats. I dip straight inside them, yanking her panties out of the way as I stroke my fingers against her.

I already know how wet she’s going to be. She’s going to be absolutely fucking dripping for me, but that knowledge doesn’t prepare me for the roaring need that tears into me when I tease my fingers between her pussy lips and find her slick heat.

She’s fucking glorious.

Let’s face it: the restraint I show on a daily basis is phenomenal. I’ve seen this woman naked. I know just how blindingly beautiful she is without clothes on. I know what she *tastes* like. I know the exact rosebud flush shade of pink her nipples are. I know what her pussy feels like, hungrily

gripping and pulsing around me from the fucking inside. She is a walking goddess, the likes of which I've never encountered before, and yet somehow, I manage to drag my ass to Uni every day. I compose music to a professional standard. I cook food for us, and I read books, and I go out and adult in the world, knowing what I have waiting for me when I climb into bed at night. I'm not normally one to pat myself on the back, but the fact that I can function at all, knowing that Carrie Mendoza is mine, and I can eat her cunt any time of the day I want, borders on the miraculous. I deserve a fucking medal.

She makes a soft, whimpering sound—a sound that will kill me dead one of these days—a low growl builds in the back of my throat. “You feel a hand on your thigh under the table. You assume it belongs to me, but it doesn't take long to realize that it's Genesis. Her touch is light. Tentative. Teasing.” I breathe heavily into her hair. “And it *really* turns you on.”

“Dash, this—this is ridiculous. I don't—I'm not—” Carrie stutters. She arches her back, though, grinding her ass up against my cock, her body betraying her. She can try and tell me that she's impervious to the scene I'm painting for her, but her denial would be futile; she's so turned on, she's squirming out of her own skin. I smirk, peppering the nape of her neck with featherlight kisses, pleased as fuck when I feel her skin respond, goosebumps forming in the wake of my attentions.

“Her hands are soft. So gentle. She skims her fingers over the fabric of your skirt at first, but it's not long before she's toying with the hemline. Sliding the silk further up your leg. Her fingers stealing underneath, skating over the insides of your thighs. She watches you as she talks about the wine we're drinking. Her eyes are full of suggestion. She's enjoying it so fucking much. You can tell she wants to take it further, and you want her to as well, but...”

“Dash. Oh my god, please, baby. You need to stop,” Carrie whispers.

Nipping the tip of her ear between my teeth, I relish the sound of the sharp inhalation I coax out of her. “Do I, though? You sure that’s what you want, love?”

“Yes! I—I just want you. I only love you. *Please.*”

“Oh, I know. No one else will ever matter to you the way that I do. But that doesn’t mean the thought of another woman enjoying your pussy doesn’t make your heart race a little, though. Am I right? Are you going to admit it?”

Licking my way up the column of her throat, up toward her ear, I smile an open-mouthed smile. Her silence is damning. “It’s okay, *Stella*. You can tell me. Because the thought of that...fuck, the thought of you lying on your back with your legs open and pussy exposed? While a beautiful woman licks and sucks at your clit, worshipping at your altar? That’s so fucking hot to me, baby. I’m gonna jerk off thinking about it for days.”

She shudders, falling slack, all of her weight leaned up against me, as she processes the words that I’m saying to her. Still, she can’t bring herself to say anything, though. Nuzzling my nose into the crook of her neck, I breathe her in, feeling more and more feral by the second. I drive my fingers into her, curving them deep into her pussy, a dark, animalistic part of me growing impatient, demanding that I sink my cock inside her this very instant. The game we’re playing is just too delicious. I won’t relent so easily, even if I can barely hold myself back. I want her screaming for me, begging me to thrust myself deep inside her. I want her on her hands and knees, pleading with me, crawling, panting, desperate—

A loud, unwelcome sound cleaves the air in two.

Riinnnggg. Ringgggg. Riiinnng!

Sounds like the shrill, urgent chime of a rotary phone. Carrie changed her cell’s ringtone a couple of months back—I’ve considered the old-school tone charming thus far, but right now, I fucking *hate* it. “Silence that this second,” I snarl, loosening my grip on her. Carrie almost sinks to her knees.

“I don’t—I don’t even know where it is,” she whimpers.

Well, fuck. I’ve wound her up so bad she can’t think straight. I soften my tone at once. “That’s okay, love. Come.” Taking her hand in mine, I guide her over to the sumptuous cream couch by the window and gesture for her to sink down onto it. “Sit there. I’ll find it for you. And when I get back, I’m going to lick and tease your clit, and I’m going to make you come until you scream. Is that what you want?” I curl my finger under her chin, forcing her head up so that she has to look at me. “Hmm?”

She nods, her eyes unfocused, glazed over. “Yes. Oh my god, yes, please...”

Riinnnggg. Ringgggg. Riiinnng!

Goddamnit, the incessant ringing makes me want to roar. I tear away from her, back toward the door, where her purse lies abandoned on the floor by the entrance to the penthouse. Yanking her phone out of her bag, I go to reject the call right away, but the name on the screen gives me reason to pause.

Michael.

Carrie’s caretaker never calls her from his own cellphone. He always calls her from a fake number that shows up as a florist’s or some shit. It’s weird that he’s calling from his own personal number. There has to be a reason for it.

“Who is it?” Carrie’s husky voice calls out from the living room.

Sighing, I take the cell phone to Carrie, where she’s sprawled out on the couch looking languid, as if her bones have turned to liquid. She’s so fucking beautiful—*goddamn*, her nipples are still piqued through the thin fabric of her shirt. The sight is all the more torturous because there’s no way I’m getting laid anymore. It’s as if her terrifying guardian has some sort of sixth sense now that we’re in his city. There’s no way in hell he’ll let us fuck while we’re in the same zip code. Carrie’s eyes round out when she sees Michael’s name emblazoned across the screen. Suddenly, she’s very

alert, very wide-eyed, sitting upright, hands moving quickly as she fumbles with the phone in her haste to answer the call.

“Everything okay?” she asks. No hello. None of the pleasantries other people might bother with when picking up a call. I can’t hear what’s said on the other end of the line, but from the deep creases that form between Carrie’s brows, it seems as though my suspicions were right. “What, right now?” she says.

I can just about make out deep, muted male rumbling.

Carrie’s eyes flit up to me; her gaze locks with mine, and a steel knot forms in the pit of my stomach. Why do I get the feeling that I’m not going to like whatever comes out of her mouth next...

“Yeah, I’m sure *he* won’t mind, but *I’m* not very comfortable with you asking him to—” She stops, huffing, frustration visibly bubbling out of her when Michael cuts her off. “No. I’m not babying hi—No, he can’t hear you. No, he’s not afraid to get his hands dirty,” she says incredulously, rolling her eyes. “Of course, he’ll help you. *I’m* the one who doesn’t like the idea of him leaving ri—” She growls. “It’s the middle of the night. Plus, we’ve just landed. We’re both jetlagged and—”

“Give me the phone, Carrie.”

She looks up, her eyes full of some unknown emotion. It looks like a combination of defiance and fear. “No.”

“Why not? Sounds like Michael’s asking for my help.”

“He is. But—”

“Then what’s the problem? You said it yourself. He’s a restaurateur now. Whatever he needs can’t be *that* bad.”

When Carrie defended her guardian’s murky business dealings back on the plane, I’m sure she didn’t think I would be roped into them mere hours later. She flushes, color rising to her cheeks; she looks infuriated, but what can she do?

I smile softly, holding out my hand. “Come on. You want me to get on with Michael, and right now he’s asking for my help. It’ll be all right, love. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Reluctantly, she passes me her cell. She hates that this is happening—I see that written all over her face—but there’s no way around this. Michael is just as important to Carrie as I am. In a different way, of course, but he matters to her. What he thinks of me matters to her, and Michael will forever think of me as a cowardly, worthless piece of shit if I don’t answer a request for help when he makes one. She flinches as I hold the cell up to my ear and speak.

“Hello, Michael.”

His response is instant, cool, and deadly calm. “Get your ass over to 515 West Ave. Apartment 12c. *And bring a fucking gun.*”

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“SO, IT'S TRUE, THEN?”

Wren hands over the paper for me to read myself.

It isn't headline news. The media has lost interest in Wesley Fitzpatrick, or rather the public has grown tired of seeing his name splattered so flagrantly all over the media. No one died when Fitz trapped us in that cave before graduation. The last person our old English professor actually murdered was Maya Bancroft, and she had been missing for close to a year by the time we stumbled across her body. The price that must be paid to capture the public's interest is blood, and the pool of blood surrounding the Wolf Hall murder is no longer fresh. Some basketball star cheated on his wife last week. A politician was found to be embezzling money from a charitable fund. All of this is to say that Wesley Fitzpatrick's possible release is now *third-page* news.

“The accused's lawyer recently gave a statement declaring that all of the evidence presented in the cases pertaining to the young women who were unfortunately killed in the states of Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and New Hampshire was insubstantial at best and not enough to convict her client. There were no traces of DNA on at least two of the bodies. Dr. Fitzpatrick had privately tutored a number of the other girls in the hours or

days leading up to their deaths, which would allow for his hair or clothing fibers to find their way onto those particular bodies.

Of course, even Dr. Fitzpatrick's counsel admits that it would be a striking coincidence if all of these girls had seen him privately in the days leading up to their deaths and he wasn't responsible for their brutal murders. Alessia Regan, Fitzpatrick's lead counselor, stated, 'Yes, of course. The optics might not look good, but mercifully that isn't how justice is executed in this country. A man can't be found guilty of a series of murders, just because it would be a coincidence if he didn't commit those crimes. We are bound by law to provide irrefutable evidence that confirms a suspect's involvement in any crime before they can be judged by a court of their peers and found guilty. And in this case, the evidence presented by the district attorney's office in support of their case against my client simply does not hold water.'

When asked about the statements given by the students who found the body of Mara Bancroft on the grounds of Wolf Hall (an exclusive private school located in rural New Hampshire), Regan declared, "Dr. Fitzpatrick was a highly respected member of faculty at Wolf Hall. There were never any complaints lodged against my client whilst he taught at the school. The students who have levied these accusations against Dr. Fitzpatrick, however, were known troublemakers and had clashed with my client on a number of occasions, primarily about their behavior in class and their poor academic performances. One of these students in particular assaulted my client in public, outside a bar that he illegally operates under a fictitious license. This assault was witnessed by at least three other bystanders, who all reported that this student, Wren Jacobi, was shouting and screaming at my client, who was making a visible effort to calm the young man down. It isn't uncommon in situations like these for angry students to spread lies against teaching professionals who hold them accountable for their actions in school."

I set the newspaper down, layers of anger rising and then settling, only to peak again when I consider each aspect of the ridiculous piece. There's *plenty* of evidence to convict Wesley of the murders in the South. There's plenty of evidence to convict Wesley of Mara Bancroft's murder, too. Plus, the sick freak confessed to us all in that cave that he'd murdered her, and now his lawyer's claiming that we had a personal vendetta against him? That we're all lying because we're spoiled kids out for a spot of revenge?

Horseshit.

I never thought it'd be possible to hate Wesley Fitzpatrick any more than I already do, but time and time again I'm surprised. Wren is agitated. He's been pacing up and down like a caged lion, running his hands through his hair, muttering angrily under his breath while waiting for me to finish. The moment I set the paper down, he ceases his frantic pacing, stops dead, and turns to face me.

"They're laying the groundwork to discredit me as a witness. I *did* punch that motherfucker outside the bar a couple of weeks before we found Mara. I bet a bunch of people witnessed it go down. I didn't give a fuck who saw what I was doing at the time. The moment these reporters get ahold of the fact that Fitz and I—" The muscles in his jaw work as he shakes his head. I've never asked him about what happened between him and Wesley Fitzpatrick. Not properly. It was obvious that there was some kind of sexual encounter between them, but I just couldn't force myself to ask for details. Not because Wes was a guy, and I didn't like the idea of my boyfriend sleeping with other men. I've never had a problem with that. Sexuality is fluid. More importantly, it's private; Wren never needs to justify or disclose his actions to me in that regard. No, I wasn't comfortable asking for details about the connection purely because it made me sick with jealousy. I didn't want to think about him with *anybody* else, but now it seems as though I'll have to; the words can't remain unspoken if we're going to discuss Wes's game plan here. Wren must feel the same way, too.

“Once they find out Fitz and I were fucking, they're gonna have a field day,” he groans. “They’ll say you accused Fitz of harassing you and tearing your room apart because you're my girlfriend. So easy to discredit a jealous girlfriend. They'll say Mercy backed up my story because she's my sister, and—”

I've never seen him like this before. Nothing fazes Wren. He takes everything in stride, dealing with issues that arise with a reassuring straightforwardness. I cross the hotel suite we've been living in these past few months and go to him, placing my hands on his arms. “It's okay. It's gonna be fine. There's no way in hell that man is walking free after what he did. A jury has already reviewed the evidence and made their decision. They found him guilty. We can appeal that decision until the end of time. That's all he has now. *Time*. And these things take years and years to make it back to court, anyway. Who knows what other evidence will be found? How many more bodies are going to show up at schools where he's taught before. This isn't going to go anywhere, and he knows it.”

Cold fury burns in Wren's beautiful, vivid green eyes; they flash with malice as he stewes on this new turn of events. “Then why would he even bother? And why would that reporter harass you instead of me?” he seethes.

It dawns on me, then; it makes perfect sense. “Because he knows that the only real way to affect you is by messing with me. That's why you're so upset right now, isn't it? You're worried that Archer guy was right—that there'll be a fresh onslaught of reporters bothering *me* now? That the media will call me a liar?”

Wren blasts a sharp breath down his nose. “You're damn right that's what I'm worried about.”

“He's reaching for your attention. He's doing it the best way he knows how. How many times has he written to you now? Five times? Six?”

Wren's nostrils flare unhappily. He told me about the first two emails he got from Fitz, but he refrained from telling me about the ones that followed.

I slept badly after I found out that psychopath was trying to contact him, and I suppose Wren didn't want to worry me any more than I already was. I could tell when it happened, though—the nights at dinner when we were traveling through Europe, and he would sit silently, swirling his fork through his food, lost in such deep thoughts that I could hardly even reach him. It took days for him to return to himself after every incident. I hated the fact that he didn't want to concern me with it when it clearly bothered him so much.

“Yeah,” he says uncomfortably. “Something like that.”

“And how many times did you respond to him?”

“Never! I wouldn't give that piece of shit the pleasure of even knowing that I'd read his messages.”

“Precisely. So if he thinks you won't respond to him when he reaches out to you, what's his next plan of attack going to be? Naturally, he's gonna try and affect *me* somehow. That'll always get your attention. He knows you'd do anything to protect me. So he'll come for me again and again, until he finally elicits a reaction from you and you communicate with him directly. I'm guessing that's all that he wants—to know that he's still capable of inserting himself into your life in whatever small way he can manage.”

Wren growls, frustrated, the growl turning into a roar. His body vibrates as he clenches his hands into fists and lets out an infuriated shout. It's good for him to get this out. “This is ridiculous,” Wren spits. “Once someone's convicted of multiple murders, they shouldn't be able to contact the witnesses who gave evidence against them. I swear to God, if any of those journalists even *slightly* inconvenience you in the tiniest way, they're gonna die horrible deaths. They'll regret the day they were born. They—”

“Hey. Hey, it's all right. Hey! Look at me!” I have to grab his face in my hands before he'll pay attention to me. “Stop worrying about all of that. They can come after me all they like. It won't bother me. The worst thing

you can do is to let it bother *you*, Wren. You'll be giving Fitz exactly what he wants if you do. Here's what's going to happen, okay? We're gonna move into our new place, and we're going to shop for furniture, and we're going to make it beautiful. We going to make it *ours*. We're gonna decorate for Thanksgiving, and no matter how many times these idiots try to get a rise out of us, we're not going to let them, are we?"

Wren pulls an unhappy face; he can be such a child sometimes. "I'm not making any promises. If one of those bastards oversteps the mark and fucks with you, they're gonna get what they deserve."

Lord save me from this stubborn, willful man. "And what about what *I* deserve? Do I deserve for my boyfriend to be arrested and charged with assault, when we're just starting our new life together here, in a brand-new town, at a brand-new, highly prestigious school, where I don't know a single soul?"

He rolls his eyes, attempting to step away, but he thinks better of it when I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm not gonna get arrested." He says this with such certainty that it's almost as if he truly *does* believe that he's above the law.

"I swear to God, Wren Jacobi. You're gonna be the death of me. Wait here." I head into the bedroom, searching for and finding my purse. From inside, I take out the small knife he bought for me when we were making our way through Rome. He'd said it would deter pickpockets, that I should only ever pull it on someone if I was serious about using it. Wren arches a cool eyebrow when he sees the weapon in my hand.

"Wow. I thought we'd be together a couple of years before you tried to do me in."

"Funny."

"I try."

"Hold out your hand."

Wren eyes me suspiciously. "Why?"

“Because I asked you to.”

“To what end?”

“For fuck’s sake, Jacobi. Do as you're told and give me your goddamn hand.”

He relents and does as I've told him, though he pouts about it like a sulky brat. “You're gonna hurt me, aren't y—fuck! *Ow!*”

I've made the tiniest little nick in the center of his palm—a centimeter long and so shallow it barely draws blood. Wren grouses so loud I might as well have taken off a finger.

“Don't be such a baby. It was barely a scratch.” Repeating the motion, I make an identical cut on the palm of my right hand and slap the hand right over his, so that our palms press flat together. “Now repeat after me,” I tell him.

“Typically, both parties consent when entering into a blood pact,” he says dourly.

“I, Wren Jacobi...”

His eyebrow arches to extreme degrees. I kick him in the shin. “Fucking hell! I, Wren Jacobi...”

“Do solemnly swear to ignore the press and keep my head down. I swear to stay in my lane and keep my fists to myself. And no matter what happens, I will not let Wesley Fitzpatrick cause further undue distress in our lives, in perpetuity—”

“Jesus wept. I didn’t sign up for drama club. I’ve never memorized lines. I've already forgotten how this monologue started.”

“Wren!”

“All right! Fuck! I solemnly do swear to abide by everything you just said, in full, even though I can't recall the exact wording. Though I do think you’re hobbling me a little. What if one of them kidnaps you? Am I supposed to just sit on my hands and wait for them to hopefully return you at some point?”

“If any of them kidnaps me, feel free to disregard all of this and come rescue me,” I concede.

“What if one of them puts you in the hospital?”

“No need to sound so hopeful! I’m not gonna end up in the hospital. Journalists don’t go around assaulting the people they want to interview—”

A knock at the suite door stops me dead. As if he suspects a member of the press has already infiltrated the hotel, Wren stalks across the living room and wrenches the door open so hard the damn thing nearly flies off its hinges. He’d have forgotten his promise immediately if there *had* been a reporter out in the hallway; the invasion of privacy would have been too much for him to handle. But luckily, or rather *unluckily* for me, the person standing outside our suite is no journalist. At least not yet, anyway.

Pax Davis is the human personification of a category-five hurricane. He sucks up all of the oxygen out in the hallway. He had been growing out his hair before Wren and I left for Europe, but his skull is freshly shaved today, right down to the root. His dark brows pinch together in an intense frown that dominates his entire, brooding expression. He wears a thick black woolen military-style greatcoat, left open to reveal a black button-down shirt and black dress pants beneath. Black leather boots complete his outfit, making him look like something out of a fucking spy novel.

The boys glower at one another for seven long seconds before Wren crosses his arms over his chest, sighing dramatically. “It’s a ten-hour drive from Virginia to Massachusetts. Didn’t think to call on your way up?”

“I was shooting in New York with Callan. It’s only a three-and-a-half-hour drive from there, asshole. And no. I didn’t think to call. I’ve had *far* more important things on my mind.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking photos of fall foliage or some shit?”

Pax bares his teeth, issuing a gravelly sound that I *think* is meant to be laughter. “You’re a funny fucker, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Pax places his hands high on the doorframe, bracing his weight against it. "Aren't you gonna let me in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you came here uninvited, and I planned on fucking my girlfriend stupid for the next three hours."

It's then that Pax notices the thin streak of blood that stains Wren's palm. Quickly, his eyes venture to me, where he sees the blood also marking my hand. An outrageous smile creeps across his face. "*Kinky*. I always thought you two had super vanilla sex." He pushes past Wren into the suite. "Looks like I got you guys all wrong." He throws himself down onto the three-seater sofa, kicking his feet up onto the coffee table. "Need I remind you that the last time I checked myself into a hotel and *I* wanted some peace and quiet, you two showed up unannounced and ruined a perfectly good weekend—"

"Uh, excuse me?" I cut in. "We ruined nothing. We brought the girl you were in love with to see you, when the two of you were too stubborn to even admit to yourselves how you felt about one another. You still haven't thanked us for that, by the way."

Pax's gaze flits to me. He narrows his eyes. "*Grateful*," he says. Wait, was that actually *sarcasm*? This motherfucker right here. I swear to God...

"Your timing's atrocious." Wren remains by the door to the suite, holding it open, as if he actually expects his old roommate to leave of his own volition. "We're moving into our new place tonight. Don't you have anyone else to pester for the next couple of hours? I don't have time—"

"So presumptuous. Who even said I came to see you?"

"You didn't?"

"No, actually," Pax says smugly. "I came to see *her*."

I am the 'her' in question, naturally. He jerks his head toward me, and Wren stalks away from the door, letting it fall closed, adopting a defensive

stance in front of me.

Pax quirks a perplexed eyebrow at him. “Why do you look like you’re about to challenge me to an arm-wrestling match?”

“If you’ve come here to write some piece about Fitz, then you can fucking forget it.”

“The *fuck*?” Pax rockets to his feet. Ohhhhh lord, his expression does not look good. “What the hell are you talking about, a piece about Fitz?”

“He’s stirring the pot from prison, trying to get them to overturn his sentence,” I say, joining the conversation. Perhaps if I’m involved, cooler heads will prevail. “A reporter approached us in the park earlier. He said there’d be others.”

“I have no interest in writing a single fucking thing about Wesley Fitzpatrick. I’ve had enough of that prick to last me three lifetimes.” He scowls at Wren. “I should knock you the fuck out for even suggesting I’d come here for that.”

Back in New Hampshire, I saw the residents of Riot House interact in many different ways. Pax, Wren and Dash baited each other constantly. They argued and bickered like siblings. They scuffled and threw punches from time to time, too, but throughout their posturing and bravado, they were never really serious. This is the first time I’ve ever seen genuine hurt on Pax’s face.

I think Wren realizes that his friend is actually upset the moment I do. He hangs his head, letting out a deep breath. “You’re right. That was a shitty thing to say. I apologize.”

Pax draws his greatcoat around him, driving his hands angrily into his pockets. He works his jaw, before shrugging abruptly and sagging back down onto the couch. “Whatever, man. I wanna talk to your girl. If that’s all right with you.”

“Uh, I’m right here? Shouldn’t you be asking *me* if you can talk to me?”

Wren snorts, rocking on his heels. “She’s right. I’m not her keeper.”

“Maybe not. But you make for a pretty aggressive bodyguard,” Pax argues. “I wouldn't dare address her directly without your permission first. You might tear my goddamn throat out.”

“Fuck’s sake! I just apologized, didn't I?”

“Enough.” I hurry over to the table by the window, grabbing Wren’s leather jacket from the back of the chair where he left it yesterday. He might not have needed it earlier when we went to the new place, but he’ll definitely need it now that the sun’s gone down. I hand it to him, thrusting it into his chest. “Go and sign the paperwork. We’ll get no peace until he’s said whatever he needs to say. You standing here sniping back and forth with him isn't going to move this along any quicker. Maybe practice those grocery shopping skills we talked about earlier, so we have a stocked fridge.”

Pax snorts, then quickly marshals his face into a blank expression, pointedly gazing around the hotel room—anywhere but directly at Wren.

“Also, grab us a bottle of wine or something,” I add.

“All right. Fine. I’ll be back soon. *You’d* better not make a nuisance of yourself,” Wren says, frowning at Pax.

“Fuck, dude! D’you think I'm gonna *hurt* her? I wanna talk to her about Presley. You wanna stay and listen to me gripe about my love life, please be my fucking guest. Otherwise, go grab your girlfriend a bottle of wine. I’ll behave myself, I promise.”

Wren blanches at the suggestion that he stay and engage in such a conversation. Hastily, he shoves his arms into his jacket and tugs it on, patting down his pockets, checking for his keys, phone and wallet. “I’ll be back in half an hour,” he mutters.

“Yeah, that's what I thought,” Pax mutters.

HAVE Pax and I ever been alone together? Like, stuck in a room, within four enclosed walls, behind a closed door? No Wren? No Presley? No Carrie? I can't for the life of me think that we have. Once upon a time, the prospect would have been terrifying; he was irascible and straight-up vile when I first met him. I've watched him change, though. He'd never admit it, but I saw him soften when things ramped up between him and Presley. He became infinitely more likable. And that speech he gave at graduation? That shit actually made me *like* him a little.

It's strange seeing him here, in these unlikely surroundings, though. And after not seeing him for months, with my life and my sole attention revolving around Harvard and Wren, I can't say that I know what the fuck to do with the brooding presence of Pax Davis anymore.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the tops of his knees, covering his mouth with his hands for a second. His breath rushes out between his fingers; the sound makes him less infuriating and a touch more human. He winces when he looks up at me, and I get the impression that this is just as uncomfortable for him as it is for me. He would *not* be here unless he really had to be. "I s'pose I should start at the beginning or something?" he offers.

"Probably be a good idea, yeah."

"Aren't you gonna sit down or something?"

I'm hovering; I haven't really known what to do with *myself*, either. "I s'pose that'd be a good idea, too," I mutter under my breath. Pax relaxes a little once I've taken a seat in the armchair on the opposite side of the coffee table, but his relief only appears to last a moment. He scowls darkly, scrubbing his hands over the top of his shaved head, frustration ebbing out of him in waves.

"This was a stupid fucking idea. I don't know what I was thinking. I should go." He coils in on himself, folding his massive frame over, and I

know that he's about to launch himself up and fly out of the hotel room. Much as I would like Wren to come back and for us to spend the rest of our afternoon in bed together, this issue Pax has, whatever it is, must be important. He wouldn't be struggling like this if it wasn't. And Presley's my friend. If this has something to do with her, then I would be a complete piece of shit if I didn't hear him out.

"Stop overthinking. Just spit it out. You'll only be back here later on tonight, once you've convinced yourself it's a good idea to talk again. I'd rather get this out of the way now rather than go back and forth."

Pax's scowl deepens. "I hope you aren't planning on becoming a doctor. Your bedside manner's fucking terrible."

"Nope. Not a doctor. I hadn't planned on a career as a psychotherapist, either, but it seems like I'm supposed to pretend I'm one tonight. Can we move this along, please? Is it your internship with that photographer?"

He pulls a disgusted face. "I am not an *intern*. I'm Cross's understudy. And no, that's all going fine. He cut me loose until after Thanksgiving. He wants me to go to Japan with him after that, but I told him no."

"How come? Japan would be cool."

"I've been a thousand times. And it'd mean six months away—whatever, it doesn't fucking matter."

"Is it your mom, then? Has the cancer come back?"

"No, she's healthy as fuck now. I didn't come here to talk about her. I came to talk about Chase."

"Go on then. Talk about Chase."

"All right. All right. *Fine*. Presley and I are...we're..." He shifts awkwardly in his seat, tugging at his greatcoat again.

"You're having...*problems*?"

"What's with the tone? Are you insinuating that my girlfriend and I aren't having great sex? Because I can assure you now, my dick is in full working order. It performs fucking *perfectly*."

“No, I wouldn't dream of it. I was just wondering...y'know...this seems like some sort of, well, *personal* issue, and I would hate to get involved in anything that Presley might consider...*private*, and—”

“Are you always this awkward?” Pax seems astonished that I'm having trouble here. It's not every day that a guy like him tracks you down in a city of millions and demands a private audience, though. This is hardly easy for me.

“How about you just have a think about what it is, exactly, that you want to say and how you want to say it, and then you just spit it out?”

“Yeah. That's a good idea.” He sits back on the sofa, throwing his head back so that it's resting on one of the throw pillows Wren was using as a book prop earlier. He closes his eyes. For a tense, long few seconds, he just sits there like that, completely still, processing what he wants to say like I told him to. Eventually, just as I'm starting to get *really* antsy, he cracks one eye and fixes it on me. “I'm in love with Presley,” he rushes out.

“I'd gathered that.”

“I've never been in love with anybody before.”

Pretty sure you've always loved yourself. I think that counts. That's what I want to say. I'm too smart to actually let the words past my lips. “Everyone has a first?” I offer instead. “Love can be tricky—”

“I'm not *stupid*,” he growls. “I'm just having a hard time...” He shakes his head. “I keep trying to call her, and she's always in a rush to get out of the door. Or she's late for class. Or she's tired. Or her phone's turned off, and I don't even catch her. And I keep having these *feelings*,” he says. “Late at night, when I'm trying to fall asleep.”

“What kind of *feelings*?”

The Anarchist of Wolf Hall clenches his jaw—he'll be cracking teeth soon if he's not careful. “Like, my mind won't stop racing,” he admits. “I can't stop thinking about what she's doing, or where she is, or who she's with. I keep thinking about her studying in the library or something, and

some dude I don't know catching sight of her sitting by the English Lit stacks, and him thinking to himself that she looks beautiful, and him going over to her, and her looking up at him and smiling, because she's a friendly, nice fucking person, not an awful, rude cunt like me, and—" He struggles to swallow. "And—and I imagine him asking her what her name is, and then striking up a conversation, and then eventually he asks her out, and—" Pax blows out his cheeks, shuddering, like he's trapped in a waking nightmare. "It's fucking awful. Really, really fucking awful. My heart starts racing. My hands start sweating. I can't stop pacing back and forth in my bedroom for hours. I don't feel like eating. I think I'm going fucking crazy."

Oh boy.

Oh boy, oh boy, oh *boy*.

If I were any less focused on pressing my lips together as hard as I can, I know for a stone-cold fact that I would be laughing. Pax Davis has got it fucking *bad*.

"It gets to the point where it's three in the morning, and I know she's in bed, asleep, but I feel like I'm going out of my mind, and I know the only way I'll be able to knock the fuck out is if I call her and I hear her voice. But I can't do that. I can never do that, because that would look fucking *insane*, and there's no goddamn way I'm letting Chase know that I'm apparently fucking unhinged now. So my heart rate gets even faster, and I feel like I can't breathe, and then the next thing I know I'm sitting in the fucking shower, fully dressed, blasting myself with ice water just so I can get my brain to calm the fuck down."

Not too long ago, Pax barely knew that Presley existed. He knew that she liked him, and he tormented her for it. She was head over heels in love with the guy, and he treated her like she didn't even exist. Now Presley is happily living her life at Sarah Lawrence, secure and content in the knowledge that she got the guy of her dreams. Meanwhile, Pax is coming

apart at the seams. Oh, the irony. I wonder if Presley has *any* idea that this is going on.

“Sounds like you've been having panic attacks,” I say evenly. “Perhaps you're feeling a little anxious because of the distance between the two of you right now.”

“I know what a panic attack feels like,” he retorts. “I'm not having a fucking panic attack over a *girl*.”

Again, I tried to hide the smirk building at the corners of my mouth. “You sure about that?”

He looks like he's about to jump up and storm out. Or maybe try and murder me. I can already feel the pressure of his inked-up hands closing tight around my throat, squeezing the life out of me. Eyes the color of a restless sea, hard as steel, narrow at me. “I don't have panic attacks, Stillwater. I'm not some weak ass, pussy son of a bitch, all right? I think I can handle the simple fact that my girlfriend is far away, and I haven't seen her in forever, don't you?”

I need to come at this from a different angle. Pax wants me to help him. He wouldn't have come all the way from New York if he didn't. He just can't handle telling me the truth. Somehow, he's managed to describe how he's feeling and how it's affecting him, but putting a name to it is far too intimidating. It isn't going to happen. I'll just have to work within the confines of what he *will* admit to.

I let loose a deep sigh. “Okay. Pretend we're talking about someone else. Someone super sensitive and in touch with their feelings.”

Pax nods, leaning forward. “Right. Lord Lovett. Complete pussy.”

I sigh. “Dash it is. Okay, So, let's imagine that Dash and Carrie aren't living together in London right now. Let's say that Dash is in L.A. and Carrie's in, I don't know, Toronto. It's the first time they've been apart since they got together properly, and Dash is feeling a little insecure—”

“Insecure? *Insecure*?” Pax looks like he's about to throw up. “I am *not* feeling insecure.”

“Shut the hell up, Davis. Do you wanna do this or not?”

He pulls a face. “What do *you* think?”

“Whatever. Just...go with me on this. Dash and Carrie are apart. They haven't seen each other for weeks. Dash is feeling a little *perturbed* about the possibility that Carrie might meet someone while he isn't around to defend his territory—”

“I take exception to that,” Pax interjects. “Chase isn't territory. I don't wanna piss all over her. I'm not trying to mark my property. Not that I wouldn't mind her pissing on *m*—”

“Stop! Nope. Stop, stop, stop.” I screw my eyes shut, shaking my head. “Just, please. For the love of God, do *not* finish that sentence. I do not want your wet-play fantasies haunting me when *I* try to go to sleep tonight. What do you think Dash would do in this situation? If he was far away from the girl he loved, and he wasn't feeling particularly good about the fact that other guys might try and hit on her?”

“He'd talk to her about how he was feeling,” he answers definitively.

Damn. Maybe this isn't going to be so difficult after all. “Great!”

“Because he's a prissy little bitch who can't handle himself,” Pax continues.

Fuck. My. Life. This is a test, right? Pax has been sent here to tap dance on my last nerve. Pinching the bridge of my nose between my fingers, I exhale slowly, taking a moment to consider how the hell I'm going to make any kind of headway here. Eventually, I look up, ready for a final Hail Mary. “You want me to call Pres and ask her if any guys have been hitting on her? Is *that* what you want?”

“That'd actually be awesome.”

“I am *not* calling your girlfriend to dig for dirt for you! That's tantamount to spying, not to mention really fucking toxic!”

“Ahh, come on. It's not as if I can ask Jacobi to do it for me. He hasn't said more than five words to Chase in the past five years, and frankly I want to keep it that way. What's so bad about asking her if the guys in Yonkers are behaving themselves? It's not as if I don't trust her. I just know what horny college frat boys are like—”

“If you trust Presley so implicitly, then why are you even letting this faze you? If you know she's not gonna do anything, why not just put this nonsense out of your head altogether?”

“I can trust Presley until the end of time, but that doesn't mean I want some smarmy fucking lacrosse player trying to shove his dick down her throat every time she goes to study in the goddamn library! I can't fucking deal with the thought of it.” He's shaking so badly; I can see him trembling. “It makes me wanna scream!”

Pax's emotional default is anger. I've seen him so mad, so often, that it's a surprise when he *isn't* furious. This is the angriest I've ever seen him, though. I've always suspected that he enjoys the chaos of being at the mercy of his hairpin-trigger temper, but he's plainly hating this right now. He'd do anything to *not* feel this way; he looks like he's three days dead and wild dogs have been fighting over his bones. For the very first time in my entire life, I experience a spike of empathy for Pax Davis.

“Okay, okay, just breathe. We'll figure this thing out. It's going to be all right.”

“You'll call and ask her, then?”

“No! I've told you, I'm not spying on one of my best friends. I will call her and have a conversation with her, though. Maybe that way, you guys can figure out a time to FaceTime or something. You're worried about nothing, okay? Knowing Pres, she's been consumed by studying. That's why she's been so hard to get ahold of. She probably completes all of her assignments in her room, not the library. I bet she's so focused on getting her work done and getting back to you as quickly as possible that she hasn't

even bothered to make any friends, for God's sake. I'll put her on speaker so you can hear the whole thing."

Pax doesn't say a word as I take out my cell phone. He slumps, dejected, back into the chair again, scrubbing his face with his hands, groaning quietly.

Presley picks up on the fourth ring. "Hey, Elodie," the voice on the other end of the line whispers.

"Hey, Pres!" Man, I sound *way* too peppy. "How's it going?"

"Yeah. Yeah, things are...they're uh...they're good?" From her tone, things are not good. The way her voice rose at the end of her sentence made it sound like a question instead of a statement.

"Cool. Yeah, that's great. Glad to hear that. How's school? Are you still loving Sarah Lawrence?"

Pax rolls his eyes at me from the couch, unimpressed with my performance thus far. I'm a shitty actor, though. What can I say?

"Actually..." Presley's voice wavers, a strange catch in her voice. I hear it clearly. Unfortunately, so does Pax. He sits up straight, becoming very alert. I was so sure he was imagining things, but fuck. Presley sounds *weird*. "I'm not at Sarah Lawrence anymore," she says. "I...I kinda transferred to a...ah, a different school."

Pax erupts.

Leaping to his feet, he lunges for me, reaching to grab my phone, but I hold up my pointer finger, aggressively shaking my head. This does nothing to dissuade him from trying to snatch my cell, so I kick him as hard as I can in the shin. He hisses in pain, furious, bracing a hand against the arm of the sofa, baring his teeth.

"Elodie? What's going on?" Pres asks. "You still there? The line's muffled."

"Yeah! Yeah, totally still here!"

"*Give it to me,*" Pax hisses murderously.

“Just shut up and let me *talk* to her!” I fire back. Smiling, I try to keep the fact that I’m being attacked by an unhinged, six-foot-two psychopath out of my voice when I speak again. “I don’t think I heard you right. Did you say you *transferred*? To another college?”

“Yes. I left last week. I know how crazy this is gonna sound, but...”

“What? Where the hell did you transfer to, Pres? You’re freaking me out.”

“Alaska. University of Alaska Fairbanks.”

All hope of keeping this situation under control evaporates. Pax’s face is a livid shade of red. He grabs me by the wrist and sets to prising the phone free from my hand. I have no hope of—

“Listen, don’t tell Pax, okay?” Presley says. She’s choked up, her voice full of emotion. It sounds as though she’s on the verge of tears.

Pax lets go of the phone as if it’s burned him.

“I—I just don’t want to have to deal with that right now. He’s been calling non-stop, and I want to talk to him, really, I do. It’s just...there’s so much going on right now, and I wanna be able to figure out how to word it all, and...”

My heart plummets, a lead weight in my chest, falling, falling, falling... “That’s okay. Of course. I won’t say anything.” Poor Pax. He drops onto the couch, shaking his head, his eyes distant. I don’t even think he’s in the room with me anymore.

“Thanks, Elodie. Look, this is a lot. I get it. You just called at a tricky time is all. I really have to get up to the administrative block to hand in some paperwork. Would it be cool if I called you back later?”

I don’t think my throat has ever been this dry. It feels like I’m coughing up razorblades as I say, “Sure. No worries at all. I’m free for the rest of the day. I can’t wait to hear all about Alas—”

“Thanks, E.” The line cuts off before I can even finish what I was saying.

Holy fuck. What the hell was *that*?

I look to Pax, bracing for holy hell fire, but...ahhh, shit. The surprise and his earlier anger are gone now. He looks at peace, and surely that can't be a good thing. "There was a guy there," he says.

"Of course there wasn't! She was just busy, that's all."

"Busy?" Pax quirks an eyebrow at me. "For sure. Busy. I mean, *moving to Alaska is a pretty big job*," he says, voice dripping with sarcasm. "I *bet* she's been fucking busy. Shame she didn't tell her friends or her *boyfriend* that she was moving across the other side of the country. Maybe one of us could have helped her!"

Where the fuck is Wren? I need him. Pax is starting to sound a little crazy, and who can blame him? "We should just try and stay calm. Who knows why she decided to transfer. I mean, there could be a perfectly good explanation for all of this. If we're patient and give her some time, I'm sure Pres will get in touch and explain."

"Bullshit." Pax smiles sweetly. "There's fuckery afoot." Getting up from the sofa, he runs a hand over his shaved head, sweeping his tongue over his teeth at the same time. "Something isn't right," he says breezily. Why doesn't he sound upset? Why does he actually sound *happy* now? Ooh. Oh no. He's lost his fucking mind. And...he's headed for the door?

"Wait. Where were you going?"

Grinning evilly, he says, "Where do you think? I'm gonna go find out what the *fuck* is going on with my girlfriend."

DASH

A GUN.

I just got off a plane. I'm in a city I've only passed through briefly before. Where the fuck am I going to get a *gun*?

The answer to that question is obvious, of course. The most colorful clientele frequents the hotel we're staying in. The concierge is ready and willing to fuck Carrie and I senseless. Genesis will *absolutely* be able to hook me up with a firearm. I just don't want to have to ask her for one.

"This was supposed to be a vacation," I hiss under my breath, as I leave the elevator, making my way across the deserted lobby. "Most people don't have to *arm* themselves for a little R and R."

I didn't tell Carrie what Michael said. She'd never have let me leave the penthouse otherwise. Gun or no gun, if Carrie suspected I was being dragged into a scenario that might wind up getting me hurt or killed, there's no way she would let me out of her sight. I kissed her on the top of her head and told her to get some rest, that I'd be back soon, and that I'd be bringing her a breakfast bagel and some coffee when I returned, and then I'd slipped out without a backward glance, only the smallest frisson of nervous energy firing through my body.

Now that I'm standing in front of the reception desk and Genesis is giving me that cool, professional-yet-oh-so-suggestive smile, I feel like

calling Michael Aubertin back and telling him in no uncertain terms to go fuck himself.

Instead, I blurt out, “Genesis, I need a weapon.”

She doesn’t even blink. “What kind?”

“Uh...a gun?”

“Handgun? Or something a little more...” She arches an eyebrow. “*Heavy duty?*”

This should not feel so casual. Should it? Fuck, I don’t even know what’s normal anymore. “Handgun. Definitely a handgun.” I’m not stalking around Seattle with a sawn-off shotgun tucked inside my fucking jacket. That would be *insane*.

Genesis nods beatifically. “We have a no-return policy on firearms, Lord Lovett. Once you’ve signed for it, it’s yours. It will also be your responsibility to dispose of it when you’re finished with it. If you’re caught with a firearm that we’ve supplied to you, under no circumstances are you to tell the police or any other outside party where you obtained it. Do you agree to these terms?”

Jesus Christ. I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s fine. Do I need to sign something?”

She laughs politely down her nose, eyes sparkling with mirth. “No, Lord Lovett—”

“Seriously. It’s Dash. Please.”

She’s trying so hard not to grin. “We prefer to avoid a paper trail when it comes to these things, Dash. We operate on a ‘my-word-is-my-bond’ policy here at The Creston.”

“Seems like it might be difficult to police.”

“On the contrary. The ramifications for breaking your word in this regard would be...uh, *severe*. Our guests know that they would pay a high price if they were to jeopardize our establishment in any way. I’m sure you understand. Yes?”

She cocks her head to one side, waiting patiently for me to confirm that, yes, I do get it, and that I acknowledge I'll likely lose a limb if I fuck The Creston over in any way. I give her the answer she's waiting for. "Absolutely. That sounds very fair indeed."

Genesis beams. "We like to think so. Please wait here. I'll be right back with the item you've requested." She drums her fingernails against the cool marble top in front of her, spinning on her lethally high heels and disappearing through the heavy door behind her. Jeez, the damn door looks like it's made out of reinforced steel.

No more than a minute passes before Genesis returns with a small, black, rigid case in her hands. She places it between us, and I see that there's a combination dial on it rather than a traditional lock and key. "The code is one zero six seven. You'll find both handgun and ammunition inside. If you'd be so kind as to wait until you're off the premises before you open the case, that would be appreciated."

I take custody of the case, grasping hold of the handle, drawing it toward me. It's too small to be mistaken for a briefcase. It's very clearly a *weapon's* case, which is pretty fucking inconvenient considering that I have to make it back to the rental now, and lord only knows who'll see me carrying it.

"I understand you'll be visiting with some friends of The Creston this evening. Please pass on our regards to them. If you need anything else from me, as I said earlier, I'll be more than happy to assist you. I'll be here, within the building, during the entirety of your stay."

"I'm sure we'll be fine for now. Thank you, Genesis."

"You're most welcome, Dash."

I turn, about to head back to the elevator, so I can head down to the parking garage beneath the hotel, but Genesis clears her throat respectfully. "Our mutual friend arranged for a car service for you this evening. He thought it might make parking at your destination a little easier."

“So thoughtful of him,” I grunt.

“Yes. Our friend puts a great deal of thought into everything he does. Things tend to run very smoothly thanks to his foresight.”

I keep my mouth shut. If I don’t, I’ll wind up saying something scathing, and it sounds like Genesis, here, has a bit of a hard-on for Carrie’s guardian; it isn’t hard to imagine that my comments might find their way back to him if I make some salty quip.

Outside, a sleek black car—murdered out, naturally—lurks curbside like a silent, stealthy shark. I’m trying to figure out exactly what kind of car it is, but there isn’t time; a blonde guy wearing an oversized ‘*Kill Crew*’ hoody climbs out of the driver’s seat and makes his way around the car, opening the passenger door. “Get in,” he commands.

“I’ll sit in the back if that’s cool?”

He looks at me in a way that makes it very clear that it is *not* cool. “This isn’t a fucking Uber. I don’t have all night, man. Just get in the car.”

“I don’t even know who the fuck you are.”

“I’m Mason. I’m a Pisces. My favorite color’s purple. There we go. Now we’re best friends. Are you getting in or not? There are fifteen other things I’d rather be doing than running *your lordship’s* ass around town right now. If you wanna fuck off, you can be my guest.”

He says ‘your lordship’ with heaping scorn. Clearly, he doesn’t think much of my birthright; his derision makes me kind of like him.

“Fine. Whatever.” I get into the passenger seat, and this Mason guy, whoever he is, climbs back into the car—I can see now from the badge in the center of the steering wheel that it’s a Charger of some kind. Heavily kitted out, though. Even the interior mods are insane. “Sick ride, man. I take it this is Michael’s?” I place the hard case containing the gun onto my lap.

Mason curls a lip in my general direction. “It’s mine.”

“You’re not his chauffeur, then?”

“Fuck you, dude.”

“Then why are you running around in *your* flashy car, opening doors for people like you’re the hired help?” I shouldn’t bait him, but his attitude is spiky as hell, and I am not in the best of moods. I’m lethargic as fuck, and my balls are aching something fierce; I guess that’ll happen when you’ve just flown across the world and nearly fucked your hot-as-hell girlfriend, only to be interrupted by dumb shit that has absolutely nothing to do with you.

Throwing the car into gear, Mason flares his nostrils, glowering at me as he reaches up and hits a button by his window. Next to me, a *thunking* sound lets me know that the fucker has gone and locked us in. “I’m no one’s lackey. Michael said I might need to choke you out in order to get you into the car. That’s the only reason I opened the damn door for you, asshole.”

“*Great.*”

He shrugs unapologetically. “Not every day you get to put a member of the British aristocracy to sleep. Buckle up, Buttercup.”

Before I can comply, he slams his foot down on the gas, and we’re burning through the rain-soaked city at breakneck speeds.

Mason isn’t a talker. Not until I grow antsy, stewing in the thick silence, and I begin to fiddle with the combination lock on the hard case, purely for something to do with my hands. He huffs out an annoyed breath, glancing over at me. “The fuck you think you’re doing?”

“*Preparing,*” I reply, my tone cold enough to turn the word to ice. If I’m about to walk into some kind of shit show, I want to be ready. If Wren and Pax were here, I might not be so jittery; my friends are both on the other side of the country, tending to some issue with Pax’s girlfriend, according to Carrie, so I’m shit out of luck. I’ll need to get a handle on my nerves; if that means inspecting the weapon Genesis gave me, feeling the weight of it in my hands, stuffing the fucking thing into my waistband at the small of my back like a common criminal, then that’s exactly what I’m gonna do.

“The hell you are,” Mason growls. “Not in *my* car. You even know what’s inside that thing?”

“None of your fucking business.” It was refreshing at first—this guy knowing about my pedigree and still talking to me like I’m a worthless piece of shit. Now, it’s getting pretty annoying.

“If you wanna walk across the city in the middle of the night, in the pouring rain, toting a weapon you *don’t* know how to use in your back pocket, then have at it. If you wanna stay warm and dry, not to mention keep yourself from getting shot in the head for being a moron, then you won’t open that thing up in my fucking car. You read me?”

Something tells me that Mason will have his ass handed to him if he dumps me on the side of the road, miles away from the address Michael gave me, but I don’t feel like taking my chances. I’ve developed quite a sixth sense for people, and this guy hasn’t just had a bad day. He’s had a bad year. A *couple* of bad years. He’s just begging for someone with a shitty attitude to come along so he can take out his frustration on their face with his fists.

I leave the case alone.

Curtains of rain buffet the car; it comes down so thick and fast that the windshield wipers barely keep up with the deluge. Every couple of seconds, Mason gets a clear view of the road ahead, when the rubber blades cut across the glass, flinging the water out of the way, and then the world turns to smudgy, blurry smears of color and light.

I stare ahead, back straight, chin up, refusing to let this guy know that I’m even slightly concerned about the prospect of him turfing me out of his moving vehicle.

After a long old while, Mason sucks down a deep, steady inhalation as we turn onto West Avenue. “Okay. This is you. Take the elevator up to the twelfth floor. They’re expecting you.”

“Shouldn’t we go up together?”

He laughs, the surprised sound bouncing around the front of the car. “Me? Go in *there*? You’re crazy. I do not have a death wish, my friend.”

What the fuck does *that* mean? This Mason guy is probably in his late twenties. He’s built like a brick shit house. Covered in tattoos. There’s a hard, cold glint to his eye that says he doesn’t care if the odds are stacked against him—he does *not* lose a fight. And yet this guy thinks that heading up to this apartment is insane? And I still have to go? By myself? I grit my teeth, rolling my shoulders back. I’ve found myself in reckless, dangerous situations more often than I can count. I’m perfectly capable of defending myself.

I’ve never killed anyone before, though. I’ve always suspected it would come down to this someday, but—

“Well? Go on. Grass is gonna start growing on the hood if I sit here any longer.”

I scowl, flinging open the passenger’s side door, climbing out into the rain. Turning back, I stoop down, narrowing my eyes at Mason. “How many guys are up there?” I demand, steeling myself.

“A lot,” he shoots back.

“Are they expecting me?”

He chuckles, his top lip curling a little. “Oh, I doubt anyone’s expecting *you*, Little Lordling. Do not open that case before you get inside the apartment, you hear me? Last thing they need is the cops showing up uninvited.” Before I can slam the car door closed, Mason steps on the gas, sending the Charger leaping forward, the door closing of its own accord as he tears off down the road. The rain hammers at me, drenching my jacket and my shirt, sluicing down the channel of my spine in a bitterly cold, persistent river. My hair is plastered to my skull.

The building I face is unremarkable at ground level. Just an average-looking residential apartment building. The lobby is painted a dull, dirty off-white, the walls decorated with the kind of generic, mind-numbingly

bad art you'd find at a low-rent Motel 6. I'm alone as I enter the elevator. When it stops at the twelfth floor, I step out into a bland, carpeted hallway that splits into a fork, apartments A through D to the left, apartments E through H to the right. Reluctantly, I exit the elevator and take the left-hand corridor toward apartment 12C, a combination of annoyance and trepidation prodding me angrily in the gut.

Bullshit.

This is *such* bullshit.

Michael is a stone-cold killer. I fucking *know* he is. He's up to his neck in shady shit. He has to know half of Seattle's most notorious criminals, so then why the hell does he need *me* to do anything for him? This is nothing more than a calculated move to scare me away from Carrie. He wanted her to move back to Seattle after graduating Wolf Hall, but she went and moved halfway across the world to be with me instead. Well, if the bastard thinks he can terrify me into leaving her by landing me in this kind of shit, he's got another thing coming.

I'm not soft. I do not scare fucking easily. I'm never going to run from Carrie with my tail between my legs. I'll stand and face whatever horseshit 'trial' he's planned out for me. I'll prove myself to be a man. I'll kill whoever I need to kill. I'll—

Shit.

I've reached the apartment.

12c.

The door looks normal. Unassuming. There are two spy holes, though. *Two*. One at head height and then a second at waist height. Why the fuck would there be another peephole halfway down the door? An alarming thought occurs to me—I've heard being shot in the stomach is one of the most agonizing, miserable ways to die—and I immediately step to one side, rapping my knuckles against the wood.

Silence.

I take a deep breath in through my nose, and then knock again, much louder this time. The door rips open, throwing a pillar of blazing yellowed light into the dimly lit hallway...and there stands Michael Aubertin. Slick as ever in a crisp, tailored black suit, the man who took Carrie in and cared for her when she needed help most casts a disapproving look over me as he straightens out the cufflinks at his wrists.

“There you are,” he says.

“Here I am.”

“I’m running late.” He disappears back into the apartment without another word. I assume I’m supposed to enter and follow after him? I do so, hissing out a string of curse words under my breath that would make my grandmother spin in her grave.

The apartment is ridiculous. Of course, it is. High-end, beautifully crafted furniture; a loaded bar cart. Stunning artwork. Plush charcoal rugs underfoot. Huge floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook a spectacular city skyline. There is a distinctly masculine vibe to the place, though for some reason, it doesn’t feel like Michael’s vibe, per se. I cast a look around, searching out all of these people that Mason told me were up here, but there’s only Michael as far as I can tell. He doesn’t say anything. Just jerks his head toward a doorway, leading into another room. The guy is calm enough. That’s good, I think. Though, I get the impression that Michael Aubertin is always calm, no matter the situation. That’s what makes him so fucking scary.

I stay on his heels as we move through to a massive living room; a gilded chandelier hangs from the fifteen-foot-high ceiling, cut crystals casting a rainbow of light over the walls. A TV sits atop an antique-looking sideboard, the sound muted, the screen displaying some kind of anime show. And opposite, on the far side of the room, perched on the edge of a vast L-shaped sectional couch, sits a little boy.

He looks up, startled, when he registers that Michael has returned with someone. His liquid brown eyes meet mine, pensive and unsure, and I'm struck by the intelligence I find gazing back at me. He's four, maybe? Five at most. A mop of unruly dark brown hair. Pale and fine-boned. He's small, but there's a tough set to his shoulders. With his back straight, chin held high, he looks to Michael and speaks in a high-pitched yet certain voice. "You said he was bringing pop-tarts."

Michael ruffles the boy's hair, smiling affectionately down at him. "I know. I promised, didn't I?"

He nods, blinking owlishly up at the man. "Mmm-hmm."

"Have I ever broken a promise yet?"

"No," the boy concedes.

Michael finally turns around and meets my gaze properly. "The case, Dash. I'll take it now, thanks."

I look down at the hard case Genesis gave to me back at The Creston, a horrified realization coiling around my insides.

Pop Tarts?

Pop Tarts?

The fuck kind of game is this guy playing? Numbly, I approach Michael and the boy, offering out the case. My temper spikes when Michael opens up the damn thing, and yep, sure enough, there are a bunch of Pop tart packets inside.

Nothing at all except the Pop Tarts.

The boy claps his hand over his mouth, eyes bright with excitement. "Oh my *god*," he exclaims. "That's so many flavors!"

"Right? Genny hooked you up. Which one you wanna have first?"

"Chocolate! Chocolate!" The little boy bounces up and down on the edge of the sofa.

I can't stop myself. I have to say something. "Seriously? You could have Doordash-ed Pop-Tarts. Or had that rude guy who drove me over here

bring you some. What the hell?”

The little boy gasps, attention flicking back to me; he grins impishly. “You swore.”

“Did *not*.”

“You’re supposed to say...” He chews his bottom lip, dragging it between his teeth, “...H. E. Double hockey sticks.”

“That’s right, buddy. We get in trouble if we swear, don’t we? Should we give Dash a frowny face on the chart?”

The little boy considers me for a second, then shakes his head. “We will...give...” He holds up a small index finger. “He gets *one* pass.”

“Very magnanimous of you,” I say.

Michael selects a pack of Pop Tarts from the hard case, thrusting them into my chest. “Kitchen’s through there. You do know how to use a toaster, right?”

I take the Pop Tarts, my blood raging like a river of molten lava through my veins. “Yeah, I do. And I’ll happily go and prep these the second that you explain what the he—” I catch myself in the nick of time. “What the *H. E. double hockey sticks* is going on!”

If I’m not entirely mistaken, Michael’s eyes actually dance with amusement. “Dash, this is Colt. He’s a very special friend of mine. You’re going to be watching him for the next six hours.”

“What! I did *not* come here to babysi—”

“Yes, I’m afraid you did. Mason isn’t too great around kids. Plus, we need him with us tonight, anyway.”

The little boy with the dark chocolate eyes has gotten up from the couch. He tugs on my hand, pointing at the Pop Tarts. “I can...I’ll show you how to make those, y’know. You can try one.”

“Michael! You’re not leaving me here with him. I know nothing about childcare!”

“You’ll figure it out. Just don’t let him eat too many of those. He will definitely throw up.”

“I will,” Colt agrees. He starts tugging me in the direction of what I can only assume will wind up being the kitchen.

“Where are you even *going*?” I call back over my shoulder. Michael gives me a wicked smile—the first smile I’ve *ever* seen grace his face—and replies, “Do not answer the door to anyone. I mean *anyone*. If anything happens to that little guy, you are gonna find yourself in a serious mess. His father isn’t the kind of man you wanna let down. *Believe me.*”

Then he’s gone.

In the well-stocked caterer’s kitchen, thirty seconds later, I set the little boy on the counter, his legs swinging, while he talks me through how to open the Pop Tart packet and slide them into the toaster.

“Then...you just...yeah! You *do* know!” He’s delighted. “You push it down like that, and the inside of the toaster starts...gets...it goes *glowy*, and then it cooks—”

“Colt?”

It takes a lot of effort for him to look away from the toaster, I can tell. “Yeah?”

“Do *you* know where Michael just went?”

“Yeah, I do!” he says proudly. “It’s...he’s went to be with...my daddy. They’re having...a big boy party.”

“Oh? They *are*?” The bastards are going out *drinking*? I’m going to raise so much hell over this. I swear to all things good and holy—

The toaster spits out two steaming hot Pop Tarts, and Colt squeals at the top of his lungs.

“Colt, who is your daddy?” I should know better than to ask the question when I know I’m probably not going to like the answer.

Colt frowns at me, as if he doesn’t understand what I’m asking him. “He’s my daddy, silly. Daddy and Mommy are having an even bigger party

soon. They said I could come with them, next time. That's because...Daddy and Mommy are getting..." He takes a deep breath. "They're getting *married!*"

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PAX

FUCK ALASKA.

For fucking real.

I went to Sarah Lawrence to help Chase get settled in back in August; I've visited her there a bunch since then, too. I thought that place was over the top and pretentious as fuck, but at least it was close to New York City. Fairbanks, Alaska, is in the middle of fucking nowhere, and it's freezing. It's nearly November. There's snow everywhere, blanketing everything, so deep and powdery you can't differentiate between the white lumps that are cars and the white lumps that are houses. Snow on the East Coast is fine—it's wet and damp and doesn't stick around for long. Occasionally, a blizzard rolls through and the city grinds to a halt for a day or two, but there's a romantic, cozy quality to the city then. Here, the city infrastructure is well prepared for disgusting weather like this; no one has the decency to stop what they're doing and wait it out. They just keep on going to work, going to school, going to buy groceries, and driving. Driving everywhere, as if the roads aren't treacherous swathes of ice, hell-bent on killing anyone who dares try and navigate them.

"Tell me again why we're here?" Wren mumbles into the collar of his thick wool jacket. We've only crossed the airport parking lot from the terminal to the Europcar rental office, but the fucker has little teardrops of

ice forming on the ends of his black eyelashes; he looks like something out of a Brontë novel. Drives me fucking crazy that no matter where we are or what we get into, Jacobi always manages to look like the hero of a tragic romance novel. It's all the thick wavy hair, and that tortured, soulful look he's perfected on his too-fucking-handsome face.

