IRREVERSIBLE
SEE YOU SOON...
JENNIFER HARTMANN
CHELLEY ST CLAIR

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IRREVERSIBLE

BY JENNIFER HARTMANN & CHELLEY ST CLAIR

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CONTENT WARNING

To view the content warning, please visit the following link.

https://bit.ly/40GFZUK

To four years of GIF madness, midnight giggles, metaphorical book burning, graceless unraveling, unfortunate Charlies, caterpillars, chaos grenades, and love. ♡

PART 1

IRREVERSIBLE: NOT ABLE TO BE UNDONE OR ALTERED.

PROLOGUE

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, 2125

Machinery growls like a hungry T-Rex, sending vibrations through the earth. As dirt and debris rains from above, I huddle under my only protection: a scratchy blanket and a hoodie big enough to fit a large adult.

I'm trying to be brave, but I want to go home.

"Still with me, Aiden?" A beam of light follows the man's voice as he leans out from the bucket of a crane suspended overhead.

I bob my flashlight in response, my throat so parched it hurts to talk. I'm tempted to ask for another bottle of water, but I already drank the last one from the supply pack lowered by the rescue team, and now I really need to pee.

"Good. You just hang in there a little while longer, kiddo. Soon as we're stable, I'll come get you myself."

I've already forgotten his name. Drew, maybe? Yesterday, I might've told him that I'm almost thirteen and not a *kiddo.* But right now, I just want to crawl into my parents' bed with my dog, Barney, eat Mom's chicken soup, and cry. Won't even bother me if that kid Carson from down the street calls me a baby; let's see *him* stay down in a dark hole for half the night.

Drew's light makes spots dance in front of my eyes. "They're going to lower me down, so I don't touch the sides. Then we'll get you in this harness and haul you out of there."

Somewhere above, I hear Kaylee's high-pitched whine, saying she told

me I'd get in trouble for coming out here. I know she's scared, too. We've been warned to keep away from the back of the property, where the old house used to be before it caved with age, and the demolition crews came.

This time, my little sister was right.

"You're being so brave, honey," Mom hollers, while Dad promises I can take off school and hang with him at work for the rest of the week if I'm feeling up to it.

I'm clinging to that as tightly as the mud-crusted wooden box I found sticking out of a pile of broken concrete a few feet away. Maybe Dad will let me use his tools to clean it up.

Now that the dust has cleared, I let the blanket drop and balance the box on my knees so I can take a bite of my granola bar. Peeling the wrapper back, I watch my fingers shake from the chill.

A few hours ago, I didn't think anyone would find me out here.

I've been thinking about this place since I heard Mom and Dad whispering around the kitchen table one night after I was supposed to be in bed. Rumors had been passed through the generations about my great-great-grandparents, who lived here originally. When I begged them to tell me more, they said they were just stories, and that I should never go near it.

That was a long time ago, but I never forgot about it. Early this morning, I decided to explore, hoping to find something cool. Some human bones; maybe even a skull. Anything could be a clue from the past.

Dad might let me help in his forensics lab if I found something like that.

But then the ground gave way…

I thought I was going to die. I really thought I was —

Something shifts ahead of me, and I jerk my light toward the gaping opening. There's nothing. Just darkness and dirt.

Now I'm *really* glad I didn't find a skull.

Scooting as close to the wall as I dare, I glance around. No dead bodies. No ghosts.

BANG.

My heart beats like the wings of a trapped bird. Making myself as small as possible, I clutch the box.

No ghosts, no ghosts, no ghosts.

"Hey, kiddo." Movement above me. Grinding, clanking. Drew. "How'd you like to get out of here?"

“Really?” Scrambling to my feet, I look straight up into the beam of light, like it’s from heaven and this man is my guardian angel.

“Move back, I’m coming for ya.”

He lowers so slowly, I’m afraid I won’t be able to hold my bladder long enough to get to the top. But then he’s here, in front of me, his feet flat on the ground. If I weren’t afraid of the box crumbling if I jostle it too much, I’d throw myself at him in gratitude.

“Well, it’s nice to finally see you up close, Aiden. Your family’s been telling me all about you. Gonna be real happy to have you back where you belong.”

“Yeah. Thanks, sir. I…” My mind goes blank. I’m nodding and shaking, my eyes wet and blurry, and—and I can’t think of anything else to say. “Thanks.”

“How’s the arm?” He gestures at the wrist I landed on when I hit the bottom, but I’m too relieved to care about that now.

“I’ll live.” I shrug. Despite the bruises, I know I got lucky.

“You’re a brave kid, that’s for sure. We’ve got some medics up there to look you over, and if all’s well, you’ll be home real soon. Bet you can’t wait to hug your mama.”

“Yes, sir.” Dad, too. I’ll even hug Kaylee. If she hadn’t been spying and saw me head this way, I might have died down here.