Ahead of us, Elodie scowls crossly over her shoulder. Not at her boyfriend, for being an annoying pain in the ass. No, she scowls at *me* for some unknown reason.

"Ask your buddy there," she snipes.

"The fuck? I didn't ask you to come. In fact, I recall protesting *very* loudly that I didn't want either of you assholes to come. I don't need hand-holding while I visit my girlfriend."

"We didn't really have a choice, though, did we?" Elodie hisses. "You told us you were coming up here to kill someone, and the way you said it gave us the impression that you meant it. So, unless we made our peace and let you *murder* someone—"

"I could have made my peace with that," Wren interjects. "A man's homicide list is a private thing."

Elodie glares at him. "I'm not about to let him murder *Presley*, now, am I?"

A bark of laughter rips out of my throat, forming a burst of fog in the frozen air. "Fuck you, Stillwater. If you think I'd lay a finger on her, even if she *was* cheating on me...just seriously. Fuck you. I would never."

Wren's pint-sized girlfriend has the decency to look chagrined. "I know you wouldn't. Sorry. But what do you want me to say? It seemed prudent to come. Sometimes things get out of hand when emotions run high and—"

"So, you *do* think she's cheating on me, then." I let my head hang as I shove my way inside the stupid fucking Europcar porta-shed, wincing at the blast of stale heat that slaps me in the face. Pretending like Elodie's answer doesn't matter is vitally important for some reason. She knows Chase as

well as anyone. Better, maybe. They're girls, and girls talk about personal shit all of the time. Could be that Chase confessed what's been going on to her after that weird ass phone call and that's why she insisted on crashing my little trip up here. She swears blind she hasn't spoken to her since—I made her promise not to reach back out when Chase didn't return her call yesterday evening—but who fucking knows if she's telling the truth.

It's not that I don't trust Stillwater. I don't trust anyone. Right now, I'm having trouble trusting *myself*, and that's a pretty frightening prospect.

"She's not cheating on you, dipshit." Wren surveys our surroundings with the level of contempt one might direct at the sole of their shoe after stepping in a pile of dog shit. He picks up a Styrofoam cup from the coffee station, standing beside an ancient vending machine in the corner—it still has a button for *Tab Cola*, for fuck's sake—peers inside said cup, as if inspecting its worthiness as a potential caffeine receptacle, grimaces, then sets it back down, disgusted.

I ignore the display of snobbery, choosing rather to focus on his comment. "How the fuck would *you* know? When was the last time you saw her? Fucking graduation?"

"Yes. Fucking graduation," he says airily.

"I suppose you've been chatting up a storm on IG, then." Petty. So fucking petty. I sound like a butthurt thirteen-year-old. I don't know what the fuck is going on inside my body right now, but I know one thing for sure: I do not appreciate this new, reactive, emotional side of myself. The idea that Wren might have messaged Chase on Instagram is fucking ludicrous —

"You're fucking ludicrous." Wren smirks savagely, the corner of his mouth tugging up to form the smuggest of smiles. "Remember when you gave me shit for gluing that bird back together for Elodie, asshole?"

I glower at him. "No."

He arches an eyebrow. "Oh?"

“No.”

“How about when you tried to knock me out at our last Riot House party, for developing feelings for a girl and breaking our pact?”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

“Really? How convenient for you.”

“I don’t think any of this is fucking convenient. I’d say all of this is decidedly *inconvenient*. We’re in *Alaska*. It’s colder than a witch’s tit out there.”

“I stand by my statement. Presley Chase is *not* cheating on you.” He picks up the Styrofoam cup again and quickly looks inside, as if he might find something lurking at the bottom of it this time. Elodie snatches it from him and sets it back down on the coffee stand, rolling her eyes.

“What Wren’s trying to say is that Pres is madly in love with you, the poor girl, and the very last thing she’d ever do is betray your trust like that. Anyone with a pair of eyes in their head can see that.”

Jacobi pulls a face—looks like he just swallowed a bee. “The girl has emoji love hearts in her eyes when she looks at you. It’s fucking sickening.”

“Excuse me, guys. Is there...can I...haha...is there something I can help you with this afternoon? Are you looking to rent a vehicle, or...?”

Well, hot fucking damn. There’s a person behind the desk. A young, acne-ridden guy in his early twenties. His white button-down shirt is so thin that I can see his nipple hair through the cotton. He smiles sheepishly, giving us a small wave that says, *sorry to interrupt but I do fucking exist and why the hell are you bickering in my porta-cabin like morons?*

Elodie steps toward him, gesturing with one hand that me and Wren should stay exactly where we are. Probably a good idea; neither of us are known for our civil tongues. “Yes, we actually have a booking. It’s under the name Davis.”

“Ahh, yeah. Davis. We’ve finished cleaning the SUV you requested. Four-wheel-drive. We’re just putting snow chains on it at the moment.

Shouldn't be long. If I could just grab an ID, I'll take a copy and we'll have you guys on your way."

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PAX

ONCE, when I was eight years old, my father took me on one of his many ‘business trips.’

Hawaii. A week-long stay at one of those shitty, cheap all-inclusive resorts, where the breakfast buffet serves powdered egg, filmy slabs of sliced spam, and endless trays full of overripe melon. I’d been so excited to go—excited that he wanted to take me with him. Foolish enough to think that he actually wanted to spend time with me.

I realized my mistake almost immediately. He’d driven me to get ice cream from the airport, and while I was busy jamming the loaded spoon into my mouth, he’d told me with a very serious look on his face that I’d be meeting one of his friends at the hotel. A woman named Veronica. Veronica was one of his very best friends. He’d said he loved hanging out with her, but for some reason that he couldn’t fathom, my mother didn’t like him to see his friend.

“It’s like...” He’d frowned, looking wounded as he’d searched for the right words. “It’s like Bobby, right? You remember Bobby? The little boy you used to play with after school a couple of years back?”

I nodded, swallowing down my mint choc chip. I remembered Bobby.

“Your mom didn’t like Bobby, did she? She said she you wanted to play with boys who were...more like you.” Even then, I’d known that ‘more like

you' didn't mean outgoing, or athletic, or smart. It meant that Bobby wasn't from a well-to-do family. His parents didn't drive an Aston Martin, and Mom thought her son spending time with a kid from a middle-class family meant that I was going to become poor by association.

"Does Veronica not have a good job then? Is that why Mom doesn't like her?"

"Well, it's not that Mom doesn't like Veronica specifically. She's never met her—"

"Then how do you know she doesn't like her?"

"Because your mother is a vicious, cold bitch, Pax. She doesn't like anybody." He'd turned the color of shame and anger perfectly blended together. The vein in his temple throbbed like a piston beneath the skin. He'd taken a moment to compose himself and then said, "Your mother ruins your fun all the time, doesn't she? She takes everything that's supposed to be awesome, and she destroys it. Well, that's what she'll do if she finds out that we hung out with Veronica this week, okay? So we can't tell her anything about it. We have to keep it a secret, just between us." He'd leaned forward, taking the second spoon out of the mountain of ice cream, scooping some of the neon green dairy onto it. Lowering his voice conspiratorially, he said, "Look. I know you've wanted one of those new PlayStations for a while now. She won't let you have one of those, will she?"

Immediate frustration had surged in my chest. "No."

"And everyone else has got one, right? All of your friends at school?"

I'd nodded.

"Well, that just doesn't seem fair, does it? It's not right that everyone else should get one and you shouldn't?"

The injustice of it had clawed at me.

"So..." My dad had cheers-ed my spoon with his, a fat dollop of ice cream landing with a splat on the table between us. "How about this. I get

you one of those PlayStations here, this afternoon. A couple of games, too. And you get to play it all week, whenever you like. And I get to hang out with Veronica all week, too, and neither of us has to worry about your mom ruining our fun. That sound like a plan?"

I'd thought about it for a second. "But what about when we go home? Can I take the PlayStation home with me?"

My father had shaken his head. "Not home, no. But I can take it to my office. There are times I may wanna hang out with Veronica after I'm done with work. We could tell your mom that we're going to play football together in the park or something, she'd probably believe that. You can hang out in my office and play your games on that big screen I use for presentations sometimes. You know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yeah."

"That screen's massive. I bet your games would look awesome on there, right?"

"Uh-huh." I was getting brain freeze from the ice cream.

"And I could go have dinner and maybe spend an hour or two with Veronica, and then we could go home and tell Mom how much fun we'd had at the park. It'd be our secret. Do you think you'd like to do that? Then we both get what we want."

I'd known on many different levels that I was getting played. I'd known. But I'd still nodded my head, wincing against the sharp pain that lanced through my brain—

"Never pegged you as the suspicious type." Wren bumps me with his shoulder as we climb the steps up to the third floor of Chase's halls of residence; a frazzled-looking guy with dreadlocks had pointed us in the right direction—according to him, the new redhead from New York has been causing quite the stir.

The student accommodation is deserted. Not what I'd imagined at all. It feels like a fucking youth hostel. A shitty one. The carpet in the hallway is

thin as paper, the crazy pattern faded to muted oranges and browns. The walls are scuffed and dinged, covered in posters and sign-up forms, petitions, and crude drawings of what look like they're supposed to be dinosaurs. A faint tang of mold lingers in the air. It's almost as cold in here as it is outside, for fuck's sake. I roll my eyes at Jacobi.

"Can we just *not*, dude? I rarely ask you for anything—"

He snorts. "You ask me for shit all of the time."

I swear to God, I will knock this fucker out in a minute. Despite the cold, I'm sweating inside my heavy jacket. My skin feels all itchy, and my heart is squeezing in the weirdest way. Feels like it's galloping behind my ribs.

Elodie jabs her boyfriend in the back as if sensing my impending explosion. "Leave him be."

"I don't need *you* defending me. I can kick this motherfucker's ass in three seconds flat and he knows it."

"Jesus. You two are as bad as each other. What number did that guy say was Presley's room again?"

"313B," I say through gritted teeth.

"It'll be coming up here on the left then."

And it is.

Four doors away.

Three doors away.

Two.

One.

The hallway stretches out like some dramatic horror movie pull-back. Why the *fuck* are my palms so sweaty? The three of us come to a halt in front of Chase's door. Half-scraped-off Harry Styles stickers cover the chipped paintwork. Jesus wept, why is my throat closing up? Why—

"You gonna knock, or should I?" Elodie asks.

I start, glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. “I’m gonna do it. In a second. I’m just...”

“Taking your sweet fucking time,” Wren mutters under his breath.

I lift my hand. I’m *about* to knock, but before I can, the door whips inwards and there she stands. My Firebrand. Presley Maria Witton Chase, in all her auburn-haired glory. She wears a blue and black checked flannel that I haven’t seen her in before. It looks massive on her. By her fur-lined boots, it appears that she’s heading outside. If that’s the case, then she sure as shit shouldn’t be wearing yoga pants. Or the skimpy black strappy shirt beneath the flannel.

Her face drains of color when she realizes who’s standing in front of her bedroom door; mouth opening and closing, eyes twice their normal size, she looks like a cartoon version of herself, scrambling to make sense of what she’s seeing.

“Pres!’ Elodie rushes in to give her friend a hug. “Oh my god, it’s so good to see you!”

Chase stands there for a second, then automatically wraps her arms around Elodie, her eyes still locked on me. She finds her voice, and the words that come out of her mouth sound strange. Too high. Strangled. “Guys. What...what the hell are you doing here?”

“Good question,” Wren mutters.

I say nothing. I can’t look away from the girl I fell in love with back in New Hampshire. I can feel the fear rolling off her from four feet away. Anxious doesn’t even come close—she’s *terrified*. And I get it now. I understand why.

“Pax? Hey, Earth to Pax?” Elodie’s stopped hugging Chase. She’s staring at me, prodding me in the arm. I feel her gaze on me, but it’s impossible to turn my attention to her. I’m frozen to the spot, gripped by an unnamable panic. “Don’t be rude. Aren’t you gonna say hello to your girlfriend?” Elodie coaxes. “See, everything’s okay. He’s been worried as

hell about you. Wouldn't shut up about coming to see you until we eventually all decided to just get on a plane. And now we're here, and Presley's fine, Pax. You're fine. I'm fine. Wren's fine. Everything's fine!"

I swallow down the golf-ball-sized lump in my throat, but it doesn't stop the burning ache I feel there. "Everything is not fine, is it, Presley?" I say, my voice rough-edged.

Her eyes shine, tears welling in them as she reaches out to try and take my hands. "Pax, please. Don't. Don't freak—" She cuts herself off when I step back, out of her reach.

An invisible wall begins to form between us. The same wall that used to stand between me and the outside world—a wall I know all too well. It's like a familiar, long-lost friend, throwing a protective arm around me as it snaps back into place. "I need to get some air," I grit out.

"Pax, no! Let's just talk about this!" Presley pleads.

"Can someone explain what the *fuck* is going on?" Wren demands. "You're all acting like insane people. I don't see what the problem is."

And he wouldn't. Why would he? He only has eyes for his Little E. He saw Chase standing there in one piece and didn't bother to look any closer. But Elodie did. And so did I. If Wren had bothered to *really* look at Chase, he'd have immediately noticed the reason why Elodie tugged Chase's shirt closed as she drew back from hugging her. He would have seen the small but noticeable swell of her normally flat stomach. He would have seen that she's fucking *pregnant*.

WREN

MODERN MEDICINE IS A WONDERFUL THING. Less than a hundred years ago, women used to employ all kinds of untrustworthy methods to prevent pregnancy, and when they invariably failed, they'd risk throwing back a mad concoction of poisonous plants to get rid of an unwanted child. Even that wasn't foolproof. Back-alley abortions used to kill as many women as they helped, and even knowing that was a possibility, they still begged for the barbarous procedures to be performed on them rather than bring a child into a world where it couldn't be supported.

Today, things are mercifully different. For starters, highly effective birth control exists. Condoms. Which is why my blood is boiling hot, scorching at my veins, as I stalk after Pax into the café he just bolted inside. I follow after him, instantly sweating in my oversized jacket as the heat from the kitchen hits me in the face, hissing like a scalded cat as I hurl myself into the booth opposite my friend.

"You're a fucking moron," I announce.

My friend lances me through with a look so violent and bloody, it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. "Be very careful what you say next," he seethes. Fighting his way out of his coat, Pax dumps it onto the bench beside him, revealing a hoody underneath with a vampire teeth logo and graffitied text that says, *'Evil Overlord'* on it. The design's

pretty cool. I want to ask him where he got it, but now is *not* the time. I disrobe, too, chewing on all of the scathing words I want to say to him. I give the situation a moment. If I'm not careful, he'll put his fist through my face; he won't be able to help himself.

"Afternoon, boys. What can I get for you?" A cheery woman with a mop of curly red hair has materialized next to the booth. She isn't in uniform. No order pad in hand. In fact, I have no real reason to believe she even works here, aside from the fact that she just asked us what we'd like.

"Coffee. Black. *Irish*," Pax grits out.

The woman laughs. "We're a café, handsome. We don't have a liquor license."

I refrain from looking at the woman; my attention remains solely fixed on Pax, who trembles like the tiniest thing might cause him to blow, Mount Saint Helens style, any second. "I'm sure you can find something to throw in a coffee for him."

"Even if I could, I can't serve alcohol to minors. I'm sor—"

Now I look at her. "Ma'am?"

"Mmm?" She smiles warmly at me.

"If you want your day to continue in a relatively peaceful manner, you'll go away now. When you come back, you'll have a black coffee with a shot of whiskey in it for my friend. Wait, I'll take one, too, I guess."

Her smile falters. "And if I don't?"

"Then I suggest you call a glazier."

"A *glazier*?"

"To replace the windows he'll smash if he doesn't get what he wants. But only after you've had to call for an ambulance. *And the police.*" I offer up a beatific smile. "Give him what he wants, and I'll keep him calm. You have my word."

Pax snorts at this. His jaw working, eyes all flint and steel, his body is rigid, muscles tensed and ready to explode. The state he's in, I don't even

know if I *can* keep the promise I just made to this woman if something sets him off.

The redhead looks at both of us, registering the tension radiating from Davis, and then grunts, hurrying away from the table.

“Pax—”

“*Don’t say a fucking word.*”

Shit. This is worse than the time that guy scratched his car in Cosgroves’ parking lot. Worse than when Meredith, his mother, burned a year’s worth of his undeveloped film. Another comment out of me, and the both of us will end up in an Alaskan jail cell, consequences be damned. He’ll tear me limb from limb.

The woman returns with our coffees. Sets them down. When I lift the steaming tar-black liquid to my mouth, the smell of whiskey slaps me square in the face. “Order some food,” the waitress demands. “You’re not getting juiced on caffeine in here and drunk at the same time if you’re not putting anything into your stomachs.”

A reasonable request. “Two double cheeseburgers. Extra fries,” I say.

Pax shoots me a vile look, growling like a dog. He can gripe all he wants, though. Eating might be the last thing on his mind right now, but this woman will find a way to have us kicked out if we don’t meet her halfway. And it is a terrible idea for Pax to be slinging back coffee and alcohol on an empty stomach, after what he’s just learned.

Once the waitress leaves, Pax shows me his teeth. “Get the fuck out of here, Jacobi. Go and find E.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? I don’t want you here. Just fucking *leave*.”

This guy is a raw, exposed nerve. He’s freaking out, and he’s scared, and he’s responding the only way he knows how: with threats of violence.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I level out my voice, hoping that my tone will serve as a balm to his temper, but it only seems to incense him further.

“This has nothing to do with you, Wren. Mind your fucking business. You need to fucking leave before I—”

“You just found out that you’re going to be a father—”

He cuts me off, his voice rising with each strained word. “I’m *not* fucking kidding! If you don’t back off—”

“—and you are *not* taking it well,” I continue. “This town’s a shit hole. I hate it here more than I can articulate, but the unfortunate people who live here already have it hard enough. They don’t need a psychotic asshole showing up at their one and only café and causing mayhem. Drink the coffee.”

“Fuck you, man.”

“*Drink. The. Fucking. Coffee.*” Pax isn’t the only one who can be scary. He knows what the hard, unreadable expression I’ve plastered across my face means; it gives him pause for a second. That second is enough to take the wind out of his sails a little. I watch, relief coursing through my veins, as the fight ebbs away, an air of defeat overcoming his fury. Pax slumps back against the booth, his throat bobbing as he swallows again, and again, and again.

He closes his eyes. I let him sit like that for a long time while he processes what’s just happened. I don’t say a word. When the waitress returns with our food—two of the biggest burgers I have ever seen, plates overflowing with French fries—she looks surprised when she sees that neither of us has really touched our coffee. She probably thought we’d be requesting a refill already.

“There we go, boys. We’ll be hit with the late afternoon rush soon, so I’ve brought you the check now, just to speed up the process —”

I hand her three twenties, ignoring the sticky billfold that she’s placed down on the table. She wants us gone, that much is clear, and I don’t want to be here, trapped inside a quaint family restaurant, a moment longer than is humanly necessary, either. The quicker I can convince Pax to eat and

leave with me, the better for everybody concerned. “Keep the change,” I tell her.

She inclines her head gratefully, acknowledging that she and I appear to be on the same page, and then moves on to the next table to take their order. Pax’s phone buzzes on the table. He picks it up immediately, eyes darting from left to right as he reads the message that just came through.

“Is it her?” I ask, trying to interpret the dark scowl on his face.

“No. It’s Cross. He keeps trying to convince me to go on this fucking Japan trip with him. He’s not taking no for an answer.”

“That can definitely wait, then.” Turning back to Pax, I pluck a fry from my plate and point it at my friend. “Spit it out,” I say.

His face contorts into an incredulous expression. “The hell are you talking about?”

“Say exactly what’s in your head. Come on. All of it. All of the fucked up, scared, angry, confused bullshit that’s swirling around inside that thick skull of yours. Get it all out as quickly as possible, otherwise you’re gonna have a breakdown.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m absolutely fine.”

This is categorically the most insane, laughable thing that Pax Davis has ever said, and my boy has said some ridiculous fucking things in his time. “You’re not fine,” I counter. “*I’m* not fine, and I’m not the one who just found out that I impregnated my girlfriend. There is *no way* that you’re okay, dumbass.”

Defiantly, Pax levels me with a wicked glare. “We don’t even know that it’s mine, though, do we?” Halfway through this sentence, I watch him break. He regrets voicing the sentiment before it’s even past his lips. A shadow falls across him—a heavy cloud that seems to throw the whole café into darkness.

Leaning across the table toward him, I stab my finger against the laminated menu the waitress left behind. “You say some seriously ugly shit

when you're mad, you know that? Presley hasn't been sleeping with anyone else. You know she's in love with you. You know that's *your* kid inside her belly. Far be it from me to tell you how to react in this situation, but if you're gonna say any more dumb shit like that, best to get it all out here and now, while we're away from the girls."

"Oh *yeah*?" Pax spits nastily.

"Yeah. Say that kinda shit in front of Presley and she'll never forget it. It'll be burned into her memory forever. There won't be any taking it back. Is that what you want? Once you've cooled down and had a chance to gain a little perspective, you're not gonna feel like this, dude. But say something like that and the damage will be permanent. There'll be no coming back from it."

He knows I'm right. I see it on his face. He scowls, looking out of the window at the wintery scene on the other side of the glass, his brows pinched together in a furious black line. "How? How can this have happened?" he whispers.

"Hah! Seriously? I *know* you were bored for most of your time at Wolf Hall, but you're a smart guy. You know how babies are ma—"

"That's *not* helping."

I shut up.

Pax fidgets, agitated, in his seat. He takes a sip from his coffee, closes his eyes, and exhales deeply. "She's on birth control. Has been the entire time we've been together. I'm not stupid, okay. I do know how these things work. I've seen her take the damn pills every time we've spent the night together, so tell me, smart ass. *Tell* me how something like this fucking happens."

"Terrible fucking luck?" It's not the answer that he's looking for. Not the one he needs. It's the only one he's going to get, though. Birth control methods are highly effective these days, yes, but highly effective doesn't mean infallible.

Pax picks up a packet of sugar and bends it in half, back and forth, one way and then the other. “She didn't tell me,” he says. “She didn't call me to tell me what was going on.”

“Yeah. God knows why,” I say, sarcasm dripping from my words. “It's not like you'd have reacted *badly* or anything.”

“You have a fucking death wish, Jacobi?”

“I'm just saying—”

“Well, don't.”

He has a point. I know I shouldn't be giving him shit right now, but it's impossible to overlook the fact that Pax saw Presley Maria Witton Chase's belly and instantly lost all sense of reason. If I were her, I wouldn't have told him, either. I'd have been scared out of my mind every time I even fucking *thought* about confessing this sorry state of affairs to him. “I'm not saying I'd be handling this any better than you,” I say.

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, you fucking are.”

“No. I'm not.”

“Then what *are* you saying? Cause from where I'm sitting, it seems an awful lot like you're judging the fuck out of me.”

“I'm saying do better. You love Chase, don't you?”

He folds the sugar packet even more aggressively. From the way his nostrils flare, it causes him physical discomfort to admit this to me, but he nods his head. “Yeah. I love her.”

“Then figure out your shit and do it fast. These next few hours are crucial. If you stew on this for too long and let Presley, think you believe this is the worst thing that has ever happened to you, that'll change things between the two of you irrevocably. Think about how this will feel six months from now. What kind of man are you gonna be? Are you going to be the kind of man that stands by the girl he loves? Who supports her and his newborn child, or are you going to be the kind of guy who bails and runs at the first sign of a pothole in the road?”

Pax's twists the sugar packet so viciously that it splits open, granules of sugar exploding over the table. "I'm not fucking running," he snarls. "I would *never* do that to her. I would never do that to my kid!"

"I know that. I know the kind of guy you are. But what do you figure Chase is thinking at the moment? You think *you're* scared? Imagine what she's feeling. Pax Davis just found out that he's going to be a father, and the first thing he did was bail. You've got a small window of time to fix this, and that window is closing by the second. I suggest you do so real fucking quick if you—"

Suddenly, Pax is up out of his seat. Coffee forgotten. Burger forgotten. He's charging for the door.

I take another long swig out of my coffee cup and set it down on the table, slowly grabbing my discarded jacket along with Pax's. "That's better," I mutter to myself, as I head toward the exit after him. "*That's* more fucking like it."

PAX

JACOBI TRIES TO FOLLOW ME, but I give him the slip two blocks from the café. Without my jacket, the night air knifes at me, the cold biting at my lungs, but I feel nothing. I walk for an hour, and soon the air begins to shiver with snow. The streets are deserted. The world is silent, everything muffled and still. I come across a twenty-four-hour pharmacy after a while and stumble inside, throwing things into a basket without a thought in my head.

When I reach the register, the cashier eyes me warily, scanning the items I've just dumped onto the conveyor belt. She does *not* look impressed. "Other people shop here, y'know," she says.

I do a one-eighty, quirking an eyebrow at the other shoppers waiting in line behind me to pay. "Evidently."

"Right."

"And your point?"

"You've bought every single pregnancy test we have. D'you really need to buy *all* of them?"

"I don't know, Linda. What do you think? Do I look like a guy who would buy fifteen pregnancy tests for the fucking fun of it?"

She rolls her eyes. "Honestly, no. You don't."

“Then one might conclude that I threw all of these fucking things in my basket out of necessity. Wouldn’t you think? *Linda?*”

She scowls. “You only need one test to figure out if someone’s pregnant. Two to confirm, maybe.”

Let her keep hassling me. Just *let* her keep fucking doing it. I’m one hundred percent primed for a screaming match with a stranger. “Sure. I agree.”

“Then why are you hoarding *thirteen* of them?”

“Why do you think? I fucked so many women this month, I gotta do the rounds and make sure none of them are knocked-up. I actually need five more but looks like you’re all out.”

Disgust? No, the word isn’t strong enough. Disgust doesn’t come close to describing the cashier’s expression. She wrinkles her nose, grimacing as she scans the tests through one by one. “Far be it from me to offer out medical advice, but it sounds like you’d probably better grab a couple of those STI kits, too.”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Linda.”

“Well, all *right* then.”

Outside, the dark sky is a shroud of heavy clouds, blotting out the stars. The snow falls purposefully now, covering everything. I walk, and I walk, and I walk. After another hour or so, I hurl the plastic pharmacy bag containing all of the pregnancy tests into a dented trash can on a street corner, unsure of why I even bought them in the first place. Chase is one hundred percent pregnant. Forcing her to piss on a million tests isn’t going to change that. This walk was supposed to clear my head, but I’m not thinking any straighter. My thoughts are a jumbled mess—snippets of self-reproval punctuated by cursing. My mother’s cool voice makes an appearance, just to make things *really* fun.

Stupid child. You were out of the house for five seconds and look where you’ve gotten yourself. Tied to a penniless, uneducated nobody with no

name for herself. Her people are common. She is common. Now, you're going to be landed with a common child. I swear to god, you'll be paying for the whelp for the rest of your life. Way to go, Pax. I always knew you were stupid, but this is beyond the pale, even for you. If you ask me, I'd take the girl to the first clinic you can find and get ri—

"I *didn't* fucking ask you, though, did I." I spit the words out, creating puffs of fog on my breath as I charge across the street, heading back in the direction of the Fairbanks University campus. I get halfway when I have to stop and take a seat on a bus stop bench in order to catch my breath. My chest is so tight, it feels like a twelve-ton elephant is crushing my ribcage.

This is fucking insane.

I need a drink.

Once I've recovered enough to put one foot in front of another again, I hurry down the street and enter the first bar I come across. It's warm inside. Too warm. The air is humid and cloying, pouring down my throat like syrup. A young girl with bubblegum pink hair and a nose ring asks me what I want, fluttering her eyelashes at me seductively. There was a time, not too long ago, that I would have had her naked ass perched on the edge of a sink in the bathroom, her panting pleas hot in my ear as I railed the ever-loving shit out of her. Now, I barely even notice that she's female as I bark out my order.

"Johnny Walker. A double. Neat."

"Ooof. Bad day, Cowboy?" she purrs. "You want ice?"

"No, I do not want ice. Have you *seen* outside?"

She holds up her hands in mock surrender. "Coming right up, boss."

She goes about fixing me the drink, flirting and laughing with the other patrons sitting at the bar as she does so, and I begin to spin out. It's so hot in here; I might pass out just for the hell of it. At least that way, I won't be conscious.

It's all so fucking dumb. Chase is on the pill. This *shouldn't* have happened. Shouldn't have been able to happen. I should have worn a fucking condom. I should...have been fucking...smarter...

A second later, I have my double Johnny Walker in one hand and my cell phone in the other, screen unlocked, thumb hovering over the green call button. The name on the screen reads:

ROBERT WITTON

THIS IS NOT a call I want to make, but I don't see that I have much choice here. I smash the pad of my thumb against the small green circle, my body locking up the second I hear the ringing sound emanating from the handset's speaker.

Five rings.

Eight seconds. That's how long I have to decide if I actually want to do this or not. I still haven't made up my mind when the ringing cuts off and Robert's face appears on the phone's screen.

FaceTime?? I *FaceTimed* the asshole? God, today just gets fucking better and better, doesn't it. Oh well. Too late to back out now. Presley's old man smiles tightly at me from the other side of the camera, and from the look of his expression, he *knows*.

"I was wondering how long it'd take you to call," he says stiffly.

"Oh? I'm *shocked*." My voice drips with attitude. I can't turn it off.

He huffs, glancing away from the phone. Deep, unhappy lines have carved themselves around his eyes and between his brows since the last time I saw him. The windows behind Robert are pitch black. His cheeks look hollow, the bags beneath his eyes pronounced under the stark overhead

lighting. Looks like he's in a kitchen of some sort. "Wait, where are you? The restaurant?" I ask.

"Yes."

"What time is it there?"

"Nearly four. *In the morning*. The bread doesn't make itself."

Fairbanks is four hours behind Mountain Lakes. I'd feel bad about calling him so early, but the guy was up anyway, so fuck it. I'm not apologizing.

"Where are *you*? In a *bar*?" Robert asks, squinting at me.

"No."

He suspects I'm lying, but what can he do about it? "Whatever. Come on, then. Spit it out. I've run this conversation through in my head a million times over the past two weeks. I've been trying to figure out how you're gonna handle this whole thing. None of the scenarios I've imagined have gone very well, so...let's have it."

Two *weeks*? I should have been the first person Chase told about this. I've been in the dark, worrying myself sick because I've *known* something was wrong, and her dad has known for two *weeks*? I swear, if I wasn't so stupid in love with the girl, I might be fucking furious with Chase right now.

Can't focus on that, though. Not here. Not now. This entire thing is hard enough as it is. I down the rest of my drink, wincing as the alcohol burns a path to my stomach, and then I say what I need to say.

"I'm not waiting a year. Not now. You know I can't. I want your permission."

He looks at me blankly. "Permission for what?"

"You're fucking with me."

"Permission to impregnate my daughter?" he asks. "'Cause it looks like you went ahead and did that already."

“Robert, you are out of your goddamn mind if you think I’m in any fit state to deal with this level of bullshit right now. I’m doing my best to be respectful—”

“You weren’t being very respectful when you put a kid in my daughter’s stomach, though, were you.”

One Mississippi.

Two Mississippi.

Three Mississippi.

I gesture for another shot of whiskey.

Four Mississippi.

Fi—fuck, who said counting cools your temper? They were fucking lying. There aren’t enough Mississippis in the world to douse the flames inside me.

The bartender slides the shot toward me, and I knock it back in one, not caring that Robert can see me. When I slam down the empty glass, I focus all of my attention on Chase’s father. “Are you done?”

He pulls a face.

“Good. I didn’t intend for this to happen. I definitely didn’t do it on purpose. Now are you gonna give me your permission to ask Chase to marry me, or am I gonna walk out of here and ask her without it?”

“I still think you should wait.”

“What for? Until she’s the size of a house? Until our kid’s five? Until we’re retiring in Florida and you finally kick the bucket?”

“Whoa, now. That’s a little harsh!”

“You don’t think *you’ve* been a little harsh to me?” I let out a scathing laugh.

“All right. Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’m just worried, is all. Presley is my only daughter—”

“You think I’m not gonna look after her? That I won’t earn enough to keep her comfortable?”

“It’s not that.”

“You think I’m gonna make her unhappy, then?”

He pauses, then reluctantly says, “No. For some reason, you seem to make her very happy. I doubt that’ll change.”

“You think I’ll cheat? Lie? Get bored?”

“No. None of that.”

“Then what is it? How are you justifying keeping us from this?”

“She lost her teens, Pax! My own son robbed her of them. During the years when she was supposed to be out, having fun with her friends, exploring life, and figuring out who she wanted to be, she was being accosted in the most brutal, awful way, right underneath my nose. Her innocence was ripped from her. It kept on being ripped from her over and over again. She grew up so fast, because she didn’t have a choice. I just want—I want her to take some of that time back. For herself. I want her to act her age. She should enjoy college. Be free, and wild, and full of joy. If she’s married to you, then what? She’s a wife at eighteen? Even twenty’s too young. It’s too much!”

“But she can be a *mother*? A baby might throw a spanner in your ‘wild and free’ plans for her, don’t you think?”

He goes to say something. His mouth opens, but he stops himself. He looks away, off to the right, toward the photo shrine of Chase’s youth. A series of emotions flit across his face, but all of them are hard to pin down and name.

“What? You don’t have anything to say to that? You want your grandkid to grow up with a party girl for a mom. Pledging sororities and drinking her face off every night for no good fucking reason, while you end up having to look after the kid—”

“Jesus! For fuck’s sake, be *reasonable*, Pax. There isn’t gonna *be* a kid, okay? Not if I have anything to say about it. Presley knows what’s best for

her, and that is not having a baby at eighteen, before she's even had a chance to live, okay. She—"

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?" I go deadly still. My voice is quiet, but the question I've just posed thunders in my ears.

"I've talked to Presley. She knows that I'm here to support her. There's nothing wrong with her making a decision that benefits her future. It benefits your future, too. Just think for one second about what your life will look like with a newborn. What, you think you're gonna be able to traipse all over the world with that Cross guy, going on photoshoots? You're dreaming. You'll have to buy a house, and settle down, and get used to being chained to—"

"You told her to get rid of it?" I whisper.

"Don't say it like that. It's the obvious way out of this situation. Aren't you pro-choice? Presley's too smart to—"

"Of course I am fucking pro-choice! The fuck is the matter with you?" I hiss. "Presley can make whatever decision she wants. *I'll* be the one fucking supporting her, though. I'll be the one holding her hand, no matter what. Did—" Hot, acidic bile scorches the back of my throat. "Did you tell her not to talk this through with me? Did you tell her to just get the situation taken care of before I could fucking stop her?"

Robert's eyes fall closed. He wears the look of a weary man, sick of trying to talk sense to a moron. "You're barely out of school. Neither of you are old enough to make these kinds of decisions—"

I end the call.

My ears hum, a high-pitched ringing blocking out the chatter and bustle of the busy bar.

Holy fucking *what*?

Am I...?

No.

Did that seriously just happen?

Robert Witton has been in Chase's ear for the past two weeks, whispering poison to her? He tried to convince her not to tell me she was pregnant? What...what the actual *fuck*? Who *does* that?

"That didn't sound like a fun conversation." The bartender with the bubblegum pink hair has returned; she stands opposite me, unscrewing the cap off of a bottle of Johnny Walker. She attempts to pour me a refill, but I cover the glass with my hand. "Sure about that, boss? If I were you, I'd be drinking myself blind tonight."

"It's rude to listen in on people's private conversations."

She chuckles, shaking her head. "If you're having a conversation on speaker phone in a bar, it ain't private."

"Just close me out. I need to get the fuck out of here."

She shrugs. "Fair enough, *Evil Overlord*," she says, jerking her chin toward my hoody. "I'll grab your check. For what it's worth, you look pretty fucking mean, but I can tell you've got a good heart. You'd better talk to that girl before her daddy convinces her that you *are* evil, though. Otherwise, she's gonna do exactly what he tells her to, and you will never see her again. Trust me." She raises her eyebrows. "I have personal experience with the kind of fathers who only '*want what's best.*'"

WREN

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you didn’t tell me!” Elodie stomps around the hotel room, pretending to be pissed at me; she’s been doing this ever since I got back from the café. “He made her a ring! He asked her *dad*? Do you hate me, Wren Jacobi? Is that it? You must hate me to not tell me he was going to propose.”

She’s adorable when she’s like this. A tiny, feral kitten throwing a temper tantrum. “I assure you, I do not hate you. Far from it.” Suppressing a smile, I sweep my finger over the artist’s pad resting on my knees. The charcoal I’ve put on the paper smudges, making a broad, sweeping blur of the pensive face I’ve drawn. Some people would consider the portrait ruined, but it’s perfect in my eyes. I can still see Elodie’s intelligent, crystalline eyes gazing back at me from the page. Her hair looks wind-whipped and wild. Her high cheekbones and gently upturned nose are still visible through the grain of the charcoal. Her parted lips beg to be kissed. She looks like Catherine, out on the moors, searching for her Heathcliff.

“This is huge, Wren. Earth-shatteringly *huge*. This is not the kind of secret you keep from your girlfriend.”

“This is *exactly* the kind of secret you keep from your girlfriend.”

“How can you say that?”

“Does this information affect your life directly? Does not knowing that Pax told us he wanted to propose to Presley at the start of summer mean that you’re *unsafe* in any way?”

She props her hands on her hips. *Pouting*, for fuck’s sake. “No.”

“Did not knowing that information directly cause pain and suffering in your life?”

“No. But it caused pain and suffering for *Pres*,” she argues. “If she’d known how serious he was about her, she might not have kept this whole pregnancy thing a secret.”

“That might be the case.” I shrug a shoulder. “But *you* knowing wouldn’t have helped that situation.”

“It—it might! I could have—I could have told—”

Glancing up, I laugh, shaking my head. “You would have told Presley that Pax was going to propose? Seriously? And you don’t think that would have ruined the whole thing for her a little? It was *Pax*’s place to tell her that. This is precisely why I didn’t say anything.”

“Urgh!” Elodie grabs a pillow from the bed and hurls it at me. I duck out of the way, and the pillow harmlessly thumps against the wall behind me. Elodie sighs, sagging down on the edge of the bed. “All right. Fine. You were right not to tell me. I one hundred percent wouldn’t have been able to keep it a secret. I would have let it slip accidentally. It *is* Pax’s place to share that with Pres.”

Chuckling, I smudge out more of the portrait, softening the edges. I think I’m actually going to keep this one—

“Are you ever gonna let me see that?” Elodie asks. Her huffy attitude has done a one-eighty; her voice has become far more serious, tinged with an edge of curiosity. She still sits on the edge of the bed, her legs drawn up to her chest. Her thick dark hair falls in messy waves around her shoulders, wayward strands loose and framing her beautiful elfin face. My blood races at the sight of her.

“It’s *of* you, not *for* you.”

She pouts. “You’re the cruelest.”

“I know.”

She scoots off the bed and crosses the room, the long t-shirt she stole from me to wear to bed doing a piss-poor job of covering the tops of her bare thighs. I devour the expanse of smooth skin, groaning, my dick growing hard as she straddles my lap and sits herself down on top of me. The wicked little witch knows exactly what she’s doing as she rolls her hips, ‘*trying to get comfortable.*’ I close the artist’s sketch pad and set it down next to me.

‘I’d never write about *you* and then refuse to let you read it.’ She feigns petulance.

“You would. You write about me in that journal of yours all the time—”

“Uh, that’s my *journal!*” She tries to pinch my nipple, but she has terrible aim. I defend myself, slapping my palms over my pecs, before she can take another stab at it.

“And?” I ask.

“And journals are private.”

“So is what I draw sometimes,” I counter. “For all intents and purposes, that sketchpad *is* my journal.”

Elodie’s bottom lip protrudes rather adorably. “Maybe one day you’ll draw something for me, then. On purpose. To make me happy.”

“Making you happy *is* my eternal quest.” Wrapping my arms around her, I cup her ass with both hands, planting a kiss on the tip of her nose. In return, she winds her fingers through my hair, her blue eyes assessing my face, skipping over my features, as if she’s trying to memorize the lines of my face. Fleeting, her brows bank together, the expression there one second, gone the next. She wanted to say something. To ask something, maybe. Peppering her jaw with a series of light kisses, I give in to my curiosity and ask. “What?”

“Hmm?”

“Say what you were gonna say.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just...well. Pax and Presley. Their whole situation. It’s so crazy, right? I mean...Presley’s *pregnant*. You think Pax is over there right now, asking her to marry him, for fuck’s sake. It’s all so intense.”

“It is.” I agree cautiously, wondering at the strange note in her tone.

“It just made me think.”

“It’s made you wonder what would happen if it was *us* in their shoes?”

She nods.

“I’d marry you tomorrow, Elodie Stillwater, baby or no baby.”

“You’re *crazy*.” But she blushes, and the coy shading of her cheeks is beautiful. I want to bite her. I want to fucking *eat* her. Consume her whole, until I’ve claimed all of her as my own and we both cease to exist. The silence would be wonderful. Just me and Elodie, souls threaded together, floating on a sea of black.

“Personally, I think we should wait, though,” I tell her, tucking a thick wave of her hair behind her ear. “I want nothing more than a life with you. But I want to enjoy every single aspect of that life. That means savoring it. Dating. Falling in love. We’ve relished *those* parts. Now we have living together to enjoy, in a place of our own. We have college, and traveling, and a million other adventures to get through before we run head-long into marriage. We are *mayflies*,” I tell her, giving her ass another squeeze. “Our lives are bitterly short. We wake up, naked and screaming, and before we know it, we’re already on our way out again. I want to savor every single experience I get to share with you on this earth. I want the little pieces of every single day with you. The good stuff and the bad. Important and inane. I plan on savoring you like dark chocolate. Every microsecond of this life with you will be burned indelibly into my soul before I die. Rushing a second of it won’t do either of us any justice—”

She cuts me off with a kiss. Deep. Powerful. Thrilling. She tastes like honey, and springtime, and sunshine, and every good thing I never thought I'd get to have. When she's finished with me, she bumps the end of my nose with hers, and then rests her forehead against mine, humming under her breath. "You love people to think you're some kind of morose, depressed artist—"

"I *am* a morose, depressed artist."

She shakes her head, laughing. "I hate to break it to you, but you're actually one of the sweetest, most romantic people I've ever met. And you can forget about pulling that face, Wren Jacobi. No amount of grimacing will make it untrue."

"If you don't stop talking, I'm gonna dump your ass on that bed, and then I'm gonna pull your panties down, wrap my hands around your throat, and fuck you raw."

My Little E's eyes grow round, her eyebrows floating up toward her hairline. Her pupils are dilated, though. She might be mock concerned about the threat I just made, but in truth, the thought of it is turning her on. She's sweet, this one. So fucking kind and thoughtful that she makes my teeth hurt in the very best way. But that doesn't mean that she's meek. There's a fire in her belly that burns hotter than hell. Her dark side is that much more thrilling because it's unexpected. She loves me to be rough with her. She loves to be subservient to me. She loves to give me what I want. Even now, I can feel her pretty little pussy soaking through her panties against my thighs.

"You wouldn't dare," she says, with a certainty that belies her nerves. I'm not blind. I can see the way her pulse is fluttering at the base of her throat.

Slowly, I trail my right hand up her back, all the way up, into her hair. Fast as lightning, I spin my wrist around the column of her neck so that I can feel her breath quicken beneath my palm, my fingers clamping around

her throat. Elodie's eyes widen for real this time. "You know better than that," I snarl, leaning into her, biting her bottom lip harder than is polite. She makes a stifled gasping sound that instantly has my dick throbbing in my pants. I live for those fucking gasps, the whimpers, the sharp inhalations—all of the vulnerable little noises that she makes only for me. They're so innocent, music to my wicked, wicked ears. With my left hand, I take hold of her jaw, driving my fingers into her cheeks, forcing her to open her mouth. "You know better than to contradict me when I tell you I'm gonna do something, don't you?" I whisper into her open mouth.

"Ahhh—" She tries to speak, but I give her head a small shake, tutting disapprovingly.

"I don't think so," I breathe. "I don't think you should be allowed to speak after that outrageous comment. I *think* you need a moment to reconsider whether I mean something when I say it, Elodie Stillwater."

Her eyelids flutter—she'd close them and hide in the dark, away from my intense scrutiny, but she's not getting off that easily; I give her head another terse shake with my left hand, applying more pressure around her throat with my right, controlling exactly how much air she can pull into her lungs. "Oh, no, you don't," I reprimand. "You're not going anywhere. You think I'm such a sweet, romantic guy, huh?"

Her eyelids flutter again, color rising to her cheeks, her nostrils flaring and dilating as she fights to drag more oxygen in through her nose. Her hands remain loose at her sides, though. This isn't what fear looks like on her. This is arousal, and we both know it.

"Have I been too gentle with you, Little E?" I bite her lip again, and this time I taste the faintest tang of copper. I've made her bleed. "Shall I remind you exactly how cruel I *really* am?"

She shivers, arching her back, grinding herself into my lap; the movement is involuntary, I can tell. She tries to meet my gaze, to level me with a defiant stare, but her body works against her, telling me exactly what

it wants. Her throat bobs beneath my palm, and I ease off a little, permitting her to speak. “You’re not so big and scary now, Jacobi. I know you. You’re nothing but a sweet little ted—dy—bear—” I clamp my hand back around her neck, tighter than before, making it difficult for her to finish that sentence. Oh? My precious, petite Little E has decided she wants to play, has she? Well, I’m not in the habit of denying her what she desires. Far be it from me to refuse her when she’s shown me what she needs.

In a heartbeat, I rocket up out of my seat, hoisting her up with me. I remove the hand from around her throat for a second so I can hold her underneath her ass, supporting her weight as I stalk purposefully toward the bed.

“Wren! Oh my god, Wren! Don’t you do it. *DON’T YOU DO IT!*” she squeals. When I throw her down onto the bed, enjoying the way her body bounces against the mattress, she unleashes an outraged growl, attempting to scoot over to the other side of the bed. I let out a hail of raucous laughter that has my girlfriend glowering at me with a confused expression on her face. “Why the hell are you laughing?” she demands. “You think you’re gonna make me sweat a little attention from you? Sorry, buddy. I’m officially desensitized to the Wren Jacobi rough treatment. Try all you like, you—”

“I won’t need to try, sweet girl. I’m gonna make you *scream*. Take off my t-shirt.” She reaches out for the shirt I’m wearing, but I smack her hands away. “No. The one that *you’re* wearing,” I clarify.

It slipped her mind that she’s wearing my clothes. Must have done. She looks down at the black shirt that’s preserving her modesty, her cheeks flushing. Her nipples are already stiff, poking through the fabric; she isn’t wearing a bra. With intentionally slow movements, she plucks at the hem of the shirt, inching it up her thighs a little.

“*Today, Stillwater.*”

“But...” she pants.

I tilt my head to one side. “But?”

“You do...*hate* to rush things.” She has the good sense to be nervous when she says this—to be sassy with me while I’m in this kind of mood. Mischief sparkles in her eyes, but there’s trepidation there, too. She doesn’t know if she’s gone too far, or if I’m going to allow the impertinent comment to slide.

Unlucky for her.

I’m not in a very forgiving frame of mind.

I pull the shirt I’m wearing over my head, buzzing with pent-up energy that’s just begging to be unleashed. “You’re going to wish you’d complied the first time around,” I inform her.

She shuffles back on the mattress, a weary light in her eyes. “*Wren.*”

“Up. On your knees for me. Right now.”

“*Wren.*”

I rip the belt from my jeans, snapping the leather. “You *really* wanna make me ask twice?”

No hesitation this time. She obeys immediately, popping up onto her knees, her lips parted, a feverish look to her. I set aside the belt. This is playing out very seriously, but it *is* still a game. There are rules. Elodie must play along if she wants to reap the rewards of this interaction, just as I must.

It might seem like I’m the one with all the control here, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Elodie has the power to fell me with a word. That’s all it will take. One tiny, inconsequential word out of her mouth, and I will be on *my* knees in supplication to *her*. All of this ceases the second she wishes it. But she doesn’t wish it. She wants me standing over her, running the pad of my thumb along the line of her jaw, over her bruised lips, forcing it into her mouth.

“*Suck,*” I command.

She wants me to hook that thumb into her cheek, giving her no other option than to open her mouth wide for me.

She shudders, her eyelids trying to close again.

“Look at me, Elodie.”

She looks, her breath ragged and quick, coming in and out of her nose. Her eyes are watering, causing her eyeliner to smudge, and the look is so sexy on her. Holy fucking saints and martyrs above, she is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I have to fight the urge to tear my jeans down, throw her back onto the hotel bed and ram my throbbing cock into her over and over again like some frenzied, rabid animal.

She does this to me.

She makes me fucking *crazy*.

Oh boy, I am gonna have so much fun with her tonight. I remove my thumb from her mouth. A string of saliva comes with it, glistening between her mouth and my hand. Elodie tries to wipe it away, but I smack her hand away again. Instead, I rub the spit against her lips, against her mouth, against her cheek.

“I get to decide if you’re messy,” I whisper to her. “I get to choose...and I’m gonna make you so messy tonight. I hope you’re fucking ready. This is what you get when you don’t give me what I want right away.”

“Oh my god, Wren...” She scrambles, trying to rid herself of the t-shirt, but I shove her back onto the bed, shaking my head slowly from left to right. “Too late now, Stillwater. You don’t wanna give me my shirt back? Fine. Then I’ll take it myself. Lay back on the bed.” She can sense how far my feral mood is taking me and how badly I’ll stripe her ass if she doesn’t behave. This is the part that she loves the most. The part that makes her tremble and quake, rushing to do as she’s told as quickly as she can... because if I’m willing to punish her so ruthlessly for being bad, then she knows exactly how well I’ll reward her if she’s *good*.

She lowers herself down, eyes watching me, never leaving me, as I cross the room back to the sofa where I was drawing...and I pick up one of the fresh razorblades from the torn open packet by my sketchpad.

Elodie's pupils narrow to pinpricks when she sees what I have in my hand, as I return to the bed. She sucks in a breath, hands fisting the sheets, as I climb up onto the bed, flicking the plastic shield guard off of the ferociously sharp blade.

"Wren," she whispers.

"Stay still. Don't you move an inch," I rumble. The hem of the black shirt is bunched up around her waist, her lacey turquoise panties on show. I take hold of the t-shirt hem, and with a very precise flick of my wrist, I shred the fabric, cutting away a piece. It goes fluttering to the bed covers like a feather on the breeze.

"When you're bad, this is what happens." I trail the flat of the blade along the inside of her thigh; the metal barely *kisses* her flesh. Elodie's breathing quickens to short, urgent little pants. I look at her, and her lips are parted, cheeks the color of sin, lust, and fear warring in her eyes.

"Do you trust me?" I ask her.

"Yes."

"Good." Another piece of the t-shirt comes away in my hand, parting like silk when I hold the razorblade to it. I cast it away, taking Elodie roughly by the hip, dragging her closer toward me.

"When I tell you I want you naked, I want you *naked*, E." This time, when I cut the material with the razor, I don't cut a piece away. I only slash it, making a six-inch tear in the fabric right across her stomach. The rent exposes her skin, giving me the most delicious snapshot of her toned belly. So fucking hot. *Such* a fucking turn-on. I alternate between cutting the t-shirt away and slashing it, working with fast but steady hands, careful not to nick her skin. The sleeves. The chest. All over her stomach. Very soon, Elodie's body is barely covered by the tatters of the shirt. There's only one area of the material that I've been saving for last. She hisses, cursing under her breath, as I cut a long, diagonal slit in the shirt over the right side of her chest, and the pale pink bud of her nipple and half of her breast is revealed.

“Fuck *me*.” I’m fixated by the sight of her, bound by invisible ties to the bed, her head thrown back, the muscles in her throat working as she attempts to swallow. Her body is magnificent. Skin so pale. So perfect, begging to be touched. She’s on the verge of hyperventilating, her ribcage rising and falling quickly. Dropping down, I hold myself over her, and I flick her tight, perfect nipple with my tongue, groaning as I suck it into my mouth.

“Ahh! Shit! Wren! Fuck, that feels...so...holy *shit!*”

I introduce teeth immediately. My patience has upped and left me. Not that I had any in the first place. Fastening onto her flesh, I tug hard, eliciting a strangled yelp out of her that sounds like a combination of pleasure and pain. Before she can recover from the sting, I sit back, holding the shreds of the shirt away from her body and slashing at the other side of the shirt, exposing her left breast. The full curve of her breast is on show this time, and the sight of it sends me fucking mad. I take that nipple into my mouth, biting down, palming the swell of her in my hand and holding her in place as I lick and suck. Elodie bucks and writhes, her legs tangling in the sheets, her eyes rolling all the way back into her head. She swears and curses, begs and pleads, urging me on and begging me to stop. And all the while, her fingers wind into my hair and she draws me closer, pulling me into her chest until I can’t fucking take it anymore.

I tear free from her arms, snatching what’s left of the shirt’s hemline, and I drag the blade upward, sundering the tattered material in two. In a heartbeat, the shirt has been sheered from her body, the swatches of shirt discarded on the bed around her stunning body. She lies there before me in nothing but those pretty little turquoise panties...and she won’t be wearing *those* for long, either.

She looks up at me, need written all over her beautiful face, and I can see it in her eyes: she knows what’s coming next. “I’m gonna put my mouth on every inch of your body,” I tell her. “Your ass. Your mouth. I’m gonna

make you come so hard you won't even remember your own name. Over... and over...and over..."

"*Fuck.*" Elodie mouths the word, but the shape of it on her lips makes my head spin.

"Open your legs for me."

She does it, spreading her legs so that her knees are splayed wide open. As soon as she's angled herself back, I take up my rightful fucking place between her thighs and I go to work with the blade. This time, I hook my fingers beneath the lace and lift it, breath hissing through my teeth when I discover how wet she is. "Look at what you've done," I rumble under my breath. "You've soaked right through your panties, Elodie. Didn't I tell you I was going to make a mess of you? Hmm?"

I hear her breath catching, but she doesn't say a word. Her addicting little whimpers come every other second, sounding more and more needy, as I oh-so-carefully cut the ultra-fine fabric of her panties away.

"Oh, my fucking god." I catch my bottom lip between my teeth, biting back a string of words that would make even the most deviant piece of shit blush. Her pussy...god, her pussy is fucking perfect.

The blade.

The fucking blade.

I need to get rid of it before I give in to all the filthy things I want to do to her. The sofa's too far away. Quickly, I lean across the bed and set it on the nightstand for now. A moment later, and I'm back between Elodie's thighs. I bury my fucking face between them, and the slickness of her pussy coating my nose and my mouth and my face...it's more that I can fucking take.

I lick at her. I inhale her. I press my face in deep, wanting all of it, needing it more than I need breath in my fucking lungs. I'm fucking feral as I trail my tongue up the length of her shredded panties, groaning as I taste the sweet, damp material. I'm going to fucking ignite at this rate and take

out half of Fairbanks. There won't be a man left standing. Nipping at Elodie's clit through the teal lace, I feel the swollen, taut bud slide through my teeth and I almost roar. I can't fucking handle this. Can. *Not*.

I am too fucking turned on.

Elodie's face is crimson, the shade of want, and shame, and desperation. The kind of hunger that prowls around inside me has killed men before. It's started wars. It's toppled governments and spilled rivers of blood. I have to have this girl right now or I'm going to do something really fucking stupid.

Her underwear is giving me the most scandalous access to her pussy, but it's not enough. I want more. "Panties *off*."

Elodie tucks her knees into her chin, smooth, pale calves extended upward as she slides the scrap of lace down her thighs and all the way off.

"Over. On your stomach," I order.

My good girl does as she's told. My fingers gouge at her ass cheeks, digging into her flesh. My god, her ass is sheer perfection. I trace my tongue along the line where cheek turns to thigh, growling at the back of my throat, obsessed with the feel of her.

"Hike your hips up for me. Yes, like that. That's right."

She arches her back, lifting her ass in the air, her thighs pressed together, and my blood sings in my ears. Never have I seen anything as sexy as this: Elodie's perfect, tight, wet little cunt, bare and exposed, presented up to me for inspection. My hands shake as I reach out and part her folds, a hiss escaping through my gritted teeth. "Fuck." The word scorches the back of my throat. "Your pretty little holes. I can see how much you want me. You're pulsing for me, aren't you, baby? I can fucking see how badly you need my cock."

"Yes! Yes, I—I fucking *need* you!"

Right on cue, she clenches.

"Jesus wept. I'm gonna glaze this pretty little cunt of yours, Elodie Stillwater. I'm gonna pump my come all over your asshole, and I'm gonna

watch your pussy throbbing for me while I do. Do you hear me?”

“Oh my God. Please. *Please!*” She sounds delirious. “Fuck me. Please. Just fuck me. I need you.”

I’m all for teasing the hell out of her, but who am I to deny her, when she begs for release so sweetly? Her pleas are music to my ears. Carefully, I dip my index finger into her pussy, sliding it in to the first knuckle, wetting it. She gasps, and the growl that slips up and out of my throat sounds menacing even to *my* ears. Quickly, I dip my finger back, rubbing and circling her asshole, making sure she’s wet there, too.

Elodie goes still, holding her breath, which only emphasizes how badly she’s trembling. I palm my dick, rubbing her slickness over the head of my cock, too, a rhythmic war drum pounding in my ears. When I thrust myself into her, the room sways, the lights flaring, everything blurring for a second.

“You are so fucking tight.” Curving my body over her, I reach around and take her by the throat, pulling her back with me so that she’s on her knees. From here, I can bite her neck. I can control how much air she gets. I can whisper exactly what I plan on doing to her in her ear. And I can reach around...and I can part her pussy lips with my fingers...and I can rub her clit as I drive myself up into her again....

“FUCK! Wren! Oh...my...*GOD!*” She gasps out a strangled word on each thrust.

Her tits bounce as I slam myself into her from behind. “You’re lucky I don’t have any rope,” I snarl into her ear. “I’d have you trussed up with your hands bound to your ankles and your pussy on display already. I’d sit between your legs and sample this sweet fucking cunt for hours. You’d be trembling...”

I drive myself home, working her clit.

“Begging...”

I apply more pressure, closing off her throat a little.

“Pleading...”

Elodie clings to my forearm, holding on for dear life, but she doesn't try and pull my hand away. She lets go, leaning her weight on me, her back to my chest, letting me hold her as I spear her on the end of my cock.

Again.

Again.

Again.

She comes, twitching in my arms, her body falling slack, and I hold her, rolling my hips forward, driving myself inside her as she screams and shakes. I'm right behind her; I fully intend on watching my come roll over her ass and down her inner thighs, but when the moment arrives, I can't bring myself to pull out. She feels too fucking good, and it just seems right. My balls tighten, heavy as hell, my cock pulsing inside her as I empty, a lightning storm of pleasure taking out my senses...

Holy...what...the...*fuck*?

Coming with E is like nothing else.

Some men are addicted to coke. Others heroin. For others, it's drink. Plenty of people are addicted to sex, but this is different. Sex with this girl is the stars shifting into alignment. It's the perfect song, and the perfect summer's day, and the best steak you've ever eaten, and Christmas morning when you were a kid, and everything good and everything amazing all compiled into this one blindingly wonderful moment that even *I* am at a loss to describe.

It's the very best of everything, and when it's over, I find that I have the most beautiful girl in the world cradled in my arms.

There's no fucking beating it.

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DASH

“HEY, asshole. You’re drooling on the couch.”

I jerk awake.

Michael looms over me like an unkempt sentinel. Shadows gather beneath his eyes, and his bottom lip is split wide open. Most worryingly, there is a trail of blood down the front of his shirt, and his beautiful Tom Ford suit is conspicuously rumpled.

“The fuck happened to you?” I groan, attempting to drag myself into an upright position; I manage it on the third try, wincing as I realize I now have a crick in my neck, and my shoulder is killing me. There’s a reason why I don’t sleep on couches, even if they are nice, deep, expensive sectionals like this one.

“Tijuana,” is all Michael says. He spins and heads off in the direction of the kitchen. “I was hoping you’d have a pot of coffee going,” he grumbles.

I drag myself up and follow after him. “*I* was hoping you’d actually come home at a reasonable hour so I could get back to my girlfriend.”

“I don’t like you calling her that.” Michael thumps a bag of coffee grounds down onto the kitchen counter, then rubs his forehead, wincing against what looks like an impressive hangover.

I go about hunting through the kitchen cabinets, searching for the mugs, purposefully slamming the doors as I go. “What would you prefer I call

her?”

“For the love of god, please stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

SLAM.

“*That.*”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. My back is killing me. What the fuck is that sofa made out of? Concrete?”

He eyes me dourly. “There are four bedrooms in this very large apartment. You could have slept in any of *those* beds. You didn’t have to crash on the couch.”

“Like hell. I don’t know whose bodily fluids are in those beds.”

“It’s been a while since anything rowdy happened here, but I can promise you, there’s way more DNA embedded in that couch you slept face down on. You can go now, Lovett. I texted Colt’s mom two seconds ago. She’s coming to get him, so we don’t need you anymore.”

“Oh, I’ll gladly leave, don’t you worry. But we’re going to have a chat first, you and I.”

“I’m really not in the mood to chew the fa—HEY!”

I grab him by the lapels of his suit jacket, shoving him against the counter. I will never forget the expression on his face—shock, mixed with nausea and a heaping dose of rage. He swipes my hands away, livid, ready to lay into me, but I grab him again, stepping in close. “I know you care about her. I know you love her and want to protect her. I know I’m young, and English, and I’ve led a very privileged life, but be under no illusions, Michael. I am not a weak, arrogant little pushover. I am not a fucking punching bag that you can humiliate and mistreat to make me feel small. I’m not going anywhere. Carrie’s more precious to me than my own fucking life. I love her so much that it’s actually sent me a little mad, which is why I’m going to do something I know to be really fucking stupid right now, and I’m going to threaten you. If you fuck with me again, or try to make a fool

of me, or you try to come between Carrie and me, or you undermine me in any way in front of her, I will fucking *hurt* you. Do you understand?”

Michael doesn't make a peep. His hands are locked around my wrists, as if he's about to yank them off him again, but he just stands there, looking at me. After a long, tense beat, he blinks. “All right. I can respect that. Won't happen again,” he says. Dropping his hands, he claps me on the shoulder. “Now, please, dear *god*, make some coffee before you leave. I feel like I'm about to *die*.”

“I'll make the coffee.”

I whip around, a shock wave of adrenalin rocking me to my nerve endings. I didn't hear anyone come in. Neither did Michael; he looks like he just about jumped out of his skin, too. A woman stands in the doorway to the kitchen. Maybe thirty or so. Her long brunette hair is the same color as Colt's. The shape of their noses are similar, but where the little boy's eyes are dark, the woman's are blue. She's beautiful, there's no denying that. And she's...*familiar*?

“Wait. I know you.” I step away from Michael, facing her properly, taking her in. “You...You're...” Why can't I put my finger on it? I swear I've seen this woman before.

“I'm Sloane,” she says, smiling warmly, offering me her hand as she enters the kitchen. She's really fucking *tall*. I can smell the fresh suede of her jacket as we shake. “I think we may have come across each other in a hospital once upon a time. I'm here to collect my very precocious son.”

“Damn. You got here quick.”

She laughs. “Oh, I slept next door last night. We own that apartment, too.”

“I'm sorry, *what*?” The glare I send Michael's way could wilt flowers. I could be mistaken, but the fucker doesn't look the slightest bit remorseful as he goes back to trying to find the coffee.

“You didn’t seriously think we’d leave such precious cargo in your care, did you?” he asks. “Half of Seattle would pay ‘fuck-you’ money for that kid. There were two armed guards by the elevators all night. Plus one outside the door. And yeah, his mom was next-door.”

“Why the *hell* would you make me come here to babysit, then!”

Michael sags with relief, hands braced against the kitchen counter, when he finds a box of Keurig pods. “We wanted to see if you’d play ball,” he says simply.

Sloane shoves him aside, taking custody of the coffee pods, wrinkling her nose when she gets close to him. “You reek like a brewery. Where’s my husband-to-be? Please tell me he didn’t get arrested in Mexico.”

“He was already snoring in your bed, last I saw of him.”

“Thank God. Go and take a shower. I’m getting drunk just standing next to you. Caffeine will be waiting for you by the time you’re out.”

“Lifesaver.” Michael groans as he shuffles out of the kitchen, not sparing me another glance.

“I’m sorry they did that to you,” Sloane says, watching me as she puts the pods back in the cupboard and goes about filling a larger French press with a heaped amount of coffee grounds that she gets from the freezer. “They’re overly cautious. And, let’s face it, they like hazing the younger guys sometimes.”

What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? I can’t get mad at *her*, but I really am mad.

“Michael and Zeth find themselves involved in some...*interesting* situations sometimes. I think they just wanted to know if they could count on you in the future. If they needed you. Y’know?”

Her tone is so even. Calming. I find the ire that was choking me only a second ago is already abating. “I guess,” I answer stiffly. “I wish they’d gone about their interview process differently, though. I have an audition tomorrow. I was supposed to spend the night practicing.”

“Oh? What kind of audition? Acting? Music?” Sloane fills the kettle from the tap and sets it on the stove to boil.

“Music. I play piano. But this is a composition audition. For the Seattle Summer Composition Conservatory. The guy who’s running it next year is a genius. I’ll never get the chance to study under him again. So, yeah. The pressure’s on. I should have been practicing all night...” My mouth keeps moving, words spewing out. Why the fuck do I feel so compelled to tell this person my entire life story? The way she nods as she listens, asking questions, makes me think she’s really interested in what I’m saying, though.

I tell her everything about the conservatory. I gripe about having to go to Michael’s dumb restaurant lunch *and* opening dinner today. I stop griping very quickly once Michael returns to the kitchen, towel wrapped around his waist. He ignores both of us, sipping on his coffee while we carry on our conversation, until—

“Merchant? The guy’s name is Merchant?”

I glance over at him. “Yeah. Theo. He was originally going to become a concert cellist, but now he’s moving into medicine.”

Michael nods. “He did a rotation at St. Peter’s. Zee checked him out when he started.”

“Jesus. So overprotective,” Sloane says, but with a level of affection that shows she’s not annoyed. “Yeah, I’ve met him. Weird, huh? Our whole world seems to be six degrees of separation. He’s very smart. Gonna be a... neurologist? At least I *think* that’s what he said he wanted to specialize in. Amazing that he’s gonna teach this conservatory.”

“Yeah. It’s going to be a one-off. *If I’d been able to work through my piece last night, I might have stood a chance of scoring the position.*” I lay on the annoyance thick, so Michael knows I’m still pissed at having my evening commandeered.

“You want a spot on the conservatory?” Michael asks, cradling his coffee like it’s as precious as a newborn baby.

“Hell yes, I do.”

“And you’d be back here in Seattle for a while?”

“At least three months.”

“Carrie would be here, too?”

God, could he be any more transparent? “That’s right. She would. Shame my chances are about one in a thousand now.”

Michael smiles a smile that can only be classified as cryptic. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll get the spot.”

“There are world-class musicians flying in from Switzerland, and Germany, and Austral—”

He traipses out of the kitchen, chuckling to himself. “Like I said, Lovett. I’m sure you’ll get the spot.”

PRESLEY

THEY CALL IT QUICKENING—THE moment when you feel your baby move inside you for the first time. I was standing outside the Dunwoodie CVS, soaked by the rain, my hair plastered to my skull, when it happened to me. Almost a month early, the unsettling, strange fluttering sensation had taken me by surprise, a whirlwind of tiny down feathers brushing up against my insides.

My phone had lit up in my hand, a signal flare in the dark, Pax's name flashing across the screen, and for a split second, the irony of the whole situation had been too much to take; I'd laughed like a mad woman at the ridiculousness of it all.

How long did I chase Pax Davis? How many years did I fantasize about him being mine? And then the moment the fates decide to bring us together, they followed up and threw *this* curveball at us.

A child.

His child.

And no way in hell for the situation to work, no matter how hard I tried to puzzle it out or how many different angles I squinted at it from. I'd held my hand over my stomach, marveling and afraid at what I'd tried to pretend wasn't happening inside of me, and I'd wept. Wept for the life I thought I was going to have, moving away to college. Wept for the life I'd wanted to

share with Pax. And I'd wept for the life that had accidentally taken root inside of me, quietly arriving without invitation, filling me with so many conflicting emotions and feelings, that I didn't even know myself anymore.

Today, I stand outside a different CVS, my hand placed protectively over my stomach as the baby performs somersaults, and I am no better off. I'm still so lost. So confused. So scared. The look on Pax's face when he'd seen my stomach...

It's snowing today. No rain. Fat, elaborate snowflakes eddy on the air, floating down to land in my shoulders and the thick woolen sleeves of my black peacoat. In the parking lot, the tires of all the Tacomas and F150s have created a soupy swamp full of gravel and dirt—a gambit of deep puddles that must be navigated carefully in order to make it inside the building with dry socks intact. The cold feels electric, a living force in the air. It makes me hiss, my nervous system revolting as I gingerly pick out a pathway toward the covered entrance to the store.

For the seventh time this morning, my phone explodes to life in my pocket, signaling that Pax is trying to reach me yet again. I don't even check to confirm that it's him. I can't stand the thought of seeing those three letters arranged on the screen.

The look on his face.

Fuck!

The look on his face.

My eyes burn ferociously, my vision swimming. The cold, I tell myself. So bitter and biting that even the grown men with grizzly beards jogging into the pharmacy have tears streaming down their faces. I'm aware that my tears have nothing to do with the cold. I'm lying to myself, yes, but the lie is the only thing keeping me together right now. If I shoulder the truth, the floodgates will open, and I'll be *that* girl, sobbing outside of a fucking CVS in public.

When my phone starts ringing again, I yank it out of my pocket, ready to hurl it into the trash can beside me, but...shit. No, it isn't Pax. It's Elodie. I should have realized she'd call.

"Hello?"

"I'm pulling up now," my friend says. The moment I hear her voice, I feel the cracks widen. By the time I see the black SUV drawing up in front of the building, Elodie sitting behind the steering wheel, any composure I've maintained since I found out I was pregnant has completely dissolved. Bawling, wracked with sobs, I clamber into the passenger seat, my pulse skipping all over the place. I cover my face with my hands, unable to even look at her.

"Ahhh, Pres," she murmurs. "It's gonna be okay. Come on. Let's go somewhere we can talk. Is there a café or something around here that you —"

"Can we just go and park somewhere? I don't think I can face a big crowd." I sniff, pulling myself together, dashing my tears away with the backs of my hands.

"Yeah, for sure." She rubs my shoulder, giving the top of my arm a reassuring squeeze. We're quiet as she drives around for ten minutes; I don't even pay attention to where she's going. I spend every second reining in my rioting emotions, steeling myself so that I'll be able to talk calmly. Eventually, we pull over down a wide suburban street. To our left, huge cabin-style homes line up steep salted driveways, set back from the road. On our right, a vast blanket of deep, virgin snow stretches on for as far as the eye can see. In the spring and summertime, this is a public park with a playground and running trails that stretch on for miles, eventually winding up in Steele Creek. I haven't seen it first-hand. Only images online. In a weird, disassociated way, I've been looking forward to the weather change, and exploring where all of those trails led, but now...

Fuck, now I don't know anything.

I turn and give Elodie a watery smile. “Well, this is pretty stupid, isn’t it?” I laugh, even though I think it’d be more appropriate to start crying again.

“Hey. Don’t say that. It’s not stupid. It’s just...” There’s no mistaking the sympathy on her face.

“Complicated?” I suggest. “Confusing? Terrifying?”

“Yeah, I bet it’s all of those things.” She takes my hand, and for the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I feel like I’m not alone anymore. A fresh hail of tears washes over me.

“I’m sorry. I should—I should have told you,” I hiccup. “I just—I didn’t know what to—do—and—I was so scared—and—”

She leans across the car and draws me to her, pulling me into a tight, if slightly awkward, hug. “Shhh. It’s okay. It’s all right. It’s all gonna be all right.” She doesn’t say anything else until I’ve cried myself out and I’m calm again. “Give me a second. I just need to let Wren know we’re okay.” She fires off a quick text, then turns her attention back to me. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

I blow out a breath of laughter. “I’m pretty sure you can figure out the genesis of this story, Elodie. Even Pax Davis’s swimmers have problems with authority. If someone or something tells them they shouldn’t do something, they’re damn well gonna do it. Even the pill can’t prevent them from doing whatever they set their minds to.”

Elodie wrinkles her nose. “If we could not talk about Pax’s swimmers, that would be *great*.”

The sigh that leaves my body feels like a breath I’ve been holding for months. So much tension leaves with it. Shaking my head, I look out of the window at the huge field of snow. In the distance, birds launch from a stand of evergreens, darting upward into the bone-white sky. “I don’t know,” I say softly. “I took my birth control religiously. I never missed a single day. I wasn’t taking breaks. I didn’t wanna have a period. As soon as I came up

here and I knew I wasn't gonna see Pax for a while, I *did* stop so I could give my body a break. I figured my period would come in right away, but..." I shrug. "Obviously it didn't. That was a month ago.

"And...you just didn't feel like telling anyone? You didn't want to tell me or Carrie? You didn't want to tell *Pax*?"

I face her again. It's clear that she's confused by all of this—the decision that I made to keep quiet. I don't expect her to understand. How could she? "I know you guys love me. I know Pax loves me, too. But...I don't know. I tried to pick up the phone so many times. I wanted to talk to him about it, but every time I tried, the words just wouldn't come. I kept imagining how angry he was gonna be. How cold. How annoyed."

"*Pres.*" There's a chiding tone to Elodie's words. "You couldn't know that he'd feel that way. He—"

"Come on, E. This is *Pax Davis* we're talking about. The guy is an unexploded IED. It's a miracle he even wanted to date me in the first place. And then I'm suddenly *pregnant*? There's no way he'd be anything other than pissed—"

Clunk.

"Shit! Oh my god! Oh my—" The rear driver's side door of the SUV opens. I nearly jump out of my damn skin. Suddenly, Pax is climbing into the back seat.

Pax.

He's here, wearing a black Parka, a freshly shaved head, and a look on his face so grim that my blood turns to ice. I spin on Elodie, her betrayal stealing my breath right out of my lungs. "What did you do! I told you I couldn't see him! You *promised* me!"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm so sorry!" The look of devastation on her face is unmistakable. "I know, I shouldn't have told him where we were, but this...you can't just ignore this, Pres. You can't ignore him. You two need to talk this through—"

“Can we have a moment alone, please, Elodie?” Pax is quiet, calm, but his stiff, monotone words cut through the tension inside the car like a scythe. Wide-eyed and guilty as hell, Elodie shoots me an apologetic look, giving my hand another firm squeeze. “I *am* sorry, Pres. But this is for the best, I promise. You’ll feel better once the two of you have ironed everything out. I’m gonna go for a walk or something. You’ll be okay?”

“I’m not a fucking monster,” Pax snaps. “What do you think I’m gonna do, *eat* her?”

“I’m not saying you are! I’m just—”

“Stop. The two of you, just stop.” To Elodie, I say: “It’s fine. Just go.”

She is the epitome of a hangdog as she climbs out of the car. “Call me if you need anything.” When she’s gone, I swivel in my seat to face forward, too nervous to even glance at the boy sitting in the back seat. My heart is in tatters. He’s so close. I could reach back there and touch him if I wanted to. I’ve thought about it. Dreamed about it. Missed him, needed him so badly that his absence has been like the blade of a knife carving into my very soul. But if I reached back there...and he pulled away? It would all be over. Gone forever. That’s probably already the case, but I’m not ready to face that fact just yet.

“You’re not my favorite person right now, Firebrand,” Pax whispers.

A bitter taste floods my mouth: sadness and regret. “Oh, I can imagine.”

“Why haven’t you answered my calls?”

I work my jaw, clenching my hands into fists in my lap.

“Chase. Answer me.”

“Because of this. Because of what I know you’re about to say to me.”

“You don’t know what I’m about to say. You don’t know *anything*.”

“I’m not fucking ready for a kid, Chase,” I say, mimicking his deep tone. “You did this on purpose, Chase. I want you to get rid of it, Chase. I *hate* children, Chase. I’d rather die than have to take on a squalling, screaming brat—”

“Stop.”

I do stop. The anger in his voice strikes me dumb. A hot, miserable sob works its way up my throat and bursts out of my mouth; the sound of it rattles around the inside of the SUV.

“You do not get to say *any* of that to me,” Pax hisses.

“What am I supposed to say, then? Am I supposed to beg you to understand this? Am I supposed to convince you that it’s all gonna be fine, and it’s not gonna be hard? Am I supposed to guilt you into staying with me, when I know that’s not what you want?”

“How? *How* do you know that?” He sits still. Even facing forward, studiously refusing to look at him, I can tell that he’s frozen in place, locked up tight, rigid as a statue. I *feel* his stillness, and it’s like an oppressive weight, crushing me down into my seat.

“Seems to me you’ve had a decent amount of time to process this situation and fabricate some really interesting outcomes for yourself. I only found out about this yesterday, so yeah, I’m still processing over here. But you could have the decency of apprising me of the fact that I’m going to be a father before you decide how I’m actually going to take it.”

“Of course I knew how you were going to take it! I knew you were going to lose your shit. You aren’t the type of guy who—”

“YOU HAVEN’T EVEN GIVEN ME A CHANCE!” he roars, punching the back of the headrest in front of him. “You haven’t even given me a chance. You’ve made all of these decisions about who I am and who I get to be. What the fuck? Why would you *do* that?”

“I know you. You’re free, and you don’t want to be tied down by responsibility, and you’re angry, and you hate *your* parents, and—and you *hate* responsibility—”

“And I *love* you! Didn’t you factor that into all of these shitty fantasies you created for yourself, where I was an asshole who treated you like crap

and walked away from you and my kid? Did it mean nothing to you when I told you that I was in love with you? Seriously?”

“No! Of *course* it meant something—”

“Can’t have meant fucking much at all if you seriously couldn’t even be bothered to tell me that you were fucking *pregnant*—”

“You’re not the type of guy who likes having emotional conversations! The walls you build around yourself are ridiculous, Pax. You closed yourself off years ago. You won’t let anybody in. How was I supposed to talk to you—”

“I LET YOU IN!” He roars. “I closed myself off because I don’t like getting fucking *hurt*, Chase! I protected myself for as long as I could. I threw up a shield, and I shut people out, and I held everybody at arm’s length. Yes, I fucking did that, and it worked. It protected me. And then you came along and made me want to let someone in at last. I made myself fucking vulnerable by letting *you* in. I gave you the means and the opportunity to hurt me, and I trusted that you wouldn’t. Do you have *any* idea what that cost me? And the first thing you do is fucking *destroy* me.”

“Pax...” I’m withering inside. Dying. What am I supposed to say? I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel. I’m so afraid that I can’t think straight around the panic and the pain.

“How far along are you?” he demands.

“Fourteen weeks.”

“So what? You were just going to ignore me until you gave fucking birth? Is that it? You were gonna ghost me and have my fucking kid in secret, and expect me not to come up here to find out what the fuck was going on?”

“No. I was—” I screw my eyes shut, shaking my head. “I wasn’t going to do that. I don’t know how I was gonna handle it. I needed more time. I just couldn’t face how badly you were going to react, and—”

“YOU DIDN’T EVEN GIVE ME A CHANCE!” he explodes again, the same words ripping out of him.

“Well, I don’t need to now, do I?” I fire back. The anger clawing at me isn’t real. I’m so confused, but this—shouting at him, screaming—feels like wrestling back control of the madness somehow.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I’ve already made up my mind. You don’t need to be the bigger man, stepping in to martyr your youth for some girl you met at high school and a kid you never wanted. I won’t do that to you. You don’t have to worry about any of it, okay? I’ve made up my mind. I’m not keeping it. By this time next week, this won’t even be an issue anymore. I can get on with my classes. You can go back to Virginia and continue with your internship with Cross, and you won’t even have to spare a thought for me again, all right? That’ll be the end of it.”

I’ve been so good at not looking at him up until now, but I can’t help myself. I risk a glance in the rearview mirror, and what I see there knocks the wind out of me. Pax’s steel-grey eyes meet mine, our gazes locking. He’s pale as a ghost, whiter than the fresh sheet of snow that covers the park. He’s so still, stiff, rigid as a board, a cold fury rolling off him in potent waves. “Just like that then?” he says.

“Yes.”

“No conversation? No fucking discussion?”

“I’m saving you the hassle.” God, I want to die. I want the ground to open up and eat me up.

“That’s what you want?” Pax says numbly.

“What do *you* think? I can’t imagine a fate worse than forcing you into caring for a child you never fucking wanted. I won’t be the girl who trapped the notorious Pax Davis—”

The car door wrenches open, cutting me off. “Fuck you, Presley.” It slams closed after him, the sound so very final. Like a gunshot. Like a

period. Like an end.

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WREN

ELODIE'S A LOUD CREATURE. Headstrong and sure-footed. She wasn't like that when I first met her. Oh, no. I saw the rough sketch of the woman she would be, beneath the uncertainty and the wide-eyed cautiousness of a new student, thrust into a strange and unfamiliar world. Beneath the troubled aura that shrouded her like a veil, courtesy of her father's vile mistreatment, there was a spark that promised to transform into an inferno of confidence and self-assuredness under the right circumstances. She was just a suggestion of herself then. A whisper of potential. The second I saw the truth of her, waiting timidly to step forward into the light, I determined that *I* would be the one to carry her out of the darkness. And she hadn't fucking needed me.

Strong women with piss and vinegar for blood never need a *guy* to make things right for them. I'd stroked my ego, believing that she was flourishing under my protection last year at Wolf Hall, but let's face it. All Elodie needed was time. To adjust. To heal. To process. Recover. Maybe I gave her some breathing room to accomplish those things, but she would have gotten there all by herself, no doubt about it.

She became fire.

I became a shadow, made dim by the light she cast off. And I *liked* it. I've relished bathing in the brilliant glow of her for months. I've become so

accustomed to that glow that I'm hyperaware of its absence right now, sitting here at the only nice restaurant in town, because Elodie Stillwater is sad and, try as I might, there's nothing I can do to make it better.

I sit opposite her, acid eating at the back of my throat. Do I care that this whole Pax/Presley situation is a mess? Yeah, I care. Of course I do. Pax is my friend. I've got his back, no matter what. I cannot—*will* not—overlook the fact that the fallout from the Davis/Chase debacle is hurting my girlfriend's heart, though. Spearing a piece of steak with my fork, I flare my nostrils, working hard to overlook the fact that the girl I love looks like she's about to burst into tears during dinner.

"I could castrate him. Would that help?"

Elodie jerks, eyes snapping to me, pulling in a sharp intake of breath. She was a million miles away a second ago; my offer has brought her screaming back to the here and now, and I honestly can't tell if she's happy about it. A small crease mars her brow. She laughs quietly, shaking her head. "I don't think that'll solve the problem," she muses. "Maybe if you'd done it back at the start of summer..." She trails off, moving the food around her plate, distracted. She insisted we come here for dinner. That, even though we're in a different state and far away from our new apartment, we should still have time together. A date, to decompress and enjoy a meal in each other's company. We should have stayed at the hotel, though. Her concern for Presley is a cinder block shackled to her ankles, and no amount of coaxing can free her of it.

"She's gonna be okay," I say:

Elodie looks up, exhaustion sketched into her features. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that I am one fucked up individual. How is it that I find her more beautiful than ever when she's haunted like this? I'd rather die than let her suffer. But fuck me if she isn't *seriously* fucking beautiful right now. I'll hit up a therapist at some point. But for now, I'll revel in my sickness. I want to fuck her so bad. It doesn't help that, without my

knowledge, she took the razorblade I left on the nightstand the other night and turned it into a choker necklace with the help of a little waxed black cord. The clear guard safely protects her skin from the edge of the blade. The sight of it there, resting against her pale, smooth skin, is *doing* something to me.

My hands around her throat.

Her breath catching beneath my palms.

Her pupils dilating.

Her tongue, darting out to wet her bottom lip.

Her nipples, peaked, straining against raw silk...

God, I need her.

The other diners in this (admittedly decent) restaurant do not know how lucky they are. I could surrender to my depravity. I could grab the leg of her chair and pull her to me, around this table. I'd have my fingers teasing her pussy beneath the snowy-white tablecloth in ten seconds flat if I thought that Little E wouldn't balk at the impropriety of it.

Fuck, but she's so goddamn breathtaking. Her hair, braided into a crown on the top of her head, is purposefully disheveled. Dark strands have slipped free, curling against her bare, outrageously distracting neck. Her eyes are bright and alert, turned a mournful silver-grey. The little black dress she brought with her to Fairbanks is a little too light for this cold weather. I bundled her up in my thick wool jacket for the ten-minute walk from the hotel, and the restaurant itself is pleasantly warm, but the alabaster skin of Elodie's shoulders and down her bare arms is stippled with goosebumps.

I take a sip from the Old Fashioned I ordered with our appetizers, then set the thick-cut rocks glass down, clearing my throat. "We're going home tomorrow, E."

She blinks at me like I'm speaking a foreign language. "I'm sorry?"

“We have a life in Cambridge. A new home to move into. We both have class. I have three pieces I need to finish before the end of the month—”

“Wren—”

“And we have no business being here. This is Pres and Pax’s thing—”

“I’m not just gonna leave my friend—”

“Presley’s made her decision, no? It’s Pax’s job to be there for her now, not yours. This is a really *personal* issue—”

“I know! But I can’t just disappear back home with everything so up in the air. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I know Pax’s track record is murky at best, but he’s not a *complete* shit. He’s not just going to walk away from her. Pax has got Chase—”

“But who’s got *Pax*?” Elodie’s fork clatters down onto her plate, her features conveying her dismay. “I know they’ll figure their shit out. They love each other. Of course he’s going to support her. She’ll be okay no matter what they decide to do, because she’s got him. But who’ll be here for Pax? He’s got...” Elodie casts her eyes around the restaurant, suddenly aware that the tables next to us are glancing over. She lowers her voice a touch. “He hasn’t got *anybody*, Wren. His mother is a vicious piece of work. His father’s dead. You and Dash are his family. Without you guys—”

“I promise you now, Pax does *not* want me here. He’s the most closed-off, private person I’ve ever met. He never even told me that his dad had died. Not for months. Did you know that? He doesn’t want me looking over his shoulder, sticking my nose into things that don’t concern—”

“God, you’re such an idiot sometimes.”

A small smile itches at the corner of my mouth. It isn’t that I enjoy being told that I’m an idiot by the girl that I love, but she’s so damn adorable when she’s angry.

Elodie’s left eyebrow curves into a derisive jet-black arch. “You can forget looking at me like I’m so fucking adorable when I’m angry, Wren Jacobi.”

I stop smirking.

“Pax shut people out at the academy, sure, but I don’t think he felt like he could open up to you guys. Haven’t you noticed him changing since he started dating Pres?”

I set my jaw. “No. He’s his usual, stubborn, annoying ass self.”

“Well, *I*’ve noticed. Have you forgotten that he attacked me in the forest when we started spending time together?”

I snort. “I’m sure *he* hasn’t forgotten. You put him on his ass. Wouldn’t stop griping about it for weeks.”

“Did you ever imagine that he’d be coming to me for *relationship* advice not so long after?”

“Hell no.” The idea of it sounds preposterous. Yet, I witnessed him do it with my own two eyes.

“Precisely. And he *hasn’t* sent us home yet.”

“He hasn’t stopped griping about our presence since we left Cambridge, Elodie. He told me to fuck off back home at least three times this morning. And that was *before* breakfast.”

Elodie shoots me a look that I suspect might mean she’s calling my intelligence into question. “Would the Pax you knew six months ago have tolerated you getting on the plane with him if he didn’t want you to come?”

“No,” I concede. “He would have bolted into a taxi and disappeared off into the night without even mentioning where he was going. We wouldn’t have seen him for dust.”

“Hmm.” Elodie huffs in a self-satisfied sort of manner that I think is supposed to highlight her point. “If Pax didn’t want us here, we wouldn’t be here. He’s getting better at masking what he wants and needs, but he’s also letting the chinks in his armor show, too. You just need to know where to look for them.” She lifts her napkin out of her lap and drops it down onto her plate. “You just need to be looking, is all.”

“I’m looking.”

“You’re looking to me, Wren. Always. And I adore that you are. You make me so incredibly happy. I can hardly breathe around how happy I am these days. But you need your friends, too. They’re your family. You’re *their* family. Pax needs you just as much as Presley needs me. I’m not going home yet. Not until I know both of them are okay.”

I watch her solemnly as she gets up and leaves the table. She doesn’t storm away. That isn’t Elodie’s style. She heads toward the restrooms, unhurried, head ducked down, focused on her feet. She misses the hungry looks of the men seated at the other tables, as they track her from one side of the restaurant to the other.

Little E is a fascinating creature. Even sad (and currently pissed at me), she’s magnetizing. She shines brighter than the most dazzling star in the night sky. I should be irritated by the dressing down I’ve just received—no one likes a reprimand—but my anger never spikes.

She’s magnificent.

Fucking magnificent.

I love that she’ll call me out on my shit.

Especially when she’s right.

I ASK our server to tell Elodie I’ve stepped out for a breath of fresh air.

Outside, the night sky glitters, studded with diamonds. My lungs complain bitterly against the cold as I drag in a breath, fighting the urge to pat down my jacket for a pack of smokes. I don’t have any on me. Elodie didn’t ask me to stop smoking; she didn’t have to. I caught her wrinkling her nose at the smell of smoke lingering in her hair one day and that was it: no more cancer sticks for me. I was never addicted to them. Just...

sometimes, times like right now, for instance, it's nice to light one up and enjoy the burn while you think.

"Excuse me? Got a light?"

I whip around, hands in the pockets of my jeans, irritation nipping at me; does no one understand the look of a guy who wants to be left the fuck alone for five minutes? A woman approaches, having exited the restaurant after me, and the dumb, animal part of my brain immediately points out that she's pretty. She's factory-seconds pretty, though. Discount pretty. Next to Elodie, she looks faded, out of focus—the subject of a photograph left out too long in the sun.

"Sorry. No." I turn away from her.

This obviously wasn't the reaction she expected of me. Her glossy, straight black hair is cut into a brutally sharp jaw-length bob. Her green eyes are almond-shaped and slanted like a cat; they lend themselves to the feline, predatorial air the woman puts off. The crimson dress draped over her body showcases a plunging neckline that leaves little to the imagination, the material split from the hip all the way down to the floor, displaying a staggering amount of perfectly toned leg. This woman has been told her entire life that she's a smoke show; she can't comprehend that a guy like me might ever look through her like she doesn't fucking exist.

It snowed all of last night and most of today as well; the small stretch of sidewalk in front of the restaurant is mostly dirty, compacted ice from all of the foot traffic. The owners must take their civil responsibilities very seriously; though, because there's a decent amount of grit lodged in the ice underfoot, not to mention large chunks of red rock salt that's stained the sidewalk pink. Good news for this chick, whoever she is, because she makes it to the edge of the curb to stand next to me without issue, despite her four-inch heels.

"Cold tonight." She hugs herself, rubbing her hands up and down her bare arms. "Beginning to think I should have stayed inside."

“No offense but I wish you had.” I don’t even want to be talking with this woman. Once, I would have torn off my own right arm for a shot at her, but now every second I spend communicating with this woman who is not Elodie makes my skin crawl. I throw an annoyed sideways look at her—perhaps the sight of my unimpressed expression will end this interaction—and immediately notice that the thin, gathered silk of her red dress has slipped to one side, exposing the better part of her right breast. She steps forward so that she’s closer to me—way too close for my liking—and begins rifling in her small black clutch.

She knows she’s flashing me.

She fucking knows, all right.

No way she doesn’t.

It’s colder than the seventh circle of hell out here, and her skin is pebbled with goosebumps. I huff out a breath of amused laughter, rolling my eyes heavenward, looking off in the opposite direction down the street. “How old are you?” I ask.

“Excuse me?” She purrs like she’s in heat.

“How *old* are you?”

She’s silent a moment, as if considering whether or not she’s going to answer such an impertinent question. But then, “Thirty-one. How about you?”

“I’d say by thirty-one, you should know a little better, wouldn’t you?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Her tone remains coquettish, but there’s a hint of an edge to it now. A dash of malice that is distinctly unfriendly.

“You saw me inside?” I ask.

Breast still exposed, she tilts her chin back, eyeing me defiantly. “I did.”

“Then you saw that I was sitting with someone—”

“A silly, spoiled little girl. She looked like she was throwing a temper tantrum.”

Oh really? Wow. I'm not sticking around for this. If she won't fuck off, then *I* sure as hell will. If she was a guy, I'd knock her on her ass for a comment like—

"He said you were a spoiled little boy, too. Too rich and stupid to know what was good for you. I said he was wrong, but..." she muses. "I'm beginning to see his point."

I stop dead in my tracks. The door to the restaurant lies within arm's reach. All I need to do is reach out and take the handle. Step inside from the cold. But the hairs on the back of my neck are standing to attention, and the gnawing sensation in my gut demands that I turn around and ask her what the fuck she's talking about.

"That's a very cryptic thing to say to someone you've never met before."

The cat-eyed woman puffs out her cheeks, studying her fingernails. "Oh? We've never met before?"

"I'd remember if we had."

A slow, honeyed smile spreads across her face. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"*Don't.*"

"Oh, come now, Wren. Don't be peevish. Makes you look constipated."

"There had better be a very good explanation as to how you know my name."

"What would you consider *good*?" The woman steps toward me, every part of her sinuous, suggestive, her hair brushing the tops of her shoulders as she approaches. "If I'd read about you in a fashion magazine, maybe? '*Friend and roommate of our model, Wren Jacobi is featured here wearing this season's Aviator One-Forties.*' She reels off the quote like it's nothing. Like she memorized the text without even trying. I remember the piece she's referencing—the only time I've ever been photographed and featured in a magazine. Pax had refused to do a job last summer on account of the

fact that it was Dash's birthday. We'd been out on *'The Contessa'* before Pax had sunk it, of course, and the photographer had shown up to get the images he'd needed while we were in the middle of a champagne breakfast. Both Dash and I had ended up in the photos. They'd had to credit us and send on a check for the day's work, which Pax had found hilarious.

"Or would a newspaper article be more satisfactory?" the woman in the red dress asks curiously. *"Jacobi, eighteen, is said to have found the girls in a cave on school grounds, after they went missing during a party that he was hosting further down the mountain. It's there he claims the body of Mara Bancroft was discovered. Bancroft, another student at Wolf Hall Academy, was involved in a romantic relationship with Jacobi the prior year. Some sources have speculated that the discovery of Bancroft's body by Jacobi might be more than a little coincidental, with some investigators openly suggesting that they believe Jacobi led his classmates to the cave that night—"*

My teeth groan, my jaw clenching tight. "What is this? You're a reporter?" My fingernails bite into my palms, the skin stinging there, but I can't force my fists to uncurl.

The woman's pale green eyes, almost as light as mine, dance with obvious delight. "Alessia Regan." She holds out her hand for me to shake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Wren. I've been waiting for such a very long time."

I leave her hand extended out toward me, hanging in mid-air. She pouts, tutting as she retracts it. "See. So, so spoiled." She retracts her hand. "I feel bad for you. You can't have been spanked enough as a child."

"Who do you write for?" This vile bitch will be fired by morning. She's right. I *am* rich, and I *am* spoiled. Rich enough to make one phone call and ensure no newspaper will ever hire her again. Spoiled enough to make it happen.

She titters under her breath. Finally, she makes a show of glancing down and realizing that her modesty has been compromised. She tucks her breast away, winking at me slyly. “Oops.”

“Tell me who you work for,” I growl.

“I work for Raylite, Garrison, and Regan Associates. Regan? Get it? I’m not a partner, sadly.” She pretends to pout. “My father. *He’s* the Regan in Raylite, Garrison, and Regan. But he does love me so. He gives me all the best cases.”

“*You* are an attorney?” I can’t hide my disdain.

“I know. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, does it.” She toys with her hair, winding a thick black coil of it around her index finger. “Lawyers are so stuffy and unfashionable. I don’t look like I could be a lawyer at all, right? I look like I could be....” She taps her chin with her finger, pretending to think. “An escort?” she suggests. “Model? Airhostess?”

“This is unethical.”

“I totally sat and passed the Bar, though. And despite my stunning beauty, I have a viciously sharp mind and an even sharper tongue. I’ve been known to eviscerate men with both, professionally *and* for sport. You should see me work a courtroom. It’s quite impressive. Though...” She grins at me slyly, walking her fingers up my chest, chucking me under the chin. “I suppose you will see me work a courtroom soon, won’t you.”

I slap her hand away. “*You?* You’re Fitz’s attorney?”

She bows theatrically, an excited light cavorting in her eyes, and I realize all at once that she’s quite fucking mad. “Guilty as charged. I do try and avoid that word, though. Guilty. It tends to make my clients nervous.”

“Wesley Fitzpatrick *is* guilty. Doesn’t it make you sick? To defend a murderer?”

She stands erect again, fiddling with the neckline of her dress; she’s probably ‘accidentally’ flashing me some more, but I have a read on her

now. My eyeline is staying far north of her fucking jawline. The woman, Alessia, adopts a sour twist to her mouth. “How *boring*.”

“Am I supposed to ask what you mean by that?”

“Morals,” she retorts. “I wouldn’t have thought *you’d* have any.”

“I don’t have many. But Wesley’s a degenerate piece of shit with a penchant for murdering innocent girls. I kinda have to draw the line at that.”

Alessia frowns. The lights illuminating the building behind her flickers, a brilliant white glow stuttering across her features, throwing her profile into shadow when she says, “Is that why you fucked him then? Because you didn’t like him?”

The blood in my veins becomes glacial runoff in a painful heartbeat. So, he told her about that. Of course he did. I’ve been expecting it all to come out—the ill-advised few months, two years ago, when I hate-fucked my old English teacher. He will use this information to try and undermine my testimony. If he can make a jury believe that I’m trying to besmirch his name because of some lover’s tiff, that he spurned me and I, the rejected lover, took umbrage, he might just have a chance to cast doubt in their minds.

Alessia studies me, mouth open, eyes glossed over, high on her own power as she watches me imagining all of this coming to pass.

“You aren’t going to deny it, then?” There’s the weirdest note to her voice. A tension that snaps me out of my rising fury and brings everything back into sharp focus.

“I’d be a fool to say anything at all to you.” I watch her closely to gauge her reaction. “I’m pretty sure the fact that you’re here, in Fairbanks, harassing me in the cold with your tits hanging out, could get you disbarred or something. In the very least, this is professional misconduct—”

“What about me, Wren?” she purrs. “You seem like you hate *me*. I think my chances of getting laid are improving by the second.” She tries to lie her

palm flat against my chest, but I step back, smacking her hand away for the second time.

“What the *fuck* are you trying to accomplish? Are you fucking *high* right now?”

Alessia throws back her head and laughs, the muscles in her throat flexing, her breath fogging up the night air. She sobers abruptly, her head whipping back down, eyes locking onto mine. “I just thought...I know you swing both ways. And since you’ve already slept with my fiancé...”

Fiancé?

Fucking *what*?

“No need to look so confused.” She holds up her hand, waggling her fingers. Sure enough, there, on her ring finger, sits a chunky, very noticeable silver ring. It’s far from elegant—a large crowned silver heart, cradled between two hands, one on either side of it. It’s a Claddagh, the point of the heart turned in to symbolize that the wearer has found love. “Wesley’s very proud of his Irish heritage, y’know. He told me exactly what he wanted me to buy for myself as an engagement ring.”

Did I accidentally smoke a bunch of crack before dinner? Wesley Fitzpatrick’s lawyer is not *here*, in the middle of this godforsaken Arctic wasteland, wearing something that can barely be called a dress, trying to get me to confess to having a sexual relationship with her client, while propositioning me and telling me that she’s *engaged* to him.

Just...*no*.

“It’s a shitty ring. We’re done here.” I’m successful in my attempt to move around her this time; she tries to stop me, but instead of letting her, I bulldoze straight through her. She staggers back, heels slipping in the hardpacked ice, and for a second it looks like she’s going down. I do *not* put my hand out to save her. Only sheer luck prevents the awful cunt of a woman from faceplanting on the sidewalk.

“That was very rude!” She launches a volley of colorful curse words at my back, but I’m not listening. I’ve already passed through the heavy oak door and disappeared back inside the restaurant.

Dum. Dum. Dum. Dumdumdumdum.

My heart hammers against my eardrums, a deafening tattoo, as I beeline back toward the table, where Elodie waits for me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to get angry,” she says softly.

I reach out and take her hand, gently tugging her out of her chair. “I’m not mad at you, Little E.”

“Then why are you dragging me toward the emergency exit?” she demands. “We haven’t had dessert yet. We haven’t even paid!”

There was once a time when I might have tried to sit on what just happened, so I could avoid telling her about it, or the implications of the interaction. But times have changed, and I’m not the guy I used to be. No matter how fucked up the situation is, I will always tell Elodie the truth.

Doesn’t mean I have to like it.

Doesn’t mean it’s going to be fun.

I brace myself as I suck in a deep breath, wondering where the hell I’m supposed to begin.

Outside, Alessia Regan is nowhere to be seen, thank God. I open the car door for Elodie, clipping her seatbelt for her, and then I make my way around the rental and climb in the driver’s side. I’ve almost figured out how to explain what just went down in front of the restaurant, but in the time it took me to walk around the car, Elodie’s received a text message. She groans, rubbing her forehead with the tips of her fingers, staring at her phone’s screen.

“What? What is it?” Whatever it is, it can’t be worse than my run-in with Fitz’s lawyer.

“Presley,” Elodie sighs. “Her dad’s told her to go back to Mountain Lakes. She has a flight back to New Hampshire in the morning.”

“Jesus wept. You mean to tell me we flew all the way to fucking Alaska and now Presley’s *leaving* again? Has she told Pax?”

“She said she did, yes. Has he said anything to you about it?”

I don’t make a habit of reading my messages when I’m on a date, so I have no idea if Pax has been blowing me up about this. When I open up my texts, I find that there *is* one message from him.

PAX: *She’s going back to NH. I’m gonna need to use the house for a couple of days. That cool?*

I ANSWER IMMEDIATELY.

ME: *Sure.*

PAX: *Do NOT come!*

“WHAT DID HE SAY?” Elodie asks.

“He said he’s going back there, too. That he wants to use the house for a couple of days. And then he told me very emphatically not to come.”

“If you even think about suggesting we go back to Cambri—”

“Don’t worry, Stillwater. I’ve learned my lesson. We are so going. If I let Pax stay at the house unattended, he’ll probably burn the place down to the ground.”

CARRIE

LUNCH GOES OFF WITHOUT A HITCH. No one gets stabbed with a butter knife. Miraculously, no fists are thrown, either. Dash spends three hours practicing his piece over and over again at the hotel, and before we know it, it's time to go over for the restaurant's opening dinner. The restaurant isn't what I'd call...*homey*. The lighting leaves something to be desired. The simple fixtures and fittings are very clean-lined. Surgical, almost. Everything is sharp lines and right angles. The artwork on the walls feels severe. Even the chairs are made of bare, unfinished wood, too shallow to properly perch an ass on comfortably.

A strange buzzing sound—irritating, tinnitus-like—pervades the space, which is large and drafty. With the right staff on deck, you could manage two or three hundred covers here on any given night of the week. I don't think Michael will have a fight on his hands for a reservation, though. With the undesirable location of the restaurant (right by the commercial port) and the bizarre, cold vibe when you walk through the doors of '*Alba*,' I'm going to be very surprised if Michael's first venture as a restaurateur isn't very short-lived.

"What do you think?" Sliding his hands into his pockets, he seems rather pleased. He gazes affectionately up at the stark white ceiling as if this

place reminds him of a trattoria in Florence, not a prison cell in Alcatraz. “The kitchen’s a work of art,” he announces proudly.

Dash dressed in ripped jeans and an oversized black t-shirt in honor of today’s momentous unveiling; I tried to coerce him into a suit, but he point-blank refused. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was actually *trying* to offend Michael. My boyfriend spins around in a circle, mouth open a fraction, a frown marring his handsome features. Once he’s completed a full three-sixty spin, and then another one for good measure, clears his throat and says, “It’s fucking horrible.”

“*DASH!*”

“What? Am I supposed to lie? I’ve been inside more welcoming morgues.”

“I thought the English were supposed to be *polite*.”

Dash gives me a pointed look. “Manners are for the great unwashed masses, *Stella*. I’m a Lord. The blunter I am, the more of an old-blooded eccentric I appear. Men of title in my position are encouraged to be total cunts whenever the opportunity arises.”

“That might be the case while navigating bullshit social environments back in London, but this is Michael’s restaurant. He’s family. He’s—”

“Glad,” Michael says, cutting in. “It *is* fucking horrible. The ambiance is off-kilter, one hundred percent. And wait ’til you try the food. It’s the blandest thing you’ll ever put in your mouth.” He beams as he speaks—you’d think unpalatable food and a hostile eating environment were *exactly* what he was going for. Dash doesn’t seem surprised by Michael’s attitude at all. Me, on the other hand?

“Sorry. You’re gonna have to explain. I don’t get it.”

“I have an income that I can’t declare to the IRS,” Michael states simply. “But I want to *buy* things, so I need a reasonable explanation as to where all of my cash comes from. A restaurant’s a great front to feed cash back into circulation. Why do you think the Italians all have restaurants?”

I gape at him. “Money laundering? You’re using this place to *launder money*?”

Michael chucks me under the chin, giving me the same look a father might give a four-year-old right before explaining something difficult. “You’re not in high school anymore, Carrie. And I’m not one to keep secrets from the important people in my life. I don’t like to say that term out loud. But yeah. I launder a fuck-load of money. Most of the time, it’s physically *and* metaphorically covered in blood. That’s just how it goes.”

“Awesome.”

“So, you make the place miserable. People hate the vibe and the food. No one comes. You run fake transactions through as cash, pretending you’re doing a roaring trade, and then you get to deposit your dirty cash at the bank. Meanwhile, the inventory you buy for the kitchens is used as groceries for you and your cohorts,” Dash muses.

Michael doesn’t even scowl when he sends a nod Dash’s way. He actually looks like he’s—oh my god, he’s *smiling* at him! “Very astute.”

I stand between the two men, holding my hands up. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Whatever this is, we can work it out.”

Michael arches an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth ticking even further northward. “What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re smiling. You just paid my boyfriend a compliment. Something’s *very* wrong. My money’s on you trying to lull me into a false sense of security. You’re planning on killing him, aren’t you?”

Behind me, Dash chuckles. “Jesus, Mendoza. He’s just being friendly. We’re friends now.”

There’s a hard flash in Michael’s ice-blue eyes—I don’t think he *likes* the accusation per se—but he doesn’t deny it. “Dash and I have come to an accord,” he says. “I promise, I won’t be trying to murder him any time soon. Unless he does something to hurt you, that is. Naturally.”

“Naturally,” mirrors Dash, as if this is a given.

I blink, trying to parse this information, but my mind feels like it's backfiring. "I do not like this one bit."

"Why not?" Michael squints at a small black remote in his hands, pointing it upward, into a corner, mashing at one of the buttons. "I figured you'd be pleased."

"I don't trust either of you to be nice to the other. Not properly."

Giving up on whatever he was trying to accomplish, Michael sets the remote down on the closest table, turning his attention to me. "Don't know what to tell you, Carrie. You love the spoiled blond English boy, right?"

"Hey!" Dash hurls an irritated look over his shoulder. "Fuck you, man." He doesn't mean it, though. If he did, he wouldn't immediately turn back around to resume his perusing the books on the shelf behind the host's stand.

"Well?" prompts Michael.

"Of course I love him. You know I do."

"And you love me too, right?"

"Yes!"

"Then it makes sense that Lovett and I cultivate peace. It's the only way to make sure we can both keep you happy."

This is a very rational, logical argument. It's the kind of attitude a normal, logical person would adopt. Neither of the men in my life are very much of either, though—this situation is starting to make my brain hurt.

"The 'guests' will be arriving soon." Michael bunnies his fingers around the word 'guests' as if it's code for something else. As if all of this is just for show and he's not expecting anybody to show at all. "We'll be eating at seven-thirty. Zeth and Sloane will arrive before then to scope the place out—"

"So we're basically having dinner with Zeth and Sloane, then?" I ask. "Just the four of us? I didn't need to wear a freaking *dress* to this thing?"

Michael eyes me, deadpan. “There’s no reason to ever dress *down* for something.” He means it, too. I’ve never seen Michael wear anything but a suit. Sure, the suit might be covered in dirt and blood sometimes, depending on what kind of day he’s having. But he wears a suit none-the-less.

Dash huffs down his nose, the corners of his mouth twitching. His eyes dance with mirth. Clearly, he knows that Michael’s comment *is* directed at him, and he’s deeply entertained by it.

“Got something you wanna say there, Lovett?” Michael takes another stab at turning on some invisible device with the remote he’s picked back up again.

“Not really.” Dash turns away from the books.

“No, please. Come on. You think I’m a fool because I take care of my appearance?”

Dash shakes his head. “I think you dress well for a job that would normally require overalls. So you can take pride in it. In yourself. And *I* dress down for my entire life because I am sick to death of being strangled by a fucking necktie. Because I’m supposed to be better than everyone else. Because I’m supposed to hold myself to a higher standard, when all I want is to be the same as everyone else. We do our own thing, you and I, so we can be comfortable in our own skin. The suits are a part of you. They’re not a part of me...and that’s all good. They’re just *clothes*, dude. Carrie looks great in a silk dress, she does. But she should have worn a bright orange t-shirt and purple overalls if it made her feel more like herself.” He tilts his head to one side, assessing Michael. “No?”

Michael sighs. He tosses Dash the remote. “See if you can figure this out. It’s making me feel stabby.” With that, he walks away, across the restaurant floor, and disappears into what I can only assume is the kitchen.

I can’t make heads nor tails of what’s going on between these two, but the interaction they just shared was weird. *Michael* was weird. Dash meets my gaze, and the two of us stare at each other. “What the *hell*?” I mutter.

My adorably English boyfriend shrugs. He looks down at the small, sleek black remote and frowns at it. “I’m not sure,” he says absently. “I think it might be for...the heating system?”

I’m about to slap his arm very hard and exclaim that I was not talking about the stupid remote, when the door behind Dash opens, allowing a blast of bitterly cold wind to rip through the restaurant. My heart seizes, expecting Michael’s boss and his girlfriend, but then a slender woman with glossy dark brown hair, styled very beautifully into a braided knot at the base of her neck, tentatively steps into the foyer. She wears a long, fashionable tan trench coat and glossy black pumps, the dress beneath the coat black and classically elegant. She turns wide, uncertain eyes on me. They’re liquid brown and warm, despite the hard edge I see in them. Her gaze skims over Dash and me, scanning behind us, as though anxiously searching for someone in particular.

“I’m—I’m sorry, I—”

I step forward. Best to iron this out right away. Michael obviously doesn’t want random women traipsing all over his fake restaurant. “Hi. Are you, uh...are you looking for someone? Lost? I’m not sure if the phones are connected yet. If you need to make a call, you can use one of our cell phones, though...”

The woman focuses on me, smiling softly. “Oh no, I—I’m not lost. At least...I don’t think I am. Is this ‘*Alba*?’”

“Sure is,” Dash says.

“Oh. Great. Um...” The woman casts another nervous glance around, taking in the décor; she wrinkles her nose a little. “I know the owner. Tonight’s opening night, right?”

“It is. Did you have a reservation?”

The woman blushes. “Oh god, no, I don’t!” She presses her palm to her brow, closing her eyes as she gently shakes her head. “How stupid of me. I should—I should have thought about that. I—uh—” The poor woman is

utterly frazzled. “And I just came in, too. Pushed ahead of everyone else like I own the damn place. Sorry, I—I just figured that Michael wouldn’t mind, and—”

Michael, is it? Huh. Who *is* this gorgeous, very tense woman, who’s come here specifically looking for my uptight guardian? A new girlfriend? Say it ain’t so. There’s no freaking way...

Dash turns on his ten-megawatt smile, rocking on the balls of his feet. “Don’t worry about cutting the line. Tonight isn’t gonna be very busy by all accounts. In fact, you might be our *only* table of the evening.”

Uncertainly, the woman looks back over her shoulder at the door she just came through, pointing her thumb in the direction of the darkened street beyond. “Really? Because...there’s a line wrapping around the building.”

Dash lets out a bark of laughter. “For real?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Take a look for yourself.”

Dash does exactly that. He opens the door and leans out into the frigid night, the light from the restaurant’s brand-new sign making the back of his blond head burn brilliant white for a second. He takes another step, leaning out farther, hand on the door, holding it open. When he turns around and lets the door fall closed behind him, he’s wearing a menacing grin.

“Only Michael could plan for a restaurant to fail, only to have it be a roaring success,” he says.

“How many people are out there?” I ask.

Dash throws his head back and laughs. “I don’t know. Too fucking many to count.”

It’s at this precise moment that Michael reemerges from the kitchen. His dark royal blue suit and his crisp white shirt makes the light mahogany of his skin pop. His vividly blue eyes catch on the woman who just let herself

into the building, and whoa! He doesn't stop walking, but he fucking *falters*?

“Pippa,” he says coolly, regaining himself. He’s as unflustered as ever by the time he reaches the three of us. “You came. Can I take your coat?”

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DASH

“ARE YOU NERVOUS? You shouldn’t be nervous. This is gonna be great. I heard you this morning, and your piece was amazing. We passed a bathroom back by the entrance if you feel like you’re gonna puke.”

I take hold of Carrie’s hand, finding her palm clammy; if anyone’s nervous, it’s *her*, not me. She wears turquoise cord pants today, with a navy-blue shirt that’s embellished with a cute little star pattern—a somber outfit in comparison to what she’d wear any other Sunday. I am wearing a white tuxedo with a black bowtie, for fuck’s sake. Turning up to a very scary criminal’s restaurant opening in civvies is one thing. Turning up to an austere, highly respected audition wearing anything less than black tie would be professional suicide. “Maybe that third cup of coffee was a mistake,” I say, gently squeezing Carrie’s hand. She nods anxiously, chewing on her bottom lip.

“I think you might be right. God. I’m sorry you were out so late last night. You didn’t say a word, but I know you wanted an early night.”

“It’s okay. Shh.” I stop walking, keeping a firm grasp on her so that she has to stop with me. “Carrie, just breathe. I got plenty of sleep. I didn’t drink. I’m not hungover. I’ve run through the piece. Everything’s great. I’m gonna go in there, and I’m gonna play, and when it’s over, we’re going to the fucking pub and I’m having a beer or five. I’ve got this. No drama.”

Does she look comforted by my reassurances? *Kiiind* of? She's at least thirty percent calmer as she stands on her tiptoes and kisses me quickly. "Sorry. I'm being crazy. This is just a big deal. I'd hate to think I'd had any hand in fucking up your chances. If you don't get it, then—"

"I keep saying it. Everything will be fine if I don't get it. This conservatory is a bonus. Icing on the cake."

"You're being very calm."

"What can I say? I'm a very calm person."

Carrie snorts under her breath, making it clear what she thinks of that statement. I tuck her hair behind her ears—it's extra curly today, fat corkscrews sticking out all over the place. *I have* been very wound up about this audition, but standing in front of Carina now, everything snaps into perspective. We're young. Healthy. We don't have to worry about money. My girlfriend is the sweetest, sexiest, most amazing astronomer on the face of *this* planet, at least. I'm basically the luckiest guy alive. Not being selected for this conservatory isn't going to change that.

I pepper the freckled bridge of Carrie's nose with three light kisses, then tip my head in the direction of Auditorium Three, where today's auditions are being held. "Shall we?"

The Pacific Northwest Institute of Contemporary Music, commonly referred to amongst local musicians as 'The Institute,' is a grand, modern building that overlooks Washington Park. Loosely modeled after the Sydney Opera House, its curved outer shell has been designed with perfect acoustics in mind. The inner space comprises two monstrously large concert halls, either of which I would be fortunate as fuck to play inside one day. Beyond the halls, the academic facility takes over. Behind closed doors, music rooms and auditoriums span as far as the eye can see.

A very straight-backed usher checks my printed invitation to audition when we reach auditorium three, remarks on my punctuality, and sees us inside. Per my invite, I'm allowed one guest to accompany me and watch

my performance, so he tells me to wait for him while he seats Carrie in the extraordinarily quiet, dimly lit theater. When he returns, he takes me down a long, carpeted hallway, then through a side door that leads backstage behind the auditorium. Seems like overkill, to have me enter from the wings, but then again, this is a highly revered school; it shouldn't be a surprise that they hold to tradition.

"Break a leg," the usher says stiffly.

"Thanks." I take a deep breath and step out from the curtains, approaching the stunning grand piano that awaits me in the middle of the stage.

This process isn't new to me. I'm used to being shown straight to an instrument and told to prepare in silence. A spotlight washes the piano in a warm, off-white light. It's so bright that I can't see a damn thing when I look out toward the theater, seating myself on the bench.

"Dashiell Lovett?" a formal female voice asks over the speaker system.

"Yes." I nod as well as speak just in case my voice is swallowed by the vast space.

"A warm welcome to you from Pacific Northwest Institute. We're honored that you've chosen to join us in this audition for the Seattle Summer Composition Conservatory. Can we confirm the name of your piece?"

"*Stellaluna*," I answer.

"Thank you, Dashiell. You may proceed. The very best of luck to you."

I've been working on this piece for over a year now. When I stretch my fingers and close my eyes, the pathway of the music greets me like an old friend reaching out for me to take its hand. My nerves leave me. I sink into a quiet, dark, safe place, a deep certainty enveloping me. And I play. The piece flows, dancing, fluctuating, rising and falling as my fingers skip over the keys of the piano. Sound floods Auditorium three, swelling,

reverberating, sweetly echoing off the walls in such a way that the music feels like it shakes the very foundations of the building.

I lose myself.

Somewhere out there in the dark, one of the most accomplished young composers of my generation is listening with his eyes closed, taking mental notes, assessing my skill as a writer, and deciding if *I* am the musician who deserves the one open spot on this course. The pressure of the moment weighs on me, but it doesn't cause me to break. It invites me to soar, to play my heart out, to imbue every note with as much passion and feeling as I can muster. And that is the easiest part, because this song is about Carrie. It's sweet like her one moment, fiery and bold just as she is the next. Love spills into every note I play; even I can recognize that the auditorium rings with it—so much love that it could make a man's heart break.

When the music ends, a part of me feels like it dies. There's always a cost to playing something so visceral; it *requires* something of you, and I gladly give it, handing over a piece of myself in exchange for the sublime storm I wrought at the keys in return. I didn't make a single mistake.

Breath coming fast and hard, I open my eyes, a cold sweat breaking out across my back. *Now*, the nerves come rushing back in. *Now*, a wave of anxiety proceeds to kick the absolute shit out of me.

Was it enough? God, was it enough? Was I enough? Shiiiiit, I think I'm gonna throw up.

The bench legs screech as I push it back so that I can stand. My legs don't feel strong enough to support me. If I collapse on this stage, I will never recover from the embarrassment. I'll fly back to England and never show my face in this country again.

Turning to face my invisible audience, I pull in a deep breath...and bow.