He swings his light in an arc. Up, down, and all around. “So, they tell me this was a cellar.” He shines it right into the cavern, where it only reaches a few feet before the dark swallows it up. “Pretty shitty job they did filling it in. ‘Scuse my French.”

I watch as he drops a curious glance at the box sandwiched under my good arm.

“What you got there?”

I don’t know why, but I pull back when he reaches for it. “Just a box. It’s old. I’m going to give it to my dad to clean up so we can open it safely.”

“Ah, good idea. I’ve been talking to your dad. Cool job he’s got. I hear you want to follow in his footsteps some day?”

I nod. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.

“Well then, how about we get this harness on you and get you back to your family, huh?” He holds out a hand. “I’ll hang onto your treasure on the way up.”

His hand hovers there, like we aren't leaving until I hand it over, so reluctantly, I do.

Stepping into the harness, I look back at Drew just as he wipes a hand over the lid.

"Wait. Be care —"

"There's something carved here, did you see?"

I shake my head. I'd planned to examine it better at home.

"Hold that flashlight up, will you?"

I bring the light closer.

Then, at just the right angle, the faint impression of letters become visible:

FOREVER.

1

I try not to squint through the myriad of flashing lights.

Cameras snap and click, only giving me seconds to conjure up new poses. Hair touch. Hip twist. Pageant pose. Model walk. My chin is elevated, my smile only hinting.

Posture, posture, posture.

This isn't my first rodeo, but my body still itches to slouch like I'm permanently hunched over my too-short computer desk, researching the kleptoparasitic behavior of a cuckoo bee.

As I nod my thanks to the swarm of photographers and step away, my attention latches onto two jade-green eyes fixed in my direction. Heat radiates from his gaze, firing straight into my core.

Buzz.

I jolt in place when my cell phone vibrates against my thigh, attached by a lacy garter. Fetching it quickly, I peer down at the familiar name of my best friend as a smile crests.

ALLISON

It's been five minutes since I've gotten an update. I'm dying over here.

ME

You're in Belize. I'm sure you're enduring.

ALLISON

Erik is drunk on Malibu and singing that coconut song in a British accent like Zazu in The Lion King. OVER AND OVER.

I giggle and cringe simultaneously, the song immediately stuck in my head.

ME

Yikes.

ALLISON

I'm breaking up with him as soon as we land back in LA.

ME

Seriously? I thought it was…well, serious.

ALLISON

It was serious until he forgot my name while introducing me to some babe in an itty-bitty bikini. Slimeball. Erik is just another placeholder. Tell your husband to find me a husband because he's a fantastic husband and I trust his husband endorsements.

ME

What an ass! We'll commiserate over sangria when you get back. In the meantime, get a nice tan, plus an extra one for me since I'm incapable.

ALLISON

<ghost emoji> Will do. Is the launch going amazing? How famous are you at this exact moment? Did I just become famous by association?

ME

LOL. I'm not famous, but it's going well.

ALLISON

Make those connections, Ev. You're a superstar.

ME

You make me sound more important than I am. I just stand around, looking mildly pissed off and constipated, while people take my picture.

ALLISON

You're right. Maintaining experimental cultures of aphids and cabbage stem flea beetles would have been way cooler than fame and fortune.

ME

Thanks for that dose of stone-cold regret.

ALLISON

Mwahaha. Anyway, I gotta go tend to my inebriated placeholder. I hope you have extra hot sex tonight to make up for the fact that I'll be sad and celibate. Send lots of pics!

ALLISON

…Of the party. Obviously. Not of the sex.

ALLISON

…Maybe. <devil emoji>

Laughing out loud, I send her a flurry of multicolored hearts and slip my phone back into my garter, just as my name echoes throughout the ballroom.

Well, half of my name.

"Cross!" A man beelines toward me in a peachy button-down shirt and an eclectic jacket reminiscent of Alexander McQueen. "Shorter in person, but infinitely more stunning. I'll need meticulous notes detailing your moisturizing routine."

Blinking, I shift my attention to the unfamiliar man, while instinctively straightening my spine at the "short" comment. "Oh, thank you. Do you work for Casey?"

Casey Lee Abner designed the clothing line I've been representing with a few other models who have resumes far more intimidating than mine.

Tonight is the launch party.

"No, I'm just sleeping with him." He says it casually, slurping some kind of fruity cocktail made of slush and a half-a-dozen paper umbrellas. "Trevor Scott. Social media influencer from Miami and a legendary fashion icon in a past life. I'm sure you've heard of me."

"Of course." I take the hand he offers, clearing my throat. "I'm Everly Cr —"

"I know who you are. Casey hasn't stopped talking about you since you killed that video ad for his swimwear line. He thinks you're the next big thing."