Clapping fills the auditorium, and a wave of shock fires up through the length of my body.

Not the sound of one man clapping, politely showing his respect for my performance.

Not the sound of my girlfriend clapping, enthusiastically showing her support.

No, this clapping is a cacophony of sound, deafening and wild. Many people clapping. Hundreds even. I don't understand.

When the house lights go up, I nearly double over, the breath knocked straight out of my lungs. This doesn't make sense. The auditorium is *full*.

Faces smile back at me from the rows and rows of seats. Men and women, all strangers, get to their feet, and they clap for *me*—a resounding standing ovation for me, as I stand astonished, taking them all in.

Where's Carrie? Where the *hell* is Carina Mendoza? I can't—I can't fucking *see* her.

"Congratulations, Dashiell. A magnificent performance," the warm female voice says over the P.A. system. "I think we can all agree, a truly remarkable piece. The P.N.W. Institute thanks you for sharing your music with us. You may now exit the stage."

My legs are twin rubber bands as I walk as calmly as possible off stage right and descend the stairs there. The same usher that escorted me through back-of-house is waiting for me, a kind but professional smile on his lined face. He gestures toward the aisle that leads toward the back exits. I follow after him, the sound of applause still ringing in my ears. Rather than showing me out of the auditorium altogether, the usher stops about halfway up the stairs, and I realize that he's showing me to a seat...right next to my girlfriend.

"That was incredible. Fucking *incredible*, Dash!" Carrie throws her arms around my neck the moment I sit down next to her, her eyes shining bright with tears.

"Went all right, I think," I say briskly.

“You’re mad.” Carrie beams. “I’ve never been so proud in my entire life. You were amazing.”

“Thank you.”

She’s about to speak again, but a hush falls over the crowd, and the house lights dip as a dark figure makes its way down the opposite aisle and starts to climb the stairs up onto stage.

A spotlight immediately finds the silhouetted figure and narrows to a sharp focus, encapsulating the young guy dressed in a black dress shirt and jeans in a perfect circle of white light. Dark-haired and tall, he shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot as he holds a microphone up and speaks. “Firstly, I must apologize to our last composer,” he says. “On his application, he neglected to include his title. He is, in fact, *Lord* Dashiell Lovett, I’ve just been informed. An esteemed member of the British royal family, and an honorable member of the London Royal Academy of Music. His achievements as a musician are many, and we are embarrassed not to have given him his due honorific before he blessed us all with that outstanding rendition of his chef-d’oeuvre, *Stellaluna*.”

Mortified, I try to slink down into my seat, but there’s nowhere to hide. I didn’t include my title on my application for good reason. And that reason is *this*.

“Thank you, Lord Lovett, for sharing with us.” The dark-haired stranger sounds terribly sincere when he offers his thanks. “As some of you may know, my name is Theo Merchant. Uh, Theodore *William* Merchant, if any of you are mad at me,” he says awkwardly. A titter of laughter travels through the crowd. “I’m here because...well, I don’t really know why I’m here a lot of the time, but I’m assured by people far smarter than me that it’s because I wrote some really catchy music once upon a time. Uhhh...” He scratches his forehead, looking down at his feet. There’s something blue wrapped around the fingertips of his left hand. What is that? *Tape*? “I want to thank you all for bestowing this remarkable honor upon me. I can think

of eighteen people here and now who are far more qualified to teach next year's conservatory, but I am so deeply proud to have been selected instead of those stuffy old bastards. No offense."

More laughter.

"It's very unconventional, inviting a guy of my age and experience to teach such an esteemed conservatory, and I can only thank all of *you*, the representatives and family members of The Institute, for placing such trust in me. And since I *am* such an unconventional choice as next year's conservatory master, it seemed only fitting that I opt for an unconventional audition process for next year's placement, too. Under normal circumstances, the burden of selecting the perfect student to study beneath me would have fallen on my own shoulders, but coward that I am, I opted to invite you all here to do it for me.

"Later this evening, you will receive an email asking you to reply with your vote for the composer's understudy position. We're aware that emails get lost or forgotten, but please, we implore you, reply and let us know who you would love to see benefiting from The Institute's placement as quickly as possible. And *please*..." Theo looks up, an almost wounded expression on his face. "Vote for the piece of music that moved you most this afternoon. Don't vote for a name or a pre-existing reputation. This conservatory is about the growth and expansion of music, not merely supporting the most recognizable name. I—" His eyes search the crowd, searching, searching, searching. Eventually, he says, "In your wisdom, I know that you'll all pick the worthiest candidate. Again, thank you for coming. As soon as we've counted the votes, you'll be informed who won the slot."

Merchant hurries off the stage, running down the steps into the darkness. Courteous applause follows after him.

"What was that about?" Carrie whispers next to me. "Was he telling people not to vote for you because of your title?"

“No. That’s not what he was doing,” I reply. I answer with absolute certainty because I found an audition program at my feet while Theo Merchant was talking. I angled it in the dark so I could read what it said. And the moment I saw the name at the top of the program, I knew that I was fucked.

Piotr Richec.

Piotr *fucking* Richec.

The most lauded, most talked-about pianist in the world. Winner of every award going. Undisputed golden boy of the international music scene. Yeah, *that* Piotr Richec.

I do not stand a fucking chance.

Carrie is still oblivious to that fact, though. “Good. So, I have a question. What the fuck does the thing he said in French mean? Chef...?”

“*Chef-d’oeuvre*,” I mutter under my breath. “It means masterpiece.”

We filter out of the hall, buffeted by conversation, swept along with the crowd of people all making their way out of The Institute. I receive at least twenty claps on the back from people, smiling at me, congratulating me on my performance, thanking me for sharing my music. By the time we’re outside, I’ve already mentally shifted gears and accepted that I won’t be receiving a congratulatory email from Theo Merchant any time soon.

“Come on, Mendoza. Time to find that pub. I hear those beers calling my name.” I won’t be buying any beer. It’ll be shots of *tequila* for me. I can’t wait to get out of this fucking tuxedo—

“Hold up a second,” Carrie says.

I pivot to find her standing still, phone in her hand. She stares at the screen, eyes unblinking, mouth hanging open a little.

“What? What is it?”

She hands me her phone, shaking her head. “Elodie just texted me. Here. Take a look.”

The message on the screen reads:

Elodie: Carrie, pick up.

Elodie: Hello?

Elodie: Have you heard from Pres?

Elodie: Call me back when you can. It's urgent.

Elodie: Presley's pregnant. Things are *really* messy between her and Pax. Her dad told her to go back to New Hampshire, so we're all following her back there now. I know you're supposed to head straight back to London after Dash's audition, but any chance you feel like stopping by Mountain Lakes on your way home? Presley needs all the friends she can get. And so does Pax."

"WAIT." I hand Carrie's phone back to her and check my own. Sure enough, there are a slew of messages from Wren, and a missed call from Pax. Any disappointment over the conservatory immediately takes a backseat, replaced by shock. "What the fuck? Presley's *pregnant*?"

Carrie looks just as dumbfounded as I am. She shakes her head in disbelief, holding her cell phone to her ear as she returns Elodie's missed calls. "Hey, sorry. My phone was on silent. I—Oh my god. What the hell is happening over there? Slow down. Tell Pax to quit yelling. I can't—wait. Yes. Yes...we...can make it." As she says this, Carrie looks at me questioningly, making sure I'm okay with what she's telling Elodie.

I nod yes, of course.

“We’ll get the first flight we can. Okay. Love you, too. Bye.”

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PRESLEY

THREE DAYS LATER

“DIRTY LITTLE BITCH. Open your mouth. Open it right fucking now.”

Pain lances through my jaw; the pressure of his fingers, gouging into my skin, is wicked enough to make me cry out. I claw at his hand, trying to push him away, to get free, to wrench myself out of his grasp, so I can wriggle my way out of the bed and run, but his weight presses down on top of me. I’m pinned. Trapped. Helpless. There’s nothing I can do.

“I swear to God, if you don’t open your fucking mouth, I’m gonna break your goddamn jaw, Presley. You’ll do it right now if you know what’s good for you.”

He will do it. Normally, he wouldn’t dare hurt me so obviously—he’s smarter than that—but not now. He’s been drinking, is so drunk that he can barely speak without slurring, which means that he’s currently not very smart at all. He’ll do it just to prove to me that he can. It’ll entertain him to cause me so much pain. I don’t have a choice. I open my mouth.

A wet, fat gob of spit lands on my tongue, rolling to the back of my throat. It’s warm, and disgusting, and slimy—oh god. It’s not saliva. It’s

phlegm. He's just hawked phlegm into my mouth.

His fingers dig into my cheeks even harder, the ragged edges of his bitten nails cutting into my skin. I'd give anything to close my mouth, but I can't; he's gripping my face so tightly that he's making that impossible. "Swallow," he snarls. "Swallow what I've given you, or I'll make you regret it for the rest of your miserable fucking life."

My heart hammers.

My stomach rolls.

The wad of phlegm sits at the back of my throat, thick and viscous.

Oh god, I think I'm going to throw up. I—

The hot stream of vomit comes out of nowhere. There's no time to brace. What can I do anyway, with my arms pinned to my sides and his monstrous weight bearing down on me? I'm at his mercy. In the darkness, I can't make out his face as I puke all over myself and him, but I hear his string of vile curse words perfectly well.

"Fuck! What the fuck? God, you're disgusting. Dirty little bitch. You're gonna wish you hadn't done that. You—"

"Sweetheart?" I shake, rocking from side to side. Where is that movement coming from? Confusion clouds my mind. Is he shaking me? I can see his hands. I can—

"PRESLEY!"

Snapping awake, I sit bolt upright, gulping down air like I just surfaced after a deep free dive. My blood races, panicked, spiked with a heavy dose of adrenalin.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" a concerned voice asks into the dim dusk evening. It's my dad. From the strain in his voice, he already knows that I'm not.

My mouth is as dry as the Sahara; my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth so that my tastebuds feel stripped when I peel it free like Velcro. "What time is it?" I croak.

Three days, I've been back here. After that run-in with Pax in the car, Dad told me to come back to New Hampshire and I obeyed. Like the pathetic little coward that I am, I ran home to my father with my tail between my legs. Starting college was supposed to be an escape for me. An exciting new adventure. Certainly, it was supposed to be a reason to never come back to this godawful house in this godawful town, but in the end, when I'd needed somewhere to hide, there hadn't been anywhere else to go. I jumped from the saucepan right back into the burning Sulphur-laden fires of hell.

"Nearly five-thirty," Dad whispers. Normally, he'd already be at the restaurant, prepping the pasta for dinner service, but it's Monday today—the only night of the week the restaurant is closed. He brushes a strand of hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear. I can see a little better now that my eyes have had a moment to adjust to the waning daylight.

My father perches on the edge of the living room sofa, pale as a ghost, twin blue smudges of shadows marking the skin beneath his hollow eyes. He's lost weight since I went away to Sarah Lawrence. Even more since I told him about the baby. I rub my temple and brow, trying to soothe my tension headache away. Rather than improve, it defiantly worsens beneath my fingertips.

"When was the last time you ate, Dad?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I had a big lunch, kiddo. Burger from Sam's. They put curly fries back on the menu again last month."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Liar."

His mouth hangs open. "Why would I lie about that? Those fries were super popular. People went crazy when they took them off the men—"

"You did *not* have a burger for lunch," I say, cutting him off. "You haven't left the house all day."

"How would you know? You've been sleeping."

“A slight breeze will wake me up, Dad. I would have heard if you’d gone somewhere. Now when was the last time you ate real food?”

He scowls at me, huffing as he gets to his feet. “You’re one to talk. What have *you* had today?”

“Food is basically poison to me right now. I have an excuse.”

“Oh? And you think I don’t?”

It’s right there, on the tip of my tongue: ‘Hah! Go on, then. Hit me. What’s *your* excuse?’ But I already know what it is. His son was just convicted of multiple counts of rape and attempted murder. And the daughter he feels he failed to protect has just shown up on his doorstep, pregnant and intermittently hysterical.

Okay, life is pretty dicey for Dad, too, I guess.

“How about this?” he says. “I’ll make some soup. Both of us can manage that, right?” He pats himself down, absently looking around, as if he’s put something important down somewhere and can’t find it. He seems to realize what he’s doing and focuses his attention back on me. “Chicken okay, sweetheart?”

I nod, sinking back into the couch cushions. “Yeah, sure.” I don’t sound sure, though. I sound dubious as fuck. After the dream I just had, the thought of putting anything into my mouth and swallowing it makes me feel like rushing to bend over the toilet bowl.

“I’ll run out to the store for some supplies. Dry crackers? Bread? Anything else take your fancy? Just say the word and I’ll grab you whatever you want. How about some of those little cookies from that bakery you like on the other side of town? If I hurry, I might make it before they close.”

Fuss.

He’s done nothing but fuss for the past three days. He means well, but he’s driving me fucking crazy. It takes every scrap of patience I possess to stop myself from snapping at him. He’s just trying to help. I’ll only hurt him further if I’m short with him. “Just the crackers would be great.” I

smile weakly, placing a hand over my stomach. Dad catches the movement, his eyes flitting to the hand that now cradles my belly, and a hot, sharp bolt of acid fires up the back of my throat, making me want to puke all over again. Immediately, I shift, grabbing both my cell phone and the TV remote, one in each hand.

“Won’t be long now,” Dad says. “It’s natural that you’d do that, though. It’s normal to feel—”

I don’t want to know what it’s fucking normal to feel like. None of this is *normal*. “Gatorade,” I snap. “I’d love some blue Gatorade. *Please*.”

He looks me over, his words still hovering there in the air between us, lingering even though I did my best to reject them. It doesn’t matter what he says—this is *not* all right. It’s not okay. It’s not acceptable. “And yeah, actually, those cookies *do* sound great. If you hurry, you’ll probably get over there before they close.”

With a heavy, sad look, Dad nods, heading out of the living room and disappearing down the hall. He didn’t say a word about the nightmare I was having, even though he purposefully woke me from it. He’s being eaten alive by guilt. He knows perfectly well that I was dreaming about Jonah and all of the terrible things he did to me. My father can’t bear to hear the details of it, so he doesn’t ask. I think he’s honestly afraid to know—

The front door *snicks* closed, the sound soft as a whisper, foreboding as a clap of thunder. The house silently screams in my ears, the walls ringing with the memory of Jonah. I should *never* have come back here. I can’t even think about going up to the second floor of the house without feeling like I’m going to faint. The formal living room, with the patinaed photos of Grandpa hanging on the walls, and the heavy, slate-grey curtains, and the Art Deco lamps from Restoration Hardware, has become my hideout. I eat in here. Watch TV in here. Sleep in here. There are some things I can’t do in here, though...

I was not prepared for how often I would need to pee when I got pregnant.

I was not prepared for any part of pregnancy, full stop.

I groan as I get to my feet—not because I’m anywhere near big enough to warrant complaining. I’ve just been so lethargic since I got home—three days, sprawled out on the couch. Everything feels stiff, swollen, and achy. I use the downstairs bathroom, even though it’s cramped, and the shitty lighting makes me look ill. The other full bathrooms are all upstairs, and I can’t—I can’t—

I just can’t.

I flush when I’m done, washing my hands in the sink. Even over the noise of so much running water, I hear the front door slamming. Shaking my head, I smile ruefully as I exit the restroom. “It’s on the kitchen counter!” I call, shuffling across the hall, heading back to the living room.

“What is?”

I scream, staggering back a step, right into...fuck, fuck, *FUCK!* The ornamental elephant my grandfather bought on a trip to Africa wobbles precariously on its stand; I barely catch hold of it before it crashes to the floor.

Pax stands in the darkened hallway, a pale white ring of light cast off from the porch light haloing his head. Drawn brow. Eyes full of steel. Jaw clenched tight. Safe to say, he’s not very happy.

“My...dad’s...wallet,” I whisper pathetically. “I thought—I thought—”

“Liar,” he says coolly. “You *don’t* think. If you did, you’d never have come back *here*, of all places, thinking I wouldn’t follow.”

“Pax—”

He stalks forward, ignoring me. “Did you think I’d just go away? If you’d *thought* about your actions for even one second, you’d have realized that there isn’t a place on this earth you could go where I wouldn’t follow.”

Oh, Jesus. I've never seen such anger on his face. I step back again, panic coursing through me, even though I know he's not going to hurt me. He would never. But that doesn't mean that he won't yell at me until his voice gives out, especially after the short text I sent him, letting him know I was leaving Alaska and coming to stay with Dad.

"Pax, *please*—" My plea is only half out when he rushes for me, taking me firmly by the arms...

...and drawing me into a tight hug.

"You still haven't fucking figured it out yet, have you," he growls into my hair. "When are you going to accept that you're stuck with me? You waged the dumbest, most persistent war of attrition against my heart. You fucking *won*. This is your prize now, Chase: my undivided attention. You are my whole fucking world. You are my heart. My fucking obsession. There's no walking away from it. No return to fucking sender. You *made* me love you. Now deal with the fucking consequences.

He brims over with anger, but the way he tentatively runs his hand up and down my back, soothing me, says he isn't as mad as he's pretending to be. He's *scared*. He's waiting for me to push him away, to scream at him and tell him to get out...and I almost do. Almost. Being here, suddenly in the circle of his arms, affects me in a way I can't comprehend.

I break. Shatter. Fall apart. Without meaning to, I sink into him, burying my face into his chest. In the time it takes for my heart to shudder in my chest, I've wrapped my arms around his waist, and I've burst into a hail of tears.

Pax lets out a long, unsteady breath—relief, I think—and tightens his hold on me, drawing me even closer. It's only when our chests are totally flush that I feel the wild, unchecked thunder of his heart, pounding fretfully behind his ribcage.

"Why are you so dead set on *killing* me?" he whispers. "Why d'you have to make it hurt so bad?"

Such an abundance of pain. I honestly don't think I was supposed to hear him ask that question. He spoke so softly that I think he was talking to himself. Regret daggers me through the heart. I've been so selfish. I *should* have told him about the baby the moment I realized I was pregnant, but the news was so overwhelming that I couldn't wrap my head around the conversation. Was I supposed to tell him something that life-changing over FaceTime? The prospect of getting on a plane and showing up at his mentor's farm in Virginia, when he was supposed to be there to focus and learn? God, there's no way I could have done it.

Pax pulls back, cupping my face in his hands. His eyes might be the color of a frozen winter blizzard, but they burn with heat. "I need you to get all of your shit and put it in a bag for me. Right now, Chase."

"I can't. My dad—he'll be worried. I can't just—"

"Fuck your father. We'll leave him a note."

"He'll be worried about me. He'll—"

"Be just fine."

No excuse I can think of will be good enough. Pax will have an answer for all of them. And I'm so *tired* of making excuses. Every part of me wants to give in to him. I need him more than I've ever needed anything.

"Okay. But...I can't face traveling far right now. We can just get a hotel if you don't want to stay here—"

"We're not traveling anywhere, Chase. And we're not going to a hotel," he says resolutely. "We're going home. Back to Riot House."

WREN

THE KEY TURNS in the lock.

So surreal.

When we closed up the house and drove away at the end of summer, I didn't think we'd be back here for a long time. Long enough to forget how the place smells. How normal it feels to walk through the giant front door, like it's only been a matter of hours since we were here, not a couple of months.

We've already missed a week of college. Harvard isn't the type of school you can just no-show, but we had our assignments sent to us, crying illness. Thanksgiving is right on top of us anyway, so here we are, back at Riot House. I dump our bags just inside the door, a complicated tangle of emotions pulling taut in my chest. My relationship with this house is difficult. My father never wanted me to buy the place. I made mention of the fact that I wanted it in passing, and he'd informed me in no uncertain terms that I wouldn't be buying it. I was underage, and he was my guardian. My grandfather had only just died and left me my inheritance. General Jacobi had assumed that he could torment me, lording over me the fact that he would have control of my money until I came of age. It had come as a rude awakening to him when my grandfather's estate had named someone else the executor of my inheritance. A lawyer of *my* choosing. That had

been easily dealt with. Fifty thousand a year to let me do whatever the hell I wanted with my own money. A private agreement, made in confidence between myself and my legal counsel. Nothing on paper.

So, I'd bought the house. I don't think the General even knew I'd done it until a year later, when Wolf Hall Academy's board had written me up for throwing parties and leading my fellow students astray. They'd recommended to my father that I move back into dorms, where the beadiest of eyes could be kept on me. He'd been livid, naturally. He'd given up trying to control me by then, though. So long as I wasn't under *his* roof, it didn't matter to him which roof I was under.

Elodie sighs dreamily as she follows me inside. Her eyes rove over the familiar hallway, drinking everything in, a thoughtful look on her face.

"Weird?"

"Weird." She agrees. "Feels like we never left."

I neglect to say that it feels *right*, being back here. Our new home in Cambridge is an empty shell. No furniture. No artwork. No personality. No memories. Little E and I haven't had a chance to make it our own yet. There are so many memories absorbed into the very walls of Riot House. My own art hangs on the walls. There isn't a surface within this building that I haven't fucked Elodie Stillwater on.

This is home.

Elodie almost looks sad as she spins around, pirouetting a full three-sixty, taking everything in. "It's a shame we can't move this place, brick by brick, to Harvard. I miss it."

We are simpatico, Elodie and I. It's as if we share one mind, as well as one heart and one soul. At any given moment, I can guarantee what this beautiful raven-haired girl is thinking. We're so in alignment that we've started predicting each other's thoughts. We could conduct a full conversation and come to an agreement without even uttering a word.

Placing my hand in the small of her back, I pluck at the material of her filmy silk shirt, lifting it at the back so that I can press my palm against her warm skin. "I'm gonna make you some food later," I tell her.

"Later? What's wrong with now? I'm starving."

Burying my face into the crook of her neck, I graze my teeth over her skin, sinking them into her flesh a little. "I'm starving, too. And *my* hunger can't wait."

Can she feel the press of my hard cock against her ass? Hell yes, she can. There's something about this place. It does something to me. Having *her* here does something to me. I can't keep my hands off of Elodie, period, but inside the walls of this house, my need for her is amplified a thousand-fold. She half-laugh-half-hisses as I trail the tip of my nose up the column of her neck, breathing softly into her ear. "You're still wearing that razorblade," I growl into her skin.

"I am," she replies a little breathlessly. "I'm just being practical. What if you need it to urgently cut me out of my clothes?"

"Up those stairs right fucking now," I command. "I want you naked and on your knees in the next two minutes or you're gonna be in more trouble than you can comprehend."

She obeys.

I suck on my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood as Elodie drops her bag to the floor, along with her jacket and her phone, and starts to climb the stairs. "Good girl," I growl after her. My dark queen responds so well to praise. My dick aches painfully in my jeans at the mere thought of how her body will react soon, when I have her spread wide open for me on my king-sized bed, pussy exposed, and I have my tongue on her clit.

She will be a fucking work of art.

"*Faster, Elodie Stillwater,*" I rumble.

She knows better than to look back at me. "And what about you?"

“I’m giving you a head start. Five more seconds and I’m coming for you.”

“*Shit.*”

“One.”

She climbs the stairs faster.

“Two.”

“*Wren—*”

“Three. *Run.*”

She breaks into a full sprint as she hits the second-floor landing. Smart girl.

“Four.”

“WREN!” she squeals, hurtling around the walkway, racing for the second flight of stairs.

“Five!” I launch myself up the stairs, taking them three at a time. I was blessed with long legs for a reason; I intend on using that boon to my advantage. Elodie arrives at my bedroom on the third floor before me, but only just. She screams, laughing, as she rips the door open, hoping to slam it behind her and lock me out, but I’m too quick. I wedge my boot between the door and the jamb, blocking it open. Elodie yelps, dashing across my bedroom as fast as she can. She jumps onto the bed, grabbing one of the pillows, pulling it over her face, like the damn thing will offer her any protection from me.

“Silly, silly girl,” I whisper. “Don’t you know how hard it makes my cock when you run? I’m a hunter, Little E. It’s in my nature to chase.”

“Oh my god. Please!” Elodie’s gasped words are muffled beneath the pillow. I climb up onto the bed after her, prowling toward her. When she’s close enough, I grab her by the ankles and jerk her to me, pulling her roughly so that her legs are either side of me. In one fast, aggressive move, I tear the pillow out of her hands and hurl it across the room. Elodie’s eyes flare with what looks like nervous anticipation as she looks up at me.

“Please *what?*” I crawl further up her body, closing my hands around her wrists, pinning her arms to the mattress above her head. “What are you begging me for? Do you even fucking know?”

Her lips, so lickable, fuckable, suckable, part wide, just asking to be bitten. She tries to say something but can’t seem to scrounge up the words.

“Your body’s aching. You’re *burning*. You want release, and I’m the only one who can give it to you,” I tell her.

She nods, licking her lips, her cheeks flushing with color and heat. Her pulse rages in her veins; I can feel the *thrum, thrum, thrum* of it strobing at her wrists. She’s electric, this magical, beautiful, defiant dark-haired creature. She makes me want to paint, and scream, and fight, and fuck, and storm. I can barely contain all of the things she makes me feel inside myself. At any moment, I might crack open and the madness of my affection for her will blast out of me like rays of blinding light.

She’s *everything*.

Drinking her in, I survey her body, pinned beneath me. Her eyelids flutter, artful black strokes of ink against her porcelain pale skin. Elodie’s chest rises and falls, her breath quickening as I arch my back, rolling my hips forward, against her belly, so she can feel how hard my cock has grown in my pants.

“You’re going to come apart for me, Little E,” I tell her. “I’m going to tease you until you give yourself over to me—”

“Oh my god, please, Wren—”

“I’m going to take whatever the hell I want from you. Your pussy. Your ass. Your mouth. And you’re gonna let me, aren’t you? Hmm? You *want* me to help myself to you, don’t you? You *crave* it.”

“Yes,” she whispers breathlessly. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

By the glazed look in her eyes, she’s entering that delirious, desperate state where she completely loses herself—the most addicting thing I’ve ever had the honor of witnessing. She *becomes* her pleasure. Her skin, so

sensitive, burns like a heady, dizzying fire. Her insides turn to liquid. She melts, pliable in my hands, and I do what any good boyfriend would do: I make her *come*.

She hisses when I slip my hand down the front of her panties.

She's—holy *fuck*, she's wet as hell. Her slickness coats my fingertips as I trail them languorously through the folds of her flesh. She shivers deliciously, her eyes rolling back into her skull when I pause, circling her clit, and a tiny sigh slips past her lips.

FUCK.

I *cannot* hear that kind of sound coming out of this girl. It's too fucking much. Too sexy. Too feverish. Too fucking perfect. My dick throbs, heavy as lead between my legs, harder than granite, desperate to be touched, fucked, sucked. I quicken the circles as I rub against Elodie's clit, applying a tiny bit more pressure, and her eyes close fully, her lips falling open as she arches away from the bed, rolling her hips back a little.

"Are you gonna listen and give me everything that I ask for, Elodie?" The words feel harsh as if they scrape against my throat; I want her so fucking badly, I can barely even fucking *speak*.

"Yes." Elodie's voice is just as hoarse.

I move back slightly, edging my fingertips toward the entrance to her pussy as I continue to rub at her. "You swear it?"

"Yes! Yes, oh my god. I swear! I swear."

"Good girl." I reward her by dipping my fingers inside of her. Not too far. Only up to my index finger's first knuckle, but it must feel pretty damn good to Elodie, because she bows away from the bed even harder, sucking in a sharp, ragged inhalation.

I withdraw my fingers almost immediately, and Elodie lets out a pained whimper. "*Monster*." She pants out her objection.

"Tyrant. Bully. Pernicious bastard." I add.

"So...fucking...*cruel*."

“I can be so much crueler.”

“Wren...”

I slide one knee forward, centering my weight over her, then quickly release her pinned arms, using my other hand to clasp tightly around her throat. Elodie’s eyes snap open, wider than wide, but her eyes are devoid of fear. Fierce, raw desire hums within her gaze as she stares up at me, her pupils dilating to an extraordinary size. They say what she cannot: I surrender. I am yours. Do whatever you want to me.

I tighten my hold on her throat, cutting off her air supply. Bowing down over her, I flick the tip of my tongue over her lips, licking and tasting her as I speak. “Let me show you...exactly...how cruel...I can be.”

My fingers are soaked now. I run them lightly through Elodie’s slick heat, grinding my teeth together, blowing hard down my nose as she twitches and spasms, her hips jerking against my touch. “Feeling lightheaded yet?” I rumble.

She nods. When I stroke the pad of my index finger against her clit, her whole body jolts, her heels kicking against the mattress.

“That feel good?” I demand.

She nods again, her hands fisting the bedsheets at her sides.

I ease off, lessening the pressure I’m applying to her throat. She immediately draws in a shaky breath, panting. I allow her three full breaths, and then I tighten my hold again. And *then* I get to work.

No more light, tentative pressure between her legs. I rub at her clit, small, purposeful circles—a tempo and a pressure that I learned Elodie liked the very first time I fucked her. Beneath me, Elodie writhes, her whole body rolling and jerking, reacting to her rising pleasure. Her hips rock upward, searching for even more pressure from my hand, for more, more, more, and I unleash a teasing smile.

“You wanna fuck my hand, Elodie? Is that it?” I kiss her roughly, growling approvingly as she jerks up against my palm again. “So fucking

needy? So hungry? So desperate for more of me?”

She manages to make a small, urgent sound. I allow her some more oxygen, and my beautiful Little E whimpers some more. “You’re driving me crazy,” she hisses.

“Not yet, I’m not. Just wait.”

I move my hand faster between her legs.

I cut off her air supply.

Her legs lock up, her hands clawing at the bed, at my thigh, desperate for something to hold on to. She’s about to come. Moments away. Seconds away.

I pull my hand away.

I let her draw a breath.

Two breaths.

Three.

“Fuck!” she cries out. “Fuck! Oh my god. Please, Wren!”

“*Patience.*” With none of my own, I tear her jeans down her legs. Off her body. Her panties follow right after. “Open your legs,” I command. I rub my fingers against the taut bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs again for the briefest of moments—wait for her to suck down a deep, surprised breath, and then I close my hand around her throat again, thrusting my fingers inside her at the same time.

Shock chases across Elodie’s face. Her back bows up, up, up...

“You want me to fuck you with my fingers?”

Unable to do anything else, she nods frantically.

“How badly?” I demand.

She can’t reply verbally, so her body answers for her. Her hips rock back, then drive forward; she grinds her pussy into my hand, moaning as the friction between our bodies intensifies. She wants this so fucking bad. I’ll give her what she needs. *Eventually.*

Ripping my hand away, Elodie thrashes, almost sobbing with frustration. "Please. Shit, Wren. Please. I can't take...it...any...more."

"You can. You *will*," I assure her. "You haven't begged nearly enough."

"I'm losing my mind. God, please. I'm so close..."

Satisfaction rolls through me in hot waves. The things I'm going to do to this girl. "You're only close because I allow it. *I* decide when you've had enough teasing. *I* decide when you can't take it anymore. You'll wait because it pleases me to make you wait. Are you gonna behave yourself for me?"

She makes an uncertain, desperate sound. She doesn't give me the answer that I need. Oh, Elodie. Elodie, Elodie, Elodie. She should know better than *that*. I wind her hair around my hand, yanking her head back. "*Look at me.*"

I can see her pulse racing in the hollow of her throat. Her eyes whip to mine, locking onto me. Fuck, I need to get out of these jeans right fucking now; my dick is so hard it fucking *hurts*. My need to be balls deep inside her comes close to outweighing my need to tease the hell out of her. What kind of asshole would I be if I took my own satisfaction so quickly, though, when I've made her wait so long?

"Are you gonna wait like a good girl?" I demand again.

"Yes," she whispers.

"All right, then."

Time slows, flowing like honey. Elodie enters a frenzied trance as I toy with her, stroking her pussy, rolling the wet bud of her clit beneath my fingers, then sliding them inside her, finger fucking her until she's on the verge of screaming.

By the time I bend over her, settling myself between her legs, and I finally allow myself to taste her, she's bordering on hysterical.

Good. I want her fucking delirious. I want this to be the most explosive, most catastrophic orgasm of her life...

She tastes fucking incredible. Holy fucking shit. I can't help myself: I roll to one side as I feast on her cunt, unfastening my pants and wriggling them down, over my hips, down my legs, kicking them off once they're low enough. A quick pause to tear my t-shirt off over my head. Another to dispose of my underwear. In less than ten seconds, I'm naked and back between her thighs, licking at her clit, relishing the panting, feral sounds Elodie is making.

My dick. *God*, my dick is throbbing. Sensitive as all hell. Every time I rock forward, laving at her sweet-tasting pussy, the head of my erection rubs against the duvet, setting off explosions of fireworks inside my head. It feels so goddamn good. I want more. Way more. It isn't long before I find myself rocking my hips back and forth, thrusting my dick into the bedding, rutting against the mattress like some kind of depraved, rabid animal.

Elodie's fingers wind through my hair, her hands fisting the thickness of it. She shoves my head down against her wet heat so roughly that the bridge of my nose grinds against her pubic bone, promising to break if it's subjected to any more abuse. The very thought of that makes me harder than reinforced steel—if my nose ever *has* to be broken, it'd better be because Elodie Stillwater rode my face too fucking hard.

Hyperventilating, Elodie rocks her hips, her legs locking out on either side of my head. She's close, riiiiight on the edge of coming.

I stop, biting the inside of her thigh, sinking my teeth into her flesh, and Elodie drives her fingernails into the top of my shoulders, letting out an exasperated little yelp.

The pain is exquisite. Pure fucking bliss. My feral queen draws blood, and I nearly blow my load into the duvet on the spot. "Careful," I warn. "You start getting aggressive and I might follow suit."

"Please. Please. Wren, please..."

Music to my corrupted, wicked ears. I love nothing more than the sound of that word on this girl's lips. She's behaving so nicely that I decide to be

kind; her eyes roll back into her head when I thrust my fingers inside of her, curling them upward, stroking them in small circles as I run the flat of my tongue upward in a long, languid sweeping motion. Elodie doesn't make a single fucking sound. Not a peep. Her eyes are closed. She's holding her breath. Trying...she's trying to pretend that my actions aren't affecting her, but I know fucking better. Her legs tremble so hard, it's a miracle she doesn't vibrate herself over the edge of the bed.

I nip the inside of her thigh again, administering swift justice. “*Bad girl.*”

“Fuck!” She contorts, attempting to roll onto her side, to get away, but I grab hold of her by the hips, pinning her down in place.

“Faking nonchalance so you can *sneak* a fucking orgasm past me?”

“You’re trying to kill me. I need...I need to come. Please!”

“Bad. Very, *very* bad.” Still holding her by the hips, I spin her, flipping her over so fast that she cries out. She lies face down on the bed, huffing into the sheets, her body twitching, her back arching so that her ass hikes up in the air a little—exactly where I want it. I spank her so hard that my palm strobos with the sting of the strike. Elodie straight *screams*. She buries her face even deeper into the mattress, her hips jerking as the pain rolls through her.

Good god, but her ass is fucking perfect. Raw pride floods me as the brilliant red imprint of my hand begins to form, marring the flawless, cream-white of her round ass cheek. Mine. She's fucking *mine*. I place my hand on her ass again, this time very gently, rubbing my palm over the area where I spanked her, soothing the bright sting away.

Elodie's hips jerk, rocking, wanting more contact. More of my fingers. More of my tongue. More of the pain. Begging for my cock. The sound of her quick, shallow breath ignites my blood, setting it on fire. “On your knees,” I tell her. “Ass in the air. Legs apart. Show me that beautiful pussy. I wanna see every fucking inch of you.”

She gives me what I want, propping back onto her knees, lifting her ass up, widening her stance so I have a clear, unobstructed view of her pussy. Lord have mercy, but she's fucking *perfect*. Such a pretty shade of pink. Both her tight little asshole and her pussy presented to me for my inspection. A low, possessive growl builds at the back of my throat—I hardly recognize the sound as my own voice.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

The word is a drum. A steady, quickening beat, hammering in my ears, in my chest, inside my skull, echoing in my very blood. I'll be the only man to ever enjoy this view. I will *kill* anyone who even thinks about her like this. I will know. I'll know if they're picturing her like this, and I will end their miserable fucking lives.

I'm well aware of how crazy this thought is.

Men are weak. They can't help themselves. I'll have to murder every single dude who ever crosses Elodie's path if I want to make good on that threat. But this animalistic possessiveness won't be denied by reason in this moment. It wants to inflict damage on anyone who might threaten to take what is mine.

"Again," Elodie pleads. She glances back at me over her shoulder, and the need there in her eyes is breathtaking. "Please. I want—*please*. Spank me again."

This I will give to her.

She likes a little pain just as much as I do; we're so alike in some of our darker desires. I lay the flat of my hand to her ass, a loud *crack!* filling the room, and Elodie rocks, sucking in a startled, sharp breath. "Fuck!"

Again, I repeat my actions, rubbing small circles over the hot, fast-forming welt I've left on her skin, smoothing the pain away. "More?"

“Yes,” she whispers, letting her head hang loose between her shoulders. I’m a split second away from obliging her, but before I can bring my hand down, I see something that makes *me* suck in a sharp inhalation. A rope of viscous, sticky fluid drips down from her pussy, landing on the inside of her thigh, and my head nearly fucking explodes.

She’s dripping wet.

Fucking *dripping*.

For me.

All logical thought vanishes.

I can’t. I can’t fucking think straight.

In an urgent, impatient maneuver, I grab Elodie by the hips and thrust the head of my dick inside her. The need to drive myself into her all the way to the root of my shaft is almost undeniable. Somehow, I manage to stop myself, though. “I’m gonna fill you full of my come. And once I’m done, I’m gonna fuck it so deep inside you. Are you ready?”

“Yes!”

The second the word leaves her lips, I roll my hips forward, burying myself inside her. Elodie moans—a sound of deep satisfaction combined with a fevered need for more—and I relinquish control. I fuck her. I fuck her so hard, she screams, and pants, and whimpers until she’s hoarse.

With every stroke, a storm builds in my chest. The kind of storm that destroys buildings and wipes cities clean off of maps. “Fuck! Wren! Fuck, I’m going to come. Please! I’m gonna come, I’m gonna come, I—I—”

I won’t stop her this time. I feel her tighten around me, and I *need* her to rise with me. To peak. To fall over the edge of madness with me. Nothing matters more in this instant. My cock hardens to unbearable degrees, a rod of steel as I plunge it inside of her and withdraw it just as quickly. A burning heat prickles low in the pit of my belly. It climbs, searing my insides, building, building, building. My balls are heavy, tightening, drawing up close to my body. And then...and then...and...then...

I roar as I come. A wave of pleasure so violent that it overrides my senses. I can't fucking see straight. My mouth is tingling, my ears are ringing...

"Holy fuck! WREN!"

Just when I think the feeling can't intensify any further, Elodie's orgasm rips through her—she tightens around me like a fucking vice—and a high-pitched ringing floods my head. I sag forward, my chest flush with Elodie's back. I hold myself up for a second, but then my arms and legs give out at the same time, a body-wide weakness tugging me down, and we both collapse sideways.

"Shit," Elodie gaps. "Shit. Oh my god, I—I'm still coming."

I can feel it—small little pulses massaging my cock as she shivers and shakes in my arms. It takes a full minute for her climax to ebb.

Fuck, what I wouldn't give to have this moment last forever. Elodie, slick with sweat, curled up against me, our hearts both racing, the world soft and fucking perfect, everything muted and out of focus, endorphins still singing through our veins. I—

"Knock knock."

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!" I react on instinct. Elodie yelps as I launch myself across her, grabbing the end of the duvet and yanking it over us. A heartbeat later, we're both covered, and I'm sitting bolt upright, glowering into the face of someone I had no intention of seeing for a very long time.

Long black hair.

Leather pants.

A black strappy top.

Ridiculously high heels.

Lips the color of blood.

Eyes the color of polished jade.

"I am going to fucking *kill* you, Mercy Anna Beth Jacobi."

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PAX

LIGHTS BLAZE out into the darkness, making shadowed, long-legged ghouls out of the Sitka Spruce and Pine trees that crowd in hungrily around Riot House. A car sits in the driveway—one I don't recognize. Some kind of boring soccer mom hybrid monstrosity. It definitely isn't Wren's, which means we have a stranger in our midst. Whoever was stupid enough to break into Riot House did *not* bring an appropriate getaway vehicle.

Beside me, Chase fidgets nervously in the passenger seat, eyes wide as she takes in the scene before us. "You're sure it isn't just Wren and Elodie?"

"They said they'd be having dinner in town tonight."

"Then do you think we should call the cops?"

"Hell no. I'm gonna take great pleasure in dealing with this myself."

"Pax! Don't do anything stupi—"

I slam the car door, rushing up the path and then the steps that lead up to the front door, adrenalin surging through my system, every part of me ready for violence. I check the door; it isn't locked.

"PAX!"

Fear like nothing I've ever experienced before slams me square in the gut. I stop dead, spinning around so fast I make myself dizzy. Chase is out of the car, and she's running toward the house.

“What the hell are you *doing*? Get back!” I’m sharper than I intend to be, but the anxiety firing up and down my spine has me temporarily out of my damn mind.

Keep her safe.

Keep the baby safe.

What the hell? I can’t fucking *breathe*.

Chase shakes her head, thick auburn hair cascading around her shoulders as she jogs up the steps to meet me. Fuck, should she even be *jogging*? “I’m not waiting in the car while you go charging head-long into a potentially dangerous situation. What if you need backup? A witness? What if you get hurt?”

“I am picking you up, throwing you over my shoulder, and forcibly putting you back in that car in three seconds. Do not fucking make me.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” The outrage that flashes across her face suits her. Her hot temper has put some color back in her cheeks.

I set my jaw, staring her down. “*Try me.*”

“My god. Will you two cease your bickering and come inside already? You’re letting in the cold.”

Surprise ratchets up my heart rate all over again. By the look on her face, Chase shares my sentiments. Mercy Jacobi saunters across the entryway of Riot House, heels clicking against the polished marble floor. She looks like some kind of fucking Bond villain with the black-on-black outfit, the blunt cut to her hair, and the obnoxious slash of bright red lipstick she’s wearing. Her eyes—eyes the exact same color as Wren’s—dance with amusement as her gaze bounces from me to Chase and back again. A slow, annoying smile spreads across her face. “Oh my. I heard about this little predicament, but I didn’t really *believe* it. Looks like you’re packing some powerful swimmers, Pax.” The arch to her perfectly plucked eyebrow suggests all kinds of sin.

With one cursory sweep of her cool gaze, she manages to perfectly communicate what she thinks of Chase, which is to say not very much at all. I can take her poking at me—I'm used to it after all the years she spent lurking around the house, showing up unannounced and generally starting shit for her own entertainment—but Chase? She can think a-fucking-gain if she thinks she's going to get away with treating her like shit. "Fuck off and die, Mercy. You shouldn't be here."

"Of course I should." Her eyes flash like knives.

"This is Wren's place, not yours."

"Precisely. My twin brother's house. Blood relative. I have far more right to be here than *you* do."

This. Fucking. Bitch. Mercy lives to provoke a reaction from people; I'd only be giving her what she wants if I let my temper flare. "When Wren finds out you're here, he's gonna kick your ass out. That's all there is to it." I imbue the words with as much disregard as I can without sounding angry, but Mercy doesn't give a shit; she picks up a small golden skull paperweight from the mail stand in the hallway, turning it over in her hands as she smirks to herself. "Oh, I'm sure he'll tell me to leave. At first. But then he'll get over himself and *beg* me to stay once I inform him that I have news about Fitz. News that he's desperately going to want to hear."

Chase glares at Jacobi's witch of a sister. "What news?" she demands.

Mercy embodies the proverbial cat that got the cream. She doesn't even have the courtesy to look at Chase; she peers closer at the golden skull, the arrogance of the girl choking up the entryway. She parts her blood-red lips, about to respond with something catty and vile, no doubt, but another voice fills the silence before she can say a word.

"She's yet to part with that information." Wren thunders his way down the stairs, ends of his hair wet and curling into his face, chest briefly bare as he slides his arms into the sleeves of a sweater and pulls it over his head.

I throw my hands in the air. “Fuck’s sake! I thought you were in town! This place was supposed to be empty for a while!”

Wren stops at the foot of the stairs, regarding me with a heaping amount of disdain. “We decided we’d better wait here to see what state you came back in first. Given your temper of late.”

“Bullshit.”

‘It is, isn’t it?’

“That’s his way of telling you that he loves you and he cares about you.” Elodie appears out of nowhere, padding down the stairs to join us.

“No, it’s not!” “*The fuck it is!*” I object at the same time as Wren, heat flaring in my cheeks.

Elodie wears a pair of black silk pajamas, her hair ruffled and wet, too; Wren and his girl must have just gotten done showering. She rolls her eyes, walking straight past me to greet Chase, folding her friend into a tight hug. “Love you, Pres. I’m sorry I told this idiot where we were back in Alaska.”

Chase smiles over Elodie’s shoulder. “It’s all good. I know you only did it because you care. I love you, too, E.”

Elodie pulls back, eyeing Wren and me with fake annoyance. “See. Easy. Why are guys so emotionally inept? Why can’t you just tell each other that you matter to one another?”

“I couldn’t care less about Jacobi.”

“That asshole sank my boat!”

Chase and Elodie share a despairing look. Within the blink of an eye, Chase turns a weird shade of grey, though, her face draining of color. “Oh, god,” she whispers, clutching her stomach. “I gotta—I think I’m gonna—I need to—”

“Gross. *Please* tell me she’s not about to puke all over the Carrera.”

“Shut the fuck up, Mercy,” Wren snaps.

Chase shoots a panicked look over at me, as though she thinks...fuck, I don’t know what she’s worried about. She’s freaking out. I grab her by the

hand, leading her quickly through the living room, around the sunken couch, through the kitchen, toward the closest downstairs bathroom. As soon I've opened the door for her, Chase drops to her knees and heaves, the tiniest amount of vomit spattering into the toilet bowl. Rubbing her back, I try not to grimace as she wretches, her body spasming, trying to rid itself of something that isn't there. After a while, she drops back onto her heels and then sinks sideways, resting her back up against the wall.

"Sorry. I know that's disgusting," she says breathlessly.

"How much have you been eating?"

Confusion draws Chase's brows together. "What?"

"If you're throwing up all of the time and not eating properly, then... you look fucking exhausted. You're not eating properly. I can tell."

"Feeling nauseous all of the time doesn't really inspire a person to *eat*, Pax." She chides me, like I have no idea what it's like to be pregnant and be feeling like garbage all of the time. Which I don't, of course. But I *would* have some idea of how she's been feeling if she hadn't hidden this from me. If she'd been honest with me from the get-go. Jesus. Bitterness gnaws at my bones, but I do my best to shove it aside. Resentment won't help. I love this girl. I'll love her no matter what. She's fucking gutted me with this, though; I'm having trouble navigating all the feelings this massive pothole in the road has caused. If I allow my anger to fester, this will be an open wound between us for the rest of our relationship...which I doubt would last very long under that kind of stress.

I hold my hand out to her, exhaling steadily, forcing everything out of my head. There will be time to pick my way through all of this later, once she's fallen asleep in my arms and I'm staring up at the ceiling in the dark, unable to find any rest of my own. Until then, I'll show Chase nothing but a firm, steady, calm resolve. "On your feet, Presley Maria Witton Chase. I'm making you some soup."

There are some people in this world that just need a good fucking spanking. Mercy Jacobi is one of them. I'll admit, there was a time I would have fucked her. One hundred percent. But then three things happened. The first: Wren became a brother to me, which, by *very* loose association, meant that Mercy was connected to me in a similar manner. Second: I experienced the horrifying realization that Mercy and Wren bore more than a passing resemblance to one another, them being twins and all, and that fucking Mercy would be tantamount to fucking Wren. And last but not least, thirdly, it dawned on me just how fucking poisonous the wretched girl was, and how badly I wanted to claw my own goddamn eyes out every time I was in her presence.

Like a succubus, she soaks all of the joy out of the kitchen, her frame poured over a chair in an artful, boneless way that even the most highly paid models I've worked with in the past struggle to emulate. Mercy accomplishes it with ease and manages to look bored at the same fucking time. "Staring at me like you're picturing all of the ways you want to murder me isn't going to help," she purrs, inspecting her manicure. She's talking to Wren, not me; I'm not the only one plotting her demise.

Jacobi looms over the kitchen island, arms folded across his chest, a look of pure frustration on his annoyingly handsome face. "Just spit it out, dude. You say you came here to tell me something. So tell me something."

She pouts petulantly. "No."

"Mercy!"

"As soon as I tell you, you'll kick me out."

"And?"

"And it's the middle of the night if you hadn't noticed. And I'm not some annoying dog. You can't just use me like that and then discard me on

the side of the road. Most brothers would want to spend time with their sister after not seeing her for months.”

“Most brothers don’t have to deal with their sisters creeping into their bedrooms while they’re in the middle of fucking their girlfriend,” Wren snarls. “Most brothers don’t have to put up with their sisters standing there and watching ’til they’re fucking done!”

Mercy makes a frustrated sound, mouth open, throwing up her hands. “What’s ruder, Wren? Interrupting a guy mid-coitus and giving him blue balls, or letting him finish the task at hand? You need to get some sun, by the way. Your ass cheeks are so *white*.”

Filled with malice, Wren’s eyes narrow down to slits. “You are a *foul* human being.”

“Can we please just agree that I did the right thing by letting you finish flailing around on top of Elodie Stillwater? Just look at you now. You’re in a despicable mood. You’d have been even grumpier if you hadn’t nutt—”

“Do NOT finish that sentence! For fuck’s sake!” Wren has gone the same ashen, waxy color that Chase did earlier. “You shouldn’t have been in my fucking bedroom in the first place!”

“I wasn’t in your room. You left the door open. *I* just had the misfortune of being able to see what was going on in there once I hit the landing.”

“I can’t eat this,” Chase says morosely, swirling her spoon around in the chicken noodle soup I heated up for her. I can’t say that I blame her—it came from the pantry, a pouch of chunky, thick slop that smelled highly suspect even to my nose when I squeezed it into the pan.

I take the bowl away, stooping briefly to kiss the top of Chase’s head before crossing the kitchen to dump the gelatinous mess into the sink. Wren and Mercy continue to glare at each other malevolently, both of them refusing to look away from the other. “There are plenty of hotels in town,” Wren spits.

“No, there aren’t,” Mercy counters.

“You can sleep at Cosgroves. There’s a cot in the office that Pat sleeps on when he’s too wasted to drive home. Shouldn’t be too uncomfortable for you there.”

“And what if Pat happens to be *using* that cot when I get there?”

“I’m sure he won’t mind top and tailing with you, Mercy,” he says, voice dripping with venom.

“LOOK!” Elodie has kept quiet until now, but apparently, she can’t bite her tongue any longer. “Mercy, of course Wren isn’t going to kick you out in the middle of the night. Wren, you’re *not* kicking her out. You can sleep on the couch in the living room.”

“Pssh. I don’t sleep on *couches*, New Girl.”

“Jesus Christ. Such a fucking child,” Wren says. “You’re a bitch to the *one* person who’s actually trying to be nice to you, Mercy. The one person who you absolutely should *never* be rude to if you want to land yourself in my good graces—”

“Hah! I couldn’t care less about your good graces. I—”

What if it’s twins?

A cold, nervous sweat breaks out all over my body.

What if...it’s fucking *twins*?

Is Chase so damn sick because she’s walking around with two of my progeny in her belly? Two smaller versions of me? Oh my god. Holy shit, oh my god. My chest is so tight. Why the hell is my chest so tight? I sit down next to Chase, ignoring the petty back-and-forth volleying of the Jacobis’ argument, deafened by the sound of my pulse thundering in my ears. Chase is already looking at me when I turn my attention to her. “Have you had a scan yet?” I ask, doing a masterful job at leveling out my voice.

She shakes her head. “I didn’t—I couldn’t—”

“We’re booking you in for a scan first thing in the morning.”

“We haven’t even had chance to properly talk this through,” she whispers. “What’s the point in having a scan if—”

“We’re *getting you a scan.*”

Chase stops talking. She assesses me, her eyes searching my face, looking for something there that might help her make sense of all of this, I suppose. I don’t know if she finds it, but eventually she nods. “Okay. But we still have a lot to talk about.”

“Agreed.”

She leans her head against my shoulder. A knot forms in my stomach as I brush her hair back, tucking it behind her ear. Such red hair. If we do have this kid, will it be dark like me? Or will it have her coloring? I’m overcome by the hope that rises up inside of me. A daughter, with fiery hair just like her mother? I was riddled with anxiety over the prospect of dealing with a smaller version of me just now, but when I consider what life might be like with a tiny version of Presley in it, the situation takes on a whole new light. I—

I look up at the sudden, deafening silence.

Wren, Elodie, and Mercy are all looking at us. Well, at *me* specifically. I frown at them all. “*What?*”

“Oh, nothing.” Mercy waves a taloned hand in my general direction, her vicious brows arching even higher than they did before. “It’s just so... *bizarre* is all. You’re the most confrontational, aggressive, hostile person in the whole world, and there you are, stroking a girl’s hair, looking like you’re about to break out into ‘*The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Music.*’ Now *I* want to throw up all over myself.

I swear to God, what I wouldn’t give to punt this miserable witch out on her ass and send her Louis Vuitton luggage set out right on after her. Wren and Elodie seem to mirror her thoughts, but at least they’re keeping their mouths shut about it. Wren knows I’d beat the shit out of him if he ever—

The front door slams, startling all five of us.

What the hell? Do people just roll up out of the blue whenever they feel like it now? What is this place, a fucking motel? Will there be no *peace*

tonight? Wren darts to the archway that leads into the living room. He returns moments later. “Looks like we have ourselves a full house.” Behind him, he’s followed by...holy shit...

Dash and Carrie?

Chase rockets to her feet. There are instant tears from the girls. They rush around the kitchen island to hug their friend. Their reunion is emotional as fuck—the girls haven’t seen each other since a couple of weeks after graduation, I guess. I shake Lovett. Some people might consider the move rough, but he knows it’s about as affectionate a hello as he will ever get out of me. He slaps me on the back and then addresses the rest of the group, a tight smile pulling at his mouth. “Why the hell is no one answering their phones?”

“Mine’s dead,” Wren answers.

Elodie nods. “Mine, too.”

“Mine’s in my bag in the car,” I say.

“I don’t have a clue *where* mine is,” Chase says.

Mercy takes out her fully charged, fully present phone and holds the screen up for everyone to see. No new notifications. No missed calls. No texts. “Don’t give me shit if you didn’t actually call me,” she says.

“Why would I try and call *you*?” Dash says, genuinely confused. “You don’t count.”

I stifle back laughter, which earns me a dark, shitty look from Mercy.

“Where have you come from? How d’you know we were here?” Chase asks.

Carrie steps forward to take care of these questions. “Well, when we heard that there was a reunion taking place in New Hampshire, we weren’t about to miss *that*, were we.”

Chase looks delighted. Elodie, too. I have to admit, it’s fucking good to see Lord Lovett’s face. I’m not gonna say that out loud, obviously, but—

“It’s Wesley Fitzpatrick,” Mercy blurts out. “He escaped from police custody last night.”

The kitchen falls deathly silent.

We all look at each other, none of us knowing what to say.

Fucking Mercy. She taunts us with a secret, reveling in the attention it gets her, and the second that attention is pulled away, she spits something like *this* out? Such a fucking brat.

Wren is the first to speak. “What are you talking about? How the hell would he escape? He was locked away.”

“They were transporting him back from the hospital or something. His lawyer got him an appointment with a specialist to look at a shoulder injury —”

“He’s on death row! Why the fuck would they need to look at a shoulder injury!”

Visibly pleased that everyone’s focus is back on her, Mercy basks in the center of the group, glowing like the sun. “It’s the law. They have to treat him if he’s hurt, even for minor matters. He’s appealing his verdict. There’s a chance that he could go free at some point, so they have to—”

“He’s never going free,” Elodie says, shaking her head. “He murdered all of those girls in Texas. And the other states. Not to mention Mara. The evidence is insurmountable.”

Grim as the grave, Wren has turned a sickly shade of grey. “The evidence doesn’t matter. They don’t need to overturn his verdict anymore, do they? He *is* free.”

“They’ve closed down state lines. There are so many cops out looking for him,” Dash says. He’s on his phone, looking up information about Fitz’s escape. “They had the whole place on lockdown as soon as they realized he had slipped out of the hospital. He isn’t gonna get very far.”

Clearly, none of these facts make a difference to Wren. “He’s in the wind.”

“For sure,” Mercy agrees. “That bastard is as slippery as an eel. He’s probably sunning himself on a beach in Mexico by now. You have no idea how hard it was, keeping that shit to myself. Seriously. The look on your faces—”

“Why the *fuck* wouldn’t you tell us something that important immediately?” Elodie hisses. She’s so red in the face, she looks like she’s about to blow. The girl always seems to maintain her cool, but this might just be the straw that breaks the camel’s back.

Mercy looks extra bored as she faces down her brother’s girlfriend. “Don’t be a drag, Stillwater. I was gonna tell you all eventually. Pardon me for trying to have a little fun.”

“Get out.”

Mercy’s smile fades. “Oh, please. Like *you* can just—”

“She absolutely can. You heard her. Get the *fuck* out.” Wren hums with anger. Slowly rising to his feet, he towers over the kitchen island, his knuckles turned white, hands clenched into fists. Finally he’s ready to throw down. Thank *fuck* for that. I was beginning to think my boy was broken or something. “Get the fuck out of my house before I fucking *make* you,” he barks. “Do not come back here, Mercy.”

The girl’s perma-smirk falters a little. She gets to her feet, grabbing her phone and the keys to her car from the kitchen island. “Like I wanna hang out with you idiots anyway. You’re welcome for the heads-up.”

WREN

THE MORNING BRINGS with it thunder and lightning and an impenetrable curtain of rain that hammers at the windows, distorting the world beyond the glass into a green-grey blur. I stare out at the upward slope of the mountainside, knowing that Wesley Fitzpatrick is out there somewhere, a free man.

I'd put money on the fact that he called his lawyer for help after he made his escape from custody. She seemed as mad as a hatter back in Fairbanks. Mad enough to help him, that's for sure. Alessia means nothing to Fitz. She's a *woman* for starters, and from where I'm sitting, it doesn't seem like Wolf Hall's old English professor likes the female of the species very much. He might sleep with them, but the act is a means to an end for Fitz. He thought fucking Mara would be a solid way of steering her attention away from me. That plan had worked out rather admirably for him. He probably ended her life the second he knew for sure that I wasn't interested in having a relationship with her.

The morning crawls by on its knees, dragging, each second passing painfully slowly. In his room, Dash plays a dream-like melody, the notes of the piece flooding the second floor, floating up to my bedroom like some kind of melancholic love story. Elodie lies on the bed, eyes closed, listening intently, while I think about painting. I started out strong this morning—

slashing at the canvas with a mix of moody midnight blues, slate greys and charcoal blacks, helped ease the tension wrapped around my neck like a cord, ever-tightening—but the moment the frenzy of my anger passed, I was left clutching hold of the brush, staring out of the window at the rain, unable to form a worthwhile thought.

“What *is* this music?” Elodie asks sleepily from the bed. “I haven’t heard him play this before.”

Normally I wouldn’t be able to tell her. Dash’s choice of music has always been off the wall. The guy’s never been fond of playing other composers’ pieces. Not even the classics. He much prefers to write his own stuff. But this? He told me about this piece while I was downstairs earlier making coffee. “Some guy over in Washington wrote it. Some kind of savant cello player,” I tell her absently. “He’s just a couple of years older than us, apparently. He’s teaching the course Dash was trying to get into.”

“Hmm,” Elodie mutters sleepily. “It’s so beautiful. Sad. I bet he wrote it for a girl. It’s a shame Dash didn’t get the spot. Is he bummed out about it?”

“Nah. He said he knew as soon as he saw the other guy’s name on the program that he was shit out of luck. He kind of expected it.” The guy who wrote the music Dash is playing downstairs sent Dash an email, telling him that he believed Dash *should* have been given the spot. Said he was disappointed they wouldn’t be working together on the course. I think that had been recognition enough for my friend.

A fresh hail of raindrops batters against the floor-to-ceiling windows. Overhead, the giant beaten copper dome above my bed takes the day’s grim, gunmetal grey daylight and turns it bright, filling it with warmth, scattering shards of light up the walls, sending them dancing over the plasterwork. A particularly pretty overlapping square of light falls over Elodie’s serene face, illuminating her cheekbones and her thick black eyelashes, fanned out against her pale skin.

The first time I saw Little E, it was in a photograph. She'd been breathtaking. Blonde-haired, though. Ever since she dyed her hair back to its natural dark color, she's looked even more stunning. More herself. Right now, she looks like Sleeping Beauty, arranged so perfectly in amongst the welter of the sheets we fucked in this morning. I could stare at her until the end of time and never tire of seeing her face.

"You're watching me again, aren't you?" she whispers.

"I am." She knows that she's my obsession. I don't hide it from her. What'd be the point?

"Do you love me?" she whispers.

"More than you know."

She smiles—such a peaceful expression—her eyes still closed. "More than the sun?"

"You *are* the sun."

This makes her smile grow. "More than the moon?"

"Fuck the moon. The envious moon. Already sick and pale with grief. That thou, her maid, art far more—"

"Don't quote Shakespeare at *me*, Wren Jacobi. I'm being serious."

"So am I. I'm the *most* serious when I'm quoting Shakespeare."

"What about poetry? You love me more than poetry?"

My smile fades. A somberness falls over me, the gentlest, most heartbreaking of aches. A pain, lancing me through my chest, because I will never be able to convey to this beautiful creature precisely what she means to me. It's the greatest injustice of all time. "More than Yeats," I tell her softly. "More than Byron. More than Shelley, and Coleridge, and Wordsworth. More than any pretty thing that was ever put to paper, Little E. You eclipse it fucking all."

ELODIE

I OPEN MY EYES, searching for him. He's been so distracted all morning, but this change in tone worries me a little. He doesn't normally sound so morose when paying me a compliment. And this one was such a doozy, too; Wren lives for poetry. For him to say such a thing...it filled me with a sense of falling not unlike the dizzying weightlessness you get right before careening down the vertical section of a rollercoaster.

He stands, framed by the window, his dark, wavy hair tousled about his face. The strong, proud line of his nose, along with the angular line of his jaw and his high cheekbones, are cast into silhouette by the truly miserable day on the other side of the huge panes of glass behind him. The faded Metallica t-shirt he's wearing is one of his favorites. It's thin as hell, covered in paint and bleach spatters, pock-marked with tiny holes around the hem, but that doesn't seem to bother him in the slightest. Despite the cold, he decided on black basketball shorts today over his usual jeans. My breath catches at the sight of him, just like it always does. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at him without having to tamp down a raging storm of butterflies swirling behind my ribcage.

In his hand, he clenches hold of a thick paintbrush, wielding it like it's a weapon, a dagger, and he's about to use it to stab the canvas propped on the easel next to him.

"If you love me that much, then you won't mind answering a question for me," I say.

His eyes become distant for a moment. That used to happen a lot when we first met. He'd retreat back inside himself, pulling away, hiding behind a

cold scowl or an extra dark pair of Wayfarer sunglasses. A twinge of sadness tugs at me—that I would see him retreating now, here, after all of the shit we’ve been through. He knows what I’m going to ask him, though. He’s too smart not to. And he’s not relishing the prospect of having *this* conversation. Setting down the paintbrush on the ledge at the bottom of the easel, he pads barefoot across his room and stands beside me next to the bed, his features stormy and distant.

“The details of it, then?” he asks. “What exactly happened between us? Why he’s so fucking hell-bent on having me?”

I nod, matching his solemnity. Is it wrong to feel so vindicated? That he’ll admit to me at long last that it was more than just a fling between him and Fitz? At least, that it was more for *Fitz*, anyway.

Wren groans, sitting down on the bed stiffly, as if he’d rather be doing anything else. I know how much he’ll hate going over this; it means the world to me that he will. “He was such an asshole when he showed up to teach at Wolf Hall. Cold to Dash. Rude to Pax. Just...just a fucking *dick*. He loved baiting them. It was an unspoken agreement between the three of us that we’d teach him a lesson for being such an arrogant cunt. The guys would raise hell in class. They were working up to something bigger. Probably wanted to try and get him fired or some shit. I’d already noticed he wasn’t as shitty to me as he was to them. He was definitely preoccupied with me.”

I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Okay. He was *very* preoccupied with me. His interest in me was different. At first, I had no idea that it was sexual. He cleared that up pretty fast, though. Had me meet him in the gazebo in the middle of the maze and basically taunted me into fucking him.”

It’s never fun, hearing about your boyfriend’s past sexual exploits. Even less fun when they involve a grown-ass professor who wound up being a deranged psychopath. I grit my teeth against the tangle of emotions that

slam around the inside of my head, dispelling a confusing, complicated form of jealousy. I asked him to tell me about this. He can't be faulted for being blunt when it comes to the finer details of their involvement.

"He was determined to make me submit to him. Wanted me to surrender. Wanted me to give in." Wren's cool jade eyes study me with a fierce intensity. "You know me by now, Little E?" he asks.

"I know you," I affirm. Nothing has ever been truer. My voice might be low, almost whispered, but it's confident. Firm.

"Then tell me," he says. "How many people have I ever given into? How many people have ever coaxed me into submission?"

I smile because the answer to this question is easy. A guy like Wren, fired by determination and anger, and a blade-sharp focus, cannot be bent into submission. There's no way to force the likes of Wren Jacobi to his knees. He has to go *willingly*. He has to *want* the reprieve. Only a quiet, burning, bottomless love can give the likes of Riot House's dark lord the room or the peace to lay down his weapons and rest.

"*One.*"

The word steals the air between us. For a second, a proud fire burns in Wren's eyes, a curtain drawing back to unveil a staggering wall of emotion that, while permanently simmering, churning, always burning, is usually hidden from the watchful eyes of others. He reveals it to me now to underpin the importance of his words as he says, "That's fucking right. Only *ever* one."

The intensity of our eye contact would make an outsider blush and look away. After a long time, Wren breathes in, his chest rising sharply; the weight of our temporarily paused conversation pulls tension back into the room. "He wanted to win me over. For me to crave him as much as he craved me," he continues. "In his mind, he wouldn't have accomplished that until I submitted to him sexually." He shrugs. "I never did."

“And...you think that’s why he’s still so fixated on you now? Because he still wants...” I can’t say it. Can’t put it into words myself. “You think he still wants to win you over?”

“Fitz is insane. He thinks the world owes him whatever the fuck he wants. I didn’t give him what he wanted. I only taunted him with it. Made him want it more. I treated it all like a game. And when I got bored, he didn’t like that I stopped playing. I should have paid closer attention. If I had, I might have been able to see all of this coming.” He sighs, running a finger along my forearm, looking thoughtful. “Mara was annoying as hell. She didn’t know when to quit either, but I’d never have wished her dead. If I’d been a little more mindful of what was going on, maybe she wouldn’t have wound up rotting on that stone plinth for over a year before we found her fucking body.”

He can’t lay this at his own feet. He can’t. Wren’s reputation for being cold and vicious wasn’t unearned. The stories I heard about him when I first joined Wolf Hall were frankly terrifying. But no one understands this side of him. No one’s seen it. No one knows that beneath the granite smooth, impenetrable exterior Wren presents to the world, he’s capable of remorse, even when it’s unjustified. “It isn’t your fault,” I tell him. “You’re absolutely right. Fitz *is* insane. He couldn’t have been reasoned with. He would have hurt someone here eventually. Gauging from his past...all those girls he killed in Texas...” I recoil from the thought. “There’s no doubting it. He’d have killed someone at Wolf Hall eventually. It’s an addiction for men like him.”

Wren glows with quiet rage. “If I could go back, I’d change it. I’d have beaten the shit out of him in that gazebo. Forced him to leave the academy. I could have had him fired on the spot, the way he propositioned me. I was just fucking bored and figured it would be entertaining to see what happened. Look at where that’s gotten me. Gotten all of us. Dash and Pax

are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. But *you* ended up in that cave the night we threw that party. You could have been *killed*.”

“But I wasn’t. It’s that simple. They’re going to find Fitz, and they’re gonna put him back in jail. This bullshit appeal of his will come to nothing, and he will never see the light of day again. It’s all gonna work out just fine. You and I are going back to Cambridge. We’re gonna kill it at college, and then we’re going to enjoy building a life together. Very soon, all of this will be nothing more than a bad memory.”

Wren toys with my fingers, his head bowed. “I know,” he says firmly. “You’re right.” But he doesn’t believe it. I’d be able to feel his crushing doubt from a mile away.

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CARRIE

THE NUMBER of times I tried to sneak around this house? Damn. Too many times to count. The fear of being spotted by Wren or Pax used to have my heart thumping in the base of my throat, half suffocating me to death. It's weird to walk through Riot House so boldly now, not caring if any of Dash's ornery roommates are aware of my presence. Weirder still to know, not only are girls no longer an issue within these hallowed walls, but Wren and Pax also have their own girlfriends here, too. My best friends.

Things have certainly changed.

As I climb the second flight of stairs, I spy something unusual out of the expansive wall of windows to the front of the house: a bright flash of light flickering in the sky as the laden rain clouds part for half a second. It's Sirius. The Dog Star. The brightest star in the night sky. Part of the Canis Major constellation. The Romans used to believe Sirius was an ill omen. They would sacrifice dogs whenever it seemed to make a particularly auspicious appearance on the horizon. They'd have a fucking fit if they could see it now. It isn't uncommon to see stars in the sky during the daytime, especially in winter, but today Sirius seems to loom menacingly, its' light a little *too* bright.

In the distance, as if right on cue, a lone, eerie howl can be heard even through the double-insulated windows. Not a dog, of course. Somewhere

out there, the wolves Dash used to see flitting through the woods all of the time are still out there, pale as ghosts, prowling the mountain, searching for their next meal.

I give myself a shake when I reach Pax Davis's bedroom door. Pax has never been friendly toward me. Toward anyone that I can think of, actually. His brand of friendship can only be described as veiled hostility at the best of times, even when he's interacting with Wren and Dash. I wouldn't *dare* knock on his bedroom door under normal circumstances, but recently something has shifted. I've seen the way he treats Presley. I've seen the way he looks at her. Any man who looks at a girl that way can't be *all* evil.

I knock, bracing against the door frame, mentally prepping myself for the tirade of abuse I'm about to endure. Only, when Pax answers the door, he doesn't spit venom at me. He grabs me by the shoulder and lets out a relieved, "Oh, it's you. Thank *God*," and drags me into his room.

I nearly swallow my tongue. "Whoa. Jeez. Damn. I—" I wish I didn't sputter so much when I'm on the back foot. The room is kind of messy but nowhere near as bad as I thought it was going to be. I can see most of the floor. In fact, turning a little to take Pax's domain in, I find that it's actually pretty orderly. Aside from the multitude of photographs tacked to the walls and piled in precarious stacks on every available surface, that is.

Presley sits in the bed, wrapped in a duvet, and—oh—oh shit—is she *naked*? Did I just interrupt something? As I approach, I see with distinct relief that, no, she's fully dressed beneath the blankets. The '*Slayer*' hoody she's wearing looks like it belongs to Davis. The guy who made an Olympic sport out of ignoring Pres once upon a time paces up and down, stabbing his fingers through hair that doesn't exist; I get the feeling that, if his head weren't shaved, he'd be tearing it out by the root.

"Tell her." He turns ferocious eyes on me.

"Tell her what?"

“She’s been puking all morning, and now that she feels better, she won’t eat anything.”

“I don’t wanna eat anything *because* I feel better,” Chase says hotly from her duvet nest. “The second I put something in my stomach, it’ll bounce right back out again. And that sucks, Pax. It really sucks. So what’s the fucking point?”

“The point is that you’re gonna wind up in the hospital, Chase!”

Well, shit. I never imagined that I’d find myself feeling sorry for Pax Davis. Not in this lifetime. Exasperation bleeds from his words as he stalks to the bed, folding his arms across his chest. “I’ve already dragged your ass inside a hospital once, Presley Maria Witton Chase. Don’t think I’m above doing it again. You’ll be sorely mistaken.”

Who...who *is* this man? I don’t recognize him. It strikes me with a strange and sudden clarity that I don’t know him at all. Presley is acting like a stranger, too. She sets her jaw, glaring defiantly at Pax. “You’re not dragging me anywhere. I’ll eat when I’m good and ready. Now if you could please give me a minute, I’d love to catch up with my friend. I haven’t seen her in ages, and—”

Pax snarls, whipping around, the slate grey focus of his eyes boring into me. “A banana. Some yogurt. Something. If she hasn’t eaten anything by two p.m., I’m pinning her down and force-feeding her.”

Presley growls, hurling a pillow at Pax as he storms out of the room. It hits his back, but the guy doesn’t even react. “Can you *believe* him?” Pres acts as if she’s never actually met Pax Davis before, and this behavior is coming as a shock to her; she was the one who mooned after him for years, though. She knows that this version of Pax is downright benevolent compared to the guy who used to prowl the halls of the academy in search of blood.

“Believe me, I know how this is gonna sound, but...” I laugh under my breath. “I think he’s actually being pretty reasonable.”

Betrayal streaks across Presley's freckled face. The anger in her eyes turns to hurt. "Well, gee. Hell must have frozen over if you think Pax is being more rational than *me*. Fuck."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I take her by the hand, smiling sadly. "You're pregnant, Pres. You're carrying his kid. Pax loves you, and he's worried about you. It's not crazy to think that he might want to keep the two of you safe and health—"

Pres tugs her hand away. She closes her eyes, tucking both of her hands beneath the covers, visibly withdrawing. "Don't say that. The two of us. There is no *two* of us. Why does everyone assume that I'll allow this situation to go on longer than it already has? I have..." She exhales hard, her nostrils flaring. "I have..."

"No clue what you wanna do?" I offer.

Presley lets out a loud sob, sinking back into the stack of pillows propped up against the headboard behind her. That single sob quickly becomes a series of them, and then Pres dissolves into a flood of heartbroken tears. "Oh, Jesus. It's okay. Shh, come here." I take Pres in my arms, pulling her to me even though she fights me at first. The deep, burnished red of her hair spills down around her shoulders as I rub my hand up and down her back—a feeble attempt at comforting her. "It's gonna be okay, y'know. No matter what, it'll be okay. Whatever happens, you'll have me, and E, and your dad. And you'll have *Pax*—"

"No, I won't!" She sits up, pulling away again. She sniffs, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "I *won't* have Pax. You don't get it, okay. There's no right decision here. If I keep this baby, things are gonna be so stressful. We're just kids ourselves, Carrie. My dad keeps telling me... The pressure. The lack of sleep. The screaming and crying. It'll be too much for him. For both of us. Pax will *leave*. And if I don't have the baby, then I'm the monster who killed his child. He'll never be able to look at me and not

see me that way, Carina. He won't. So, yeah. He'll leave. Either way, Pax leaves, and *my* world ends. I just—I can't—”

Her body shakes. Presley sobs, her breath coming in jagged gasps that sounds painful. I consider trying to hold her again, to try and ease some of the misery pouring out of her, but then rethink that plan. Her body is taut, full of tension, so much so that I worry she might break if I try to hug her.

“I think you're underestimating him,” I say. “I think he'll stay, no matter what. Don't you see the way he looks at you? You've got to know how much he loves you—”

“Love won't be enough!”

I ignore her, because let's face it, she's being stupid. “And you're underestimating yourself, too. How *dare* you underestimate one of my best friends.” I grin to let her know that I'm teasing. “You think your world will end if he *does* leave you? Don't you know who the fuck you are, Presley Chase? You're so fucking strong. You're smart as hell. Fuck, you're *brilliant*. There's nothing this world can throw at you that you can't handle. I know this because I know about all of the things you've already fought and overcome. You're a warrior, Pres. A goddamn *warrior*. I won't sit here and listen to you say such shitty things about yourself. A guy does not define you. Not even one as hot and crazy as Pax Davis.”

Presley sniffs, her tears abating. The tip of her nose has turned pink. “Your opinion of me is very generous.”

“No. It's *earned*. There's a vast difference.” I refuse to bring up all of the horrific things Jonah did to her. She survived that, though. She fought for her fucking life, and she won. Her current situation might be difficult. Okay, difficult is an understatement. It's shitty and complicated and no small matter, but Presley is a badass and she needs to remember that.

The shadows beneath her eyes look even more like bruises than when I first entered the room, but her expression gradually becomes one of

cautious hope. She wipes her nose with the cuff of Pax's Slayer hoody. "You think so?"

"I fucking *know* so. But either way, you need to listen to your boyfriend and eat something, dude. Whatever you decide to do, starving yourself isn't going to help matters, is it?"

She pulls a face, wrinkling her nose. I take it as a sign of surrender. "I'll go and grab you something that'll be light on your stomach in a minute. But first, now that I've given you my unsolicited advice, I actually came here to ask for *your* opinion on something."

"Oh?"

I take a deep breath, unsure how to continue. "Yeah. So I moved to London to be with Dash..."

"Hah! Remember when you said that astronomy program was unmatched, and you one hundred percent weren't moving across the world for a boy?" Pres arches an eyebrow at me. It sucks to have my own words thrown back at me when I made them sound so convincing a couple of months ago.

Sighing, I level my gaze at the ceiling, at the wall, out of the window. Anywhere but directly at her. "Yeah, well. I lied."

"*Humph*," she snorts.

I move on before she can give me any shit, after the *don't-you-know-who-you-are, you-don't-need-a-guy, you're-a-badass* speech I just gave her. "Anyway, Dash auditioned for that course in Seattle next year. He didn't get it, but...I got myself so caught up, imagining living there next year—"

"Weren't you going to live there, anyway? Before England was thrown into the mix?"

"Yeah. And being back there for Michael's restaurant opening and the audition...it made me realize how badly I wanted to stay." Guilt whittles my bones down to toothpicks. After uprooting ourselves and moving all the way across the world, it feels like an act of betrayal to even say these words

out loud. I chose to be with Dash. He loves being back in the U.K., even if it does rain ninety percent of the time. The home we've made for ourselves is beautiful, it really is. I've made new friends. I could be happy there, together, with my blond-haired lord.

But...

Those new friends aren't family. Not like Pres and Elodie. Not like Michael.

"Maybe I'm being silly," I say. "Seattle's still on the other side of the country from Massachusetts and New York, but at least we'd be in the same country. And only three hours apart instead of five. God, now that I'm saying it out loud, I sound pathetic, don't I? The flight from Seattle to New York is almost as long as it is from London. I don't know. I just—I feel like something's pulling me back, and..."

"And what does Dash say?"

"He hasn't said anything. I haven't told him," I admit rather sheepishly. "After they gave the conservatory spot to someone else, it just felt so selfish."

Presley's look is so pointed, it could cut. "Sounds like you and Dash have some things to discuss. And after the talking to you just gave *me*?" She nudges me teasingly with her elbow.

"All right. All right. Yes, I *do* see the irony. I suppose we both have the opportunity to practice our effective communication skills with our guys." I get up, squeezing a lump in the duvet that I *think* is Presley's knee. "Things might seem scary right now, but I promise it's all gonna work out. For both of us. No matter what, okay?"

She smiles, nodding along with me, but fear still dances in her eyes. I wish I could take it away and relieve her of her worries. She really doesn't deserve this. Out of all of us, Presley deserves to have an easy life for a while, but the universe keeps on lobbing curve balls at her. If there were a way to shoulder this burden for her, I would step into the breach without

hesitation. For now, all I can do is fix her something to eat. “I’m gonna go make some lunch for you before Pax storms in here and tries to waterboard you with soup again. Sound good?”

She doesn’t refuse, which is a relief. I leave the room, my mind jostling with thoughts of Seattle, and England, babies, and the grilled cheese I’m about to go downstairs to make. I don’t see Pax sitting on the windowsill to my right until I turn directly to face him.

“Oh shit! Jesus Christ, you scared me!” I clutch my chest in an attempt to push my heart into place, back where it belongs. “Were you eavesdropping?” I demand.

“Damn straight, I was.”

“That was supposed to be between me and Pres.”

“Was it?” he asks nonchalantly. “Seemed to me like my stubborn ass girlfriend has been making herself sick and won’t fucking talk to me about anything, and I needed to find out where her head is at before I lost my own sanity.”

“*Pax.*”

“What?” He shrugs. “Tell me you wouldn’t have done the same thing if it was Dash.”

“That’s not the same. *Dash* can’t get pregnant.”

“Sure about that? He does act *very* pissy for a week out of each month. I’ve always assumed he was ovulating.”

I try not to let his comment rile me, but boy, does he make it hard. “And there I was, defending you. Thinking that maybe you weren’t a complete asshole...”

Pax’s dark expression softens a little. He lets his head hang, eyes locked onto his hands. “There are only so many spots a mangy leopard can change, Mendoza. Right now, I’m figuring out how not to fuck up this deal with Chase. And besides. Dash likes it when I take shots at him. That’s how he knows I haven’t forgotten he exists.” He huffs out a soft breath of laughter,

looking up at me from underneath his dark brows. I can't remember another time when Pax has looked at me so directly. Addressed me so directly. With intent. "You *did* defend me in there," he says. "Why would you do that?"

His question takes me by surprise. Not that he would ask it. That he doesn't already know the answer. "Presley adores you. She always has. But you? It took you a while to get there, but you worship the ground she walks on. I saw it at the academy. I heard it in your speech at graduation. I've witnessed it in your actions. You dropped everything on a dime and traveled across the country to go check on her because you knew something was up. And when you found out what was going on, you didn't run. You showed up for her. So long as you *keep* showing up for her, I'll keep showing up for you."

He chews on this, his jaw working as he thinks. After a long beat, he looks up at me again and his edge of defiance has returned. "You know, you're not half bad, Carrie Mendoza."

For what feels like the fifth time in the past thirty minutes, Pax Davis surprises me. "Likewise. Now I'm gonna go before you somehow fuck this up and make me mad at you again. I'll be back with a sandwich for Pres in a second. Maybe you could give her some space until she's done eating. She doesn't need you watching her chew every last mouthful."

"That's fair," Pax says.

I begin to make my way down the stairs, heading for the kitchen.

"Hey, Mendoza?"

I stop and turn on the fourth step. "Yeah?"

Pax grins wickedly. "Don't worry. I won't tell Lovett that you said I was hot."

"Jesus Christ. You just couldn't let it slide, could you."

PRESLEY

I FEEL BETTER. I hate to admit it, but I do. With Carrie watching me like a hawk, I ate everything on my plate, and miracle upon miracles, I've kept the food down this time, too. Two whole hours pass after I finish the grilled cheese, and my stomach isn't even grumbling. I'm so used to the twisting, rolling nausea that its absence leaves me feeling...well, frankly, I feel like a million bucks.

The sun's hanging low in the sky, cradled on the canopy of the trees out of the window, when sleep takes me. It's dark in Pax's bedroom when I wake, the sound of my cell phone chirping persistently on the pillow beside my head.

I answer, mentally cringing at the sight of my father's smiling face lit up on the screen. "Hi, Dad. I'm sorry, I know I said in the note I left that I'd call in the morning. I—I've just been so tired. The day kind of got away from me."

His voice is so warm and familiar; I instantly feel like I'm five years old again, being comforted after a bad fall. "It's okay, kiddo. I knew you were safe."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I've got Pax's number. I've been hassling him for updates."

Pax? Dad has Pax's cell phone number? What an alien concept. I can't even begin to imagine what their text messages are like to each other. Dad's not the type to make small talk, and Pax? Well, he's not the type to refrain from being abhorrent to people he sees as authority figures. I groan as I picture how stilted and awful their communication must be. "Oh god. I hope you were nice to him. I hope *he* was nice to *you*."

Dad laughs tensely. "Well. Y'know. We've been managing."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we're mad as hell at each other but trying not to be assholes because we both love you very much."

"That's very magnanimous of you."

"I *do* have every right to be shitty with the guy, y'know. The dumb bastard *did* knock up my teenage daughter."

Oh boy. This isn't the kind of chat I ever want to have with my father. "He didn't do it on purpose, Dad."

"Is that supposed to make it better somehow?"

"No. I—" I press my fingertips into my forehead, screwing my eyes shut. "It doesn't make it better. But I'm just as much to blame as he is."

"Oh, believe me. I'm aware of *that*. Don't you worry. I'm mad at you, too." He laughs tightly. He's joking. Kind of. "I worried you might be eating dinner or something. I just wanted to call and hear your voice. It's one thing being told your daughter's fine, but you never really believe it 'til you hear it for yourself. That probably doesn't make sense, but..."

"It does," I murmur. "I'm glad you checked in on me. Thanks, Dad. How are you holding up? I'm sorry I made you go get all of that stuff for me and then bailed while you were gone. That was bad manners."

"Don't apologize, sweetheart. I wasn't helping, hovering over you all of the time. I'm assuming you'll be back here on Thursday, anyway, right?"

"Thursday?"

“Thanksgiving, sweetheart. I’m doing a set menu special at the restaurant in the evening, but I’m doing a late brunch for you and me before that. I’m making all of your favorites. Pax can pick you up when we’re done. I suppose it’d be okay if he joined us for desert—”

“Whoa, whoa. Dad. I’m—I’m sorry, but I’m not excluding Pax from anything I do on Thanksgiving. I’ll be spending the whole day with him. I’d like to spend it with both of you, but if things are going to be awkward—”

“I’m your *family*, Presley.”

“So is *he*.” I’m going to fucking scream. I swear, if he says something shitty, I’m going to lose my ever-loving mind.

“All right. Okay. I can see now isn’t the best time to talk about this. You’re tired. I don’t wanna fight. We’ll figure out a compromise later. We still have a couple of days—”

“Dad.”

“And we’ll talk about getting you back to college as well. At Sarah Lawrence. No more of this Alaska nonsense. And no more talk of quitting, either.”

“I’ve already done all the paperwork.”

“It isn’t too late. I’ve made some calls and—”

“*DAD!*”

He finally stops.

“I have a monster headache. I *cannot* do this right now. Can we talk tomorrow, please?”

My father knows I don’t have a headache, but he has the good sense to accept the lie. “If...that’s what you need, sweetheart. I’ll be here when you want to discuss it all some more.”

“Cool.”

“Okay, then. Get a good night’s sleep. Love you, kiddo.”

“Love you, too.”

I hang up, and the line goes dead.

“That sounded fun.”

The voice comes out of the shadows on the other side of the room, startling the life out of me. I gasp, nearly rolling out of the damn bed in my surprise. “Pax! Holy shit, I didn’t know you were there!”

He moves, giving away his location. Sitting in the high-backed chair next to the window, he’s nothing more than the charcoal outline of a man. I can’t see his face, but I can feel his energy now—how have I missed it until now? —and it does *not* feel good.

“School, Chase? You’re quitting *school*?” he rumbles.

“Oh, come on. *You’re* gonna lecture me on dropping out of college? You decided not to go!”

“That’s not the same and you know it.” He stands, emerging out of the darkness, shrouded in shadows like some wicked wraith. He’s shirtless. Barefoot. A pair of thin black sweatpants hang from his hips, the material riding dangerously low, displaying the beginnings of well-maintained dark hair, trailing below the waistband. Even with so little light to see by, Pax Davis looks like a wrathful god.

My heart thunders in my chest as his eyes—hard and angry—lock onto mine. “I’m not built like you,” he clips out.

“I can see that.”

“I’m not *academic*. I learn better through a more vocational approach. I’m still studying. I’m still learning. What’s the plan, Chase? You just gonna stay here in Mountain Lakes with your dad. Gonna live in that house, haunted by the memories of what happened to you there, while the world moves on without you?”

“Whoa, now. That’s not fair! You might wanna give me a break here. I’ve kinda been dealt a shitty hand if you hadn’t notic—”

“No, I won’t give you a break. Thousands of other women get pregnant young and still

get their degrees. A lot of them do it alone. With no help from their families or their partners. You have your family's support. You have your boyfriend's support. But you haven't decided if you're even gonna have this baby yet, Chase. You're just fucking giving up, and for no good reason."

My cheeks burst into flames. My whole body does. I *must* be on fire, the way my skin feels like it's scorching right off my bones. "Please don't talk to me like that."

"Like I'm mad at you? Like I'm frustrated? Confused by you? Like I can't fucking figure you out?" he hisses.

"Yes!"

The harsh look on his face hardens. I can just about make out his expression, and the cold fury in his eyes makes me want to shrink back under the covers and hide from him. But...then all of it seems to fall away. The anger. The tension in his shoulders. All of it just...dissolves.

He sinks down onto the edge of the bed and twists so that he's facing me. "Take off your shirt," he commands.

"What?"

"Take. Off. Your. Shirt."

I wrap my arms around myself protectively. "I don't think that now's the time for—"

"I want to see you," he says. "Your sweats and your underwear, too. All of it. Off. Now. I want to see your body."

"I..." I don't know what to say. I'm so fucking turned around.

"Are you gonna lie to me? Are you gonna tell me that you don't love me anymore? You don't wanna fuck me anymore?"

"Of course I do!"

"I *know* you do," he says, his voice rough. "So take off your fucking clothes. I want to see you." Quickly standing, he grabs hold of the waistband of his own pants and tears them down his legs, kicking out of

them. It takes all but a second for him to be standing naked and proud in front of me. I can't tear my eyes away from the perfection of him.

It's been months since we had sex last. And pregnancy has done the wildest things to my hormones. I haven't even admitted it to myself properly, but in amongst all of the morning sickness and feeling bloated, my body has been filled with electricity. I've wanted him so badly. Fantasized about him. Had the wildest dreams, where I've imagined his hands on my body, his tongue between my legs, and I've woken soaked with sweat and slick between my thighs.

Do I want him? Hell yes, I want him. I've needed him for weeks, and no amount of time with my vibrator has come close to sating that need.

Rain patters lightly at the windows again. Outside, thunder rumbles. A flicker of light illuminates the forest, and for a split second, Pax's face is limned in silver. His eyes look like molten metal. With the muscles popping and flexing at his jaw, he takes his already erect cock in one hand and then grabs my face by the chin with the other. "Look at it," he orders.

I wouldn't be able to stop myself from obeying, even if I wanted to. And I don't. I've been full of pain and uncertainty for so long. Full of fear and doubt. The second I opened the room to my dorm back in Fairbanks, the pain and uncertainty left. A soaring hope replaced all of the fear. Lord, I've never been so relieved in all my life. I imagined falling into Pax's arms. What it would be like to feel safe again there, knowing that so long as he held me, nothing could hurt me. For a blissful moment, I was finally at peace again. But then he'd seen my stomach, and I'd realized what I'd done.

I should have been honest.

I should have told the truth.

My fear has cost me so much. I thought for sure it had cost me *this*. Never in a million years did I think he'd want to sleep with me again, but now that he's naked in front of me, that surge of hope has returned.

And he's beautiful. So fucking beautiful. Like a force of nature, awesome and terrible. I can't tear my eyes away from him. His cock is hard, standing proud, jutting from his body, the crown bobbing slightly. I'm fascinated by the sight of it. How can he be this fucking perfect?

Pax strokes his erect length, the skin shifting, silken, as he rubs his hand up and down. A small bead of pre-come forms at his tip, welling before it rolls over the swollen head of his cock and runs down his shaft.

"You made a show of your confidence. You told me that we were more than just a quick fuck. You made me *believe* you. I fell in love with you," he says, straining over the word as he tightens his grip on his cock, rubbing himself faster. "And then you just bail? You think you can abandon ship at the first sign of rough fucking seas? No. You see this?" he says, tilting my head down, forcing me to look at his cock. "This is yours. It can never be anyone else's. You want another girl sucking this?"

"No..."

"*Fucking* this?"

I can't breathe. God, I feel like I might die. The thought of someone else touching him. Of him kissing some other girl. Even looking at another girl... My eyes prick sharply as I shake my head. "No."

"Then take your fucking clothes off and claim what's yours. *Right. Fucking. Now.*"

I am bone-dry tinder, his words a flaring match. No sooner have they left his mouth than I am popping up to my knees, tearing the hoody I'm wearing over my head. My hands shake as I unclasp my bra. They tremble further still as I tug my pants down and then kick out of my underwear. I'm shaking with nerves and anticipation as I launch myself at Pax, wrapping my arms around his neck. Smoothly, forcefully, he pulls me to him, crushing me against the carved, muscular lines of his bare chest, and his mouth crashes down onto mine.

Magazines. Billboards. Even a commercial or two...

I've seen Pax half-naked in print and on video, repping a multitude of brands, staring down the lens of a camera like it's the scope of a rifle and he means his audience dead. None of that compares to real life. The strength of him as he holds me close. The fresh scent of mint and winter air. The taste of him, heady and addicting, as he sweeps his tongue past my lips and explores my mouth.

I melt for him.

I surrender.

"Silly girl," he breathes into the crook of my neck, as he leaves a burning trail of kisses in his wake. "You think you get to decide when this is done? You're mine." He kisses the hollow at the base of my throat. Licks me there, tasting me. "Mine." He grazes his teeth over my collarbone, sinking them into flesh and bone just enough to make me hiss. "*Mine*." I cry out when his teeth find more sensitive flesh, just below the shell of my ear. He bites me hard enough that I kick my head back, letting out a ragged moan as he marks me with his mouth.

Fingers weaving into my hair, he lets out a strained sigh as he angles my head toward him, bringing his lips to my ear so that he can whisper to me. "I made you a ring." His breath fans hot over my skin, making me shiver. "Months ago. Before graduation. I learned how to tie, braid, and knot it on YouTube, for fuck's sake—"

What the? I need to look him in the eyes. Is he being serious? He isn't. He can't be. There's no...there's no way. Pax holds me in place, though, preventing me from moving, his cock digging into my swollen belly as he continues to whisper into my ear.

"Your dad made me promise to wait, but fuck that, Chase. I'm *not* waiting. We're fated, you and me. Your heart is mine to cherish. Your body is mine to worship. Your soul is mine to keep."

My brain has stopped working. I can't...even...think.

Pax pulls back, and the brilliant fire burning in his eyes takes my breath away. “And this?” he says, taking my hand and bringing it to the center of his chest, right over his heart. “You claim this? You want it for your own, more than anything you’ve ever wanted before?”

“Yes.” Jesus. I imbue the word with all of the conviction and strength I possess. It comes out so softly, though, like I’m winded and can’t catch my breath.

Pax nods sharply, just once. His nostrils flare, jaw working as he moves my hand southward, wrapping my fingers around his cock. “And this? This is yours, Chase?” he demands.

“Yes.”

“Then that just leaves the matter of *my* soul,” he says resolutely. “You showed me that I still had one, you *unbelievably* infuriating woman, and I already gave it to you months ago. So there, you have it all, then. There’s nothing else left for me to give.” He falls on me like a tidal wave. A storm. He shoves me back onto the bed, catching me at the last minute so that I’m spared a jarring landing.

Shoving my legs open, he positions himself between them, but he doesn’t immediately thrust his way inside me. His hand slips between our bodies, and I hiss at the contact, my eyes rolling back into my head. He knows exactly where to touch me...

The world comes apart at the seams.

I am a lightning rod, struck.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he groans.

In the dark, he strokes and rolls my clit with quickening motions until I’m vibrating in his arms—it feels as though I’m slipping in and out of reality, unable to maintain my physical form as I rise, float, transcend...

Oh my god. Ho—holy shit, I’m going to break.

It’s too much: the sensation building between my legs, fluttering upward into my belly; the reassuring nearness of him, holding himself over me; the

weight of the words he just whispered into my hair. It all closes in on me as the wave of pleasure reaches its crescendo, slamming through my body, and I scream as I come, wordless and overwhelmed.

I'm going to cry. My emotions have been unpredictable of late, but I know within a second of taking my first gasped breath post climax that I'm about to sob out loud.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I do not want to cry.

Don't fucking do it.

Please, do not fucking cry.

"Let it go," Pax commands. "Silly girl. Silly..." He peppers my forehead with featherlight kisses in between words. "Little. Girl."

He gives me permission to fall apart; he holds me together while I do.

When my tears begin to ebb, Pax works himself deeper between my legs, setting himself against my hips. The pressure of his rock-hard cock sliding upward over my clit puts an end to my crying once and for all.

He feels so good. "Oh. Oh, shit. Pax..."

My heart swells, throbbing, out of rhythm behind my ribs when he very carefully gathers the strands of my hair, plastered to my cheeks by my tears, and sweeps them back out of my face. Pax—a guy *deeply* fond of breaking things—displaying such determination to be gentle? It *kills* me.

"I'm gonna hold you down and fuck you now, Chase. And I'm gonna tell you all of the depraved, dirty, filthy shit I'm gonna do to you the *next* time we fuck. And the next time. And the next time. You got a problem with that?"

Mute, I shake my head. I want that so bad I can taste it. I—

"Oh my god!"

He rolls his hips forward, sinking himself inside me, and my vision flares. For a moment, I somehow believe that my focus, sharpened to a

burning white point, has given me the ability to see in the dark. The room glows silvery-white, stark shadows climbing-jumping-dancing up the walls.

It's just the lightning.

Thunder crashes directly overhead, rattling the windows in their panes.

Buried balls-deep inside me, Pax pins my hands above my head by the wrist and growls into my ear. "I'm gonna fuck my come so deep inside you, Chase. I'm gonna fill your sweet little cunt up with my come and you're not gonna be able to do a thing about it. Are you?"

We've toyed with this line before. Pax would never fuck me without my consent. Never. Not after what happened with Jonah. But sometimes...a sick part of me *likes* this. I want to be vulnerable. Weak. At his mercy. A fucked-up part of my brain sees this as a reframing, in a way. I *give* Pax the power to do this to me. He never takes it. It gives me back the control over my body that someone else stole from me once. Messed up logic? Yes. Most definitely. But it brings me a strange kind of peace.

Pax's grip tightens on my wrists. "When I tell you to open your mouth, you open your mouth. When I tell you to spread your legs and show me your pussy, you spread them. When I tell you I want you on your knees with your ass in the air, you're gonna give me what I want. Yes?"

"Yes," I pant.

"Good girl."

I nearly *die*. Praise from Pax Davis is like a glass of ice-cold water when you've been wandering the desert. I can't fucking handle it.

He slowly inches back his hips, drawing himself out of me, and the friction between us, his body rubbing against my clit, makes me shudder uncontrollably.

"In the morning, when you're already sore from me fucking you, I'm going to shove you up against the sink in the bathroom, and I'm going to hold you just...like...this...." he says, baring his teeth. "And you're going to watch. You're gonna watch me rail the fuck out of you. My hands on

your tits. My fingers rubbing your pussy. You're gonna lock eyes with me in that mirror, and you're gonna see how fucking turned on I am as I shove my dick into you *again*, and *again*, and *again*..." He slams himself into me as he repeats the words, not holding back.

"Fuck, Pax. Oh my fucking god. That feels—that feels..."

"You feel my cock inside you? Hmm? You feel how fucking hard I am for you?"

"Yes. Yes! Oh my god."

Pax dips down, cupping my breast in his hand, snarling as he sucks my nipple into his mouth. He doesn't comment on the size of my boobs, but I know that he notices. It's hard not to. They're much fuller than they were the last time we had sex. And far, far more sensitive. He groans again, burying his face into my chest, biting a little more gently this time, though still hard enough to make me lock up, fisting the bedsheets underneath me.

Releasing a feral growl, he bites my collarbone instead, harder, his teeth clamping around bone hard enough that I am definitely going to be marked there, too. The pressure of his teeth dances right on the border between pleasure and pain, and holy shit do I like it.

Continuing to fuck me, rolling his hips on top of me, Pax takes me by the jaw again, tipping my head down so that I have to look at him.

"I'm going to tease and fuck every single one of your holes, Chase. I'm gonna finger fuck you while I eat your ass. I'm gonna slide my cock so far down your throat that you'll be wearing your mascara on your cheeks." He licks his lips, desire burning hot in his gaze as he wets his fingers and then slides them into my mouth. With his index finger and middle finger, he hooks the inside of my cheek, forcing my mouth open wider. "And when you can't take it anymore, when you're begging me to let you come, I'm going to fuck that tight little asshole of yours until you climb the fucking walls and name me God."

"Pax! Fuck, Pax, I'm—I'm—"

He grins mercilessly, an unforgiving glimmer dancing in his eyes that sends a spike of adrenalin careening through my veins. Goddamn, he is the hottest thing I've ever witnessed. I run my hand over his shaved head, relishing the prickle of his shorn hair, but Pax tuts disappointedly, pinning my hands above my head again.

"Touching me is a privilege," he rumbles. "You can earn that right back once you've serviced me on your knees. For now, you'd better keep your hands where I damn well put them. Understand?"

My heart pounds, stumbling out of control. My throat is so dry, I can't speak. I—

Pax drives himself home, baring his teeth and he spears me onto the end of his dick. "Do you understand?" he repeats.

"I understand! I—I—*ah!*" I have minutes left of this. Maybe only seconds. He's driving me to the point of madness. I need to come. My body reaches for release, but just as I am about to topple over the edge of the precipice I stand on and go hurtling into the blissful abyss, Pax leans back, sitting upright. His strong hands take me by the hips, and he jerks me toward him, so that my legs are wrapped around his waist. Still inside me, he rocks himself deeper, hitting a part of me that feels so fucking intense that I let out a startled yelp. My mind goes blank when he rolls my clit with his thumb, working it in tight circles as he fucks me.

"You feel this?" He applies gentle pressure on my lower stomach with his free hand, right above my pubic bone.

Suddenly, his erection buried inside me, rubbing against a *highly* sensitive part of pussy, and the rolling pleasure of him stroking my clit, is amplified ten-fold; it's as though a low current of energy has been coursing through me this whole time, but someone just cranked the current up to eleven. I squirm against the multitude of sensations that collide in my lower belly wall.

"*Answer me.*" There's a warning in Pax's tone.

“I feel it. Yeah, oh ho, ho, ho, holy shit. That’s so...so *intense*. Fuck!”

“This is how I’m gonna make you squirt all over my cock, Chase.”

I open my eyes wide, glaring at him in horror. “No! It’ll...make...make a...”

He pinches the inside of my thigh, shaking his head chidingly. “Don’t you *dare* tell me you don’t wanna make a mess.”

“But...the bed...”

“It’s *my* fucking bed. I can do whatever I want in it. If I want you to baptize me in your pussy juices and soak right through these sheets, then that’s what you’re damn well gonna do.”

I *can’t* do this for him. I’ve never done it before. Not that I’ve tried, but —

Holy fucking shit!

My mouth falls open, my back arching away from the bed, as Pax slams himself harder into me, rubbing my clit faster, more of a flicking than a rubbing motion now. It feels...so different. I want...fuck, I don’t know what I want, but the building tension in my body feels strange, and hot, and like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.

“Lift your hips.” Pax pulls out of me, sliding himself free for a moment.

“Huh?”

“Lift your hips, Chase. Do it.”

I adopt bridge pose, a brief summer of yoga classes kicking into play, not quite sure what he wants from me or why. While my ass is in the air, Pax slides a pillow underneath me. “Down,” he orders.

I let my hips sink back down, and the moment he thrusts back into me, a low, guttural growl issuing from his throat, I know that I’m in big, big trouble. That wild, new pressure I felt when he was fucking me? Yeah, that’s a million percent more intense now. When Pax places the heel of his palm against my lower stomach again, applying that steady, even pressure, I feel like I’m going to explode.

“PAX!”

I forgot that he'd been stroking my clit. He sets his fingers to work again, as if what he's doing isn't already driving me mad, and I light up like a fucking signal flare.

“Oh shit. That feels...fuck, Pax. I'm going to...I'm go—I can't—” I come, a blinding light splintering my mind, and Pax lets out a savage snarl of victory.

My eyes roll back into my head.

I'm no longer in control of my body. I convulse, spasms wracking me, contorting my spine, as a gushing wet sensation erupts out of me. A part of me is mortified—a part I pay absolutely no attention to as I am sucked deeper, pulled under, my climax claiming me.

“Yes! Good girl. Good fucking girl. Holy hell, Chase. That's it. Give in to it.” His voice is rough, laden with lust. The hand pressing down on my stomach eases back, and a shockwave of pins and needles riot through my body, another, smaller orgasm chasing on the heels of the earth-shattering one that just blindsided me.

“I can feel you clenching,” Pax says breathlessly. “God, your pussy's so fucking tight. Fuck. I'm gonna come, too.” He bows over me, resting his forehead against mine as he surges forward, angling himself deep. I am so, so full of him. I drown in Pax, his hands roving freely all over my body now as he drives himself into me like a freight train. The smell of him—the faintest scent of sweat and his endorphins—makes me want to cling to him. To wrap my arms and legs around him and to hold on to him for dear life. So I do.

His heart thunders against my chest as he groans. The groan transitions into a fierce, wordless roar that rips out of his throat as he comes.

In the deafening silence that follows, neither of us says a word. We both pant, holding each other, catching our breath. After a time, Pax pushes himself up, guiding himself backward, pulling out of me, and I become

painfully aware of the slickness between my thighs. I should *not* be that wet. Shit, did I actually...

“Don’t look so freaked out. You were fucking magnificent.”

I look up at Pax to find him very, very still, sitting on his heels, his abs and his quads glistening with sweat, and...and god only knows what else. He watches me with a bizarre look on his face, his brows drawn. And then I realize that he’s staring at my stomach.

My small but undeniable bump.

“If you’re worried about how hard you were fucking me—” I begin to say, but he laughs sharply, shaking his head.

“What has *ever* given you the impression that I don’t know what I’m doing, Presley Maria Witton Chase? The female body was built to withstand childbirth. I’m big, but I think your pussy is more than capable of handling a little abuse from my cock without suffering any ill effects. And I made sure I wasn’t leaning on your uterus.”

I’m transfixed by him. He takes my breath away, for god’s sake. His cheeks are unusually flushed. I’ve seen him a little hooped after sex, but this seems different somehow. His full lips tilt up to one side, and an awful realization hits me: he’s thinking about what’s inside my belly.

Covers. Where are the covers? I need to cover myself up. I need to hide. He got me so turned on that I forgot about the human being that I’m growing inside of me. Now that my post-orgasm glow is fading, I am all too aware of my body. I don’t want him to see me like this.

As if he knows exactly what’s going through my mind, Pax grabs a handful of his rumpled duvet and rips it out of my reach. Not content that I can’t lunge for it anymore, he gathers it in his arms and dumps it on the floor, where he knows for sure I won’t be able to get it.

“I regretted saving your life, y’know. Last year, before I knew you.” The statement comes out of nowhere—a total gut punch.

“Gee, *thanks*.”

He huffs, ignoring me. “I didn’t regret that you’d survived. I regretted that *I* was the one who’d saved you. I kept telling myself someone else would have come along and helped. Someone else would have found you and carried you, broken and bleeding, inside that hospital. You were everywhere I fucking looked after that night. In the hallways. In my classes. In my fucking *head*. Everywhere I went, day or night, there you were. And you were so determined to be my friend. You wanted *more* from me. You expected me to be a good man. You fucking demanded that from me, so I found a way. It’s not in my nature, this, Chase. Loving you doesn’t come naturally to me. I *chose* it. I worked to be good enough for you. I didn’t just carve out a spot for you to exist inside my heart. I had to take fucking defibrillator paddles to the damn thing and force it to function again. And then I *gave* it to you, whatever that’s worth.”

“It’s worth a lot. So much...” I whisper.

“Then fucking prove that to me. *Show me*. Show me that I didn’t waste my time becoming a better man for you, Presley. I’ve been the villain in every story ever told about me. Just...for once, *let me be the fucking good guy*. Trust that I love you. Trust that I’ve got your back. Trust that this won’t break me, won’t break *us*. Let me be a fucking father to this kid. Let me take care of you. Let me—”

“Whoa!” I scramble back, reaching for something, *anything* to cover myself with; he might have gotten rid of the duvet but there are still plenty of pillows. I try to cover myself with one of those, but Pax lets out a monumental sigh, tired of my shit, and rips it away from me. Grabbing me by the ankles, he pulls me down the bed, toward him. I yelp, writhing, doing my damndest to free myself, but it’s no use. He’s so much bigger than me, he doesn’t even need to try. Gently, he cups the curve of my belly with his hand, giving me a meaningful, pointed look.

“I might have kept my opinions to myself before this, but it’s too late now. I see the way *our* baby is changing your body. And I *want* it,” he says,

his voice cracking with emotion. “I fucking want it so bad I can taste it.”

“*Pax.*”

“And unless you’ve already forgotten, you just agreed to marry me while we were fucking—”

“Your dick was inside me, Pax! I’ll agree to anything while your dick is inside me!”

His jaw works, his nostrils flaring. “So you don’t want to marry me, then?”

“I didn’t say that! I—I—” Why is he like this? Why does he have to be so obstinate and difficult all of the time? My eyes burn, tears threatening to fall. I’m so all over the place. I can’t force the chaos in my mind to quiet, yet Pax sits opposite me, so still, so calm, so determined. He leans forward, cupping my cheek in his hand, placing a careful, gentle kiss on my forehead.

“You told Carrie you were afraid of losing me, but I’m here promising you that you won’t. I want to marry you. I want this baby. Why don’t you have a think on that? Let me know when you’ve made a decision.” With that, he grabs his sweatpants from where he discarded them on the floor, silently puts them on, and leaves.

ELODIE

“IT’S TRADITION. YOU HAVE TO.”

“I don’t *have* to do shit,” Pax grumbles, pulling a face at Dash. “What would you know, anyway? You’re English. You people don’t even celebrate Thanksgiving.”

“Just say something so we can go around the table,” Dash huffs, rolling his eyes.

I look around the dining table, an unexpected warmth washing over me. I haven’t done anything for Thanksgiving since my mother was alive. It was usually just me and her. My father was never around for the holidays, no matter where we were, and that’s exactly how we liked it. Mom and I would make giant roast turkey subs and go eat them on a beach, or in a park, or at a lake. At Christmas, we’d eat popcorn, watch movies, and give each other dumb little gifts that we handmade for each other. After she’d died, I did my best to go home with friends at the holidays. It was safer than trying to hide in my room with my father prowling around the house, drunk.

Today, I’m with friends, and for the first time in forever, I have a beautiful future to look forward to. Before us, the table groans under the weight of all of the food that we’ve made.

Unbelievably, Wren stepped up and took charge of the turkey. Not only did he not burn it, but it looks and smells amazing, the meat already carved

off the bone and stacked high, ready to eat. Dash and Carrie made the green bean casserole and the cornbread. I roasted some potatoes and carrots, and sprouts. Pax dropped Presley off at her dad's place and they stayed there most of the morning—a compromise Pres had to make to keep her father happy—so they got out of most of the heavy lifting when it came down to the food prep, but Pax still managed to mash some potatoes, and Presley made a gallon of gravy that smells so good, I want to pour it into my wine glass and damn well drink it.

“Fine,” Pax says, scowling around the table. “I’m grateful that I only have to do dumb shit like this once a year. And...I’m grateful that I get to do it with *you* idiots,” he adds begrudgingly.

“That’s sweet,” Carrie says. Sitting on the other side of Pax, she clinks her beer bottle against his, teasingly saying, “My sentiments exactly. I’ll word it a little more delicately, though. I am grateful for friends who are as dear to me as family. I’m grateful for amazing food and a beautiful house to gather in. I’m grateful for all of the adventures to come—”

“All right, all right. You didn’t win an Oscar. This isn’t a fucking acceptance speech,” Pax grouses. “Jacobi. You’re up.”

“I’m grateful my asshole sister isn’t here.” He’s deadpan. Means it with every fiber of his being. He shared some other, far more graphic things he was grateful for this morning, whispering them into my ear while he fingered me until I came. His hair is tamed for once, swept back in thick, lush black waves that fall artfully around his face. The flecks of paint that normally dot his skin are nowhere to be seen. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, his shirt black, of course. His features transform as Dash says something, his mouth lifting into a genuine smile, his startlingly green eyes dancing with mirth, and my heart performs a backflip at the sight of him like this. Carefree. Easier than he has been in weeks. He’s been in a good mood ever since it was announced in the news that Wesley Fitzpatrick was taken back into custody yesterday morning.

It's my turn. I have so much to be grateful for, but really it all boils down to two things for me: "I'm grateful my father packed me off to Wolf Hall Academy. If he hadn't, I never would have met any of you. And now, I'm very, very, *very* grateful that he's dead."

Some people might balk at such a macabre statement, but the people sitting around this table understand what it's like to suffer at the hands of people who are supposed to care about them. Each and every one of them has overcome dark, fucked-up shit in their pasts, and each one of them has come through the other side of it, still swinging.

"I'm grateful for Jell-O," Presley says, spooning a tiny amount of the dessert into her mouth. She's been craving it for the past few days. It's actually all she's been able to eat. She came down to breakfast looking extra pale this morning. Her dad had tried to guilt her into eating a bunch of food for lunch, and she'd returned to Riot House, very green around the gills. The Jell-O seems to be helping, though.

Dash clears his throat, raising his glass of champagne in the air, holding it aloft. "I'm grateful that Pax has already volunteered to do the dishes."

"I fucking did *not*."

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Dash continues, ignoring the vile look Pax hurls at him. "Let's dig in before it gets cold!"

In following with the trend over the past week, the weather outside continues to worsen as we dive into dinner. Rain hammers at the windows, wind buffeting the house. Out of the huge floor-to-ceiling windows in the dining room, the forest rocks and sways, the sea of trees cavorting in the storm as lightning flashes and thunder snarls in the distance.

"Looks like the end of the world out there," Carrie notes, as we all clear the plates and dishes into the kitchen when we're done eating. "Thank god this place is on a hillside. The ground floor would be under a foot of water by now, surely."

“The school’s probably swamped,” Wren says. Right as he says this, forks of lightning ripple across the sky, illuminating the clouds...and an explosive BANG! Rocks the very ground beneath our feet. A brilliant flare of light rips through the kitchen, seeming to come after the ear-splitting sound, and a bolt of lightning lashes the top of the mountain.

“Holy *fffffuck!*” Pax yelps.

“Jesus.” Presley holds her hands to her face, covering her eyes. “I was looking right at that.”

I was, too. I can still see the outline of the jagged filament of electricity lancing down from the heavens, burned into my retinas.

“That touched down,” Dash observes. “No way it didn’t. I think it struck the academy.”

“Seriously?” Carrie looks concerned.

“*Awesome.*” Pax does *not* look concerned.

“Think we should go up there and make sure no one was hurt?” I ask. Fair enough, I can’t say my time at Wolf Hall was easy. I was thrilled at the prospect of never laying eyes on the place again after graduation. You couldn’t bribe me to go up there under normal circumstances, but if lightning did just strike the school and someone’s been injured, I’d never forgive myself...

Wren goes back through to the living room. We all follow after him, watching as he stands at the window, cupping his hands against the glass, peering out into the stormy night. “There’s probably no one up there,” he says, his breath fogging up the glass. They don’t let boarders stay over the breaks anymore. New policy. I bet the place is deserted.”

“There’s *got* to be someone up there. A night guard or someone from maintenance carrying out repairs while there’s no one around,” Carrie says. “I’m with Elodie. I say we should go check it out.”

Dash joins Wren, squinting into the dark, but the glass just keeps fogging, blotting out the view up the mountain. “I say we make sure the

place isn't on *fire*, at least," he says.

"I say we *set* it on fire if it isn't," Pax counters.

No one humors him with a response.

Wren turns away from the window, sliding his hands into his pockets.

"We drawing lots then? It's still pissing down out there."

"I'm going." I can't bear the thought of sitting here, waiting to find out what's going on up there.

"Me, too," Carrie adds.

Presley sets her jaw, rubbing her left shoulder, working her fingers into the joint as she heads toward the front door. "Yep. Count me in."

"You're not feeling great, Chase. You should stay here and rest." Pax is the voice of reason for once, but Presley shakes her head, long red hair swaying. The look of determination in her eyes brooks no argument. "I'm not an invalid. Everyone else is going, so I'm going."

Pax considers arguing, I think, but his girlfriend's steely expression dissuades him from opening his mouth again. "All right. First sign of you feeling off and we're coming right back. You already said you were feeling dizzy."

"A dizzy spell won't kill me, for crying out loud. The fresh air will probably make me feel better. Come on. Let's go."

WE DRIVE IN TWO CARS. It's two miles up a winding, switchback road to Wolf Hall, and the rain's showing no signs of abating. No sense in walking up and getting soaked to the skin. A hundred feet before the academy driveway proper, the huge iron gate bearing the school's crest and name

stands locked across the roadway, preventing us from going any further. I've never even seen the gate *closed* let alone locked. Pax and Presley pull up in his car first, the brake lights of the Charger glowing red orbs up ahead, lighting up the streaking rain. In Dash and Carries' rental, we come to a stop behind them.

"Looks like we have to walk from here," Dash says.

The school looms up ahead, as foreboding as ever. The place hasn't changed at all since we left, which is hardly surprising. It's only been five months. The same ivy still chokes the stonework. The flying buttresses still prop up their stone statues. The pinnacles, and pointed archways, and sloping wings of the school remain as they ever were. The elaborate stained-glass windows stand in darkness, no light from the interior to illuminate them as we get out of the car, all of us drawing our jackets tight around us against the elements. As if determined to drench us down to our underwear, a gust of wind sends the onslaught of fat raindrops lashing at us sideways, driving into our faces as we approach the gate.

"I don't think we should climb over," I say. I'm not afraid of heights. I'd do it, but let's be smart about this. There's no way the gate can be opened from the other side—not that I can see, anyway—and the chances of slipping, falling, and breaking an ankle as we try and scale down the wet, slippery wrought iron on the other side are high indeed.

"This thing's pointless," Pax says, jerking his head to the left, toward the forest. "It's only to stop vehicles. Not very good at keeping people out if you don't bother extending the fence all the way around the property now, is it?" Extending a hand, he reaches for Presley and guides her close behind him, showing excessive care as he leads her into the trees.

In a second, they're gone, swallowed by the gloom and the rain that comes down even harder now, sheets of water crashing down on the blacktop.

“If anyone knows how to break in, it’s Pax,” Wren says, shrugging. “He spent so much time sneaking *out* of the academy that he knows all of Wolf Hall’s access points.” His collar is popped against the weather, and his black curls are wet, rainwater beading and dropping from the tips of his wet hair, but from the unbothered look on his face, you could almost surmise that he hadn’t even noticed that it was raining. “Feeling brave?” he asks, shooting me a devilish grin.

“Sure. Why not.”

I follow him into the forest, his hand holding mine tight. Carrie and Dash are right behind us. We leave the road behind, and the six of us disappear into the dark.

It doesn’t take Pax long to figure out a way in. The trees provide some shelter from the rain, but our feet are coated in slick mud by the time we all push our way through a small gap in the hedge that runs parallel to the lake. My Chuck Taylors will never be the same again. I can feel the mud squeezing between my toes as we strike out toward the main academy building, heads down, shoulders up around our ears, bracing against the cold.

“I think it’s safe to say the place isn’t on fire,” Pres shouts. “Even if it was, the rain will have put it out by now.” Strands of her hair plastered to her face, she holds her arm awkwardly as we trudge up the hill. Pax has to grab her twice to stop her from falling when she slips in on the water-logged grass.

I’m beginning to think that we’ve wasted our time coming up here. Carrie’s right. It would be pretty freaking hard for something to stay alight in this downpour. And it’s so hard to see anything, anyway. It’ll be virtually impossible to figure out if lightning *did* strike up here.