I buzz at the memory of how liberated I felt in front of the cameras that day, wearing nothing but a turquoise bikini and the residual chafing from my Brazilian wax.

But then the rest of his words register.

Next big thing.

I've always felt like the odd one out in this industry. Fellow models often

exclude me from their social circles and tight-knit bubbles, poking fun at my height and gossiping about my personal life, claiming I was only given this opportunity because I married a highly respected agent. “That’s extremely flattering,” I respond, squaring my shoulders. “Tell him I said thank you.”

Trevor snatches a champagne glass off a server’s tray, handing it to me. “Your Instagram presence is impressively lacking, but I can help you there. I had a blue tick before everyone had one.” Sucking down another sip of his neon-swirled cocktail, he eyes me over the rim of the glass. “But that face is a real money-maker. The hair, the eyes, the bone structure. Who does your hair, by the way?” He flicks it with two fingers.

An awkward laugh falls out. “Allison James.”

“Never heard of her.”

“She’s my best friend.”

His face sours. “Well, it was great to finally meet you. I need to make the rounds and flirt my way into somebody’s good graces,” Trevor chirps, chugging the rest of his drink. “Keep in touch, Criss Cross Applesauce. Here’s my card.” He pulls a business card from the front pocket of his suit jacket and slips it into my hand. “Also, let me know if you see a rogue ferret getting into trouble around here. She likes to chew through leather handbags —specifically Prada. Goes by the name of Sprinkles.”

I watch him skip away, an amused frown gathering between my eyes as I spin the champagne stem between my fingers and stick the card under my garter to join my phone. As I take a sip, a warm hand presses along the small of my back, pulling my focus to the right. I instantly light up like a starlit sky. “Jasper.”

He grins, snaking both arms around my waist and pulling me to him, his chest flush with my back. “Mmm. You smell divine.”

“I smell like whatever that guy was wearing.” I’m still choking on cologne fumes.

Chuckling, Jasper nuzzles his face into my tamed hair—an endeavor that took over an hour to straighten without Allison’s help—and drags his nose down the length of it, until it’s buried in the crook of my neck. “Is my girl making connections?”

I shiver at the contact. “Inelegantly.”

“You looked like a pro from where I was standing,” he murmurs, kissing my shoulder as we start to sway. “Graceful. Classy. Sexy as fuck.”

“You have to say that. You’re my agent.”

“If I were only your agent, you’d have a sexual harassment lawsuit on your hands right about now.” Despite the crowd of partygoers, Jasper edges his palms down my hips and starts to inch the hem of my silver sequined slip dress up my thighs. “I’m your husband. And I’m going to make love to you all night, until you believe with undeniable certainty that you’re perfect in every way.”

Oof.

Wetness pools between my legs, and I’m two seconds from allowing him to take me right here in the middle of this ballroom packed with fashion designers, high-demand models, and a ferret nibbling through a table full of French baguettes —

I blink, distracted, then shake myself from the lusty haze. “We’re getting looks.”

“Let them stare.” He sucks the skin along my neck between his teeth, nibbling gently. “Let them stew in their jealousy, knowing that I’m sleeping with the most gorgeous woman here.”

Spinning in his arms, I plant my hands against his chest and look up. His eyes are hooded, glittering with future promises of late-night lovemaking.

It’s been three years since I was introduced to Jasper Cross at a wine bar while studying for an exam. On a whim, I stopped by his agency later that week for a modeling audition. The audition turned into a paid job for an eyewear company’s website banner, which then manifested into a hot and heavy relationship with the dreamiest agent I’d ever met—which, eventually, spurred a marriage proposal at the same wine bar, one year later.

I never really saw myself getting married or falling in love. I had plans, dreams to live out, rooted in the field of entomology and science. I grew up with an exotic dancer for a mother and a father who died when I was five months old, which gave me a burning desire for independence and stability. Mom and I are close, but I saw how her career choices had weighed on her throughout the years. Overnight shifts. Necessities, dependent on her tips. I never judged or resented my mother for doing what she needed to do to keep a roof over our heads, but I wanted something different.

Now, I can’t imagine my life without this man.

Before I melt beneath his molten stare, he plants a kiss to my hairline, cupping my face between two large palms. “I’ll try to keep my hands from

misbehaving for a little while longer." Jasper smirks, lowering his head until our foreheads press together. "Mostly because I'm dying to hear what Trevor Scott said to you."

Out of my peripheral vision, I catch sight of Trevor wrangling the ferret that just skittered over to an adjacent table and is now chewing through the burlap table runner as guests flee the scene.

I snicker under my breath and return my attention to Jasper. "He said Abner was impressed with my work on that ad last month."

"For the swimwear?" Curling his fingers around my upper arm, my husband guides me toward a quieter corner of the room. "Your hashtag was trending on TikTok. I knew he'd notice."

"It's such a surreal feeling," I breathe out, gnawing on my bottom lip as my pulse thrums with adrenaline. "He said Abner called me 'the next big thing.' *Me.* The pint-sized girl who had zero modeling experience and wanted to be a bug scientist."

"Shit, baby." His onyx eyebrows lift to his hairline, his smile stretching as wide as the tickle in my heart. "That's fantastic. This is fucking huge."

More elation sweeps through me, more ecstatic disbelief. "What does it even mean?" I don't realize my knees are wobbling until I reach for Jasper to hold myself steady.

"It means you're going to take this industry by the balls, and you won't stop until Everly Cross is a household name. It means you're going to light up billboards and television screens and runways, and you're going to prove to the world that a five-foot-two spider enthusiast can become a renowned supermodel." He clasps my face between his hands and pulls our noses together, breathing against my lips. "It means I get to stand by your side and shout to anyone who will listen, *'That's my beautiful wife,'* while cheering you on, feeling so goddamn proud."

Tears rush to my eyes. I choke on a strangled laugh, the kind of laugh you make when you're obscenely high on emotion and too overwhelmed to speak.

"Personally, I'm ready to celebrate right now." He kisses the tip of my nose, then the bow of my lips. "Us, tangled in our new French linen sheets." Jasper cradles my cheek, gifting me another lingering kiss. "All this hair spilling down your back like a fine champagne while you moan my name and drive me wild." Dragging his lips to the shell of my ear, he finishes in a low

voice, “Putting a baby in you.”

My heart jackhammers.

A baby.

Anxiety swims through me at the notion.

“Not yet,” he clarifies, smirking. “I know your career comes first. I just can’t stop imagining how stunning you’ll be, glowing from head to toe, this body carrying my child.” Jasper presses a palm to my flat stomach, his eyes sparking with heat.

My pulse steadies as I stretch a teasing grin. “Apparently, you’re not the only one eager for that.”

He drops his hand. “Mm. That’s never going to happen.”

“The couple is persistent.”

“Let them persist. The only child you’ll bear is *mine*.”

I chew on my cheek, nodding as I gaze up at him.

A few months ago, I was approached with an offer to become a surrogate for an anonymous couple. After my bathing suit ad went viral, a slew of unique opportunities had been presented to me—surrogacy being the most unanticipated.

I denied the proposal, even though it carried with it a startling price tag. Then I denied the counteroffer to donate my eggs.

Jasper wasn’t on board.

And as much as the idea of helping a couple bring new life into the world to complete their family tugs at my heartstrings, I know, deep down, I’m not a good fit. My life is just taking off, gaining traction, the future clear and bright. There are plenty of other women out there, better candidates. Maybe someday I can reevaluate, but for now, the timing isn’t right.

“Anyway,” I continue, reaching up to straighten his tie. “I want a baby, too. You know I do. In a couple of years, maybe.”

At thirty-four years old—and ten years my senior—I know Jasper wants to start a family. I also know his white-picket-fence dreams are temporarily on hold because he married his most promising rising star.

Swallowing, he bends down to graze his nose with mine. “As much as the thought of getting you pregnant turns me on, I can be patient.” His grin is playful and provocative. “Abner is a legend in the making, and he has his eyes on you.”

“I know, and I’d hate to throw a wrench into an opportunity like this.”

I swear he winces, and I cringe at the crass analogy.

A wrench.

I just compared our future child to a mechanic's tool.

"God, I didn't mean it like that." Shaking my head, I fluster through my words, giving Jasper's arms a loving squeeze. "I just want the timing to be right. Perfect. Please don't think I —"

He shushes me with a kiss. "Shh, I understand, baby," he tells me, his tone mimicking his words. "I get it. And you're right, I shouldn't be talking about babies five seconds after you break that kind of news to me. I'm just…"

"Excited," I provide, smiling softly. "I know."

Jasper drags his thumb over my bottom lip until he's dusting my jaw, his eyes alight with glimmering sentiment. Then he whispers, "I was going to say hopelessly and stupidly bewitched."

We stumble through the front door an hour later, lips locked, hands roaming, hearts pumping wildly with anticipation. Jasper kicks the door shut with the heel of his shoe, only pulling away to rip off his suit jacket. Our mouths collide, groans permeating the quiet house, and I toss my stilettos off, one by one.

I suck his tongue into my mouth before inching back, breathless. "More."

He slams his mouth to mine.

Then I bite his bottom lip, roughly tugging it between my teeth.

Jasper pulls away, wincing. "Ow."

"I… I'm sorry." My body churns with a frenzied need for rough kisses, mean touches, and violently delicious sex. But guilt gnaws at my bones when I see a dollop of blood pooling on the inside of his lower lip. "You're bleeding."