Dash jogs up to the main entrance of the school and tries the doors. Naturally, they’re locked. Every window is in darkness, sealed up tight. Every entryway locked. We hurry around the perimeter of the school,

searching for damage, but find none. “This is madness.” Pax glares up at the building, baring his teeth in annoyance. “Fuck this. There’s nothing to see here. There’s a bottle of whiskey with my name on it back at the house. Come on. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

No one argues with him. We’ve done our due diligence. There are no flames licking up the walls of Wolf Hall. No giant smoking hole in the side of the place. A hot shower and spiked hot chocolate are sounding mighty fucking good right now. Our small group gathers close, walking as quickly as is safe in the mud slick that has formed around the rear of the school, outside the old English department, when Wren slows his pace next to me. Lifting his head, he scans from left to right, searching the darkness.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I can smell smoke.”

Sure enough, when I inhale deeply through my nose, I can detect the acrid smell of smoke over the wet grass, and fresh dirt, and chemical reek of petrichor, courtesy of the electric storm still going strong in the sky above. Presley huddles into Pax’s side, scanning the shadows. “Where is it coming from?”

“Up ahead.” Pax points, but his eyes must be better than mine. I only see the pitch-black silhouette of the forest to our left, and the blocky, towering shape of the west wing of the academy to our right. We set off again, straight ahead...and it doesn’t take long to discover the source of the smoke. In the parking lot, a single car sits abandoned, half-parked beneath the branches of a massive live oak tree. One of the tree’s branches has sheared away from the trunk, charred and blackened, the width of the bough too wide for a man to wrap his arms around... and it has landed on the roof of the car. Curls of smoke rise from both the car and the tree. As we get closer, it’s clear that the lightning struck both at the same time; the paintwork on the side of the Subaru Outback is pock-marked and blistered,

bubbled up and streaked with a weird black pattern that looks like the jagged roots of a tree. The car is absolutely destroyed.

“Hot fucking damn.” Pax whistles.

“Hope no one was inside.” Pres hugs herself, ducking down to look inside the Subaru, but the gigantic tree limb has totally crushed the roof, making it impossible to see inside. She wobbles a little as she stands up again, momentarily losing her balance, and Pax’s morbid fascination with the wrecked car instantly morphs into a very serious concern.

“Right. That’s it. We’ve had our fun. This thing isn’t about to blow up, and this weather’s for the fucking birds. We’re getting you somewhere warm and dry. Now.”

“Yeah. Actually. I’m—I’m feeling a little—” She sways, her hand reaching out for something to grab onto, and nearly goes down.

“Jesus fucking Christ, what the fuck was I thinking,” Pax curses. He catches her up in his arms, scooping her up before she collapses. White as a sheet, Pax hisses through his teeth as he sets off at a fast walk, skirting around the parking lot, back toward the academy.

“Where are you going?” Carrie calls. “The cars are back that way!”

The remainder of our group takes off after him, jogging to keep up with Pax’s long strides. “He can’t carry her through the forest like that,” Dash says. “He’ll end up falling. It’s slippery as hell, and we can’t see a fucking thing.”

“And the cars are too far away, anyway,” Wren says grimly. “There isn’t time to hike back down to the gate. Presley needs to get warm *now*.”

“Well then, where the fuck are we going?” Carrie demands. Her tone is laden with an anxiety that’s started to steal along my bones, too, chilling me from the inside. Pres does not look good. Her hand hangs limply from her body as Pax charges off in the direction of the school’s rose gardens, her fingers uncurled and lifeless, her skin pale as alabaster.

“He’s heading for the maze,” Wren says tightly. “He’s taking her to the gazebo.”

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WREN

PAX KNOWS the route through the maze as well as me or Dash, but in his haste to find shelter, he misses a turn, leading us in the wrong direction. He growls like a dog, nearly taking my head off, spitting curse words as I grab him by the arm and steer him back the way we came.

“Calm the fuck down,” I snipe back, gesturing toward the left-hand turn we need to make. “You wanna get us really turned around in here, asshole? Go on. Go!”

I can’t blame him for being reactive. If it were Elodie lying unconscious in my arms, I’d be just as vicious and likely to snap. He needs to listen, though. This maze *is* big enough to cause a headache if we don’t stick to the right path. With all this rain, I don’t know if I could find the way to the gazebo before *all* of us catch pneumonia.

More lightning crackles across the sky, fingers of white light dragging through the clouds. With every flash of light, the tall hedge walls of the maze fall into sharp contrast, the academy rising out of the darkness. Pax constantly mutters under his breath, talking softly to Presley. With every turn we take, my focus remains locked on Elodie at my side.

Left.

Left.

Right.

Left.

The maze spits us out into a clearing at last. The small gazebo is exactly as I remember it—the fascia covered in rose vines and ivy, the shutters painted white, the pale blue wood trim turned a muted grey by the storm. Pax flies up the stone steps and reaches the door first, but his hands are full. Elodie rushes up behind him and turns the brass handle, and miraculously it opens—the door was never locked when we were students at Wolf Hall; I made fucking sure of it. This was *our* place. Well, mine, really. Once upon a time, it belonged to Fitz, but I made sure he knew that I’d commandeered it once I decided I wanted it. I wasn’t the type to share.

Inside, all the books I brought here are still sitting on the shelves. The comfortable, worn old white couches are still angled toward the open fireplace. Even the smell is the same. Everyone piles in, and Carina slams the door closed behind us, sealing out the weather.

“Someone start a fire,” Pax commands. I’m way ahead of him, though. The stack of chopped firewood by the hearth is dry—a small blessing, considering how unreliable I know the gazebo’s roof to be, and how heavy the rain has been coming down for the past week.

I scrunch up some newspaper and stuff it beneath the wood, lighting it with a match from the mason jar I put on the mantelpiece years ago. In under two minutes, there are flames licking at the wood, the fire strengthening. When I turn back to my friends, Presley has already regained consciousness, and she’s lying out on the couch, face incredibly pale, blinking owlishly up at everyone. Pax stands back, regarding Pres, his fist pressed into his mouth, eyes wild with concern. Elodie, Carrie, and Dash are all prodding at their cell phone screens, wearing matching frowns.

Shaking his head, Dash says, “It’s no good. There’s no service up here. The storm—”

“No. Absolutely fucking not,” Pax growls. “‘The storm took out the service tower’ is not coming out of your mouth right now. Just fuck off with

that.”

Presley reaches out, hand extended to Pax. She smiles at him, rolling her eyes. “Don’t start, please. I don’t *need* an ambulance. I feel fine now. I just got dizzy, is all. Just let me get warm. I’ll be okay to walk back to the car in half an hour or so.”

“You’re not walking anywhere.” Pax doesn’t take her hand; by the looks of things, he doesn’t want to be calmed. His anxiety is at a ten, the pressure inside of him building by the second. The slightest prod, and he’ll fucking blow. Again, I can’t say that I blame him. If he loves Presley a third as much as I love E, then the state he’s in is no great surprise. I’d be climbing the walls if this was Elodie. “You’re gonna stay right fucking there until we can get an EMT to you,” he says.

“God, you’re being ridiculous. Have you never fainted before?”

“No!”

That takes the wind out of Presley’s sails, her argument rendered moot. “Well, it’s not that big of a deal. I faint at least two or three times a year.”

“Then you really need to get that checked out!” Pax cries.

“Elodie, tell him—”

“Sorry, girl. I’m with Pax.”

The last thing Presley expected was for her friend to side with Pax, it seems. She gapes at Elodie, then turns pleading eyes in Carrie’s direction.

“Don’t look at me. Sorry, Pres,” Carrie says. “You should really let us get someone out to you. Just to be safe. You’re super pale. You were really off-balance earlier too, and you said you had a headache—”

“Wouldn’t you have a headache with so many people fussing over you?” Frustration strains her words, pulling each word taut. Presley attempts to drag herself up into a seated position, but a low, menacing growl rumbles in Pax’s throat.

“Do you want me to tie you down? ’Cause I will. I’ll have no problem restraining you if you won’t listen to common sense.”

I bet he will. I'll fucking help him do it. The girl does not look well. Elodie comes to me, talking softly as Pres continues to protest, chafing under Pax's strict care. "Shouldn't this at least say SOS or something?" She shows me her phone, and she's right. Her cell reception is one hundred percent out, the bars replaced with 'NO SERVICE.' When I check my phone, the display tells me the same thing.

"I don't know. We're out of the way out here. If lightning struck the cell phone tower..."

Elodie nods, chewing on her lip. "I'm gonna wait with her for a while, and then I think some of us should head back to the cars and drive down the mountain until we can call someone. I don't like this."

"For sure."

"I can hear you guys," Presley grouses from the couch. "I feel much better now that it's getting warm in here. I just need some proper food—"

"What, you mean your body needs more than Jell-O to function properly? I'm *shocked*," Pax says, pacing up and down along the back of the couch.

"Please do not say I told you so right now," Presley moans. "I can't take it. I just need to get back to the house and eat a sandwich or something. The carbs will fix me right up."

"You're *not* going back out in that cold and rain."

"We could dip inside the academy and go see what they have in the kitchens," Dash suggests. "Probably won't be much in the way of perishable goods, but maybe there's something in the dry store we can make. Pasta or something."

"That's a great idea," Presley says, perking up. Jeez, she really doesn't want an ambulance called out for her. Her attitude shifts almost immediately, though, worry marring her features all over again. "Wait. If the school's all sealed up tight for the holidays, won't an alarm go off if you break in?"

“Fucking hope so,” Pax says. “That’ll be one way to get a trained medical professional to you. The cops will be able to radio for an ambulance—”

“Oh my god! Just stop fussing. Please! You’ll get in trouble if the police show up. We aren’t students here anymore. We’re trespassing. Darhower would love nothing more than to press charges against you, Pax. You embarrassed the fuck out of her with your graduation speech. She wouldn’t hesitate to have your ass thrown in jail.”

“It’d be worth it.”

“You’re not breaking into the school just so you can make me a PB and J. God, will everyone just calm down? I’m feeling a lot better now. Just—*just let me sit up already!*” She slaps Pax’s hand away when he tries to guide her back down onto the couch, and for a second, I think he really will tie her down. Muttering angrily, he stalks away from the couch and grabs a throw blanket from one of the armchairs, taking it back to her. “Get that jacket off. It’s soaked. And those jeans. Wrap yourself in this until you’re dry.”

Presley sits up, defiance sparking in her eyes as she removes the jacket and...that’s as much as I see. I go to Elodie. Her long dark hair is still dripping from the rain, tiny wisps at her temples starting to curl a little in the increasing warmth of the gazebo. Her cheeks are bright red from the cold, as is the tip of her nose. She trails her fingers along the line of books, smiling softly to herself.

“Wonder what you’re thinking about...”

The tiny lift at the corners of her mouth lets me know she’s battling a smirk, but under the circumstances, she’s too polite to unleash it. “The first time you brought me here...” she says. “You said to me, ‘Of all my sins and misdeeds, making you fall in love with me will be the very worst of them all.’”

With a very steady hand, I twist a piece of her damp hair around my index finger, that memory crashing into me, hitting hard. I'd been so fucking fascinated by her that night. I couldn't look away. She'd been wet from the rain, much like she is now. I hadn't touched her, then, though. I hadn't experienced what it was like to own Elodie Stillwater, body and soul, and have her own me right back.

"I'm still sinning..." I whisper. "I followed through on that promise, didn't I?"

"I suppose so." She looks up at me with an air of insolence. "But I made you fall in love with me too, y'know."

Softly laughing under my breath, I trail my fingertip down the slope of her nose. "Then we're *both* sinners. We deserve each other."

Pax is done fighting with Pres. He's all business as he heads over to us. "Can you two quit canoodling for one second? She still won't let me break into the school. I'm gonna head over to the gardener's outhouse and see if that vending machine's still there. If not, I'm one hundred percent raiding the kitchens. You coming?" He aims his last question at me.

"Sure."

"And will you stay and watch her, Elodie? Please?" he adds awkwardly at the end. In all my years of friendship with Pax, this is the first time I've seen him really, genuinely be polite to a girl. Sure, he has manners around Presley, but she doesn't count.

Elodie nods. "Of course."

"How about you, Lord Lovett? You coming?" Pax calls to the others. Dash and Carrie have been fussing over an electric kettle. They've found some tea bags and have made a couple of mugs of hot tea by the looks of things. "Absolutely," Dash says, even though he has no idea what he's agreeing to. That's what I love about Dash. You never have to explain a thing to him. If you tell him you need his help, he'll give it no matter what. Fucker didn't ask a single question about why I wanted him to come to Tel

Aviv on my birthday last year. He just packed a bag and jumped into the back of the car, ready to do whatever needed to be done.

“I’ll be quick,” I tell Elodie, kissing her on the temple.

“Please. This storm is freaking me out. The forest looks so creepy out there.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I SWEAR TO GOD, I’m never going to understand women. If she felt so bad, then why wouldn’t she stay back at the house and rest like I told her to?” Pax grumbles, hiking double-speed up the grassy slope that leads back to Wolf Hall.

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and say it’s because you *told* her to do something rather than asking her,” Dash suggests. “In case you haven’t noticed, women aren’t huge fans of being told what to do. Unless it’s in the bedroom. In which case—”

“I’m gonna go ahead and stop you right there, Lord Lovett,” Pax says. “Last thing I need is a rundown on the power dynamic between you and your girlfriend. I can’t think of anything worse right now.”

“Oh, I can think of plenty of things that are worse. How about trudging through the icy rain on the hunt for a bag of *Cheetos*?” Dash fires back.

“I’ll give *you* fucking Cheetos.”

“Please don’t. I’m more of a Fritos type of guy. All I’m trying to say is that you kinda asked for this. If you hadn’t demanded that Presley stay at the house, she’d probably have said she wasn’t feeling great and would have opted to stay of her own volition. Instead, you riled her up and—”

“What the fuck, Lovett. It was a rhetorical question. I didn’t mean for you to give me the teen agony aunt response—”

Oh, how I’ve missed this. It’s been months since the three of us have been together. I didn’t realize how accustomed I was to these two taking shots at one another, but their familiar bickering is making me sort of sentimental. Even so, better to nip it in the bud now before they start roughhousing. “Fuck the vending machine. The outhouse is too far away. I vote we kick in a window and head straight for the kitchens,” I say, changing the subject. “And if your girlfriend complains, you can blame me. I’m not staying out in this any longer than I have to.”

“I was gonna do that and blame you anyway,” Pax says nonchalantly. “We won’t have to kick a window in, though. What’s the betting that the vent by the laundry is still open, Lovett?”

“High, I’m sure. Now that *you’re* not here anymore, the faculty probably don’t have to worry about students breaking out of the academy in the middle of the day anymore. This lot probably behave themselves.”

It turns out the grate by the laundry *is* still open. Pax prizes the mesh guard away from the wall, pulling it out and propping it up against the wall, and then he wriggles forward on his belly, squeezing through the gap inside the building.

“Wait. Isn’t this where he got poison oak?” I ask, casting about for any suspicious-looking plants.

“Sure is. He got so angry about it, he came back here and ripped it all up last year. Doesn’t seem to have grown back, thankfully,” Dash says. He goes next, sliding through the vent and dropping down into the laundry. I’m right on his heels.

Inside, the three of us prowl around the laundry room, raising eyebrows at each other as we wait for the ear-splitting alarm to start wailing somewhere. But no alarm comes. “Maybe it’s a silent alarm,” Pax hypothesizes.

“Or maybe there’s no alarm because there’s no power,” I suggest.

“Be a pretty shit security system if it stopped working the moment the power grid went out. How the hell would it alert the cops of a break-in if all they had to do was kill the electricity to the building?” Dash opens the door to the laundry room, sticking his head out in the hallway. Still no alarm. He glances left, and he glances right. “No night guard,” he confirms. We knew there wouldn’t be. If there *were* any guards up here for the break, they would have seen us at the gate, and then walking the perimeter of the school, looking for lightning damage. So...we’re on our own, and there’s no alarm. Great.

“All right. Let’s get in and out. I want to get Chase down to the urgent care as soon as possible.”

“Couldn’t agree more. Being back in this place is giving me flashbacks. And not the fun kind.” I lead the way, hurrying toward the kitchens, the boys following behind; the sound of our soles striking stone echoes around the eerily empty hallways, though our footfall is slightly muffled by all of the mud caked on our boots. Someone’s going to be very confused when they open this place up again next week and find all of the dirty footprints we’ve left behind.

We hurry past the science rooms, technology rooms, history...

None of us makes a peep as we pass the door of our old English room. Fitz’s room. He’d decked the place out like a members-only club, the space filled with book stacks and quirky stools, armchairs, couches and beanbags, indecorous chaise lounges, and a battered old tan leather sofa under the north-facing window, which I had claimed as my own personal property. We all have history in that room. The thought of it haunts me sometimes...

Faster, we move at a steady clip until we reach our destination. Dash lights the way with the flashlight on his cell. Pax stalks to the pantry by the walk-in fridges and immediately begins to grab items from the shelves. Granola bars. Cartons of juice. He finds a huge, catering-sized bag of

Cheetos, which he lobs at Dash's head, sticking out his tongue when Dash flips him the bird.

I stand in the doorway, checking my phone, trying to coax a single bar of reception out of it—

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"What the fuck was *that*?" I spin around, searching the kitchen, hunting for the source of the strange tapping sound. Dash has disappeared into the walk-in refrigerator, so he doesn't even hear my question. Pax heard me fine, though. "Just the rain, by the sounds of things. I have everything I need, so we—"

"Ham! Country ham!" Dash crows, emerging from the fridge with a hulking piece of meat held over his head. "Nothing a ham sandwich can't fix."

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I spin around, and I catch the movement this time.

There's a bird at the window, its small, dark shape little more than a shadow perched on the windowsill on the other side of the glass. He's getting drenched, though his midnight feathers are smooth as an oil slick. They flash with a metallic blue-purple, as the strangely brave creature tap, tap, taps its beak against the window.

"The fuck is that crow doing?" Pax whispers.

"It isn't a crow. It's a raven," I say, still staring fixedly at the bird. "He's beautiful."

"Hope he has the common sense not to fly in this," Dash says, stuffing the country ham into Pax's bag of treats. "Be a shame for him to get smoked by a lightning bolt."

As if the raven can understand every word, he lets out an indignant “*RAWWK!*” and leaps into flight, wheeling away into the night.

“Back the way we came,” Pax says, rushing out of the kitchen in a flurry of frenetic energy. “We’ve already taken too long.”

I’m as eager to get back to Elodie as they are to get back to their girlfriends, but the sight of that raven perched on the windowsill has done something bizarre to my brain. Why the fuck was it *tapping* like that? I stare after it for long seconds; Dash has to grab me by the shoulder and physically spin me around in order to usher me out of the kitchen.

Down the corridor, past Harcourt’s office. Past the stairway that leads up to the girls’ bedrooms. Along the wide, sweeping hallway that will take us all the way back to the laundry room. Past the English room. Past history. Past te—

My legs become leaden, my feet locking to the ground as if the soles of my shoes are suddenly glued to the stone. “*Wait.*”

Pax and Dash both stop at once, both donning looks of confusion as they glance back at me. Pax hikes the bag of our liberated goods higher on his shoulder. “It was a *bird*, Jacobi. I know you love feathers and that shit, but the damn thing was outside, and it flew away anyway.”

“The door...” I murmur.

“We can’t go out of the front d—”

“Shut *up*, Pax. For fuck’s sake, I’m trying to fucking *think*.”

With his shaved head and all of the ink marking his body, you might be forgiven for assuming that Pax Davis is incapable of looking hurt. But you’d be wrong. “All right, dude. No need to be an asshole.”

“The door,” I say again, more firmly this time. “The door to the English room was closed when we walked past it on our way to the kitchen.”

“And?” Dash and Pax say it at the same time, their voices layering over one another.

“And when we walked by just now, it was *open*.”

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ELODIE

“THREE BEDROOMS. Two more than we need right now,” I say, jamming the poker in between the happily burning logs in the fireplace. I tilt the one on top to feed the fire more air. It’s getting nice and toasty in the gazebo now, and none of us are complaining. My hair is mostly dry, as is Presley’s. Carrie’s has been dry for a while now since it’s a little shorter, but her curls are corkscrewing madly, completely out of control. They look amazing. “We want to turn one of them into a shared office for us, though. A kind of library, too, I guess. There are all these really cool bookshelves. And then the other room will be for when guests come to visit.”

“Can I just move in with you?” Presley moans theatrically. Some of the color has returned to her face, which is a reassuring sign. “I’ll be your house elf or something.”

“I don’t think being Elodie’s house elf will help your situation,” Carrie says. She sits behind Presley on the couch, rubbing her shoulders for her, giving her a massage.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Presley says. She hisses when Carrie circles the pad of her thumb into Pres’s shoulder blade, digging it into the muscle. “God, that really freaking hurts. Ahh—”

“Don’t be a baby. I’m barely touching you,” Carrie chides.

“Being Elodie’s house elf would be great. My dad and Pax will finally stop playing tug of war with me. I’ll do all of your housework and keep the place neat as a pin, so I don’t have to go back to Sarah Lawrence. And I’ll just forget that I’m pregnant, and...and...”

“Bury your head in the sand?” Carrie suggests. “What happened to talking to Pax?”

“Oh, we talked all right. He asked me if I wanted him fucking other girls, and when I said no, I didn’t want that, he took that to mean that I was agreeing to marry him—”

Carrie locks eyes with me; I can tell by the surprise on her face that this is the first time she’s heard the word ‘marriage’ and the name ‘Pax Davis’ in the same sentence before. “*Excuse me? What now?*”

“Yeah, what the hell? Pax wants to marry you? Pshhh. That’s *crazy*,” I say, poking the fire some more.

“Elodie Stillwater!” Presley cries.

“What?”

Both of them stare at me incredulously. Presley shuffles closer to the edge of the sofa cushion she sits on. “What do you know about this?”

“Nothing, I swear. I—” Fuck, I can’t lie to them. I just don’t have it in me. “Pax told Dash and Wren that he was going to ask you right after graduation. He made you a ring and everything. He asked your dad for permission that first time you took him over there for dinner, and your dad said no. He said he wouldn’t give his blessing unless he waited a year to ask you.” It comes out in one long breath, the words running together like too much ink on a page. It feels so good to get it off my chest. I hated knowing that Pax was going to ask Pres something so important when she didn’t. Now that the cat’s out of the bag, I feel like I can breathe again.

“So?” I ask excitedly. “Did you say yes?” It’s only after I’ve asked this question that I realize that Presley is aghast.

“My father *refused* to give him permission?”

“Oh. Uh...*shit*.”

“Why would he *do* that?”

“I think it had something to do with...you guys not knowing each other long enough...and...”

“I’m going to kill him.” Wrapped up in her blanket, Presley lurches to her feet, rage flashing across her face. She steps just three steps toward the chair her clothes are draped across, drying by the fire, and something terrible rips across her features, chasing her anger away. I know at once that it’s fear.

“Pres? Are you alright?”

“I—” Out of nowhere, she doubles over, crying out in pain. “Oh! Oh my god. Something...” She winces, screwing her eyes shut, clutching at her belly. “Something isn’t right...” she grinds out. “My stomach. Holy shit.” She drops to her knees before either Carrie or I can get to her, going down hard on the rug.

“Presley!” Carrie flies from the couch. I rush from my vantage point by the fire. We get to her at the same time, each taking an arm, trying to get our friend to her feet. It isn’t easy at all; Pres curls tight into a ball, her arms and legs rigid, her back curved, refusing to uncurl so we can help her walk back to the couch. Instead, we half lift, half drag her back until we can set her down on the cushions.

It’s then that Carrie and I notice the blood.

A river of it, an arterial red so dark that it almost looks black, running down the insides of Presley’s legs. Carrie stares at me, eyes rimmed with disbelief, worry manifesting on her face as I imagine it manifests on mine at the same time.

“That is not good,” Carrie whispers. “That’s a lot of blood.”

“Oh god! Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.” Pres holds her stomach, panicked hands fluttering against her sides. “I need Pax. Something’s wrong,” she pants. “I feel...really weird. Ahh, God. My shoulder! I—” Before she can

say anything else, she rocks forward and throws up, heaving again and again, vomit splattering onto the rug. Between ragged breaths, she moans, shifting between holding her shoulder and then her stomach, and still the river of blood flows down her legs. A pool of red stains the white couch, growing outward by the second.

“What the fuck’s happening?” Carrie’s hands tremble as she runs them over Presley’s back and shoulders. “What should we DO!”

I would love to have an answer for her. I would *love* to know what to do, but shock has me in its grasp. I can’t think straight. All I can see is the blood. All I can hear are Presley’s agonized groans. All I can smell is the puddle of vomit on the rug before me, and the coppery tang of Presley’s life force draining out of her. How is this happening? What the fuck is happening?

“Elodie! ELODIE! We have to do something!”

“I want...Pax,” Presley mutters weakly. I thought that her face had regained some color not fifteen minutes ago, but now Pres’s skin bears the sallow hue of death. Her lips are tinged blue, for fuck’s sake. Her eyes roll in her head like those of a terrified horse as she sags back onto the couch, her arms and legs finally loosening enough for her to recline. “Go...and find...him. Please,” she whispers.

“We’re not leaving you,” I tell her.

Carrie lets out a choked, gasping sob. “You should go,” she urges. “One of us should. We need to get help. And I can’t...” Carrie shakes her head. “Please, Elodie. You should go. I *can’t* leave her.”

I only showed up at Wolf Hall for the last year of my secondary school education. Carrie and Presley are family to me, and I know they feel the same way about me. But these two girls were best friends long before I showed up. For years they looked out for one another and had each other’s backs. There’s no room for jealousy here and no need for it besides. My friends need me to go and get help, so that is what I’m going to do.

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WREN

“SERIOUSLY. Who fucking cares? The wind blew a door open. It’s howling through every crack in this drafty old bitch of a building. Come on. We have to *go*.”

I understand Pax’s desperation. I do. But Wolf Hall is a historic building of note. The academy can’t even put up a notice board without having eighteen meetings about it first. The place is meticulously well-cared for, and any repairs are taken care of immediately. There *are* no cracks for the wind to sneak through. The wind did *not* open that door. I’ll be damned if I walk by and pretend like it did.

“Go on without me if you need to. This’ll only take a second. I’ll catch up.”

“The door was probably open when we went by the first time,” Dash argues. “Let’s get back to Presley and take her back to the house. You can come back here, hunting for ghosts, when we know she’s all right.” He tries to grab my shoulder, but I step out of his reach.

“What did I say? I’ll be right behind you. GO!”

I’m not fucking debating this with them. They can go, by all means, but I am checking that door. I have this feeling—I can’t breathe around it. It’s like the tapping on that window in the kitchen. An insistent tugging on *me*, beckoning me to go back. I can’t ignore it...

I turn on my heel, back the way I came. I run.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” Pax spits. “I’m gonna fucking *kill* you, Jacobi.” But the sound of their boots hitting the stone joins mine as I charge back toward the English room.

There it stands.

The door is open.

The way inside...

I enter, fists already clenched, teeth gritted, adrenalin surging like an electrical current stripping my veins raw. The tang of blood hits the back of my nose before I can register anything, and then—

The floor moving out from underneath me—the walls spinning—the ceiling flipping—everything turning—

The back of my head cracks as I hit the floor.

Pain lances through every molecule of my being. My brain feels as though it fractured with the impact.

“Holy fuck, dude. Are you okay?” Dash crouches over me, hands tugging at my arms, urging me upright. “You slipped in—what is th—oh my god!”

Even through my splintering vision, I can already see what has given Dash pause. I’m lying in a *lake* of blood. The reek of it shoves up my nose, so pungent and awful that it makes me want to gag.

From my position on the floor, I quickly find the source of all the blood. Over Dash’s shoulder, above him, a body swings from a support beam, listing lifelessly from side to side.

“What the *fuck*?” Pax drops the bag of food down onto one of the tables, staring open-mouthed at it. Dash offers me a hand, and I accept his help; I’d have to put my hand down in the blood in order to push myself up, and I sure as shit don’t want to do *that*.

Fuck, there’s blood in my hair. My jeans are soaked with it. Pax still stares at the body, eyes full of horror, transfixed by the sight of it. It

becomes abundantly clear why. It's a woman. She wears a short black dress, black patent pumps on her feet. Her fingernails are painted a bright shade of purple. I can't see her face, because...

Because...

"I'm gonna throw up," Dash whispers, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. "What kind of sick fuck...?"

The body wears a mask. But not a masquerade mask. No, this is far more macabre. The head of a wolf has been fastened to the woman's face. Its jaw is broken, the bone shattered and piercing through the animal's skin. Its tongue lolls past sharp, yellowed teeth, creating a horrific, leering smile. Grey fur. One clouded, blue eye, one clear. A jagged scar running down its face. The woman's face is fully obscured by the wolf's head, thank god, but the rope synched tight around her neck is not. A yawning rent has been slashed from one side of the woman's stomach to the other, and her insides have tumbled out of the wound. Blood still drips from the wet, snake-like ropes of intestines, slowly *pat...pat...patting* onto the pool below.

"That..." Dash says breathlessly. He swallows, taking a step toward the nightmarish scene. "That's Rasputin. The wolf I used to see in the forest all of the time."

"But who the fuck is *she*?" Pax asks.

I've seen the silver Claddagh ring on her finger. I've recognized the color of her nail polish. I know exactly who this woman is. "Her name is Alessia Regan."

ELODIE

THE CAR OR THE ACADEMY? What makes more sense?

Shit, shit, shit.

Presley desperately wants Pax, but what is he going to do if I go fetch him? He's not a trained medical professional. He won't be able to do a damn thing. She needs a fucking doctor—which means *I* need to head back to the car. I check my pockets as I run. Good. The keys are still there. Even in my panic, I had the common sense to swipe the keys to Dash and Carrie's rental as I ran out of the door.

I find the hole in the hedge that leads through the forest, back to the road. Lady luck is on my side as I thrash and bully my way through the undergrowth; I have no true sense of direction here, with the trees closing in on me in the dark, but I manage to follow a straight path back toward where I think we left the cars. Sure enough, I emerge from the forest after a couple of minutes, and I'm exactly where I need to be. The cars are still parked right where we left them.

The silver hatchback chirps as I hit the unlock button, lights flashing in the rain. "Don't worry. I'm getting help, Pres. I've got this. I've *got* this."

In the car.

Engine on.

E-brake off.

I spin the car around, tires screaming as I take off back down the mountain. With all of the hairpin switchbacks, the recommended speed limit down most of the road that leads from Wolf Hall down into Mountain Lakes is twenty-five, but fuck that. I go as fast as I humanly can, hitting the gas on the straights, slowing only as much as I need to on the corners so I can navigate them safely.

“I’ve got this. Help’s coming, Pres.” I chant the words over and over, determined to make them true. I’m going to hit Mountain Lakes in record time. There’ll be cell phone reception down there. The hospital will deploy an ambulance the second I’m done explaining the situation. They’ll race back up the mountain, and they will get to Presley in time. They’ll figure out what’s wrong with her, and—and—

Tears blur my vision, blotting out the road for a frightening moment. I’ve never seen that much blood before. It looked like Presley was hemorrhaging, for the love of God. How much blood can a person lose before there’s no pulling them back from the brink of death? Because I sense it in my bones. That’s exactly where Presley was when I ran out of the gazebo: the very *brink* of death.

“Focus, Elodie. Focus!” I dash away my tears, forcing myself to pay attention to the road. With conditions this treacherous, I’ll go careening off the road and crash into a tree if I’m not careful. Or worse. I’ll slam into the guardrail and go straight through it, sailing out over the drop before plummeting to my death.

My pep talk does the job. I watch the road like a hawk. The windshield wipers slash at the rain, the rubber juddering against the glass. It hits me out of nowhere, just as I’m about to pass the house, that I don’t need to drive all the way down to Mountain Lakes for help. There’s a landline back at the house. A fucking landline! No matter how bad the weather is, that phone should work, surely? Right?

I nearly miss the turnoff, trying to decide whether I should check to see if the landline works. At the very last second, I throw the hatchback into a turn, careening across the road, and I gun the engine, burning down the dirt road toward the ho—

Fur.

Skin.

Eyes.

Staring at me.

In the middle of the road.

Something streaks out in front of me, only two meters ahead of the car.

There's no time to think.

Only react.

I slam onto the brakes, the hatchback fishtailing in the mud as the car tries to slow.

It's no good. Too fast. I'm going too fast to stop!

I spin the wheel.

“SHIIIIIIIIIT!”

The car whips around, a world in darkness twisting around me, gravity shoving me up against the door, and—

CRASH!

It's raining so hard. But the raindrops are no longer made of water. They're made of shattered glass.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick...

Hissing. Popping. The sound of hot metal warping.

What...the hell...just...happened?

My head hurts so bad. I touch my fingers to my face, and they come away red...

Wait. I...*crashed?*

My thoughts come back into focus. Everything, all at once, pulling back into focus. I crashed the car. There was an animal in the road. I collided

head-on with a tree. Oh lord, the front end of the hatchback is crushed, the hood crumpled up like an accordion. Smoke billows up from underneath the twisted metal in great, dirty grey clouds.

How long have I been sitting here, dazed? Wasted seconds while Presley is up at the gazebo, potentially bleeding to death. Thank fuck I'm almost back at the house. Rallying, I fumble with the seatbelt, tugging at it weakly until it clicks and releases me. The door handle is far more stubborn. I lean my shoulder into it three times before it groans and swings open, setting me free.

I fall out sideways in the mud, landing hard.

Panting, I push myself up, wind whipping at my hair...and a hand comes into focus.

“Ah. Ms. Stillwater. *Allow me.*”

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PAX

ADRENALIN LEAVES a burning trail of fire in its wake, sheer terror ripping through my veins, as the three of us race down the slope toward the gazebo. This is *not* happening. Not here. Not tonight. Not with Presley so sick. I'm not fucking having it.

"It can't be him!" Dash shouts over the rain. "He can't be here. They caught him back in Texas. We all saw it on the news!"

Wren says nothing. As he sprints through the rain, the look on his face is grim, though. He isn't buying that Wesley Fitzpatrick's lawyer has somehow ended up hanged and eviscerated in Fitz's old classroom by some weird coincidence. Dash doesn't believe it either, but it's in his nature to try and find a less frightening explanation for all of this. His girlfriend is back at the gazebo, just like mine is. Just like Wren's is.

Pumping my fists harder, I run full tilt toward the maze, slipping in the mud, going down, getting back up. The three of us slip and slide like we're running on an ice rink, but we keep on surging forward. Wren hits the maze first. He's a streak of black as he swings through the turns, me behind him, Dash bringing up our rear. The hedges reach up around us, throwing strange shadows, hiding the path, but Wren doesn't miss a turn.

Light blazes out into the night, cutting through the storm when we enter the clearing. Bile stings the back of my throat, acrid and foul, my heart

hammering like a freight train. The door to the gazebo opens before we can reach it, and Carrie stands there, tears streaming down her face...and her hands. Her hands are covered in blood.

“ELODIE!” Wren roars like a wounded animal, shoving his way into the gazebo. I’m right behind him, ready to fucking hurt someone. Dash sweeps Carrie up—

Presley is right where I left her on the couch. But...she’s covered in blood, her eyes closed, face the color of pyre ash. No. That can’t be right. She was sitting up when I—when I—

“Where’s Elodie?” Wren shouts. His words are muffled; my ears feel blocked, like I’m swimming underwater.

“—just chatting one second, and then she stood up, and I don’t know what happened—” Carrie says, her mouth moving a mile a minute. “She was in pain. Holding her stomach. She said her arm hurt, and then she just collapsed and started bleeding, and—”

My skin is numb. Hands, feet, face, legs, all of me numb. I drop to the ground by the couch, kneeling in Chase’s blood, a dull, crushing pressure locking around my ribs. She’s fine. She’s not dead. She can’t be. There’s no way.

“We didn’t know what to do. I’ve been keeping her warm, but—but—”

“Shh, it’s okay. Take a deep breath,” Dash says somewhere behind me. “It’s gonna be okay. Just slow down.”

He really shouldn’t lie to her.

I think this so calmly, the chaos around me fading to silence.

There’s no way this is going to be okay. No way. I will burn down the entire world if Presley Maria Witton Chase isn’t around to make it turn. Happiness will be a thing of the past. I will single-handedly destroy all joy and hope if this girl has slipped and gone from this place.

With a shaking hand, I reach out to her. Her skin is cold and clammy to the touch, slick with sweat. I place my fingers against her neck, searching

for a steady throb of a pulse...and I don't find one.

"I kept trying to wake her up," Carrie howls. She's hysterical. The gazebo echoes with her grief. "She'd regain consciousness and then pass out again."

This.

Is.

Not.

Real.

I won't accept it.

I can't.

Looking up, I see that Dash has pulled Carrie into his arms and he's holding her, rubbing his hand up and down her back, but his eyes are on *me*. He looks destroyed. His expression only makes sense a moment later, when a pain, the likes of which I've never witnessed before claws at my soul, endless, bottomless, terminal, dragging me down into a sea of black. Presley isn't gone.

She's *not* fucking gone.

I won't have it.

"Carrie, where's Elodie?" Wren demands, still standing by the doorway.

This doesn't make any sense. She fainted in my arms on the way here from the parking lot, but she was feeling better when we left to find her food. She was arguing with me. She was fine. She—

Thrum.

My racing thoughts stop dead.

Wait.

Was that...?

Did I imagine...?

My fingers are still pressed against Presley's throat. I thought I just felt something. I could have sworn—

Thrum.

The shallowest heartbeat. Barely even there, but it *is* there.

I explode upward, grabbing hold of Presley, dragging her limp body to me, pulling her into my arms. “Her heart’s beating! It’s fucking beating! She isn’t dead!”

Relief washes over Carrie; she’s so overwhelmed that she collapses against Dash, covering her mouth with her hands, sobbing. “Thank God. Thank God. Holy shit.”

My mind kicks into action immediately. She has a pulse. She has a pulse. She isn’t dead, but that doesn’t mean she won’t be very soon if we don’t get her help. I didn’t want to carry her through the forest to the car before, because I didn’t want to risk her getting worse. That’s already happened now, though. I don’t have a choice. If I don’t get her down this godforsaken mountain—

“CARINA MENDOZA, WHERE THE FUCK IS MY GIRLFRIEND!”

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ELODIE

I'VE HEARD of stress-induced psychosis. Apply too much pressure to even the strongest mind, and eventually it will crack. The worry over Presley, and then the crash together must have proved too much for my mind, because I am seeing things right now. Terrible, awful things, and I can't make sense of them.

My brain is telling me that Wesley Fitzpatrick is standing in front of me, naked, his flesh mottled with blood. It's telling me that he's wearing a wolf skin over his shoulders, stringy pieces of gore plastered to his shoulders and his chest. It's telling me that there's an insane light dancing in Fitz's eyes, unhinged, hysterical laughter spewing out of his mouth. It's telling me that he has a lethally sharp hunting knife in his hand, the blade of which flashes and shines, spattered with rainwater, as he thrusts it into my face.

But none of this is true.

It can't be true, because Wesley Fitzpatrick is locked away in a cell on death row in Houston, Texas. He can't be *here*. It's just impossible.

"The gods...the gods *love* me," the phantom chatters. "They...they keep giving me such pretty gifts."

"You're not real," I whisper. "You can't be. I hit my head. I..."

"I'm *not* real," the phantom agrees. "I'm a spirit. I ate the wolf's heart, and I became it. I'm a shadow. I've already stolen your soul in the spirit

world. When I bleed you here, it'll—it'll all be okay, because you have no soul now. It's all gone. That's right. You'll be all gone!" He explains this earnestly, with child-like excitement. He grabs me, clamping my hand in his free one, shaking my arm with a level of excitement that apparently, he thinks we should share.

The moment he makes contact with me, his fingers curling tight around my hand, I realize my mistake. This isn't stressed-induced psychosis. Neither am I hallucinating from a blow to the head. This is real. Wesley Fitzpatrick is here, in Mountain Lakes, seemingly completely out of his fucking mind, and no amount of blinking on my part is going to make him go away.

Gingerly, I pull my hand from him, backing up a step. "I—don't want to be all gone, Dr. Fitzpatrick."

The eerie, mindless smile he wears falls away at this. He scrutinizes me, eyes darted all over my face, jumping from one feature to the next. "What you want isn't really important, though. Is it?" he barks. "You're not supposed to be here, anyway. You were supposed to leave ages ago. You were supposed to go on a trip."

"I—" My back hits the car. I've run out of room, nowhere to go. The rain has finally slowed, but it's still coming down hard enough to run down Fitz's face. His cheek and his jaw are twisted with a scar he didn't have when he taught at Wolf Hall. His right arm, too. I knew he'd been mauled by the wolves that live here on the mountain, but I didn't realize the extent of the damage that was done. It seems that the bastard hasn't just suffered external injuries since the last time I saw him. He was already crazy, but now he doesn't even seem lucid. His tongue flicks out over his teeth, wetting cracked lips, his eyes continuing to jump all over the place.

This man is going to kill me. There's no two ways about it. He's going to skin me like he skinned the wolf whose hide he's wearing, and the most fucked up part is that he probably won't even realize he's doing it. I have to

be very, *very* careful. There might be a way to use Fitz's altered mental state against him, maybe? It's worth a shot. I'll have one chance at it, though. One. If I blow it, it'll all be over very quickly.

"Dr. Fitzpatri—"

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" he roars, spit flying. Deranged and half-lucid one moment, the man before me shifts, instantly hyper-focused and incensed. "You don't know that man. I don't know that man. He's gone. Gone, gone, gone. *I* never even met him. He didn't like the wolves. I like the wolves. They're—they're—they're out there, following me. They know that I'm their brother now."

"You're right! Oh my God," I say, laughing nervously. "I'm so sorry. I see now. I see that you're not Dr. Fitzpatrick. That was a silly mistake. I—Ahh!" I yelp as Fitz lunges forward, pinning me against the car; he holds the hunting knife to my throat, baring his teeth, growling just like the wolf he thinks he has become.

"Don't even say his *name*," he hisses.

"I won't! I promise I won't. I'm sorry!"

"*Good.*" He shoves away from me, but not before leaning on the blade, driving the sharp edge of the metal into my skin. A bright sting of pain licks my skin, followed by the heat of something warm and wet trickling down into the hollow at the base of my throat. He stares at my neck, eyes wide and rolling, too much white showing. I bite back a scream as he dips down, and laps at my skin. When he rights himself, his protruding tongue is bright red with my blood, his nostrils flaring wide.

"I could eat your heart, too, maybe," he says. "But..." Shaking his head, he screws his eyes closed, staggering away. "No. I can't do that. You have no soul. I already killed it. You're null. Null. Null! If I eat your heart, I'll become null, too." Wheeling around, he holds out the knife, pointing it at me. "You can't trick me!" he yells. "I already know all about *you*, Elodie Stillwater."

“What about Wren? What do you know about him?” It’s the only thing I can think to say. Perhaps mentioning Wren will break this loop he’s in and make him focus on something else. Distract him enough to make a break for the trees. As soon as I see Fitz’s body language change, I know that I’ve made a grave error. Hunkering down, shoulders rising up around his ears, Fitz adopts a predatory, hungry look. His flaccid cock flops between his bare, scratched and bleeding thighs as he prowls toward me, turning his knife this way and that.

“You don’t say his name, either,” Fitz warns. “He’s not even real. You made him up to get me into trouble.”

“I—I wouldn’t do that,” I stammer. “I like you. I would never try to get you in trouble. We’re *friends*.”

“Stupid, ugly, hideous girl,” Fitz snarls. He still comes for me, only a few feet away from me now. “We aren’t friends.” The timbre of his voice is low and gravelly, overflowing with the promise of pain. “I’m not friends with girls. You’re a fucking *liar*.”

“I’m not! I’m not, I swear I’m not lying. We *are* friends. You like me! You like Wren, too, remember? You’d do anything for Wren, wouldn’t you?”

“*HE BETRAYED ME!*” Fitz screams.

It was too great a risk. I rolled the dice and hoped for a good outcome, but the ploy backfired. Now I’m going to pay for the foolish gambit in spades. Fitz will split me open from stem to sternum and leave me to bleed out in the mud, and once he’s finished with me, he’ll head on up to the gazebo and kill Carrie and Presley, too. Even as this plays out in my mind, I reject this as a possibility. Wesley Fitzpatrick cannot be allowed to find his way back up to the gazebo. He can’t. I *have* to stop him, regardless of the cost. Plucking up what little courage I can muster, I take a step toward the psycho, and I hold out my hand.

“Wren didn’t betray you. He loves you. He would never do that to you. Don’t you remember?” I speak so calmly that I almost trick myself into believing that I’m not shitting my pants right now.

Wesley Fitzpatrick adopts a curious, blank look, his mouth working like he’s silently repeating the words I just said back to himself. I take the fact that he hasn’t stabbed me repeatedly to mean that he’s half interested in hearing what I have to say.

“Wren talks about you all the time. He misses you.” I infuse my voice with as much enthusiasm as I can, but my voice still shakes, my nerves getting the better of me. “He told me all about when you two first got together. He said he was jealous when you left him and for—for Mara. He thought you two had something special.”

“Mara? *Mara*? I didn’t leave him for *her*. He stopped coming to meet me. He said I was pathetic. I—” Wincing, the man curls his hand around the knife into a fist, pressing the handle against his forehead. Confusion mars his brow, lines forming as he frowns. He’s struggling to remember? Struggling to separate fact from fiction? Reality from fantasy? I have no idea. All I know is that he seems to be questioning what I’m saying, running it over in his mind at least. “I told him that I loved him. And he *laughed*.”

“No way. Wren wouldn’t do that.” My eyes burn, tears promising to fall if I lose control for even a second. “He can be nervous sometimes. Shy. Sometimes he acts strangely because he’s scared and feels vulnerable. Y—you know what he told me?”

Keep it together, Elodie.

Do not start crying.

Do not!

“What did he say?” Fitz asks uncertainly.

“He said that his greatest regret was never getting to tell you that he loved you, too.”

His response comes immediately and is violent. “You’re lying! Stupid, lying, evil bitch! You’re lying about all of it. He isn’t real. *He. Isn’t. Fucking. Real!*” As he speaks this last word, he grabs a fist full of my hair, yanking it so hard that I cry out, and then he slams my head backward, into the driver’s side window of the hatchback. A spiderweb of pain fires through my head, just like the filaments of lightning that rippled across the sky earlier this evening. The agony takes my breath away. I try to scramble, trying to work myself free from his grasp, but his fingers snarl in my hair, holding on tight. Forcing my head around to the right, I have no choice but to look at him as he cranes his neck forward, sneering at me.

“Pathetic. You think I can’t see right through you, stupid girl? You’re just like all the rest of them. Making things up, trying to trick me, all trying to get what you want. Well, I’m smarter than you. I can see that you’re afraid. Tell me. Are you scared of me, Elodie Stillwater?”

With every bone in my body, I wish I could spit in the motherfucker’s face and tell him to go to hell. Even better, I’d love to be able to tell him that it’s not only Wren who thinks he’s pathetic—that I think he’s pathetic as well, and there’s no way in hell I’d ever be afraid of him. I know what will happen if I lie to him again, though. That knife will become intimately acquainted with my insides before I can blink. At least if I tell him the truth, I might buy myself some more time.

I raise my jaw, staring at him with what little courage I have left inside me, and I say, “Yes. I’m scared of you.” Saying it gives me strength; owning my fear releases me from it in a way. Even though I’m still petrified, I find I can breathe a little deeper, the paralysis that gripped my body when he pushed me back against the car easing a little.

Fitz nods, licking his lips over and over. “Good,” he coos. “You should be scared. I’m going to kill you.”

WREN

MY MOTHER'S been dead for more than half my life. I used to pray to her when I was little, hoping she'd hear me somehow and visit me in my dreams. Sometimes, she would. I'd remember the outline of her face when I woke up. A gentle, warm touch. The melody of a song, the words all faded and gone. It felt as though she'd heard my prayers and answered them, coming to bring me comfort while I slept. My father had told me that only an idiot would believe a fantasy like that, and only the weak needed the comfort of their mothers.

I'd stopped praying for her to come to me in my dreams after that. And, as if she was giving me what I wanted all over again, my mother never came to me in my sleep again.

I pray to her now, burning down the mountain in Pax's Charger, because she's the only thing I can believe in. I know she loved me. I still remember. She'd have done anything, *given* anything to keep me safe. If there is an afterlife, and she has any sway there whatsoever, I know she'll hear my pleas and make sure that Elodie is safe.

"Faster," Pax urges from the back seat. "Please, for fuck's sake, go faster."

I helped him run with Presley through the forest. She lies in his arms now, her head cradled against his chest. It looks like she's sleeping. Her lips

are blue, though, her skin waxy. No sign of life whatsoever. Pax holds his breath, constantly checking for her pulse. He felt it once back at the gazebo, but I don't know if he's felt it since.

"I'll kill us all if I push it any harder," I say through gritted teeth.

Pax makes a choking sound. He wants to scream at me and force me to do his bidding, his fear urging him to make threats until he gets what he wants, but the roads are almost washed out at this point, and he knows I'm right.

I feel as though I should be able to sense if Elodie is okay. We're so close, so in alignment, that it seems wrong that I can't reach out to her with my senses and know where she is and that she's okay. But we're not superhuman. No *magic* binds us together. Just love. And love is capable of many things, but not this.

We burn past Riot House, hurtling down the mountain. Eventually, the switchback road spits us out in town, and Mountain Lakes sprawls out in front of us. I find myself checking every car that we pass to see if Elodie is behind the wheel, but none of the drivers are her. Pax launches out of the car the moment I pull up in front of the emergency room entrance, and I get out, too, running around the vehicle to help him lift Presley out of the backseat. The girl is a lead weight in my arms as I assist in getting her inside the building.

"HELP! We need help over here!" Pax hollers.

And help comes. It arrives in the form of a sea of nurses, and a short doctor with small, black-framed glasses. He asks Pax a litany of questions, few of which Pax knows definitive answers to.

No, she isn't allergic to anything.

No, she's not on any medication.

Yes, she's pregnant.

No, he doesn't know whether she's had a blood draw.

He follows after the gaggle of nurses as they wheel Presley through some double doors, vanishing from view.

I proceed to ask every single member of staff I come across if they've seen a girl called Elodie. Growing more and more frustrated by the second, I scream at them when they don't give me the answers I want to hear.

Elodie hasn't been to the hospital.

"You're sure?" I ask the male nurse behind the reception desk for the fifteenth time. "She's this tall. Dark brown hair. Here, look. Look at my phone. You're sure *this* girl hasn't been in here, asking for an ambulance?"

"I'm sure. She hasn't been in here. I think I'd remember someone racing in here, asking for an ambulance. Look, I'm sorry, dude. I can tell that you guys have had a shitty night, but I'm gonna have to ask you to calm down. There are other people in here waiting to be seen, and—"

Fuck this guy.

I bolt out of the hospital, my heart a lump of shredded meat clogged in the back of my throat. Carrie thought Elodie was coming to find us up at the school, but we would have seen her if she *had* gone there. I'd forced myself to believe that. When we rushed Presley down to the car, that had been confirmed when we found Dash's rental was gone. She definitely drove away from that gate, and there's only one way to go from there: down. So where the fuck *is* she?

I go outside, sucking down the cold air, trying to calm myself enough to cobble a coherent thought together. The rain has stopped at last, the clouds breaking, the storm having thrashed itself out.

Where the fuck is Elodie?

There's every chance she went back to the gazebo.

Dash and Carrie are waiting there for the cops to show up, so Dash can take them up to show them the body we found.

Ah, shit. The cops. I was supposed to call the cops. I go back to Pax's car and sit in the front seat, thoughts racing as I take out my phone. The line

rings only once.

“911. What is your emergency?” a calm male voice asks.

“There’s a body up at Wolf Hall Academy.”

“A body? Is the person injured?”

“No, the person’s *dead*,” I snap.

“You saw this body?”

“Her name is Alessia Regan. She’s hanging by her neck in one of the classrooms. You’re gonna want to take a full crew up there. It’s pretty messy.”

“Can I take your name, please, sir?”

“Wren Jacobi.” No point in refusing to hand over the information. They’re going to find out very quickly. I slipped in Alessia’s blood, for fuck’s sake. There’s no way I didn’t leave some DNA behind. Our muddy boot prints are all over the academy. Plus, we don’t have anything to hide. Sure, we’ll probably get a slap on the wrist for trespassing, but there’s no way they can pin Alessia’s murder on us.

“I’m gonna need you to wait with the body, Wren,” the 911 operator says.

“I’m not gonna do that. I had to come down the mountain to get reception, so I’m not even there—”

“Where are you, sir? We’ll have someone come and find you immediately.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “I’m not gonna do that, either. You can question me all you like in a couple of hours. The guy who murdered that woman is loose on the mountain. I’m going to find my girlfriend.”

Hanging up the phone, I accept the fact that I’m likely to get into more trouble for not immediately going to the police than I am for entering Wolf Hall without permission. Whatever. They can rake me over the coals all they like once I’ve laid eyes on Elod—

My phone lights up, notifications pouring in. Missed texts. A couple of missed calls. Apps all updating now that the device has reception again. And there, on the screen: a banner update that screams out at me, demanding to be opened.

DOOR BUTLER: There's somebody at the door. Lucky you! You've got a visitor. Click here for live video camera access and to speak to your guest!

THE HOUSE? Elodie went back to the house? Why would she go back there and then not make her way to the hospital? It doesn't make sense. Unless...

Dread coils in my stomach like a pit viper, ready to strike. I hit the banner, my vision already swimming as a pop-up fills the screen.

UH-OH! You missed your guest! Click here for video footage.

THE LINK FLASHES when I hit it. A small, grainy recording appears on the phone, showing the steps that lead up to Riot House's front door. At first, I see nothing. Just the porch light illuminating individual drops of rain as they come down beyond the eaves of the porch. But then...

"FUCK!"

Elodie, crawling in the mud, trying to get to the steps. And then *him* behind her, bare skin wet with rain, a thick, tattered coat wrapped around his shoulders. Wesley Fitzpatrick, alive and in the flesh. Not locked away in Texas, as the news reported. Here, in Mountain Lakes. Outside my house. He grabs Elodie by the hair and drags her up the steps to the front door. His

mouth moves a mile a minute, but this recording doesn't have sound for some reason. Elodie gets to her feet, her head cast down as she struggles to punch the door code into the keypad I had installed at the end of summer. Then the door swings open, and the insane piece of shit pushes Elodie inside.

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PAX

“SHE’S ALIVE. *BARELY*.”

Relief prickles at my fingertips, flooding me, so powerful that I have to brace against the doorframe so the rush of it doesn’t knock me on my ass. The doctor’s face is grim as hell, so I know whatever he has to say next isn’t going to be good. I need to be on my feet for it, I can tell.

“Presley has suffered an ectopic pregnancy. Do you know what that is?”

I stare at him dumbly. “Kind of. The baby isn’t growing where it’s supposed to be?”

“Yes. The fertilized egg was implanted in Presley’s left fallopian tube. Sometimes we can catch these things early when the patient comes in for a scan. In cases where it isn’t caught that way, issues usually arise a lot earlier in the pregnancy than this. Typically between six to ten weeks. It’s very unusual to have an ectopic pregnancy remain unruptured this late—”

“*Unruptured?*” I do not like the sound of that.

The doctor nods gravely. “Yes, and I’m afraid that is what’s happened here. The embryo in Presley’s fallopian tube grew to the point that it ruptured the tube. And because of the advanced size of the embryo, the damage has...well, I’m afraid it’s been catastrophic. Typically, with this amount of damage and blood loss, we wouldn’t expect the patient to survive. In Presley’s case, there’s a chance we might have gotten to her in

time, but we need to perform surgery to stem the bleeding and attempt to correct the damage. There are some important questions we need answers to before we can proceed, and without Presley's next of kin here—"

"What are you talking about? *I'm* her next of kin!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Davis. You and Presley aren't married. Which means that her father—"

"Fuck her father! I AM HER NEXT OF KIN!" My rage bounces off the walls, startling at least four other people, waiting anxiously for news on *their* loved ones. The doc doesn't let my response faze him. He's seen this all before, no doubt.

"Pax—"

"Just tell me," I plead. "She's lost the baby, right?"

"Yes, she has. The pregnancy was never actually viable, I'm afraid—"

"Stop saying you're afraid! *I* am fucking afraid. Tell me what you need to know before you can operate!"

The doc huffs, but a glimmer of sympathy creeps into his eyes. "I assume you're the father?"

"What do you think!"

"Presley's left fallopian tube is destroyed. There's no saving that. But there's a high probability that her uterus is damaged beyond repair as well. We won't know until we open her up. If that is the case, we might need to perform a full hysterectomy in order to save Presley's life."

A full hysterectomy? Jesus fucking Christ. Scrubbing my hands over my head, I try to breathe, but I'm sealed in a vacuum. There's no fucking air in here. I can't.

"Sit down, Mr. Davis. Before you fall down. Please."

I don't get a say in the matter. The moment he guides me to a chair in the hallway, my legs crumple, refusing to keep me up anymore.

"Some women have a directive on file in cases such as these. Some women are very firm that they don't want to accept life-saving measures if

it means that they won't be able to carry children in the future."

"They'd rather *die*?"

The doc raises his eyebrows. "In some cases, yes. No matter how dangerous their predicament might be, some women would prefer to roll the dice and hope their outcome changes all on its own."

"How often does that happen?" I ask numbly.

His lips pull into a tight line. "Almost never."

"Right."

"Did Presley ever say, mention to you what she'd like to have happen in a situation like this?"

"No. No. She...she'd want to live, though."

"You can say that for certain?"

I look up at the doctor, a cold sweat breaking out across my shoulder blades. "How am I supposed to say anything for certain? She..."

"Was she *excited* about this pregnancy?"

"I—" What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? No, she wasn't excited at all. She thought it was a burden and a nightmare, and she didn't want it? That she was still so torn and didn't know what to think? That she'd changed her mind and wanted to give a family with me a chance? I don't fucking know. I'd been giving her time to think about what I said.

"It's not an easy decision, Mr. Davis. I know. Regardless, we will still have to wait for her father—"

"Well, where the fuck *is* he?" I demand.

"The nurses have been trying to get through to him since you came in. We've left a number of messages, but as of yet, we haven't been able to reach him. It's Thanksgiving. And with the storm—"

"He lives five miles away! Send someone over there to hammer on his door, for fuck's sake!"

"We don't have the staff. I wish we did. But that storm wreaked havoc here tonight. We have MVAs rolling in every other second. If you wanted to

go—”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m not leaving this hospital. Not until Chase wakes up. There’s no fucking way.”

“All right, then.”

“So, what? *You’re just gonna keep waiting for him?*”

“We’ll wait until we absolutely can’t any longer. Then we’ll operate and take whatever actions we deem necessary to save Presley’s life. But allowing the situation to reach such dire stages does not bode well for our chances at a happy outcome.”

“Wait! Her mom. Call her mom. Can’t she tell you what to do?”

Shaking his head, the doctor is a picture of remorse. “Presley’s mother is on deployment in Germany right now. The Red Cross Emergency Communications Service is trying to locate her, but things like that move slowly in my experience.”

“So, what? You’re not gonna help her now? You’re just gonna leave it until she’s at death’s door?”

The doctor leans in, sighing. “I suggest that you go and fetch Presley’s father, Pax. I suggest you go do it right now.”

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ELODIE

THE WALLS RING with silence as Fitz pushes me into the living room. To my left, the dining room is just as we left it before we drove up to the academy. Fitz eyes me suspiciously, keeping me in his line of sight as, gingerly, he walks through to investigate our abandoned Thanksgiving dinner.