"I'm fine." Forcing a smile, Jasper swipes at his mouth, smearing the crimson pearl. "I like it when you get carried away."

"You do?"

"Mmhmm."

My excitement falters. His words don't ring true. I think I scare him

sometimes when I bite and scratch and claw, like a feral spark awaiting a matchstick. Jasper always tames me, dousing our fire with sweet, honest lovemaking.

It's still satisfying.

He gets me off, takes his time, cherishes every inch of me.

But sometimes I crave more. There's an inherent desire inside me, yearning to carry it to the next level.

And that's when I scare myself.

A stab of embarrassment has me backing away before Jasper reaches out and curls his hand around my wrist.

"I'm not done with you yet." A Cheshire grin lifts on his mouth as he yanks me closer, cupping my face with both palms, and pressing his lips to mine for a tender kiss.

I allow the moment to be what it is: kind, love-laced, and pure.

Retreating, I send him a smile. "I'll meet you upstairs in a minute."

He tucks a defiant piece of hair behind my ear that's been newly zapped with humidity. "Cranberry juice?"

"Maybe." I'm weird. I always need to have a cold glass of cranberry juice waiting for me on the bedside table post-sex. "It's refreshing."

"You're a nutter." Laughing, Jasper bends down and places another kiss on my forehead. Slow and precious, like he's savoring a delicacy.

I swoon, gazing up at him with stars in my eyes. "If I'm a nutter, then you're a nutter lover," I murmur, lost in our galaxy for two.

"Always." Smacking my butt, he steps backward with a grin and starts to toe off his dress shoes.

I flash him a toothy smile, then make my way down the hall and into the kitchen to fetch the juice. The evening's events funnel through my mind, harnessing my joy. The lights, the crowds, the cameras, the shining accolades from peers and industry bigwigs.

A dream come true.

A future igniting in a multicolored swirl.

As I move around our custom quartz island, I drag my fingertips across the surface, a feeling of disbelief coursing through me. I'm only twenty-four years old, and this is my life—a devoted husband by my side, a dream home, a star-studded career on the horizon, just taking shape.

The next big thing.

I have it all.

And then the dream buckles, the lights dim, and my future shatters with a resounding —

CRACK.

I let out a scream and nearly hit the ceiling.

Oh, my God.

Something exploded.

Something in my house *exploded*.

My ears ring, my heartbeats hammering against my ribcage as a sickly cloud of fear envelops me. “Jasper.” His name strangles me on the way out as my world crumbles beneath my feet. Spinning around, I dart back the way I came and stop dead in my tracks when I face the foyer. “*Jasper*!”

No.

This can’t be happening. This isn’t real.

A milky shaft of moonglow spotlights the image of my husband lying face-down on our Gioia tiles with a gunshot wound to his back.

“*No*!” I screech like a rabid howler monkey as my vision blurs. Almost as if it refuses to believe what my eyes are telling it to see.

He’s still, so eerily still, and I know there must be a gunman nearby, planning to shoot me, too, but all I care about is getting to Jasper.

I race to him as a pool of scarlet horror begins to form underneath his chest, oozing into the white tile cracks.

My husband. The love of my life.

He’s bleeding out before my eyes, dying in front of me.

My shrieky sob pierces the air as I fall to my knees and reach for him —

But that’s as far as I get.

I’m not even allowed one last touch, hug, or tragic goodbye before I’m yanked to my feet by the roots of my hair. A dark shadow materializes out of nowhere. A monster. My worst nightmare brought to life, dressed in black, like twilight and ashes, hauling me away from Jasper.

Scalp stinging and legs thrashing, I whip my hands out, desperate to latch on to him. Scratch him, bite him, smack him, kill him.

I want to kill him.

But I’m a mere one-hundred-and-fifteen pounds of heartache, and he’s a serpent. His arm snakes around me, twisting me toward him, until I’m staring up into two coal eyes through the holes of his ski mask as tufts of coarse red

hair spill out at his shoulders.

I feel weightless in his grip, like I'm nothing at all. A twig about to be snapped in two. A tiny ant waiting to be crushed by someone's boot.

My chest heaves with terror as tears crawl down my cheeks. My body resists him, flailing and kicking and fighting, but it's futile.

I scream as loud as I can, hoping I'll wake Jasper from the dead.

Then instinct takes over. I lunge at the firearm in his hand, fingers scraping for control.

Pain detonates across my cheek as the gun's butt slams into my face, sending me sprawling. The floor meets me like concrete, knocking the breath from my lungs in a *whoosh*. Jasper's blood seeps into my hair, warm and sticky, tethering me to a horror I can't escape.

A shadow looms over me, crouching closer. Before I can react, a sharp sting pierces my neck.

No.

Sirens wail in the distance—hope, fleeting and faint—but the wooziness creeps in fast, clouding my mind, sapping my strength. My body slackens, limp and useless, as strong arms haul me off the floor.

He slings me over his shoulder, and I dangle like a ragdoll, helpless as he carries me from my home. From my beautiful, charmed life.

From Jasper.

It happens too fast. One moment, we were tangled in love, the world melting away as I imagined waking in his arms at dawn, the light catching his sleepy smile.

Now I'm jostled with each heavy step as the patio door slides open, and the cool night air steals what little warmth I have left.

As we vanish into the dark, my blurry eyes land on Jasper's lifeless body —crumpled and still on the floor we'd once danced across. Tears burn down my cheeks, but my fight is gone, drained with every labored breath.

The only thing worse than dying is living another moment without him.

And the only thing worse than that…

Is what I fear will come next.

2

The text comes in at midnight from a number I've been ignoring for months.

DICKHEAD

Need to talk. Twenty-first and Delancy.

ME

Fuck off.

DICKHEAD

I have news.

ME

I don't care.

Holding the button until the phone goes dark, I fall into a sprawl on the couch, pull a baseball cap over my face, and try to shut off my brain. If the news was good, I'd already know.

My eyes close.

Open.

Rinse and repeat for another hour, until I turn the phone on and see the last notification.

DICKHEAD

I need you to hear this from me.

Dammit—he knew that would get me.

Twenty minutes later, I'm here.

"Hey there, handsome." I'm barely through the door when a bottle blond wearing a red sequined strip of material steps in my path. "Buy me a drink?"

"I'm busy." I push past her, crunching the discarded skeletons of peanuts beneath my feet. Behind the bar, Sascha meets my eye, tilting her chin toward a table in the back corner and giving a quick headshake to Sequin Girl, who's still following me.

Must be new.

A hypnotic rhythm carries over the stage where a dancer has one leg wrapped around a pole, her arched back rendering her nearly upside down as she waves a curtain of dark hair before a throng of mesmerized men. The beat pounds slow and steady, in time with my heart.

Th-thump, th-thump, th-thump.

Inhaling a lungful of smoke-infused air, I give the area a habitual scan and head for the back. On the surface, I look no different than the rest of the clientele weaving through the dark, navigating tables, chairs, and several dubiously sticky puddles I refuse to think about. But I'm not here for pleasure. Tonight, I'm on a mission.

Though I pride myself on my well-honed instincts, they aren't necessary to locate my target: he's waiting in our usual booth, nursing a glass of whisky, his dirty-blond hair reflecting the flash of fuchsia moving lights.

Luke Tanner.

Pretty sure I'm one of three people who realize his first name isn't Tanner.

Stopping in front of the table, I pluck the glass from his hand. "You couldn't just come by my place?"

"Why? You got something better to do?" He snatches the whisky from me like the world will end if I encounter alcohol.

Fair enough; he's seen me at my worst more than once.

"Good to see you, too." He tilts his head toward the glass of carbonated liquid across from him. "Sascha made that one just for you. There's lime in it."

"You've got thirty seconds to convince me not to turn around and go back to bed." I ignore the invitation to sit. "Some people are asleep at one a.m., you know.

"You aren't one of them."

“Not the point.”

The point is, I hate this place. Not for *what* it is, but because a meeting in this hole in the wall gentlemen’s club off Delancy pretty much guarantees I’m not going to like what my former partner has to say.

Back when we were a team, this used to be our go-to for connecting with informants and holding other covert meetings. One glance at the smattering of distracted patrons, half with their dicks in hand, and it’s clear no one gives a fuck about the conversation happening in the booth tucked away in the shadows. That’s the beauty of this club: privacy without the danger of seclusion.

Even comes with its own bouncer.

Tanner aims that notoriously charming smile at someone over my shoulder, dipping his chin. “I miss this joint. It’s got a great selection of beer. And women.”

“You don’t drink beer.” I turn in time to shake my head at the server before she gets too close. “And my place has zero people. I win.”

“Ah, but the women…” He waves a hand toward the stage.

“Last I checked, women are still people.” I don’t discriminate; I just don’t like anyone all that much. “Why am I here?”

“If I’d knocked on your door, would you have answered?”

“No.”

“Have a seat, Porter.”

A glance at my nonexistent watch. “Ten seconds.”

“Isaac.” His expression turns grim. “Please.”

My stomach sours. He never uses my first name. Only once that I can remember, back when —

Suddenly, my curiosity has turned to cold dread; I no longer want his news. “I’m gonna go.”

I’m mid-turn when he drops the bomb. “Sommerfield took the credit.”

The *credit.*

My throat burns with the rise of an acidic cocktail of bile and bad omens. “What?”

“He added her to his list.”