One by one, he stands behind each chair, frowning deeply. “Where are the plates?” he demands.

“We cleared them away. In the kitchen,” I tell him.

“Where was *he* sitting?” Fitz barks. Considering that he keeps insisting that Wren is a figment of my imagination, that I made him up just to get Fitz in trouble, it’s very confusing that he keeps contradicting himself like this.

“There. At the head of the table.”

“Of course,” Fitz spits. “Precious Wren. The head of the table. In charge, overseeing the proceedings. Better than everyone else.”

“This is his house. It’s customary for the person who owns the house to sit at the head of the table. He doesn’t think he’s better than anyone.” I am crazy for arguing with him, but I just can’t stand it. A part of me has accepted that I’m not likely to make it out of this nightmare alive. And if I’m gonna die anyway, I’m damn well going to stand up for my boyfriend. The only sign that Fitz heard me is the irritated tic at the corner of his

mouth, though. He picks up a fork from the table where Wren was sitting, holding it up to the light.

“He used this?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Fitz pops the tines of the fork into his mouth, closing his eyes as he sucks on the metal. He groans, shuddering, and, horrifyingly, the reeking, bloody wolf skin begins to fall from his shoulders. Fitz doesn't even notice. It drops to the floor with a wet slap, landing in a pile of fur and stringy gore. I see the true damage the wolves wrought on Fitz's body now. His shoulder and arm are crosshatched with scars, huge chunks of flesh missing from his muscle, the skin still a livid purple, even though it's healed. Most of his left ear is missing.

His eyes snap to mine, as if he can feel the disgust I feel toward him crawling on his ruined skin. “You can stop looking at me like that. You can't even see me. Not really. I look like a man to you, but I'm not. I'm a wolf. It spoke to me when it bit me. It told me it wanted to become one with me. It told me that I *had* to eat its heart. I didn't have a choice. I had to come back and kill it...” He rants, his lips fluttering, cracked and dry, spiraling further and further into his madness.

I focus on his body language rather than his words. He twitches, his hand flexing around the handle of the hunting knife, relaxing and tightening his grip. Over and over, he does it. Rhythmically, as if there's a pattern to his hand clenching. I count, trying to figure out that pattern, but there's no time.

“You're not listening!” Fitz smacks his hand down on the table, sending the wine glasses wobbling and the empty beer bottles toppling over. Two of them roll off the table, only one of them smashing when it hits the marble. I jump, fear leaping in my chest, though I do my best to hide it. My fear seems to do something to Fitz. It excites him in ways I *don't* want to think about.

“I’m s—sorry. I—this is just a—a lot to think about, y’know? You’re telling me you transformed. I mean...it’s remarkable. I didn’t believe you at first, but—but now I can see, and—it’s fascinating.”

“You’re humoring me,” he sneers. “You don’t believe me. You can’t know.”

“I promise I’m not. I believe you. I swear. Your eyes have changed. I bet in a couple of days, your whole body will be different. The wolf spirit’s too powerful to hold inside a man’s body.” It’s nonsense. All nonsense. But if I can somehow convince him that we’re allies, then he might stay his hand. Long enough for someone to show up and disturb him before he can hurt me, at least. I just need a little more time.

I want to run so badly. It’s almost impossible to keep myself rooted to the floor. If I make any sudden movements, he’ll come for me, though. I have self-defense training. There’s no doubt that I could bring him down. My father, for all his fucked-up, disgusting faults, did make sure I had martial arts training. The only good thing he ever did for me. The form I was trained in—Krav Maga—specializes in disarming people with knives, for fuck’s sake. When he comes for me, ready to quit toying with me, I will use what I know to protect myself from him. But that knife is lethal, even if he accidentally gets a good swipe at me, and the longer I can put off engaging with him, the better.

Fitz skirts around the table, coming toward me, his mouth twitching again. “What color are they, then? My wolf eyes?”

Fuck. I would tell him they’re the same color as the Wolf whose skin he’s been running around in, but I have no idea what color they were, since he cut the animal’s damned head off. Think, think, think, Elodie. What color should I say? I can’t wait much longer to reply before he knows that I’m stalling.

“They’re green,” I say confidently. “Bright jade green. Just like Wren’s.”

“Lying whore!” He charges for me, brandishing the knife, and just like that, any thoughts of me standing my ground and fighting go up in smoke. I’m so panicked, I run. Through the living room. Through the foyer. I grab hold of the banister rail, swinging myself around it and I go flying up the stairs.

I do not waste time looking back.

I can hear Fitz in pursuit, grunting, panting, his bare feet slapping each step, and that’s enough for me. My heart beats so fast, I can hardly differentiate between the beats. I fucking *move*. Two steps at a time. Three. I clear the first staircase and hurtle around the landing, heading for the second flight.

A bloody hand flashes through the banister railings, grabbing at my ankle. I scream, Fitz catching hold of me briefly, but I yank my leg free and bolt, racing forward again. The second flight of stairs yawns ahead of me.

Go, Elodie! Move!

I yell, urging myself on as I run. I can hear Fitz gaining. The grunting is getting louder, the thundering in the steps behind me getting closer.

“Fucking bitch!” he roars. “You’re dead. You’re fucking DEAD!”

Frantic, I wrench Wren’s door open when I reach it. There’s a heart-stopping moment where I turn and slam the door behind me, where I think I’ve got it locked, but then the door explodes off its hinges, and I am sent flying backward.

Gravity shifts. I fight to stay upright, but there’s nothing I can do to keep myself on my feet. I crash to the ground, sprawling out on the floorboards, every molecule in my body alive with terror as I flip over onto my back, desperate to see...

Fitz storms into the bedroom, a whirlwind of fury and hate. Naked, soaked in blood that doesn’t appear to be his, hair wild, mouth hanging slack in a rictus of rage, he falls upon me, knife outstretched.

This is it.

I'm going to fucking die.

I'm going to fucking—

A white-hot, burning pain ignites in my shoulder. The blade protrudes out of my body, just below my collarbone. Shock ripples through me like a pebble cast into a pond, gradually spreading outward from the point of impact. He did it. He...he *stabbed* me.

Grinning madly, Fitz twists the handle of the blade, and the pain that was slow in building suddenly ignites, tearing a scream from my throat.

“They’re yellow, bitch,” Fitz spits. “My eyes are *Yellow*. Not green.”

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PAX

THIS MOTHERFUCKER HAD BETTER BE *dead*.

That's the only excuse I will accept for this bullshit. Hammering on the front door even harder, I lay my fist against the wood, ready to punch a hole in the damn thing.

"Hey, man! What the hell's wrong with you? It's one o'clock in the morning. People are trying to *sleep*." A guy stands in the driveway next door wearing a fluffy pink dressing gown. I definitely woke *him* up; his hair is all over the place, and I can see the pillow lines on his cheek from here.

"ROBEEEEEEERRRT!" I shout. "OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!"

"Dude. Are you high? He's obviously not home!"

"Then where the *fuck* is he?" I round on Fluffy Robe Guy, beelining for him across the front lawn, my hands clenched to fists.

"Whoa there, buddy. Slow down. It's Thanksgiving. He's probably still cleaning up at the restaurant. He did a three-course special—"

The fucking *restaurant*. Of course. The brunch we had with Robert earlier feels like it took place five years ago. He did mention that he had to work later, though. I just momentarily forgot that he'd opened up an Italian place in town.

And now I have to drive a stolen fucking car across Mountain Lakes, right past the police station, because Wren fucked off with the goddamn

Charger without even a by-your-leave. Elodie's missing, fair enough, but tell a guy before you peel out with his car, for fuck's sake!

No matter. The license plate of the ostentatious BMW I borrowed reads, 'DRMARK.' I have every intention of returning the vehicle before Dr. Mark finishes his shift and realizes that it's gone. It takes me just three minutes to speed across town to the restaurant. Sure enough, when I pull up outside, the lights are still on inside, though the blinds are drawn. I try the door first, but it's locked. Around the back, I have better luck with the delivery entrance. Letting myself in, I rush through the spotless kitchen into the main dining room, where I find Robert Witton bending a dark-haired woman over one of the tables, giving her a solid railing. His pants are bunched around his ankles, his shirt covering his ass (thank *fuck*), as he thrusts away like a champ.

I ring the bell on the hostess stand beside me, the bright chime interrupting him mid-pump, and Chase's dad nearly shits himself.

"Holy *shit*!" He hastily exits the brunette, snatching up his pants, the woman cursing fitfully as she wrestles down her dress.

"What the fuck are you *doing* in here?" Robert's face is cherry red, but I think that's more from embarrassment than anger.

"Check your phone," I snarl.

"You can't just let yourself in—"

"CHECK YOUR FUCKING PHONE!"

He does it, and the bright red hue of his cheeks fades to white. "What the hell?" he whispers. "Where is she? Why did you wait until now to come and find—"

"Be advised. If you finish that sentence, I am going to knock your fucking teeth down the back of your fucking throat. You haven't been answering your phone."

"Uh..." He casts around, patting his pockets. "Shit. I don't know where my keys—"

“Fuck your keys. You’re coming with me.”

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WREN

THE FRONT DOOR STANDS OPEN—A dark omen.

“*ELODIE!*” My shout ricochets around the foyer, rasping and raw. They aren’t in the living room. I check the dining room and the kitchen, but there’s no sign of them there, either. My blood roars through my veins, my pulse hammering in my ears as I run up the stairs. A smear of blood sweeps up the wall, marring the paintwork, still tacky and wet.

Dear god, no. Don’t let it be Elodie’s. Do not let it be hers.

“ELODIE!”

She doesn’t answer. From somewhere in the house, I hear a muffled thump, but I can’t tell where it came from. Dash’s room is empty. My stomach rolls over as I rip open the door to Pax’s room, but I already know they won’t be in there. I *know* where they are. Elodie would have run there because that’s where she feels safe. Fitz would have taken her there because he couldn’t resist violating my personal space. My room is up another level; by the time I’ve taken my first step up the staircase, I can hear them. A scratching sound. Grunting. Thumping. Gasping.

He’s hurting her.

A black veil descends over my vision. A strange, calm acceptance settles in my chest.

I am about to murder a man.

There is no other outcome to this scenario.

He laid hands on Elodie: a crime so grave the English language cannot describe its severity. I'm going to make him fucking pay.

"I'M COMI—"

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ELODIE

“—*NG, ELODIE!*”

I scramble, clawing and scratching at Fitz’s hand, his chest, his face, trying urgently to make him get off me. He’s as immovable as a block of marble, though. He’s too fucking *strong*. Another searing jolt of pain lights me up from the inside as Fitz leans on the knife handle, forcing it deeper into my shoulder until I feel metal scraping on bone.

My scream echoes through the house, bouncing off the walls. Stars flash in my eyes, my vision tunneling, fading to black around the edges.

“Stop. Please! I can’t—I can’t—*breathe.*”

“Good,” Fitz spits. “I get to watch you gasp for your last breath.” This idea excites him. He lets go of the knife, instead wrapping his hands around my throat. His grip is an iron vise, closing around my windpipe, his fingers gouging into the back of my neck.

I try to pull in air, but my diaphragm tugs against nothing.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck. I—I—no! NO! I—

Thrashing, I kick my feet against the floorboards. I tear at his hands. I writhe, trying to unseat him. Nothing works. Fitz leers, leaning over me,

watching me so fixedly that I know he's waiting for me to die beneath his hands. There's no mercy in his bulging eyes. No inkling of remorse. Only madness.

A voice screams inside my head, wordless and frantic. Primal, the animal part of my brain begs me to do something, so I don't lose this fight.

"ELODIE!" Wren's voice rises up the stairs, but he sounds so distant. Crackly. I can't tell how far away he is. All I know is that he's too late. I'm out of time. Over me, Fitz's outline swims in my vision, his awful smile warping and contorting. I don't even think he heard Wren; he's too focused on me.

Blackness washes over me in silent, calming waves. Bright, then dark again. Bright, then dark. The world fades—

I float down.

DOWN.

Down.

Down.

—AND THEN THE world comes screaming back into focus, color spasming in my eyes, oxygen rushing down my throat. I am a single blistering white ball of pain, every nerve ending in my body burning with the bite of a thousand fire ants.

Fitz's weight is off me. Gone.

My neck. Oh god, my neck hurts so bad. My windpipe feels like it has collapsed, though that can't be true. I *am* breathing. Thank fuck, I'm breathing.

My relief is short-lived.

"I'm gonna kill you, motherfucker!"

Wren has Fitz on the ground, but it's tough to tell who has the better of who. They roll and flip, exchanging blows, Fitz laughing hysterically, trying to gouge out one of Wren's eyes. The knife he stabbed me with is back in his hand—he must have ripped it out of my shoulder when I was momentarily unconscious—which explains why there's so much blood on the floor now. My shirt is soaked in it.

I'm still too dizzy to move properly. I try to get to my feet, but my legs won't hold me. I don't have the strength. I *have* to get that knife away from Fitz.

"You're not re-al," Fitz says in a sing-song voice, and then sinks his teeth into Wren's forearm. Wren reacts by smashing his fist into Fitz's face so hard that I hear his teeth crack.

Get up, Elodie.

Blood runs out of Fitz's mouth, staining his teeth pink as he tries to clamp down on Wren's arm again. They struggle, the blade flashing between them, the sharpened metal seeking flesh. Wren tries to twist his body to get a better grip on the bastard, but Fitz uses Wren's movement to his advantage, hooking his legs over Wren's and locking them, pushing himself away from the floor and flipping Wren over onto his back.

"Wren!" I cry out, but my voice is broken. I barely make a sound.

Get up, Elodie. Help him.

This time, when I try to stand, my left leg holds steady, propping me up while I labor to get my right one underneath me, too.

Fuck, my neck is killing me.

Fitz is about to kill *Wren*, which is *way* more important. Holding a hand to my throat, I stumble over to the two fighting men, waiting for an opportunity to make a lunge for the knife.

Wren hisses, landing a bone-jarring blow to Fitz's jaw, but the psychopath still maintains the upper hand. He rears back, holding the serrated blade overhead, ready to bring it plunging down into Wren's chest.

Wren grabs his wrist with both hands, locking out his arms, but his downward pressure seems to be winning out over Wren's upward pressure.

Do something. For fuck's sake, do something, Elodie!

Wren's hands shake. I rush forward, still not sure what to do. I hold my neck, tugging the cord of my choker necklace away from my skin, trying to loosen it. It feels like it's strangling me—

It hits me all at once.

The cord around my throat?

Fuck!

With numb fingers, I pull at the knot at the back of my neck, frantically working to get it lose. The strands unravel. Trembling, I remove the plastic guard around the razor blade that Wren used to cut my clothes away last week...

...and I move behind Fitz, grabbing a fistful of his tangled hair...

...and I reach around...

...and *slit his throat from ear to fucking ear.*

Blood spurts from the yawning wound I've just slashed into Wesley Fitzpatrick's neck, pulsing out of his carotid artery. It spews out of him so violently that it hits Wren's bedroom wall six feet away. It also rains down on Wren, who, panting, rolls out from underneath Fitz, shoving the other man's body away.

Gurgling, Fitz holds his hands to his throat, confusion tugging at his eyebrows as he looks down to his palms and finds them a slippery red.

"Fuck," he croaks, sounding surprised.

And then he topples sideways, face-planting on Wren's rug, and he dies.

PAX

“THIS ISN’T RIGHT.” Robert sighs through his fingers, his hands covering his face.

“I’d have thought you’d be pleased,” I say coldly, eyeing him with contempt as we wait for the doctor to return.

Robert drops his hands. “How can you say that? This is a huge decision. Presley should be the one making it. She deserves the opportunity to make it for herself.”

I glower at him pointedly, and as if he realizes how hypocritical this statement makes him, he turns away, directing his focus to the floor, shame flushing his cheeks.

The bastard *should* be ashamed. This whole time, he’s been trying to make decisions for his daughter, deciding what *he* thinks is best for her, trying to coerce her into doing what he wants her to do. And now she’s lying unconscious in a hospital bed, and Robert Witton has just made the decision for her that if the surgeons deem it necessary, they should perform a hysterectomy and remove any chance that she will ever be able to carry her own children, in the hope that it’s what she would want.

I *do* think it’s what Chase would choose. She’d want to live. My mind has already scoured through the possibilities this choice will leave us with, should it come to fruition. We can foster. Adopt. We have options. We

might decide we don't even want kids. This situation was thrust on us out of the blue. We didn't get a chance to talk about what we wanted our lives to look like in the future. We didn't even get a chance to *think* about it.

"Bet you're regretting not letting me ask her to marry me now," I say flatly, getting to my feet. "*I* could have made the decision and told them what to do. Would have let you off the hook. Maybe if you'd let me make the decision to be there for Chase in the first place, none of this would be happening. We'd have booked in for a fucking scan, at least. Seen that there was a problem."

"That's not fair, Pax. Be reasonable. I only did what I thought was best for Presley. Wouldn't you want the same for your child? Wouldn't you want to protect their best interests at all costs?"

"I don't know. I just lost *my* kid."

His face falls. The reality of what I just said resides like a dull weight in the center of my chest. It throbs there, aching, begging for attention, but I don't have the resources to attend to it right now. I can only think about Chase, lying on that operating table. Robert's chosen to focus on the decision he had to make for Chase, but there's a very real chance that she might not even survive the surgery. I'm afraid of what comes next if that happens. I *will* be held accountable for my actions, which will likely mean prison time; once my rage is done with me, Mountain Lakes will be left in ruins.

"I'm sorry, Pax," Robert murmurs. "I realize that I haven't been very fair to you. I know how much you love her."

"No, Robert. I don't think you do."

We sit in silence after that. The hospital rushes and flows around us, the nurses and the doctors like platelets flowing through an arterial vein, carrying much-needed supplies around a body, performing vital tasks.

The lights overhead emit an awful, penetrating hum.

The smell of cleaning products and hand sanitizer makes me want to vomit.

An hour passes.

I sit in the chair next to Robert, the back of my head resting against the wall, my eyes closed, counting in my head—it's the only way to stave off the beginnings of the panic attack I feel building inside me. When a voice interrupts my counting at last, it doesn't belong to Chase's surgeon.

"Pax Davis?"

I snap my eyes open to find a cop in uniform staring down at me. He's maybe thirty. Clean cut to the extreme, hair cut high and tight like he thinks he's a soldier, not a cop. His hand rests on his sidearm like he already expects trouble from me.

"What now?" I ask.

"Are you Pax Davis?" he repeats.

"Yeah, I am."

"I'm going to need you to come with me, Mr. Davis."

"Why?"

He looks at me like I'm stupid. Fuck me, I should *not* have stolen that car. "You and your friends found a dead body earlier this evening?" the cops says, though.

"Oh. That."

Robert stares at me, incredulous. "*What?*"

I may have forgotten to tell him about that.

"We need to ask you some questions to establish exactly what happened," the officer says. "You and your friends will be interviewed separately—"

"Christ, you can't think we had anything to do with that. We were up there, looking for some food for my girlfriend, who was sick. She's currently in the O.R. over there, undergoing major lifesaving surgery—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Davis, but I have to insist—"

“Am I under arrest?”

“No, not yet.”

“We haven’t been able to reach any of the board members yet.”

“Then I’m not going anywhere. I’ll come to the station and answer your dumb questions the moment I know that my girlfriend is safe, and I’ve laid eyes on her. Until then, I’m staying right here.”

“Pax, maybe you should go,” Robert says.

I swear to God, once this is all over, I’m gonna give this fucker two black eyes. “You think for one second that I’m voluntarily leaving this hospital until I know that Chase is gonna be okay? *Seriously?*”

“I could arrest you for trespassing on the academy grounds,” the cop warns.

“You could *try*,” I say, correcting him. “Luckily, we’re already in a hospital, though, so you wouldn’t have long to wait for medical assistance.”

“Was that a *threat?*”

“Pax, shut *up*.” Robert stands, holding out his hands, making a calming gesture to the cop. “Officer, a little grace, please? Tonight’s been incredibly stressful. Pax and I are both really worried about my daughter. He’s not thinking straight. If it’s all right with you, I can bring him to the station as soon as we have news about the surgery. You have my word; it’ll be the first thing we do. I’m sure he has nothing to hide—”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that, Sir. I can wait a while before I have to take him in, though.”

I roll my eyes. “You think I’m gonna go on the lam for a crime we called in to report? You must think I’m an idiot.”

“Honestly, you must be. If you had any sense, you’d realize the gravity of this situation. And you’d show some *respect* when dealing with an officer of the law—”

“Jesus Christ. You say that to yourself when you jerk off in front of the mirror every morning? *Show me some respect. Show me some respect.*” I

mime jerking off, and the dipshit *actually* unclips the gun holster on his hip.

“You are walking a *very* fine line—”

“Mr. Witton? Mr. Davis? Is everything okay here?” Now the doctor shows up, right when things are getting interesting. His face mask is pulled down, hanging around his neck, his scrub cap still on his head. A concerned frown draws his brows tight.

I ignore the cop. I ignore Robert. Launching to my feet, I barrage him with questions. “How is she? Is she okay? Did she make it?”

Still distracted by the police officer, the doctor faces me. “Yes. Presley’s okay. She made it through the surgery.”

“Oh, thank fuck. Oh my god. Shit.” I have to sit back down immediately. I’ve never known relief like this before. Never. I’m dizzy with it. Chase is alive. She made it. She’s going to be okay.

“We’re not fully out of the woods just yet. We still have to worry about post-operative infections and complications, but we’re confident that she’ll recover very well.”

I watch him, studying his expression, trying to preempt what he’ll say next. Because there’s something. He has the look of a man with bad news to deliver. “As I suspected, the damage caused by the ectopic rupture was very severe. Unfortunately, my colleagues and I *did* make the decision to remove Presley’s uterus. We never make that decision lightly, but we felt that, without fully removing the organ, Presley’s body would be incapable of healing—”

A ringing tone cuts through the static of the doctor’s words; the sound blocks everything out. I can’t...think. I can’t make sense of any of this. I have never felt this conflicted before. Joy and sorrow battle inside me; on the one hand, I’m so grateful that Chase is going to live. But on the other hand, my heart is breaking for her. For us. For a future that will look very different now...

“...so that means that she *will* be able to undergo an egg retrieval when the time comes,” the doctor is saying. “It complicates matters. Certainly, makes it a little more difficult, but the chances are still good—”

“Wait. Hold on. I...can you repeat that? What are you talking about? I’m sorry, I—I wasn’t...”

The doctor nods. “I know this is a lot to take in. Normally, when we perform a hysterectomy, we remove the ovaries at the same time. This addresses the risks associated with ovarian cancer. Typically, hysterectomies are performed on women who are a lot older than Presley, though. They might already be closer to menopause, so it makes sense to remove their whole reproductive system and start them on hormone replacement therapy. Presley’s very young, though. Very young. Leaving her ovaries intact is less of a risk for her right now and gives her a better chance at a normal life. While she might start menopause a little earlier than she would have otherwise, Presley will be able to undergo egg retrieval if and when she decides that she wants to have children. The eggs can either be fertilized or frozen, depending on what she and her partner want. She’ll obviously never be able to carry a child herself, but surrogacy is a very viable option. We felt leaving her ovaries intact would be the best for Presley’s overall mental and physical health—”

I’ve never hugged a stranger before. The doctor goes stiff in my arms, surprised by the speed with which I got up and grabbed him, but he relaxes a moment later, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

This isn’t a perfect outcome by any stretch of the imagination. In a perfect world, Chase’s birth control would never have failed, and she’d never have gotten pregnant. We’d have had time to decide whether we wanted kids when we were ready, and we’d have taken things from there. Fate didn’t deal us that hand. But at least, with this as an option, we still get to have that conversation down the line. There’s still a chance for us to have a family if we want one. It’s something.

I release my grip on the doctor, composing myself. “Is she awake? Can I see her?”

“She’s still heavily sedated from the surgery. She won’t be ready to take visitors for a couple of hours after she wakes up, either. We take things very slowly when it comes to cases like these. You should be able to see her by around one o’clock, I should think.”

Not what I want to hear, but I can accept it. If quiet and space are what Chase needs right now, then I won’t fight it. I face down the cop, scowling. “Hear that? I’d better be back here by twelve-thirty, dude. If I’m not waiting at that door the second they say it’s okay to go inside, you’re gonna have a world of hurt on your hands.”

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ELODIE

“YOU’RE A VERY LUCKY GIRL. It’s a miracle the knife didn’t cause any serious injury to the joint or your tendons. Honestly, I’m amazed. There’ll be a lot of physiotherapy in your future. Your shoulder might never be the same again, but I can’t see it affecting your day-to-day too much.”

I’ve had scans galore. Been poked and prodded by ten different people. Eventually, they decided I didn’t need surgery, cleaned up the wound, and stitched me closed. They’re going to keep me overnight, but apparently, I should be good to leave in the morning. Dr. Crawley, the woman who has been treating me, smiles softly at me over the top of the chart she’s been making notes on.

“Your throat is very bruised. It may be tough to talk or swallow for a few days, but the swelling and discoloration should go down soon. I have to say, Elodie, I’m impressed by how calm you are, given what you’ve been through. I can’t even imagine how scary that experience was.”

Calm isn’t the word I would use to describe myself right now. Every time I close my eyes, all I see is Fitz straddling me, that awful, deranged look on his face. I smile back at Dr. Crawley, shrugging a shoulder. “I’m gonna need a hell of a lot of therapy. Not gonna lie. But I’ll be okay.” She really wasn’t joking about it being painful to talk; my throat feels raw as hell.

“I’m very relieved to hear you say that you’ll be going to therapy. A lot of assault victims refuse to go. It makes it so much harder to process the trauma they’ve experienced.”

“She’s not a victim, Dr. Crawley,” a voice says behind her. “She fought like hell for her life, and she won. She saved my life, too. She’s a badass.”

Wren Jacobi.

My poet.

My painter.

My prince.

He smiles at me softly from where he leans against the doorjamb. His dark hair falls in thick waves, curling around his ears. Dressed in blue scrubs, hands shoved into his pockets, he is *impossible*. Too brooding. Too intense. Too handsome for words. My heart seizes at the sight of him.

“You saved me first,” I whisper. “If you hadn’t knocked him off of me, I’d be dead.”

The corner of his mouth lifts up in a lopsided smile. “We saved each other, then. We can tell our grandkids that in fifty years.”

“We won’t be telling them anything about this!” I croak, trying out a half-hearted laugh. “It’ll give them nightmares.”

“Good to see you again, Wren,” Dr. Crawley says. She was here when Wren carried me into the hospital six hours ago. “Glad to see you were able to shower up and find a change of clothes. You looked...” She trails off, struggling to find the right words. He’d looked like something out of a horror movie—as if he’d just crawled up out of a gateway from hell. His skin, his hair, his clothes: there wasn’t a single inch of him that wasn’t covered in blood.

“They let me use a shower in the nurse’s lounge,” Wren says. “They loaned me these.” He gestures to the scrubs, pulling a face. “Not really my color, but...”

“I think the blue suits you. But then I’m just used to everyone wearing scrubs, so...” She laughs. “I was just telling Elodie that her shoulder should be fine. If she does the exercises we give her, she shouldn’t lose any mobility. I’ll be back later on tonight to go over your pain meds, but I’ll leave you guys to it for now.”

She leaves, and Wren paces slowly into the room, eyes fixed and locked on mine as he approaches. He looks strange. Haunted. Angry. Taking his right hand out of his pocket, he carefully reaches out and runs his index finger over my neck, barely making contact with my skin. “I was nearly too late,” he says. The timber of his tone carries a metric ton of remorse. “I’d never have forgiven myself—”

“Stop. No.” Fuck, it really hurts to speak. Each word feels like a jagged rock dragging up the back of my throat. “We’re not *doing* that. We’re both alive. Everyone else is alive.”

Wren nods, looking down at the floor. “I’m glad Presley’s going to be okay.”

“Me, too.”

“How was the police station?” I ask gingerly.

Wren scowls. “They had video footage of Fitz knocking out Alessia at a gas station in town. Hit her over the head with a tire iron, for fuck’s sake. That was enough to exonerate us from any involvement in her murder. They had no reason to keep us there as long as they did. At least it’s all done with now. I thought Pax was gonna lose his shit.”

“Where is he now?” I ask.

“About to go in and see Presley. Dash and Carrie are waiting for us in the cafeteria. We can go in to see her once Pax is done. You feel up to it?”

“Try and stop me.” The truth is that, no, I don’t feel up to it. I feel like curling into a ball and sleeping for a week, but the last time I saw Pres, she was hemorrhaging all over the place, bleeding to death. I really did think

she was going to die. If I have to overcome a little exhaustion to go and see her alive and well, then that's a price I will gladly pay.

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PRESLEY

“IT’S YOUR CHOICE. Your father’s very eager to get some time with you before everyone else piles in here. Your boyfriend’s been pacing the halls, though. He’s desperate to lay eyes on you. Would you like them to come in together, or have your boyfriend wait until after you’ve seen your dad?” The nurse smiles brightly, unaware that the information she’s imparting to me has hidden context. Dad pulled the nurse aside and said he wanted to come in here before Pax, because he wanted to prove that he’s more important to me than Pax. If Pax is pacing the halls, desperate to get in here, then that means he’s also biting people’s heads off and threatening violence if anybody gets too close to him. He’s probably a train wreck right now. It isn’t fair that I have to choose who I let in here first. My brain is still addled from the anesthesia, and the enormity of everything the doctor explained to me when I woke up still has me reeling. Everything just feels like too much.

“If you could send Pax in by himself first, that would be great,” I tell the nurse.

Dad’s going to be all wounded and hurt when he comes in here after Pax, but he’s just going to have to deal with it, isn’t he?

The nurse goes out into the hall, and a moment later, Pax returns alone. His tall frame seems to take up all of the space in the room. His eyes, stormy as ever, seem distant as he rubs his hand over his shaved head as he

crosses the room and sits down heavily in the chair next to my bed. His 'Alice In Chains' t-shirt is rumpled, but it looks clean, at least. I know he carried me from the gazebo back to the car, even if I don't remember him doing it. He carried me inside the hospital, too. He must have been covered in my blood at some point.

"I'm glad they let you get changed," I say quietly. Seems like a stupid thing to say after everything that's happened, but I have to break the silence somehow.

He snorts. "They didn't. The house is a crime scene. We won't be able to go back in for a while yet. This was in the gym bag I keep in the car."

"I'm sorry," I blurt out. "I'm so sorry, Pax."

He looks at me so intensely, a deep sorrow pooling in the silver-grey of his eyes. I expect him to say something, anything, but he just watches me, resignation pouring off him.

"For all of it," I continue. "For not talking to you. For not trusting you to stick around through the messy stuff. For running away. *Twice*. For not giving you a chance to—"

"It's fine, Chase. It's okay." So quiet. So pained. I *hate* hearing this kind of hurt in his voice. Worse, I hate knowing that I am the cause of that hurt. Pax takes my hand in his. He leans forward, resting his forehead against the back of my hand for a second, before taking a deep breath and placing a kiss against the inside of my wrist. "It's all in the rearview now, right? We can't change it, so we move forward."

"I can't just move forward and act like I didn't behave really terribly, Pax. I wasn't fair to you. There's so much to talk about."

He chews on his bottom lip, nodding slowly, seeming to slip further and further away. "The doctor explained everything to you. About the surgery?"

"Yes," I whisper. "I haven't really wrapped my head around it yet. It's a lot." The doctor went over the details of the emergency surgery they performed on me twice, answering my questions and giving me a run-down

of what they did to save me. I've taken it all in, but I haven't processed it yet. Not properly. It's going to take me a long time to fully comprehend what it might mean for me moving forward. All I know is that Pax was there for me when I needed him. He physically carried me. Emotionally carried me. And I treated him so badly. I allowed my own fears to color my judgment, and I let my father cast doubt in my mind. I know this man. I should have been honest with him from the beginning, for God's sake. I look back on the way I handled the whole pregnancy situation, from the moment I peed on the test to waking up here in the hospital this morning, and I don't even recognize myself in my own actions.

"I'll never be able to get pregnant again." I say it out loud for the first time, waiting to see how the truth of it feels, letting it sink in. I'm surprised by how badly it hurts. I was terrified when I saw that second pink line form on the test. Mindlessly so. But only because of the timing. Pax convinced me the other day in his bedroom. I hadn't even had the chance to tell him that. He made me feel safe. Protected. *Hopeful*. I began to reframe it all in my mind. I'd started to look forward to a world where me and this man shared a child. And then it was all snatched away.

"I want a baby with you," I say. "I want the life together that you could see so easily when I couldn't. I'm never going to doubt us again, I promise." I wish I'd seen this clearly before. There was no avoiding the suffering we'd have endured, losing this baby. It would have happened. The pregnancy was never going to be viable, no matter what. But we could have faced it earlier, head-on, together. We could have supported each other from the beginning, and I went and fucked it up.

"Chase—"

"I'm going to have to spend a couple of weeks here to heal, but as soon as I can, I'm headed back to Sarah Lawrence. I'm going to catch up on all of the work I've missed, and I'm going to come down to Virginia to see you every single weekend—"

“Presley,” Pax says, squeezing my hand. He looks so, so sad, “I haven’t been fair to you. I’ve put so much pressure on you to give me what I want. To have the baby and to get married. To rush head-long into something without thinking it through properly, because I was scared about being long-distance. It was stupid, okay. Your dad was right. You deserve time to heal and *live* after what happened with Jonah—”

“What? Pax, no. Jonah hasn’t got anything to do with this. This...all just got really messy, but it’s like you said. It’s all behind us now. We can move on together—”

The second Pax sets his jaw, his eyes hardening a little, I know it’s over. “I’m going to Japan for six months. With Callan. He’s been hassling me about going with him to document this volcano that’s about to blow. And the cherry blossoms. And some spring festival. He’s got this whole itinerary plotted out. I told him no originally, but I think...” He lets out a ragged sigh, letting his head hang. “I hate that I’m not gonna be here to help you recover from the surgery, Firebrand. But you’ve got your dad. And I ca—” His voice breaks, his words failing him. I’ve seen Pax’s eyes full of so many emotions, but I’ve *never* seen them shining with tears.

“I can’t be here, crowding you, loving you, being...so mad at you—” His second attempt at talking ends in failure, too. A solitary tear streaks down his cheek. He dashes it away, frustration bubbling out of him as he stands up.

This isn’t happening.

It can’t be.

He’s not saying what I think he is.

I open my mouth, and a sob flies out before I can rein it in. I was going to tell him to sit back down again, to talk to me, to iron all of this out with me, but another sob comes, and then another. Harrowed, Pax looks away, the muscles in his throat working. He shifts from one foot to the other, the most uncomfortable I’ve ever seen him.

“Please...” he whispers.

“You’re not going to Japan! You’re staying here. With me. You’re going back to Virginia, and I’m going back to Yonkers, and we’re gonna see this through!”

He shakes his head slowly. “I *can’t*.”

“So you *are* gonna bail then? After everything you said? After all the shit you gave me about not giving you a chance to prove yourself?” The heat of my temper sends the words firing out of me like bullets. They strike home, each and every one. Pax flinches, anger flickering over his features but failing to take root. He just looks hurt, and that...that *kills* me.

“I’m done trying to figure out how to do the right thing here, Chase. You need to figure out who you wanna be, and where you wanna be, and —”

“I know all of those things, Pax!”

“And *I* have my own shit to work on, too,” he stresses. “I’m still a fuck-up, Chase. I have *major* anger issues. I tried to start a fight with *a cop* earlier, just so I didn’t have to feel fucking scared anymore. I don’t even wanna live inside my own head anymore. I’m jealous and volatile, and I don’t want to coerce you into marrying me just because I can’t regulate my own fucking emotions.”

“You’re not coercing me into anything! You can’t *coerce* me into doing something that I want to do. That’s not how this works!”

It’s too late, though. I can see it in his eyes. He’s made his decision. The instant I see his resolve harden, my heart shatters in my chest. The pain is infinitely worse than anything else I’ve endured in the past twenty-four hours. That didn’t kill me, but *this* just might.

“I’m sorry, Chase. I’ll be back at the end of May. If you want to talk then—”

“Seriously? Just get out then! Just fucking *go* if you’re gonna go!” I can’t really see his face as I scream at him. My tears have turned the world

to a smudge of color.

“Presley—”

“JUST FUCKING GO!”

He doesn’t go, though. He comes to me, cradling the back of my head in his hand. Drawing me to him, he places a long kiss against my forehead, his body shaking. When he pulls away, he whispers, “I love you. I’m sorry.”

And then he walks away.

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PAX

ELODIE STILLWATER'S arm is bound up in a sling. The smile on her face falls the second I storm out of the hospital room. She *knows* something is wrong. Her eyes flash with concern as she gets to her feet, Carrie joining her. Chase's sobs can be heard through the open door. The two girls hurry into the room behind me as I charge away down the corridor.

"Dude!" Dash follows after me, right on my heels. "What the hell, man? Did something happen? What are you—where the hell are you *going*?" He tries to grab me, but I break into a run. Outside, the day is in full swing, another bleak and miserable November sky looming on the horizon. I mean to run to the car and get in it and peel away before Dash can catch up to me, but I pass by a low brick wall, the bricks in the middle a fresher, brighter, newer red, and something loose, already rattling inside my chest, comes undone. I stagger to a stop, bracing, my hands resting on my knees, trying to catch a breath that just won't come.

"Pax! Jesus! What the *fuck* is going on?" Dash knows better than to try and touch me now. He stands in front of me, and all I can see of him are his feet.

Gasping, I point at the wall. "I was sitting there that night."

"What night?"

“The night Jonah slit Chase’s wrists and dumped her out of the car. He drove through the fucking wall. Nearly killed me. I kept her breathing that night. I saved her.”

“Fuck,” Dash says under his breath. “Did she break up with you or something?”

I’m being crushed to death. I shake my head, trying to swallow, trying to breathe...

“Say something, man. I’m having a hard time trying to figure out what the fuck is going on.”

‘PAX!’ Wren’s roar can be heard across the entire parking lot.

“*Shit.*” I spit, gulping down air.

“The fuck’s wrong with *him*?” Dash demands. A second later, Wren’s upon us.

“You’re fucking joking, right?” Jacobi wrenches me upright, his face a mask of rage. “You are *joking*. Tell me you’re fucking joking.”

“Serious as a heart attack,” I pant.

“Will someone tell me what’s going on!”

“He dumped her!” Throwing his hands up in the air, incredulous, Wren hurls daggers at me. “His girlfriend just lost his baby and had an emergency hysterectomy, and he *dumps* her.”

“Whoa. Whoa, now. I’m sure there’s more to it,” Dash says, ever the voice of reason.

“If there is more to it, then I’d *love* to hear it,” Wren rages.

“I was fucking relieved, okay!” I shout. “I was trapped in that shitty situation, and then she lost the fucking kid. It was a fucking blessing in disguise. What did you expect from me? Huh? I’m Pax fucking Davis. I’m *free* now. I get to go on my merry way, and—”

The blow comes out of nowhere. He’s fast with his fists, Jacobi. Always has been. The impact of his strike rocks me to the soles of my boots. Pain lances through my jaw, lashing around my head to the back of my skull.

I spit blood out onto the concrete at my feet. “Again.”

Wren already has another right hook ready and waiting for me. This time, the punch lands on my temple. Stars wheel in my vision, momentary darkness crowding my vision. The second wave of pain is a welcome friend, stretching a hand out to me, inviting me into oblivion. Sadly, unconsciousness fails to take me, so I get to my feet and wave him on, curling a lip at him.

“Again.”

I don’t even try to defend myself. The third strike does the trick. Wren’s fist connects with my jaw again, and the world flickers out of focus, then the lights go out. I wake on the ground, the back of my head killing me, with Dash and Wren arguing over my prone body.

“Just stop! I’m telling you, we don’t have the full story!” I never thought I’d hear Lord Lovett coming to my defense. What a fucked up day this has turned out to be.

“I don’t give a shit what his excuse is. He needs to get back in there and tell that girl he made a mistake—”

“He’s awake.” Dash pushes Wren aside, offering to help me up. I’d love to be able to decline and maintain some semblance of dignity, but it’s too late for that. Once I’m up on my feet, I clear my mouth, spitting more blood out onto the ground, and then I hold my hand out to Jacobi.

“I need my keys.”

“You’re not having your keys, you fuck wit.”

“Give them to me.”

“Why, so you can fucking disappear and run away from all of this?”

His contempt cuts worse than any knife, but I nod, flaring my nostrils. “What do you think? Isn’t that what you expect from me? What all of you expect?”

“No!” he shouts. “I expect you to be the man I know you are. I expect you to stay and *love* the girl back in that hospital room, even though it’s

hard!”

“Fuck you, dude. You don’t know what you’re talking about. I was always gonna do this! I was always gonna fuck it up! It’s just who I fucking AM!”

“*Weak*,” Wren accuses. He shakes his head disapprovingly. “This isn’t who you are. You’re better than this.”

God, at what point did he develop this opinion of me? He had a front-row seat to the ‘Pax is a Fucking Loser’ show all through the academy. I’ve been a complete shit the entire length of our friendship. I can’t imagine where he thinks he’s seen such a change in me that I warrant this level of belief from him. Craning my neck forward, I get up in his face, narrowing my eyes. Wren doesn’t bat an eyelid when I stab my finger behind me, pointing back at the hospital. “I am going to be the *death* of that girl,” I snarl. “She wouldn’t even be in there right now if it wasn’t for me. The very best thing I can do for her, the *kindest* thing I can do for her, is to fucking leave and let her get on with her life. Chase is good and kind. All I’m gonna do is back her into a corner and make her life *small*. I nearly got her killed for fuck’s sake. She deserves better than that. And if that’s all I can do—to walk away and let her make a fresh start for herself, then I’ll fucking do it. Now give me...my fucking keys.”

Wren meets my gaze. We met when we were fourteen, and we did not like each other at first. He was so quietly confident. An arrogant, pampered piece of shit in my book. We spent a lot of time butting heads, going toe-to-toe. Staring each other down was our profession. Eventually, we became inseparable, and we joined forces, directing our anger and our bad attitudes outward, toward a world that treated us badly, instead of at each other. But he learned how to read me before then, though.

Silently, he hands over the keys to the Charger.

I head off, making a beeline for the car, where I can see it parked on the other side of the half-empty lot.

“Enjoy Japan. I hope you eat bad sushi every day and get dysentery, you *fuck!*”

I don’t breathe a fucking word.

Trembling, I climb into the Charger, start the engine, and I screech out of the parking lot. As soon as I can no longer see the hospital in the rearview mirror, I pull over to the side of the road, put the car in park, open the door, and I hurl my guts up onto the sidewalk.

It’s over. It’s done. This is the end.

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PRESLEY

LONDON

“YOU THINK THIS IS COLD? *Alaska* was cold,” Elodie says, pulling the living room window closed. She laughs, about to say something else to underline her point, no doubt, but then she sees me and her smile ups and vanishes.

Alaska is a taboo subject amongst my friends.

Alaska, all mention of children or babies, and the name Pax Davis.

For the past month, everyone has been very careful not to mention that name. Two weeks, I languished at home in Mountain Lakes, and my father didn't mention him once. He didn't even lord the fact that he was right about Pax over me. He felt guilty, I think. Everyone else had to go back to school to take exams and catch up on their missed assignments, so it was just me and him. He surprised me when he brought me home from the hospital to a brand-new house. A turnkey new-build property on the outskirts of town—three bedrooms, and a pool in the backyard, and no shitty memories to fuel my nightmares when I passed out each night. Not that I needed help in that department. Moving house couldn't erase the memory of Pax. Couldn't erase the sting of him walking out of that hospital

room...and all of the tears that followed in the days after. It was something, though. A fresh start. The new environment helped.

“I can’t believe your dad let you come on your own,” Carrie says, pouring a healthy amount of wine into our glasses, refilling them. “You’re still not a hundred percent after the surgery, surely.”

“I’m fine. I’m completely healed, I promise. The doctors cleared me, so what was he gonna do? Fly out here with me and lurk in a hotel down the road while I spent the holidays with you guys, on the off chance that I needed him?

“Yes.” The girls say it at the same time. “He’s pretty overprotective,” Elodie adds.

“Oh really? Is he? I hadn’t noticed.” I wink to let them know I’m being sarcastic. The laughter that I force out sounds exactly that, though: forced. I wonder if they notice, or if they buy the lie that I’m capable of laughing again. If they see through my ruse, they’re too kind to let on.

“The guys will be back from the pub soon. We’d better make the most of the peace and quiet while we have the chance,” Carrie says, changing the subject. No one likes to linger on my surgery for too long; it leads to other, more complicated topics of conversation. It irritates me most of the time. I don’t need them to handle me with kid gloves. I’m stronger now than I was last month. Not so breakable. But today I’m grateful for their tiptoeing. We were all supposed to be here for Christmas together. The six of us. Three couples. The fact that there are only five of us, two couples and a single fifth wheel, is uncomfortable as hell. No one will mention it, but the distinct lack of Pax has been the elephant in the room since we reunited at Dash and Carrie’s London flat three days ago. Just like his personality, Pax’s absence is about as subtle as a brick to the face.

I take a sip of my wine, trying to eradicate all thoughts of him from my mind, but that is a battle that I will never win. I look at Elodie and I remember the time she flipped Pax over on his ass outside Riot House.

When I look at Carrie, I remember years of her telling me that I should give up swooning over him because he's a sociopath and I can do a million times better for myself. When I look at Wren and Dash, all I see is Pax, because the three of them are one single unit. Synonymous with one another, it's impossible to talk about one of them without the other two pieces of the Riot House puzzle cropping up. I drain my wine before I even realize that I've been chugging the glass Carrie just poured for me.

"I think I'm gonna freshen up," I tell the girls, already feeling the effects of the alcohol coursing through my veins.

"Okay, girl." Carrie smiles easily, her façade a good one. I've known my friend long enough to know that she's worried about me, though. Elodie, too. The pair of them have done a stellar job of acting like everything is normal, but I see the looks they share when they think I'm not looking. I hear their whispered conversations when they think I'm out of earshot. Case in point: their hushed back and forth when I make my way back from the bathroom.

Elodie: "Has she heard from him?"

Carrie: "Not that I know of. Dash has been texting him every other day. He hasn't had a single response. What about Wren?"

Elodie: "Nothing. He apologized for laying into him. For Wren to do that? He feels terrible. He tried calling a bunch, but he doesn't pick up. Wren thinks he didn't bother unlocking international roaming when he went overseas—"

"He had his line disconnected," I say, entering the kitchen. "At the beginning of the month. I called the cell provider. They wouldn't give me any information about his account, but the woman said that his number was no longer in use. She told me I could buy it if I wanted it. I think that was her way of giving me the information I asked her for without breaking the rules."

The girls look stricken, both of them pale as sheets. Carrie nearly drops her wine. “Sorry, Pres. We weren’t trying to be rude. We’re just...trying to understand it all, y’know.” She shrugs. “Just like you are, I’m sure.”

“It’s all right. I know. The whole situation’s crazy. I’d be trying to work it out, too, if I were you. I just wish...” I trail off, letting the thought die. Wishing is for optimistic fools and idiots.

“I can’t believe he disconnected his phone,” Elodie mutters, scowling as she drinks. “*Such* a shitty move. If I ever see the bastard again, I’m gonna break his nose.”

“Fuck his nose. I’m gonna break his legs,” Carrie growls. “At least that way he won’t be able to bail before we can all tell him exactly what we think of him.”

“I appreciate that you have my back, guys, but...I’ve had plenty of time to think over the past few weeks. And...as tough as it is to say this, I think he made the right decision. We were up against it from the very beginning. The odds were stacked against us big time. And I’m not blameless, y’know?” I say what they’re too nice to ever say. “I lied to him for weeks. I hid something very important. Something he had the right to know. I ran away from him first, and then I refused to let him in. I’m the reason why he left. At the end of the day, he didn’t do anything wrong.”

“He broke up with you hours after you had major surgery!” Elodie thumps a couch cushion, her indignance pretty adorable.

“I know. But what else was he supposed to do? If he had stayed until I was better, that wouldn’t have helped. It would have only made matters worse. He would have been lying to me, trying to maintain a façade that would have been impossible to keep up. There would have been so much resentment between us. And it would have *hurt* so much more weeks further down the road.”

“You’re too nice, Pres. I’d never forgive him. I’d wish the fucker dead every day until the end of time—”

“Hello, wonderful women who love us!” a call reaches us from the front door. “Your hunter-gatherers have returned from their foraging expedition.”

“Don’t lie to us, Dashiell Lovett. We sent you out for cranberry sauce three hours ago. The store’s right on the corner. You guys have been at the pub!”

Wren and Dash have been enjoying the fact that you can drink at eighteen in the UK without having to lie about your age. I can’t say I blame them, honestly. They’re both grinning from ear to ear as they roll into the living room. “We may have stopped for a pint,” Dash says, planting a kiss on top of Carrie’s head. “But I can assure you, most of our time was spent scouring the city for the *perfect* jar of cranberry sauce.” He produces a glass jar with a flourish, presenting it to his girlfriend with much fanfare.

She takes it from him, pulling a face. “Dash, this is *lingonberry* sauce.”

“Isn’t that the same thing? The guy at the corner store said it was the same thing!”

Carrie teases Dash endlessly. Wren quietly inserts himself behind Elodie on the couch, taking her in his arms, drawing her back so that she’s using him as a backrest. He whispers in her ear, something personal and private enough that Elodie blushes, and my insides twist themselves into knots.

I don’t know what I was thinking, coming here. I should have stayed home and let these guys have their holiday in peace without me bringing the mood down. But weirdly, Dad insisted that I come. Far from discouraging me as my friends assumed he would, he was practically shoving me out the door the other day. The new woman he’s been seeing invited him to go and stay with her in New York, and he hadn’t even skipped a beat when he’d said yes.

As if realizing that I’m sitting awkwardly on the couch, peering into my empty wine glass while they all canoodle, my friends suddenly disengage themselves, adopting far less romantic positions on their respective couches.

“All right. It’s fucking Christmas Day,” Dash says, a touch rowdier than he would normally. Clearly, he was lying about the one beer they had at the pub. “I think it’s about time we started cooking, don’t you guys!”

“Screw cooking. When are we opening presents?” Elodie asks.

“After dinner. I still need to wrap some of your gifts,” Wren says, bopping E on the end of her nose. “When did you become so impatient?”

“Today. Now,” she answers.

“Tough luck, Stillwater. You’re just gonna have to wait.”

DINNER, amazingly, doesn’t get burned. It turns out perfectly, in fact, and is really enjoyable, even though it’s weird that the English eat turkey for Christmas dinner. The last time I ate turkey, Pax was trying to tempt me to try some off his plate while he did his best to wrestle a cup of Jell-O out of my hand. Only hours later, he was telling me that he loved me and kissing me goodbye.

“I don’t wanna wear it. It keeps dropping down over my eyes. I can’t fucking see!” Carrie complains, trying to remove the pink paper crown that Dash valiantly attempts to secure over her curls.

“You have to wear it. It’s non-negotiable,” Dash argues. “They’re a British Christmas institution. You’ll get kicked out if you don’t try to fit in with the locals.” His paper hat is orange. Elodie’s is green. I thought for sure that Wren would refuse to wear his pink one, the same color as Carrie’s, but he surprised everyone by setting the hat at a jaunty angle atop his wavy hair and frankly rocking it. My hat is red, to match my hair.

We polish off another bottle of wine. By the time it comes to opening our gifts, I'm feeling nicely toasted and bone tired. It's only been a week since I stopped taking some pretty hefty pain meds. I'd do anything to just skip out on opening gifts and go to bed, but when I even suggest it I'm met with a hail of objections.

"Not happening," Wren says, steering me over to the couch, sitting me right next to the beautifully decorated Christmas tree. "You're in charge of distributing the gifts anyway."

I don't think I'll ever get used to being friends with these guys. Wren Jacobi was a legend back at Wolf Hall. Along with Pax and Dash, he terrorized our year for so long that I was certain I'd need therapy for the rest of my life, thanks to the Riot House boys. I suppose at some point in the future, I'll look back and find it laughable that my friends were ever so badly behaved. But for now...it's weird to be included in festivities with these two.

Do not think about Pax.

Do not miss Pax.

Do not think about Pax.

Do not miss Pax.

The ongoing refrain in my head works for the most part. Keeping up the mantra doesn't leave much room for anything else. I play my part well and grin and smile as I read the names attached to the gifts and give them out one by one. Everybody's presents are super thoughtful and beautiful. Dash buys Carrie jewelry, exactly her style, as well as a stunning polished brass antique telescope that makes her eyes light up the moment she unwraps it. She gifts him with a monogrammed leather folder for all of his sheet music, and tickets to see a concert pianist play, who apparently sold out seven months ago. Wren receives art supplies from Elodie and a first-edition signed book of poetry by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Wren has to show Elodie his main gift to her in a photograph: a massive, *seriously* big gilt-framed mirror mounted on the bedroom wall in their new apartment, obviously too big to have wrapped and brought to the UK. Elodie squeals when she sees it on his phone. She discovered it in an antique restoration store in New York months ago, but they'd been living out of a hotel at that point and hadn't had anywhere to keep it. Wren had bought it in secret and paid the shop owners to store it until they had a home to hang it in. He also surprises Elodie with a gorgeous black silk dress with a plunging neckline and a pair of new shit-kicking Doc Martens to wear with it.

I am showered with all kinds of gifts; I think they overcompensated a touch to make sure I didn't feel left out. Makeup, perfume, and all kinds of chocolate. A new green silky shirt that makes my hair pop, and so many books. Books upon books upon books.

I come to the last gift, wrapped in plain black paper, bound together with a gold ribbon, and find that there's only one name on it: mine.

"Who is this from?" I ask, holding it up.

"Your dad mailed it to us to bring for you," Elodie says sheepishly. "He said he wanted to make sure you had it today, but he didn't want to have to ask you to bring your own present."

That definitely sounds like something Dad would do. He said we'd have our own little Christmas when we both got home, though. It seemed like he went to an awful lot of trouble for this one present. I open it, ripping the paper with abandon, and my heart stops in my chest. It's another book. Plain black cover with gold foiling.

(UNTITLED)

By Presley Maria Witton Chase & Pax Davis.

THIS GIFT IS NOT from my father. There's no way. This isn't a book he could have bought in a store or ordered online. This is the book...

I flip it open to make sure. Yes. The words leap out from the page, so familiar.

This is *our* book. The book Pax and I wrote when I was first trying to bait him into being my friend. We'd been partnered in our Advanced Creative Writing class. Our teacher, Jarvis Reid, had challenged us to finish a book, going chapter for chapter with our project partner, and this is what we'd created.

I've never seen it formatted and bound like this, of course. I've only ever read the words on a laptop screen. Leafing through the chapters now, it all comes rushing back to me. How many hours I spent crafting my chapters, determined to craft something that would impress Pax. Reading his chapters, hooked on every word, reading so much between the lines of his words. I'd never been prouder when we finished the project in our own time.

Inside, the dedication on the front page catches me off guard, making my breath catch in my throat.

“SOMETIMES THE PATH of least resistance isn't a straight line. It's the way home.”

OH MY GOD. What...what is this? Why would he send this? The hurt is a brand searing into my flesh; it burns bone-deep, taking my breath away. The villain I was obsessed with back at Wolf Hall was capable of something like this. He'd have planned this out for months and taken great pride in the

chaos he wreaked with such a cruel gift. The man I fell in love with would never do something so spiteful and downright *mean*.

A hand at my back startles me, snapping me out of my downward spiral. Elodie stands next to me, exuding sympathy. “Sorry,” she says. “We wouldn’t have brought it if we knew it was from him. Your dad said you were gonna love it. I’m so confused.”

“It’s okay. I—maybe he thought it was—I don’t know. Maybe he wrapped the wrong book or something.”

“You okay?” Carrie wraps her arm around my shoulder, pulling me into a side hug. She’s just trying to be sweet, but I can’t handle the physical contact at the moment. I don’t want to be touched. I don’t want to be fussed over. I can’t stand the idea of everybody looking at me, feeling sorry for me, knowing that it wasn’t enough for the guy I love to leave me, but now he seems determined to torment me from afar, too.

“Yeah. I’m sorry, guys. I’m feeling a little out of it, to be honest. I think I’m just gonna go to bed. I’m sure I’ll feel better in the morning.”

No one stops me as I get up and leave. The walls of Dash and Carrie’s beautiful flat resonate with pity as I make my way to my room; by the time I close the door behind me and lean my back up against it, my heart is racing like crazy and a river of tears are chasing down my cheeks.

When will it stop hurting so bad? *When?* I don’t know how much more I can take of this. It took weeks and weeks for my body to start healing from my surgery. I’m still nowhere near a hundred percent; the progress has felt glacially slow and incredibly frustrating, but at least I’m slowly bouncing back. The wound Pax has left behind is as deep and fresh today as it was the moment he inflicted it. I’m still bleeding out from it. Still dying from it every day. It will fester and grow worse until it destroys me, I’m sure of it.

Numb, outside of my body, I get ready for bed.

Wash my face.

Brush my teeth.

Plait my hair into braids.

I haven't yet changed into my pajamas when the knock comes at the door—a fact that I am very grateful for when I open it and discover Wren on the other side of it. He looks a little chagrined, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “Hey, Presley. Uh...”

He holds up the book. Black cover. Gold foiled title. I left it on the couch. I didn't want to make a scene by throwing it in the trash; that would have looked melodramatic, and I wouldn't have been able to keep my cool while I did it. I fully planned on grabbing it in the morning before anyone else got up and tossing it in the fire grate.

“I need to apologize,” Wren says, sighing. “Elodie doesn't know that I switched your dad's gift out for this. She would never have let me do it.”

“You switched it out? Why would you do that?”

Wren was madder at Pax than anyone else when he first left. If anyone would have told me *he* would be the one to react so violently when Pax fled to Japan, I never would have believed it. Elodie's boyfriend has been very quiet with regard to Pax since we all arrived in London, though. I haven't thought anything of it. Until now. “How did you get it? Did he send it to you?” My voice wobbles. I'm trying to keep it together, but it's verging on impossible.

“He gave it to me to give to you, yeah,” he says.

Oh my god. I'm crying in front of Wren Jacobi. “You saw him? When?”

He sighs. “Earlier. When Carrie sent us out to grab stuff for dinner.”

“So you weren't at the pub?” My voice gets higher and higher every time I speak. Pretty soon, only dogs will be able to hear me.

“Oh, we were at the pub, *believe* me. I don't think any of us could have gotten through that without alcohol.”

“So, then he was here. In London. Less than a mile away. And he stayed away.”

It hurts. Holy hell, it hurts. There will come a day when Pax and I have to be in the same room. Dash and Carrie will get married, or Wren and Elodie will. It's only a matter of time. When that day arrives, Pax *will* have to face me. Until then, apparently, he intends to avoid me like the plague.

I refuse to ask Wren if he asked about me.

I refuse to ask how he looked.

I absolutely will *not* ask if he's still in this city or where he's staying.

"It's good that he came to see you on Christmas day." If I force enough enthusiasm into my voice, I might actually start feeling it. "I'm glad the three of you are friends again. It's for the best. This will all be water under the bridge soon enough. I'll meet someone new eventually. And Pax—" *Fuck, just get the words out, Presley. Just say them out loud. It's gonna be fine.* "Pax will start seeing someone else, and—"

"Hah!" Wren shakes his head. He tries to keep another bark of laughter from exploding out of his mouth, but it sneaks by him all the same. "HAH! Sorry. Sorry, sorry. I don't mean to laugh."