“No.” I blink stupidly. The look in his eyes is the only confirmation I need. “It wasn’t him,” I growl through a jaw clenched tightly enough to grind glass. “It wasn’t—Motherfucker… Tell me they didn’t buy it.”

But I already know the answer. Collapsing into the booth, I scrub a hand over my face until my eyes blur. Tanner pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his front pocket.

That means it's serious.

"He wasn't arrested for the Jenson girl until the day after…you know." Mercifully, he doesn't say it. "Theoretically, he would have had time."

"*Goddammit.*" I slam my hand on the table, sending the ashtray rolling. "It's bullshit, Tanner. Taking the word of a fucking serial killer already pinned for life. It's the easy way out. They can't —"

"You know I agree with you, Porter. I do." His hands lift helplessly. "But the DA is buying it. Chief, too."

"Oh, I'm sure they're not just buying it; they're eating it up with a spoon." And I'm no longer there to fight back. I rub at the ache developing in my forehead. "It's not anything like Sommerfield's M.O. The pattern fits the unsolved cases. I have piles of evidence supporting that. Why won't they open their damn eyes?"

It's the same argument I've held for almost two years. They listened, at first, because my track record as a detective was stellar. Then the trail died. The case went cold. But I never stopped pushing. Never stopped until the day I pushed so hard I got pushed right out the door.

"It. Wasn't. Sommerfield." I'll say it until the day I die. It's a feeling in my gut, and my gut is never wrong.

"They didn't have anyone else to point to." It's too soft, the way he says it. Too gentle. Makes me want to punch him in the face.

"They closed the case." The realization drops like shattering glass.

"Yeah." Tanner looks like he could cry. "They did."

And they didn't even see fit to break it to me first. "They can't close it on the unsubstantiated word of a monster. What if she's still alive? What if —"

I can't catch my breath.

"I'm sorry, Porter."

There's nothing else he can say.

It's over.

I grip the hair at my crown in clenched fists, ready to rip it all out and burn down the world.

No, no, no.

"What's their proof?"

He opens the pack of cigarettes, slides one into the corner of his mouth, and hands me another. When I don't take it, he sets it in front of me like an offering.

"They got a lead that suggested he was at the coffeehouse that night. Showed Sommerfield her picture and he confirmed it; said she was number nine." Apology clouds his face.

Number nine. A confession on a cold case like that is too tidy for the DA to question.

"Fuck." I close my fists, digging my nails into my palms; anything to distract from this aching pit of darkness in my chest. "He's lying."

"Well, he's a psychopath; it wouldn't be unheard of. But how do you prove that?"

"They need a body. Where's her body? Pointing at a picture isn't *proof*." I pin him with a glare that could spontaneously combust. "I want her goddamn body. Where is it?"

"I don't know what to say, Porter." He holds his hands out to the sides. "What do you want me to say?"

As much as I want to punch someone, he's just the messenger. No doubt I'll get an "official" phone call tomorrow. Tanner did me a favor, warning me first.

No one will convince me that loony toon isn't sitting behind bars, racking up a tally just to feel important. Serial killers act like they're competing against each other for the Guinness Book of World Records, and he wouldn't be the first to make an unsubstantiated claim on a cold case.

But does it really matter, in the end? Either way, she's gone. And the reality is, I could have stopped it. If I'd been there.

All the air squeezes out of me, like my lungs are in a vise. My extremities go numb. Shock should have set in two years ago, but I've been busy. Seems it's finally caught up with me.

My head sinks into my hands. I can't breathe. Can't think.

It's my fault…

Tanner lets me process like that for God knows how long.

"Are you okay?" There's a light touch on my shoulder. A flash of red in the corner of my eye. Sequin Girl.

Lucky for her, my reactions are about as fast as molasses right now.

"Not now, Serendipity. I've got him." The urgent clip of Tanner's

warning does the trick, and the hand jerks away like she touched lava.

"She's new. She didn't know." He gives her a look that speaks volumes about the eggshells he's walking on and turns back to me. "Are you, though?"

Am I? "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"What kind of stupid fucking question is that?" I snatch the lit cigarette from his hand, put it to my lips, and inhale like my life depends on it. With the first hit of nicotine, the shock is dulled.

Slightly.

"It's a normal question one friend asks another when they've heard something upsetting."

"I don't have friends."

"Well, I do. And for reasons no one understands, I've chosen you. Deal with it."

My rage spikes. "Yeah, you're such a *great* friend. Yet when they wanted me out, you agreed."

Tanner tried, for a while. But when the shit hit the fan at the department, he agreed that it was time for me to go. Fucking said as much to the chief, right in front of me.

I couldn't forgive him for that.

"Dammit, Porter, that was for your own good. You'd lost it." His hand tightens around his glass. "I'm *trying* to be your friend now. Why do you think I'm here?"

"Maybe you feel guilty. How the hell should I know?"