"Was there something else, Wren? As I said, I'm glad he came to see you guys. He doesn't have anyone else. You and Dash are his family, and it's Christmas. But I don't want that book, and—"

"You guys are both so stupid," Wren says, thrusting the book out to me. "Pax isn't gonna '*start seeing someone else.*'" He says this with so much attitude that he clearly thinks it's the most idiotic thing he's ever heard. "Neither are you."

"Wren—"

"Just flick through the book properly, okay? I've been told that there's some additional content in there. I think you might find it illuminating. Now, I'm gonna go explain all of this to my girlfriend before she kills me for keeping secrets from her. Night, Presley."

I sit and stare at the book for a long time. So long that my eyes dry out and feel gritty when I remember to blink. Midnight rolls around. And then

one. At one-fifteen, I snap the book open and begin to scan the pages, looking for something out of the ordinary. What did he change? Did he kill off my character or something? I wouldn't put it past—

A folded piece of paper flutters out from between the pages, dropping into my lap.

Immediately, I see that Pax's messy handwriting is scrawled all over it.

Panicked, I snatch up the letter, shove it back inside the book, and then slam the book closed.

Dum. Dum. Dum.

My pulse is everywhere, thumping in my hands, and my feet, and my temples, and my ears. So much pressure builds up inside my head that I feel like I'm about to pass out. I count to thirty, breathing in deep through my nose and out through my mouth, waiting for the anxiety to pass, but it doesn't, so I open the book again and retrieve the note. Quaking a little, I unfold the paper and begin to read.

WHAT I FORGOT to say in my graduation speech, Firebrand, is that the path of least resistance is sometimes an uphill battle. There are summits to climb on the path between here and the place you call home. Climbing mountains is never easy. There are many points where the top feels so far away, the distance too great to overcome, and people want to give up. They forget how far they've already come, and they set their packs down and tell themselves that they can't take another step. But that's how mountains are conquered. Not in one impossible leap, but by taking one more step. And then another. And another.

The mountain that we stood beneath recently felt taller than Everest. We'd already passed Basecamp and gotten over the altitude sickness, but when we started the climb on that daunting rock face...both of us set down our packs. You figured out how to pick yours up again. You figured out how

to take another step. I thought the only way to keep you from falling was to climb back down.

I was wrong.

I've been taking photos of volcanos for the past month with Callan. Last week, we climbed Mount Fuji from the base. We were documenting a group of eighty-year-old monks who climb to the caldera of the volcano every day, weather permitting, as a form of pilgrimage. The climb is a sacred duty to them. They wear nothing but thin robes and sandals, even in the middle of winter. The hike up the mountain wasn't that tough, but I admit, I was struggling a little. Out of breath and sweating. The old men kept passing me by. They slapped me on the shoulder and waved and laughed as they left me in the dust. At the top, I asked them how they made it look so easy, and one of the oldest guys said to me, 'It's hard for you because you carry too much. It's hard for you because you are desperate to get to the top. The mountain is an eternal journey. It never ends. We summit it today, but the job isn't done. We climb again tomorrow. We seek joy in every step.'

Our mountain is eternal, Chase. I don't think it will ever go away. There's been so much hurt and pain for both of us as individuals. My entire childhood. What you went through at the hands of your brother. Then there's our joint baggage. Fitzpatrick, and the baby, and your surgery. Stacked high on top of one another, those issues feel insurmountable from a distance. But they're not. I've never regretted anything more than setting my pack down at your feet, Chase. More than anything, I want to pick it back up again. I want to carry yours for you, too, so you can navigate the climb unburdened. I can't promise that I can do that for you, but I really want to try.

I'm staying down the street. My flight back to Tokyo is at eight-thirty. I'm going to wait on the bench opposite the blue café—the one overlooking the park. If you want to talk, come and meet me there before the sun comes

up. Likewise, if you just want to come and kick me in the balls, then I'm fine with that, too.

I LOVE YOU.

PAX.

HE THINKS he can just write me a letter and I'll go running to him? How many texts did I send to him before I realized he'd gotten rid of his number? How many messages did I leave for him? How many nights have I sobbed into my pillow, hating him for leaving me with this yawning chasm inside my chest? I fold up the letter and stuff it back inside the book, coming apart, coming undone. I should burn both the letter and the book right now. Just take it back into the living room and cast them both into the flames. It isn't as easy as that, though.

I am *far* from blameless in this mess.

Changing into my pajamas, I unbraid my hair and re-braid it again, needing to do something with my hands.

I can't go to him.

What would be the point?

We'll only end up right back here again in a couple of months. Pax was right—we have been through so much. Most couples never have to face the kind of hardships we've already struggled through. We're a lost cause, for fuck's sake, and I can't face the thought of losing him again. I can't.

I get into bed, my decision made. It kills me not to go to him, but there's no two ways about it. This is for the best. Closing my eyes, I let my grief

claim me for a second, wallowing in it. It isn't easy letting go of something you've so desperately clung to for so long. In time, we'll be able to move—

My eyes snap open, heart thundering like a piston. What the fuck am I *doing*? Who the hell am I trying to *kid*?

I throw on a jacket and some shoes, and I sprint out of the apartment before I can change my mind.

I try three different parks on google maps before I find the one with a blue café opposite; he could have been a little more fucking specific. At first, I think I'm too late. The park bench sits empty. But no, it's only two thirty in the morning. Nowhere near sunrise. He wouldn't have left already, surely? Eventually I spot him, walking toward me from across the park—a dark and shadowy figure that would otherwise look ominous, but I recognize his long, easy strides.

Out of nowhere, my nerves get the better of me.

Is this madness? Holy fuck, I want to run. But the second I see his face, I know I'm not going anywhere. He wears black jeans and a plain black hoody, the hood pulled up over his shaved head. His tattoos peek out from the cuffs of his sleeves, visibly creeping up the column of his neck, so instantly familiar. In the dark, his eyes look so light—the palest, almost silver grey that I've ever seen.

My heart squeezes when a sad smile spreads across his handsome face.

"The bench got pretty cold," he says, fog forming on his breath. "Figured I'd walk a bit. I knew I'd see that red hair of yours if you came."

"Did you think I would?" I whisper.

Slowly, he shakes his head, though he says, "Maybe. It's not every day a girl is presented with a chance to kick me in the balls."

"It was a tough opportunity to pass up," I agree.

Pax laughs softly. His hands are hidden in the front pocket of his hoody, but he uses them to gesture toward my feet. "I see you came prepared."

Fuck. I was not thinking when I was rushing to get out of the flat. I'm wearing Elodie's brand new Doc Martens—the ones Wren gave her for Christmas. Well, now I feel like an asshole. I should have paid more attention to what I was doing.

"Those things have steel toe caps," Pax says. "Good choice."

"I didn't come to kick you in the balls."

He raises his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"No, I came to tell you that you're an asshole and that I hate you."

He's been expecting this. He doesn't even look all that surprised by the venom in my voice. He nods, running his tongue over his teeth, casting his gaze down at his feet. "I deserve that," he says.

"You do. I hate you for breaking my heart. I hate you for leaving me. I hate you for disappearing and ignoring all of my texts and calls. I hate you for making my dad think he was right about you. I hate you for making this past month a living hell for me."

He closes his eyes, his throat working. "I'm so sorry, Chase..."

"Now tell me that you hate *me*," I demand.

His eyes open in a flash. "What?"

"Tell me that you hate me for lying to you repeatedly."

He falters. "I'm not gonna do that."

"Say it, Pax."

He stares at me, eyes hardening, his breath huffing out of him in a strange, labored way. "All right. Fine. I hate you for lying to me repeatedly."

"Say that you hate me for not trusting you."

"I hate you for not trusting me."

"Finish the job, Pax."

He stands very still, glaring at me, tension pouring off him, taut as a bowstring. I think he's going to refuse, but at last he speaks. "I hate you for listening to your father and not me. I hate you for running away in New

York *and* Alaska. I hate you for not including me in the pregnancy conversation until you absolutely had to. I hate you—” He falters. “I hate you for fucking *crushing* me, Chase. That really, *really* fucking sucked.”

His words tear me apart. I did all of those things. I fucked up. I hurt him *first*, just as badly as he hurt me, if not worse. I deserve his anger. “I am so, so sorry,” I whisper. “I wish I could go back and change it. All of it. I really do.”

Pax nods again, clenching his jaw. He looks so resigned, and that destroys me. All of this talk of hate has just confirmed what he’s suspected. That there’s no room for us to come back from this. But...

“I forgive you, Pax,” I say quietly. “Do you forgive me?”

The change in him is instant; a spark of hope kindles in him. His back straightens. “Yes. I forgive you.”

“Then tell me that you love me more than you could ever hate me. Tell me that both of us are going to grow and learn from this, and we’re gonna do everything in our power never to hurt each other again.”

He rushes forward, cupping my cheeks in his hands. “On my life, I swear to you—”

“Tell me that you still want to marry me,” I say forcefully. “That you still want to build together and work on a future with me.”

Pax studies me, searching my features, wonder, and surprise, and hope, and so much love warring for dominance on his own face. “More than anything I’ve ever wanted,” he says.

“Tell me...” The words don’t come easy now. They stick in my throat, afraid to come forth, but I push them out all the same. “Tell me that you want a family with me someday. That we *can* still have a baby of our own. When the time is right. Even though it’ll be hard—”

“I want it. I want it. I want it.” He rushes it out, kissing my cheeks, my forehead, my nose. When he presses his mouth against mine, the world

ignites, adrenalin flooding my bloodstream. He crushes me to him, all of the pain that's existed between us diminishing, blown away.

It hasn't gone forever.

A pain that runs that deep doesn't just vanish in the blink of an eye. We'll have to work to heal and move forward, but for now, the two of us have earned this moment of peace. When Pax releases me at last, he looks down at me, grinning like an idiot, and I find myself grinning back.

"All right, then," I tell him. "Let's go climb a mountain."

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EPILOGUE

DASH

THREE DAYS LATER

“I’m calling the cops.”

“You are *not* calling the cops. She’s fucking fine.”

“Didn’t you hear that scream? He’s trying to *murder* her.” Elodie looks stricken, face pale as ash.

Sitting opposite her at the dining table, Wren laughs, huffing down his nose, as he holds his beer to his lips. He pulls deep from the glass rim, and then says, “Hate to break it to you, Little E, but I make *you* sound like that sometimes.”

“Gross.” Mercy Jacobi, who randomly turned up in the night, uninvited naturally, motions sticking her fingers down her throat, pretending to gag.

“I do *not* sound like that,” Elodie objects.

“My brother might be disgusting for talking about his sex life in front of his sister, but he’s right, I’m afraid,” Jacobi’s twin says. “I thought a cat was being slaughtered when I snuck in here at three a.m.”

Wren slams his drink down on the table; a jet of beer sloshes out of the bottle. “Will you fuck *off*, Mercy!” His vivid, too-green eyes glitter with malice. “I swear to fucking god, one more bitchy remark out of you and I will end your life.”

“You’d hate that.” Her retort comes quickly, already on the tip of her tongue. “Not being a twin would be so *ordinary*.” Mercy glances around at the rest of us like we’re pathetic creatures, hardly worthy of her pity. She’s on the verge of adding to her comment when her focus drifts to the hallway and Pax, who pads barefoot through the door into the kitchen, wearing nothing but a pair of black sweatpants. A spark of something unholy flares in Mercy Jacobi’s eyes. “Well, hello there, Mr. Davis. That photo I saw of you on the Kingston’s Photography Journal did *not* do you justice. And I do believe that you were *naked* on that cover, no?”

“Fuck off, Mercy,” Pax snaps.

“I’ve been telling her to do that all day,” Wren mutters.

“For the first time since we all sat down at the dining table in our flat, Carrie, curled up in my lap, lifts her head from my shoulder casts cold eyes over Mercy. “How the hell did you even know where to find us? We didn’t exactly leave a forwarding address back in New Hampshire.”

“That’s true,” she agrees. “But the internet’s super fucking useful. All I had to do google Lord Lovett ancestral seat—”

I nearly bolt up out of my chair and dump Carrie on her ass. “You did *not*.”

Mercy shrugs, smiling innocently. “Surrey’s lovely this time of year. Your family really go all out for Christmas, Dash. Your father made me feel *very* welcome.” She pops a slice of apple into her mouth, giggling like the viper that she is.

“You spent Christmas...at *Dash*’s family estate?” Carrie looks like she’s about to launch herself across the table and claw Mercy’s eyes out. I threatened her with having to visit the estate back when we first moved here, but she wasn’t ready. We’ve been talking about making the trip back home in February, maybe. And now *Mercy* has beaten her to it?

“Sure,” Mercy says, smirking. “What’s the big deal? We’re all family. *Dash*, your aunt gave me this *glorious* tennis bracelet.” She holds out her wrist, flashing the string of diamonds like the bracelet is a quaint little trinket and not a family heirloom that used to belong to my grandmother.

“What the fuck.” Carrie glowers at me like this is somehow my fault. “Why the hell would they give Toxic Goth Barbie a gift like that?”

“Oh, I think I might have implied that *Dash* and I were dating. Just as a joke, y’know. Plus, I didn’t want to have to get a train back to London in the middle of the night. It was cold and snowing, and they’d just served cocktails—”

“You are the fucking *worst*, Mercy.” My girlfriend is channeling anger rather than hurt; she might have everyone else fooled, but I can tell that Mercy’s antics have actually bothered her. “Why bother coming here at all if you successfully hijacked the Lovett family Christmas?”

“If you must know, I’m here out of necessity,” Mercy says, pouting. “Our father, the right honorable General Jacobi has cut me off. And without access to my accounts, I have nothing better to do than annoy you lot. So...” She winks provocatively at Pax. “Damn, Davis. I don’t think I fully appreciated how hot you were until...well, *now*. I’m very progressive. I don’t mind that there’s a red-headed peasant sleeping in your bed. I, for one, appreciate a good orgasmic scream. If you can tease that kind of racket out of a girl, then you must be pretty talented in the sa—”

CRASH!

Everyone gapes at Pax. No one said a word when he picked up the vase from the bookcase. No one warned Mercy to shut the fuck up as he hefted it

back, ready to launch it. I don't think anyone believed that he'd throw it, least of all Mercy. She ducked just in time, barely avoiding the glass projectile as it sailed over her head and shattered against the living room wall behind her.

We all stare down at the splinters of glass on the ground.

"That was a housewarming gift," I say flatly.

A startled bark of laughter rips out of Carrie.

Wren opens his mouth. He looks like he might say something chiding about our friend trying to decapitate his sister, but Pax *points* at him with his index finger. That's all it takes, and Wren appears to decide against it. He shrugs nonchalantly instead. "Honestly, I wish I'd done that three hours ago."

"Fuck! What the fuck! You're really gonna let him do that?" Mercy wails.

"Bait a lion, expect to get bit, fuckhead," Pax growls. "How much money will it take to get you to disappear and forget any of us exists?"

"Thirty thousand dollars." The number rolls off Mercy's tongue too fast, her ire forgotten.

"Do *not* give her thirty grand." Wren downs the rest of his beer, setting the empty down on the table.

"*Someone* should give her thirty grand," Elodie mumbles.

"If you give her money, she'll only be back, asking for more in a week."

"Hey! It'd take me at least a *month* to get through that!"

"How have you been cut off, anyway?" Wren gets up from the table. Rather than grabbing another beer from the kitchen, he goes straight for the hard stuff. He sets out five glasses on the bar cart and begins spooning sugar into a mixing glass. A lot of people would be pissed about a guest making themselves so at home, but Wren isn't a guest here. He's family. He knows he's welcome to anything he wants or needs here. "You got your

inheritance just like I did. Our father doesn't control that money," he says to Mercy.

Mercy looks at the table. Her nails. The stormy seascape that Wren painted for us hanging on the wall above the fireplace. Anywhere but at her brother.

A mass of black waves tumbles into Wren's face as he spins around to look at her. He sweeps his hair back casually, and Elodie Stillwater ducks her head, averting her eyes like the action just made her toes curl inside her shoes. "Mercy, you didn't. There's no way." If I'm not mistaken, that's genuine shock strewn across Jacobi's face right now. "You can't have *blown* it all."

"It wasn't my fault!"

"Millions. Eleven *million*! How?"

Mercy snorts. "Come on. Like I didn't *invest*. I doubled my money in three months after the old guy kicked the bucket."

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from wincing. Wren doesn't hide his reaction as well as me. "That's even worse!"

"I *may* have tied up my funds in something...*unstable*," Mercy says briskly. "I'll be getting it back. It might just take a couple of months. In the meantime, I've been forced to rely on my allowance from our father. You know he'll do anything to manipulate us—"

"What did you do?" Wren returns to his task, dashing bitters into the mixing glass. He must have planned this earlier, because the silver ice bucket to his right is already full; he dumps a bunch of cubes into the mixing glass, then free-pour bourbon on top of the ice, bitters, and sugar.

"I...may have...not...uhhhh..."

"Hell's teeth, Mercy. Spit it out," I snap. These two have bickered since the dawn of time, but this is getting out of hand. I earn myself a glower from the Jacobi of the female variety.

"I didn't graduate," she snaps. "All right. *There*. Are you happy now?"

Wren drops the bar spoon he was holding with a clatter. He doesn't say anything at first. Shoulders inched up around his ears, he pours the golden liquid into the five glasses he laid out on the bar cart. Once he's done, he spears a couple of cherries onto toothpicks and drops them into two of the glasses. He takes these Old Fashioneds and hands one to Elodie and one to Carrie. He hands me one, and then one to Pax, who takes it with a grunt and downs it in one.

"Why the hell do *they* all get drinks?" Mercy gripes.

"I'm in love with Elodie. Carrie and Dash own this place. And Pax *didn't* put his fist through your face, even though you deserved it. Owing to the lack of medals lying around the place, I'm rewarding his restraint with alcohol instead. Explain, please. How the *hell* did you not graduate?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that my best friend went missing. And then my brother was fucking our English Professor and got himself caught up in the very same friend's murder scandal!"

"Best friend? Please. You didn't give a shit about Mara. You bailed on Wolf Hall so many times before any of that, you gave everyone whiplash. You were in and out of the place like a whore in a VD clinic—"

"Sex worker." Mercy corrects him tartly. "We don't call people whores anymore. And we don't shame people for working in the sex industry."

"I wasn't shaming anyone for being a sex worker! I was shaming them for being stupid enough to keep catching venereal dis—urgh, fucking never mind! What the hell is the *matter* with you?"

"Look. I won't have access to my money until certain *assets* have been sold by parties outside of my control. I can't get my allowance from our father until I graduate. Which means that I need thirty thousand dollars to enroll in a disgusting, low class high school up in Washington State—"

"Why do you need to pay them thirty grand? I thought public schools were free," Elodie asks.

“Eww! I said low class, not pedestrian. The place is still *private*.”

I watch the back-and-forth take place with mild amusement, thoughts swirling around in the forefront of my mind. This is how things were so often, when the three of us lived at Riot House. Peace was a foreign concept. If Wren wasn't fighting with Mercy, Pax and I were brawling over something stupid. Or Pax and Wren were going at it. Wren and I never really fought, but there were times when I wanted to strangle the fucker. I'm sure there were times when he wanted to do the same to me. No matter what, though, Riot House was home. It's only now that we're here, in the UK, that I've realized that it wasn't the house that was home. It was these people.

“I'll give you thirty grand to get that bracelet back, Merce,” I say quietly.

Everyone stops talking. My friends look horrified that I'm giving in to her, but the thought of her sauntering around with my grandmother's tennis bracelet on her wrist has my hackles up. If anyone should be wearing that bracelet, it should be Carrie. And the sooner Mercy gets her fees paid and back up to Washington, the better for everyone.

“But I like it.” Mercy pouts. “It's so shiny.”

“Your call. Take it or leave it.” Sipping on the Old Fashioned, I feign nonchalance...which does the trick with Mercy every time.

“Fine. Transfer the money and I'll give it back.”

I hold out my hand.

“Money first, Lord Lovett.”

I arch an eyebrow at her.

“All right, fine.” She unfastens the bracelet and slaps it into my palm. She watches me like a hawk as I initiate an instant transfer from my phone, and then squeaks when she checks her banking app and sees the money hit her account. “How much is that thing worth anyway,” she asks.

“Two hundred and fifty thousand.”

Her mouth falls open.

“*Pounds*,” I add.

Outraged, Mercy balls up her fist and slams it against the table. She’s in no position to complain, though. I’m about to tell her that she can use some of the money I just sent her to get herself a room for the night at the nearest Holiday Inn, but my phone starts blowing up in my hand. Carrie feels it vibrating against her leg and bites my earlobe suggestively. “Couple of inches higher and I might find myself getting a little antsy,” she whispers.

“If you two are gonna fuck, at least have the decency to go and find a room like Pax and the redhead did,” Mercy grouches.

“Aren’t you supposed to be leaving now?” Pax demands.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in *Japan*?” she fires back.

“I’m not going back. They weren’t big fans of the ink.”

“Urgh. I’m gonna go ask Pres what she wants for dinner,” Carrie says under her breath. “Back in a second. And you should get that. Seems important.” My phone buzzes again, another string of text messages coming through. I block out the bickering racket going on around me as Carrie leaves the room, checking the phone, grateful of the distraction.

Odette’s Country Farm Kitchen: Congratulations! You’ve won our summer sweepstakes!

Odette’s Country Farm Kitchen: We’ve updated our local prize winner details!

Odette’s Country Farm Kitchen: Only took one finger.

Only took one *finger*?

Am I confused? Hell yeah, I'm confused. Fucking *bewildered*, more like it. Odette's Country Farm Kitchen is not a diner in the deep south, though it might sound like one. It's a name Michael sometimes texts me from, the business name a pseudonym created for what he called 'safety reasons.' Normally, he messages me about Carrie, the content of the message veiled but obvious enough that I get the general gist of whatever he's trying to communicate. But this time his message is too confounding to figure out.

ME: Elaborate.

Odette's Country Farm Kitchen: You got the job! Your new role's commencement date is July 15th. We look forward to seeing you then.

ME: What job???

Odette's Country Farm Kitchen:

(link) <https://musiciansdigest.com/piotrrichec-6507783>

**WORLD CLASS PIANIST PIOTR RICHEC LOSES FINGER IN
FREAK ESCALATOR INCIDENT.**

My heart hammers out of my chest. Piotr Richec lost a *finger*? What the actual *fuck*? I click the link and feel bile rising up the back of my throat. Good job I'm already sitting down.

“The career of one of the world’s most promising concert pianists, Piotr Richec, is over before it even started today. Richec, who won the coveted Rider Award at the age of just twelve years old, was earmarked as the upcoming generation’s next Argerich. That is, until this morning, when the now twenty-two-year-old Czech national was involved in a tragic accident involving an escalator. Reports from St. Peter’s Hospital, Seattle, are vague, stating only that Richec’s right hand was badly injured, resulting in the loss of a finger. Which finger is unclear, but that detail is irrelevant, according to Damien Loughborough, of the New York Academy of Music. “A pianist without ten fingers is like a five-foot-eight basketball player. Sure, they can still participate in the game, but they’re never gonna be as good as LeBron. I don’t mean to sound callous, but that young man’s career is over. I know it. You know it. Richec knows it. He’s already surrendered his position at the Seattle Composition Conservatory—”

ME: YOU CUT OFF HIS FINGER?!

Odette’s Country Farm Kitchen: At Odette’s Country Farm Kitchen, we pride ourselves on our workplace safety. Employees at Odette’s are insured to upwards of six million dollars should any personal injury take place while at the work. Rest assured that, here at Odette’s, we have your best interests in mind.

Six million dollars? Richec was insured for that much? The money doesn’t change anything, though. Michael mutilated someone without a second thought. Because of *me*?

ME: You're insane! You did that? Why the FUCK would you do that?

Odette's Country Farm Kitchen: Our new home cooked recipes are very COMPLICATED, but there's A GREAT REASON behind every ingredient!

Why the fuck can't he call me from a payphone and just talk to me like a normal paranoid person? This is too much.

ME: I need more information.

Odette's Country Farm Kitchen: We're open 8 am – 7 pm, Monday through Saturday. Feel free to reach out to us during business hours, and we'll be happy to assist you with your inquiry.

It is the middle of the night in Seattle. He should have waited to message me until he could talk properly, though. What am I supposed to do with half a story? My mind races as I close out my messages and open up my email account. Sure enough, there's a new email from the PNW Institute, sent five hours ago, waiting to be opened. I scan through its contents, unsurprised by what it says.

"Chinese food," Carrie says behind me. "I think that's the general consensus. That okay with everyone?" She looks at me and tilts her head, frowning a little. "Everything okay, babe? You're looking very serious."

"Yeah, everything's cool." I hand her my phone, though, so she can read through the email as well. Her eyes dart from left to right, taking in the information. To paraphrase, due to unexpected circumstances, the Summer Conservatory placement is now being offered to *me*.

Carrie only gets halfway through the email before she looks up at me. Her excitement is right there in her eyes; she masked it as best she could when we found out we wouldn't be moving to Seattle for the program, but I knew she was secretly a little disappointed. "Is this for real?" she asks.

I nod.

"And you're gonna take it? We're actually gonna go?"

It's *extremely* fucked up that I'm benefitting from the end of another talented musician's career, but hell. I'm not going to turn the placement down. I'd be mad to even think about it. I nod again, and Carrie squeals. "Oh my god! Holy shit! *YES!*"

"Hey. What's going on?" Presley has emerged from the bedroom, her hair neatly brushed, make-up perfect. She clearly took some time to straighten up after Pax got done with her, but she looks immaculate now. The two of them haven't quit sneaking off to fuck since she brought him back here on Boxing Day morning. They can't seem to keep their hands off one another.

"Dash got that placement back in Seattle after all!" Carrie beams. "We're moving back to the States!"

Excitement swells in the living room, six people all chattering at once. Questions volley at me from left to right. Plans are sketched out.

"We can all meet up again over Easter," Elodie says, beaming.

Pax stands behind Presley, placing his arm around her, holding her in a loose but unmistakably protective way. "I *suppose* we could stand to meet up again in a couple of months."

"Vancouver. New York. Anywhere but New Hampshire," Wren says.

Carrie bounces on the balls of her feet, her grin spreading from one ear to the other. I haven't seen her this happy in a long, *long* time. She didn't see the final text message that came through when she handed back my phone, so I won't ruin her mood. For *now*. I'm shit at keeping secrets, and this one's a doozy.

Odette's Country Farm Kitchen: Great news! Odette's now hires students! Your part-time position with us will never conflict with your studies, and we think you'll find our benefits program to be extremely competitive.

Me: I'm NOT working with you, Michael.

Odette's Country Farm Kitchen: We can't wait to start your on-boarding process soon. In the meantime, rest up and enjoy the holidays!

The meaning of these messages is pretty clear, and it doesn't look like Michael will be taking no for an answer. It looks like I just got press-ganged into working for Zeth Mayfair.

OceanofPDF.com

WANT MORE?

Mercy and Michael both have cameos in Riot Reunion, and they will also be featured in books next year. If you'd like a little sneak peek of that content, please keep reading!

Before you go, though, if you loved getting to spend some more time with your favorite Riot House boys, please make sure to leave a review! Reviews are so important to us authors. We love hearing what you think of our work, and it helps other readers decide if they want to meet our characters, too!

Keep scrolling for Mercy and Michael's chapters!

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Want to celebrate 10 years of Zeth Mayfair?? Love shiny covers, extra content, free books and goodies? Then come check out The Vault! You'll get early access to all kinds of amazing extra content before anyone else!

ENTER THE
VAULT

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MICHAEL

I shouldn't be doing this.

The orange glow of the streetlights flare across the hood of the Vanquish as I tear through downtown Seattle, hurtling toward an inevitability that will only wind up causing...*issues*.

I haven't slept in two days. I'm so over-caffeinated that my heart might explode any minute. Next to me on the passenger seat, my suit jacket lies, torn and covered in someone else's blood. The smell of gunpowder lingers at the back of my nose—an acrid, burning reminder that less than forty minutes ago, I shot and killed someone. I should be going home, but the fortieth-floor penthouse that I just purchased doesn't feel like home yet, and the eerily silent, vast, pityingly empty space makes me want to scream whenever I find myself there. Everything is so new. The place reeks of fresh paint and newly planed wood. The bed has never been slept in. The rugs in the office, and the living room, and the bedroom are all still slightly curled up at the corners, stubbornly refusing to surrender their fight against gravity and damn well lay flat.

At some point, I *will* make it a home, but for now I keep letting myself into the apartment, pacing from room to room like a caged lion, trying to find a gap in the bars of this brand new, high-end, luxury prison that I've bought for myself.

Soon, Carrie and Dash will come to Seattle. Carrie will bring so much joy and laughter with her that she'll infect the place with an undeniable case of life. She'll deck out the room I've set aside for her with trinkets, and books, and music, and color. And there will be so much color that it won't be contained—the blues, and the reds, and the violets, and the ceruleans, and the yellows will all bleed out of her space like a slowly encroaching tide coming in, and much like a tide, I will be powerless to stop it. The penthouse will vibrate with energy and joy, simply because it contains her. Only then will it be a home.

For now, it's a grey shell with a three-point-two-million-dollar view, and I can't stand being there for more than half an hour at a time.

On the dash, my phone chirps out directions, telling me to take a left at the next light, but I don't really need the guidance; I've been to my destination a number of times now. Cutting across lanes, I mindlessly navigate my way across the city, my blood on fire and my heart thumping like a piston.

"Who are you, anyway? You're nobody. Michael Aubertin. Zeth Mayfair's whipping boy. He tells you to jump, you ask how high. Pathetic. That's what you are. Fucking pathetic!"

When a man knows he's going to die, he isn't afraid to speak his mind. No point in trying to ingratiate yourself with an assassin who's widely known for being entirely without mercy. They can see it in my eyes: they know there will be no reprieve, no stay of execution at the last second, so they rage instead.

"You think Mayfair gives a shit about you?"

Blood spat at my feet.

“You think you’re his friend? God, you’re such a fucking idiot. You’re a grunt. A tool he uses when he doesn’t want to get his hands dirty. You could die right now and he wouldn’t notice for a week. Only thing he cares about is that prissy doctor bitch of his and the ugly bastard kid she shoved out of her cunt.”

I hadn’t reacted. Of course I hadn’t. I never give these assholes the pleasure of even the faintest flicker of emotion. But inside, I’d seethed. I take both great pride and great satisfaction in being the tool that Zeth Mayfair deploys when he doesn’t want to get his hands dirty. It isn’t something I’m ashamed of. But on nights like tonight, with my mind racing and pulse careening out of control, the blood on my hands stains more than my skin. It stains my soul, and there’s no washing it off.

I drift through the final left-hand turn, pulling up in front of my destination, and I kill the Vanquish’s engine. It’s not too late to turn back. I can still go home. It would be the sensible thing to do. I sit in the rapidly cooling car, listing to the faint hiss of water evaporating on hot metal as huge, fat droplets of rain begin to strike the hood. Zeth would not approve of this. Sloane would have a fucking fit if she knew where I was.

Some men turn to drink when they feel the way I’m feeling right now. It’s not often that I run into other guys in my line of work, but when I do, they’re rarely sober. Cocaine. Alcohol. Heroin. I don’t take drugs, though, and alcohol has never been my poison of choice.

No.

I like to fuck.

It’s been over a decade since I’ve been in a relationship; murdering people for a living isn’t really conducive with building a healthy home life. Way too many questions, and no possible way to give them the truth they deserve, either.

Usually, I’ll hit up a bar. It never takes long. An hour max. I’ll have a woman hanging off my arm, batting her eyelashes at me, begging me to

take her home before I've finished my first Old Fashioned. There's something about me that women are drawn to. Something that goes beyond my looks—a dark and dangerous vibe that should terrify them and send them running, but bizarrely has the opposite effect. But tonight, the thought of sitting alone at a bar, waiting for the inevitable moment when some pretty little thing with big brown doe eyes and no common sense comes to ask me if the seat next to me is taken makes me want to fucking break something, and I've already broken enough tonight.

There was only one woman who came to mind when I thought about getting my dick wet, and once the image of her was lodged in my brain, there was no getting her out.

I pocket my keys and my cellphone and get out of the car.

I'm drenched by the time I reach the steps to the apartment, my shirt clinging to my back. By the time I hit the elevator, I'm not thinking about what Zeth will say when he finds out about this. I'm certainly not thinking about Sloane's disapproval. I'm only thinking about *her*.

PIPPA

“What? Don't look at me like that. It's good. Fresh caught this morning.”

Pushkin stares at me blankly, turning his nose up at the plate of tuna I've set down on the kitchen floor. He knows I'm lying. The cat has an innate sixth sense about these things, and somehow the cursed animal knows that the line-caught, extra fancy tuna I just gave him for his dinner

came out of a can. Cost me six bucks, for god's sake, but still, it's not good enough. This cat will bankrupt me before the month is out, I swear.

He sits in front of the plate, regal and aloof, blinks his pale blue eyes at me judgmentally, and then begins to groom himself, stubbornly waiting for me to replace his dinner with something more acceptable.

I set a precedent, giving him fresh fish, and now I'm reaping the consequences. I—

BANG!

"Jesus Christ!" I grab the edge of the kitchen counter, steadying myself. Pushkin doesn't even react to the loud thud that echoes through the apartment, but my heart just lodged itself in my throat. What the fuck was that?

BANG, BANG, BANG!

The door. Someone's at the door? The digital read-out on the microwave reads twelve fifty-three; it's nearly one in the morning, and someone's hammering the door down? What the fuck?

I'm in sweats. My hair is tied into a messy knot on the top of my head. I washed my make-up off hours ago. There's no way I'm answering the door in the middle of the goddamn night. I pick up the first thing that comes to hand—the frying pan I cleaned after dinner but hadn't gotten around to putting away yet. My heart thumps as I creep out into the hallway...

"Pippa," a low, male voice says on the other side of the door.

Fuck.

My patients don't know where I live. I'm very careful to make sure I don't even share which part of town I live in. I *have* to be careful—some of the people I help on a daily basis are very ill. It's not uncommon for a client to develop unhealthy fixations on their therapists. The horror stories bandied about by other doctors when I first qualified have stayed with me to this day—a poor woman who was kidnapped and murdered by a guy who'd confessed during his sessions that he fantasized about raping his neighbor;

another woman who'd been beaten so badly and had her jaw broken by a seemingly docile patient, who'd never displayed any violent tendencies before. I always stay in the office at least an hour after my last session of the day, and I always make sure I'm not being followed on my way home. It was crucial to me that the building I lived in had excellent security when I was looking for a place—

“Pippa, I know you're in there. Open the door.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The frying pan nearly slips out of my hand; Jesus, when did my palms start sweating? “Who—who is it?”

“It's Michael.”

A knot cinches tight in my stomach. “Michael who?”

“You *know* who.”

I do know. I recognize his voice now. Low, deep, and gravelly, that voice send a shiver through the length of my body, chasing from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. Michael, Zeth Mayfair's right-hand man. I haven't heard anything from him, seen him in months. Why would I? I've barely seen Sloane since the baby was born. Mercifully, life has calmed down a lot since Colt arrived. No more police showing up on my doorstep. No more high-speed chases or deranged FBI agents trying to ruin my fucking life. I can't say I approve of the life my best friend's chosen for herself. I wish she'd picked a guy with a stable job and a shorter rap sheet, but I've grown to accept and even begrudgingly like Zeth over time.

Michael, though?

Michael's always been an enigma.

A sexy, well-dressed, incredibly attractive enigma, but an enigma all the same.

There's only one reason why he'd show up at my door in the middle of the night. I lean closer to the door. “If you're hurt, you need to go to the

emergency room. Or...or go see Sloane. I'm not that kind of doctor, Michael."

He's quiet for a beat. And then he says, "I don't need that kind of help."

"Then why are you here? It's late. I'm not dressed for company."

"I don't give a shit what you're wearing. Open the door, Pippa."

I was roped into some highly illegal, very dangerous situations last year. Things have been calm recently. Safe. I have no interest in getting pulled back into that mess and Sloane knows it. Whatever Michael needs from me, she hasn't sent him here. I doubt very much Zeth would have sent him, either. I know he's not going to discuss the reason for his visit through the door, though, and...hell, I don't want my neighbors hearing it if he does. Reluctantly, I open the door, lowering the frying pan.

Michael stands there, a giant of a man, breathtakingly hot with his piercing ice-blue eyes and his warm, tawny-colored skin, his head shaved close. Usually, the man is impeccably put together—the expensive, beautifully tailored suits he wears are works of art, fitted to his body like a glove—but his jacket is missing tonight. A splotch of what looks like oil stains the grey material of his pants. His shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and—ahh shit. The fine cotton is so drenched that it's clinging to his chest and his shoulders, emphasizing the outline of his ridiculously muscled torso. He dwarfs me as he steps into the doorway, his intelligent eyes shifting down to rest on the frying pan in my hand.

"Are you planning on braining me with that thing?" he asks.

I bristle at the hint of amusement in his tone. "I was thinking about it."

He straightens, looking at me for the first time, and something coils tight in my gut. He's quite something, this guy. It's indecent, the way his gaze skips over my features, down my neck, skating over my UCLA hoody and my grey yoga pants. "I've never seen you without make-up before," he states.

“Well apologies for not wearing five layers of foundation at one in the morning, Mr. High and Mighty, I’ll try and do better next time you show up on my doorstep, uninvited.”

He takes a step toward me. Apparently, he isn’t even remotely affected by my irritation. “I prefer you without it.”

“Oh, well in that case, I’ll consider myself lucky then. I’m glad that my appearance meets with your approval.”

“So defensive.” Michael smiles, flashing a wall of perfect white teeth. The guy must never skip a dental appointment. “I like that, too.”

“Can we get to the point here? As I said, it’s late and I’d really love to get to bed. I have an early start in the morning. Wait—” A spike of alarm catches me off guard. “Is—is there something wrong? Is Sloane okay? The baby—”

“Sloane’s fine. Colt’s fine. Zeth’s fine.”

“Then why are you here?”

He leans against the door jamb, angling his head as he looks down at me. God, he really is huge. “Aren’t you going to invite me in, Pippa? If you’ve decided you don’t want to beat me over the head with that thing, of course.” He nods to the frying pan.

He isn’t going to leave.

He isn’t going to tell me why he’s here unless I let him inside.

I sigh heavily, taking a step to the right, making room for him so he can enter. He smirks as he squeezes past me, reaching for the frying pan as he goes. He takes it from me, spinning it around by the handle as he waltzes straight into the kitchen like he owns the place.

Next thing I know, the pan’s hanging from the hook above the range and he’s rifling through the cupboards. “Got any wine in this place?” he asks.

“Uhh...” I shake my head. Is this really happening? I have to wonder. It’s been a long, frustrating day, and I *am* exhausted. Maybe I’m hallucinating. “I’m a therapist. I listen to people’s problems all day. Of

course I have wine. I don't think that it'd be appropriate to open a bottle now, though."

Too late. He's found the cupboard where I keep the expensive stuff and he's already pulling bottles out, assessing the labels, discarding some very nice bottles on the counter while he searches for something that meets his standards. He sets one down on the marble counter, and the glass makes a heavy clunking sound.

"Be careful! That's a two-hundred-dollar bottle of Chateaux Pont Neuf!"

"I know what it is," he replies. "Don't worry. I'm good with my hands. I'm not gonna break anything."

"Why don't you just back away from the cupboard and tell me what this is all abo—"

"Here. Perfect." Michael closes the cupboard, a bottle of Saint Baptiste Cabernet Sauvignon in his hands—a gift from my mother, when I graduated med school.

"No, no, no. No! Put it back. That has sentimental value." I rush across the kitchen, snatching the bottle out of his hands. I put it back in the cupboard, shoving it to the back of the shelf, my frustration levels rising—

Michael's chest presses up against my back as he leans into the cupboard, reaching over my shoulder to pick up a different bottle; the heat of him hits like a battering ram, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. My whole body goes still. His breath stirs the pieces of hair that have fallen loose from my bun, skating across my skin, as he softly says, "I didn't have you pegged as the sentimental type, Pip."

I can't breathe. Move. Think.

My god.

What the hell is going on?

"Pip? I'm sorry, I didn't know we were close enough for pet names. *Mike.*"

He huffs out a breath of laughter. I've never heard the man laugh before. "I seem to be pretty close right *now*," he offers. "And Pip is cute. It suits you. Are there any bottles in here that you're not sentimental over?"

"I—I—" I can't remember the last time I was flustered over a man. I can't seem to wrangle my words into any sense of order. "I—there's—we don't need to—" Fuck. I grab a bottle of my cheaper wine—a twenty-dollar bottle of Juggernaut—off the lower shelf, turning around and thrusting it into his chest, using it to push him away. Outside, a gust of wind buffets the kitchen window, hurling a curtain of rain against the glass.

Michael spins the bottle around in his hands, smiling again. "Breaking out the good stuff for company, I see. Don't worry. I actually love this wine."

"I'm *not* worried. I didn't even ask you here!"

He says nothing. Just opens up the glass fronted cupboard next to the fridge and takes out two wine glasses.

"Not for me. I know you don't appear to be listening to anything I'm saying right now, but I have to be up in six hours, and I don't plan on hitting the gym with a hangover."

He finds the bottle opener in the utensil draw and deftly opens the bottle, then pours the wine into the two glasses, completely disregarding my objections. He holds out a glass to me, that quiet sense of amusement rolling off him again.

"Jesus Christ." I take the damn glass, nearly spilling its contents as I rip it out of his hand.

Pushkin, the traitor, appears out of nowhere and begins to weave between Michael's legs, rubbing himself all over the wine-stealing intruder.

To hell with it. I think I need the wine after all. I take a giant sip...

"When was the last time you got fucked?"

...and nearly spit it all over the kitchen floor. It's a miracle I don't choke as I swallow. "*Excuse me?*"

Michael's eyes never leave me as he slowly raises the glass to his lips and takes a refined sip. His entertained little smile is nowhere to be seen as he says, "When was the last time someone made you come so hard you couldn't see straight, Pip?"

"I really don't think that's any of your goddamn business!"

"It's just a question," he states, shrugging. "Are you really always this tightly buttoned up?"

"I'm not...I'm not uptight," I sputter. "You're being rude! That's an incredibly inappropriate question to ask someone you barely even know!"

He pouts. "I know you. I know you plenty. And you know me. It says on your website that you specialize in sexual dysfunction, addiction, open relationships, polyamory and non-traditional relationships. You can't tell me that you're uncomfortable talking about sex."

"Why the hell have you been looking at my *website*?"

"Personal interest," he replies without hesitation. "Answer the question."

"I work with patients who are seeking therapy related to those subjects, yes. I discuss *their* sexual functions and the intricacies of *their* relationships. I don't discuss my sex life with my patients. Or with complete strangers!"

He gives me a chiding look. "That's strikingly hyperbolic. We know each other very well, you and me. We've been through plenty of *interesting* situations, wouldn't you say? Situations that have moved us well beyond the boundaries of strangers."

"We've been..." I can't find the right word.

"Accomplices?"

"No! I was a hostage during most of our interactions!"

He swirls a sip of wine around in his mouth. Swallows. "Hostage seems a little strong."

“Well, I definitely didn’t *volunteer* to get dragged into any of that shit with Agent Lowell and your employer!”

He looks me dead in the eye. “Answer the question, Pippa.”

I’m so riled that I actually give him what he wants; if it’ll shut him the hell up and get him out of the door quicker, then so be it. “If you must know, it’s been about a year since I’ve engaged in a physical relationship with anyone.”

“Engaged in a physical relationship?” His eyebrows inch up. “Very transactional.”

“What would you prefer I say? Since I had intercourse? Since I made love?” This is beyond the pale.

“Are you afraid of the word ‘fuck,’ Pip?” The way he says it, the way his teeth press into his bottom lip as the shape of the word forms on his mouth, makes my cheeks flush.

“I’m not afraid of it. It’s a word. A *gauche* word. There are far less vulgar options to choose from.”

“I like it. It’s very versatile.”

I down another gulp of wine, trying to move the whole interaction along. Perhaps if we finish our drinks, he’ll take the not-so-subtle hint and get the hell out. “I’m so pleased to hear it. While I do love discussing the English language, I’d appreciate it if you’d spit out whatever you came here to say now, before I really lose my temper.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” A suggestive, intense look flickers in his eyes. He’s barely looked away from me since he handed me the wine; I’ve never been one to shy away from eye contact, but meeting Michael’s gaze is challenging to say the least. The weight of his attention is making me want to run and hide. This isn’t a troubled patient. A friend. A colleague. I am way out of depth here, and I don’t have a clue what I’m doing.

I want to look away very badly, but I’ll be letting him win if I do. Winning what, I have no idea, but...I just don’t want that to happen. He’ll

think me weak.

After a moment, Michael nods, looking down at his glass. I have a tendency of breaking wine glasses. I only buy sturdy ones with thick stems now, but the glass looks fragile and ready to break in Michael's huge hands. Hands that I know for a fact have ended lives.

He looks back up at me. "I came here tonight because I want to fuck you, Pippa."

"*What?!*"

"I want to be very clear about my intentions. I don't want to engage in a physical relationship with you. I don't want to have intercourse with you. I don't want to make love to you. I want to *fuck* you."

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" My hands are shaking so badly, I have to put my wine glass down. "I think it's time for you to leave."

"Why?" he asks, too, too calmly. Unaffected. "You can't even have a conversation about it without getting your panties in a twist?"

"You're being ridiculous. You're being totally inappr—"

"Inappropriate. Yes, I know. I'm not a very appropriate person. We're not living in Victorian England, though. What's so wrong about openly communicating something to another person?"

"Because it's unsolicited! I've shown no interest in you! I've never flirted with you! I've never..." My mouth hangs open. I can't even remember how to speak. "I've never said anything about you to Sloane, or Zeth, or anyone that might make you think..."

He politely clears his throat. This would be far less confronting if he wasn't so composed. Or so goddamn attractive. It's not every day that an insanely attractive, incredibly alpha male invades your apartment and informs you so bluntly that he wants to do very bad things to you. I am not handling it well.

"This isn't high school, either," he says. "I don't need blatant social cues to read you. I don't need a third party to intervene and pass me a note,

telling me that you think I'm cute. I know you find me attractive. I've spent my whole life reading body language. I'm a fucking expert at it. I can literally see your pulse quicken in the hollow of your throat when I'm around. I saw it quicken when you opened up your front door. Now stop acting like a child and talk to me."

The arrogance of the man! I *cannot* believe him. Coming to *my* house, calling *me* a child?

"What are you doing?"

I bounce from one side of the kitchen to the other, lifting up stacks of paper, looking under the slow cooker recipe book sitting on the counter. "I'm trying to find my phone! I'm calling the police."

"Looks like you're walking around in circles to me."

"Ahh, fuck you, Michael!"

"Love you to."

"Urgh! Where the hell is my phone?"

He smirks that infuriating smirk again as he slowly leans over to the kitchen island and picks up my cell phone, holding it out to me. "Here."

I lunge out and take it from him, fast as lightning, before retreating to the other side of the kitchen. "I'm serious. I'm gonna call the cops if you don't leave."

He leans back against the fridge, watching me. "Has no one ever been this honest with you before, Pippa?"

I stare down at my phone screen, 911 already dialed, my finger hovering over the green call button. "This isn't honesty. This is offensive."

"I find you attractive, and I want to make you feel good? I can totally see how you might find that offensive."

"It's the way you've gone about it. It's weird. It's creepy. It's *threatening*."

He flinches at that last accusation, but just says, "Should I have sent you an email?"

“Yes!” I shake my head. “No! You shouldn’t have sent me an email. You should have stayed the hell away from me and not said anything at all!”

“What about this is so threatening?”

Ahh. That comment did hit home, then. I knew I saw a reaction. Well good. “A massive, physically imposing man, showing up on a single woman’s doorstep in the middle of the night, refusing to leave, asking very private questions and telling her that he wants to fuck her? That sounds *normal* to you?”

“Do I scare you? Am I frightening you right now? Do you think I’m going to hurt you? Force myself on you?”

Damn it, how can he sound so...so fucking reasonable! I gape at him, still trembling, the sound of my pulse slamming in my ears. He stares back at me, expression even, eyes curious. I watch the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathes, waiting for me to answer, and my panic gradually begins to ease.

“Yes,” I say.

“Yes what?”

“You *do* scare me. I don’t think you’re going to hurt me. Or do anything to me. But you’re a fucking scary guy, Michael. You’re hardly the friendly guy next-door type.”

“What about me is so scary?”

“YOU FUCKING KILL PEOPLE!”

He takes a step toward me. “I do,” he admits. Just says it like it’s nothing.

I take a step back. “That’s—that’s—”

“That’s wrong. That’s immoral.”

“Exactly!”

He takes another step. “Does it make a difference that I only kill people who hurt other people? People who hurt women. Who take advantage of the vulnerable and the weak?”

“No! It’s wrong. You’re not a fucking vigilante, Michael. You’re not *Batman*! It’s not your job to go around murdering people who don’t follow the rules. The cops are supposed to—”

“The cops don’t do shit and you know it.” He comes closer. “I don’t think that I’m scaring you,” he says.

“You’re wrong.”

“I think you’re scared of yourself right now.”

I try to retreat another step, but my back hits the wall. I have nowhere to go. Holy shit, I think I’m about to pass out. He’s so close, I can smell the rain on him, and the night, and a complex array of other heady scents that make my senses light up.

He lifts his hand very carefully, moving slowly—he trails his fingertips along my cheekbone, then down, along the line of my jaw, and my head spins like a motherfucking merry-go-round. Making a thoughtful, low, guttural sound of appreciation at the back of his throat, his eyes focus on my mouth, and I—oh god, I can’t fucking breathe.

“I think,” he whispers. “That you’re so very afraid because I turn you on. I think you’re afraid because you want me, and you don’t think that you should. I think you’re afraid of letting go...”

His mouth is so close. Two millimeters and he’ll be kissing me. One millimeter. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, he’s going to kiss me. And I’m going to let him. Am I going to let him? My eyelids fall closed. I can’t take this anymore. I’m too hot. Too turned around...

“I can be a patient man,” he whispers against my lips. “I left a card on the counter. When you stop being afraid of yourself, you can call me on that number.”

My eyes won’t open. I feel when he pulls back, though. I sense the absence of him, and the void he leaves behind confuses me more than anything else that’s happened all night.

“Thanks for the wine, Pip.”

The sound of the front door closing snaps me out of my reverie. When I manage to pry my eyelids open, I find myself alone in my kitchen again. Alone, except for the cat.

He looks at me, scornful as ever. I didn't even *want* a cat.

“Shut the hell up, Pushkin.”

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MERCY

“Crazy bitch! Kiss the fucking concrete or I’ll put a bullet in the back of your head!”

I almost laugh.

Almost.

Most people go their entire lives without their existence being threatened. They go to school. They go to college. They graduate. They get reliable jobs and meet someone they figure they can tolerate for the rest of their lives. They get married. Have kids. Have a mid-life crisis. Then they get sick, or they grow old, and they die. The end. At no point do they have a knife held to their throat or a gun aimed at their temple. But here *I* am, yet again, with some dipshit asshole threatening to put me in the ground.

The guy in the black ski mask leans close enough for me to smell his stale breath—coffee and unbrushed teeth; his halitosis could knock out a horse. “Didn’t you hear me, *bitch*?” Using the muzzle of his gun, he jabs the side of my head—just enough pressure to hurt.

I turn slowly to face him, smiling the most unpleasant smile I can conjure. “I came here to make a deposit. I’m making my deposit.”

The ski mask doesn't show much of his face, just two thin, peeling lips and a couple of piercing blue eyes, framed with black lashes. There are fine lines around the glacial blue of those eyes, though. Stubble around his mouth long enough to show a little salt and pepper. He must be at least thirty. Probably older, I'd say. His hands are ungloved—I mean, what kind of rookie shows up to rob a bank and doesn't wear gloves? Fucking amateur—the backs of which are covered in smudged, blurry tattoos. A heart with two daggers thrust through it on the left, a cheesy looking Jolly Roger on the other, grinning at me with chipped teeth. His black leather jacket bears no patches or insignias. It's worn at the cuffs and around the neck, the leather cracked and split open. It's a couple of sizes too big for him at least.

"Make a *deposit*?" He sputters, clearly not believing what he's hearing. Shifting on his feet, he tightens his grasp around the handle of the gun. Now that I've turned to face him, I can see exactly what he's threatening me with, and I'm unimpressed: a rusty old Colt Single Action. It'd be one thing, being held up by a criminal holding a Glock-17, who took his job seriously, but this is just insulting. "Hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but the tellers have more pressing things to worry about right now than some snot-nosed little cheerleader wanting to drop off her allowance. *Now. Get. On. The. Fucking. Ground.*"

This guy's dick must be microscopic. I tilt my head to one side, considering him in all his pathetic glory. "What makes you think I'm a cheerleader?"

"*What?*"

"Is it the Hermes bag? The Red Bottoms? The five-hundred-dollar jeans? Or is it just the fact that I'm a teenaged girl? I'm assuming your experience with women is limited. If it weren't, you'd know that any girl with a manicure like this one," I say, wiggling my fingers in his face, "is not likely to be a fucking *cheerleader*." Disgust laces my tone.

“Spoiled little cunt. I swear to God, you are testing my last nerve. I’m not gonna tell you again. If you don’t—”

“Now you’re getting warmer. I am *definitely* a spoiled little cunt.” I sweep my long black hair, smooth as silk and arrow straight after the blow out I just got, back over my shoulder to emphasize my point. “I love that word, by way. I’ve never understood why some people get so bent out of shape over being called a cunt. I consider it a badge of honor.”

He gawps.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

I skirt around him, heels clicking on the polished marble floor, thoroughly bored by the exchange, to see that the would-be robber of Pacific North West Federal Bank isn’t the only person wearing a stunned expression. The young blonde female teller behind the counter, holding her hands in the air, is looking at me like I have three heads. On the other side of the bank, lying on the floor, an overweight and balding guy with a halo of grey hair is side eyeing me as if I’m mentally challenged.

It’s four minutes past nine in the morning. On the other side of Main Street, Raleigh, Washington, the bakery is emitting the most delicious smell of fresh break and sugared pastries. The hardware store hasn’t even opened yet, though. The tiny little mom ‘n’ pop home goods store and the ancient-looking watch repair store are also closed, their windows shuttered, their interiors dark and gloomy. The guy in the too-large leather jacket, toting the decrepit old pistol picked his time to hold up the bank well. The tiny town center is deserted, notably lacking pedestrians. This would have been an in-and-out job for this moron had I not shown up and complicated matters for him.

The teller blinks at me, bewildered, as I reach into my bag and take out the check I came to deposit, placing it politely on the counter in front of her. “I only opened the account the other day,” I tell her. “I haven’t received a card in the mail yet, but I have this.” I snap the paper business card they

gave me three days ago down onto the counter, too. On it, a different teller, thirty years older than this one, wrote my account details in arthritic black scrawl.

“I’m sorry. I—” The girl shakes her head; she’s hyperventilating, chest rising and falling, a brushed gold name badge bearing the name “*Samantha*” flashing every time it catches under the bright overhead lights. “I can’t—I don’t—”

I sigh deeply. “He’s not going to *shoot* you, Samantha. There are cameras everywhere. Look. There. There. Over there. He’s showing off his ink from four different angles. I’m willing to put money on him being a local. The cops probably already know who he is. Robbing a bank is bad but shooting and killing a teller is infinitely worse. Armed robbery’s already a federal offense. Twenty years at least. When they catch him, which they will, he’s not going to want to add murder to his list of offenses.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” the guy behind me hisses.

If my brother was here, he’d be chuckling under his breath at the disbelief in the gunman’s voice right now. There’s something ever so rewarding about a stupid person *realizing* their stupidity.

“That’s some bullshit. Ain’t no one ever been sent to jail for twenty years for—”

“Deposit the check, Samantha. This was only supposed to take five minutes, and I’m already late.”

Poor girl. I actually feel bad for her, which isn’t a familiar sensation for me. Generally, I like to ensure my emotions toward other people fall in the category of casual disdain, but Sam’s giving off an air of sweetness and innocence, coupled with a heaping shit load of genuine terror, and I pity her for it.

Urgh.

Empathy.

Gross.

“Don’t you fucking move, Samantha,” the gunman spits.

“Sorry, Terry, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Wait a minute. *Terry*? You know who this idiot is?”

Samantha nods *verrrrry* slowly. “He works at the lumber yard. I used to date his nephew,” she whispers.

I spin on the gunman, Terry, laughing. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding. Haven’t you ever heard of not shitting where you eat? Are you...?” I shake my head. “Are you off your goddamn meds, Terry?”

Realizing the pretense is up, Terry rips the ski mask off his head, hurling it to the ground. The network of veins pulsing in his forehead, at his temples, and in his neck is quite impressive. His face, the color of a violent bruise, is purple and twisted. “Fuck you, Sammy! Seriously. Fuck you! Why the hell can’t you keep your mouth shut and do as your fucking told? And you!” He wheels on me, wearing a look of pure hatred. “Who the fuck are you, anyway?”

I lean against the counter, propping myself up on my elbow. I’d roll my eyes, but rolling your eyes is so gauche. “I’m not telling you shit, dumbass. Why the hell would I give you my name? Come on now. Think a little.”

“Samantha? Tell me her name right fucking now, or I swear on my granddaddy’s grave I’m gonna lose my fucking mind.”

I laugh again, the sound ringing out bright and clear in the almost empty bank. On the floor, the old man with the grey hair mutters, “Jesus Christ,” quietly to himself.

Samantha seems to take ol’ Terry’s threat to heart, though, because she peers at the business card with my account details written on it and gives him what he wants. “Mercy. Mercy Jacobi.”

She butchers the pronunciation of my last name, which grates me right down to the bone. “*Jah. Koh. Bee.*” I enunciate each syllable. “Not *Jah-koh-BI*. Fuck’s sake.”

“Well, Mercy Jacobi,” Terry fumes. “You made a big mistake today. You shoulda thought twice before coming in here and acting like a—”

“Spoiled little cunt? I know, I know. Calm down, Terry. You’re gonna give yourself a heart attack. Are you feeling all right?”

He wants to retaliate, but his mouth just flaps open, closed, open, closed like a dying goldfish, eyes swiveling in his head, because he’s heard what everyone else has heard: the sound of wailing sirens, rapidly approaching. He glares at me, jamming his gun back into the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

“You’re gonna regret this, I swear.” He bolts toward the bank’s exit, but slams into the glass door, desperately trying to pull it open.

“Push, Terry. It’s a push.” I mime pushing the door open.

“*Fuck!*” He yells more curse words as he finally gets the thing to open and bolts out onto the empty street.

The sirens are much closer now. The patrol cars must be turning onto the street. Drawing in a deep breath, I turn back to Samantha. “If I could draw some cash against that, too, I’d be grateful. Three hundred should do it.”

Samantha is back to blinking like a rabbit trapped in headlights.

I tap a slick, glossy black fingernail against the check, reminding her of the entire reason I came into this godforsaken bank in the first place.

She flusters. “I’m sorry. Once the alarm gets pulled, all of our systems lock down. I won’t be able to make a deposit until everything’s reset and—”

“Holy fucking Jesus on the cross. Never mind. I’ll come back tomorrow.” I snatch the check up and jam it back into my purse, scowling as deep as I dare for fear of causing premature frown lines. “I’ve been here all of two seconds and this Podunk town is already my worst fucking nightmare.”

“Where are you going? You can’t just leave!” Sam calls after me as I head for the door. “The police are gonna want a statement!”

“They can come and find me at the school then.” I don’t look back. If the cops do want to track me down at the school, then that’s only a win/win for me. I’d rather be called out of class to give a statement than commence the fresh hell that will be repeating my senior year of high school all over again.

But then again, I’d rather have every single one of my teeth pulled with pliers and gargle battery acid than do what I’m about to do.

As far as I’m concerned, Raleigh High can go fuck itself.

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