"Or, maybe I have a sense of loyalty that borders on masochism." Now it's his turn to glare. "No matter what you might think, I'm looking out for your interests. And I know it's not the same, but what happened…it hit me hard, too. You know I loved her like a —"

"You told me to sit down and shut up." I point the cigarette at him like an accusation. "Trust the department. But they failed me when I needed them and tossed me to the curb when I got pissed."

He gives me a look like I'm full of shit. "No, I said that more people would be willing to listen to your theories if you played nice. Most people don't exactly jump at the chance to deal with your hot-tempered ass."

"Well, things have changed now, haven't they?" I flatten my hands on the

table and lean in. “I’m a free agent. And maybe it’s about time I started using that freedom to my advantage.”

“Careful.” His voice lowers. “You’re walking a dangerous edge once those lines blur.” Unlike most people, he holds eye contact. He’s always been one of the rare people who doesn’t falter when I get riled up. Even the chief used to back down and let me do my thing; however unorthodox my methods might be, I got the job done. Then several months ago, I let my temper flare a little too publicly and it couldn’t be overlooked.

Turns out, showing up at a congressman’s party with all his politician friends present and demanding they get their heads out of their asses, acknowledge the unsolved disappearances of their citizens as an epidemic, and put their money where their *thoughts and prayers* were gets you labeled a loose cannon.

There also might have been a few tables flipped in the process, and a small fire…

Tanner watches me warily. “Employed or not, it’s still your responsibility to respect the law. You got lucky last time, but I wouldn’t count on it happening again.”

We were both surprised no charges were pressed, but the potential media circus was what ultimately saved me. There’d been too many missing persons cases in the past couple of years—seemingly random situations, with vastly different victims. If it got out that an L.A.P.D. detective believed they were all connected and had been shoved aside because he was related to one of them, the citizens would demand answers.

So, under the guise of understanding my grief, I was given options. I could stay on the force, submit to an investigation and probably get canned… or door number two, the one I took: mental health leave, followed by early retirement.

My preference would have been shoving their “options” straight up their asses. It was Tanner who convinced me I could still do some good in the private sector if I stayed out of jail.

But…

Exhaling a stream of smoke, I thank the nicotine for steadying my nerves and giving me some clarity. Just because I don’t work for the law now, doesn’t mean I’ve left my skills behind. I happen to have been the best undercover agent the department had seen in over a decade, goddammit. That

hasn’t changed.

“What are you thinking?” Tanner knows me well enough to see a plan forming in my head.

Suddenly, I’m calm. Resolved.

“You should go home.” I nod toward the door. “Dana hates when you stay out all night.”

“I’m sure she’s asleep.” The skin around his eyes tightens the slightest bit. He looks at the cigarette like it’s suddenly turned sour and jabs it into the ashtray. “And you’re changing the subject.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

There’s a strange dynamic between us now—one that’s entirely my fault. Trying to be my friend is a no-win situation, and it’s to his credit that he held out as long as he has.

In the end, I was too angry. I couldn’t stomach the give and take being around other humans requires and cut everyone off.

Everyone, meaning *him*, since there’s only been one other person interested in putting up with my bullshit, and she’s —

Never mind.

Tanner looks tired, and not just because it’s the middle of the night. I know the guy better than anyone, and I’m finally calm enough to notice the little things. The growth of much more than a five o’clock shadow on his normally clean-shaven jaw. The tie balled up in his jacket pocket, like he hasn’t been home yet. The cigarette pack, slightly caved, half empty, and the slight tremble of his fingers when he lit the end.

He’d quit smoking cold turkey the night before he got married. I was there, at the rehearsal—much to the bride-to-be’s chagrin—coerced by Tanner into being his best man. We had one last smoke together out behind the church’s maintenance shed while the wedding planner called for the groom to take his place. Then he was done. After that, he only kept a pack around to calm me down whenever I got…agitated.

He’d bought a new pack the day before I told him to fuck off and never talk to me again.

“You’re planning something.” Suspicion etches in the two lines between his eyebrows.

“I still don’t believe it was Sommerfield.” I lift one shoulder. “I never will.”

“I know you won’t.”

“What’s your stance on it?”

“I think it *looks* like it was him.” He swirls the alcohol around the bottom of his glass. “And I also think you’ve got the best instincts of anyone I’ve met. If you say it *wasn’t* him, I won’t be the one to say you’re wrong.”

“That’s all right. Everyone else already did it for you.”

“Because you were too close.”

“Don’t.” The word snaps out of me. My recently lowered blood pressure rises again. “I’m aware of the argument. It’s fucked me over since the beginning.”

Bias is what they called it. *Familial bias.* Basically, it just gave them an excuse for everything they disagreed with.

He exhales a long breath out his nose, steepling his fingers in front of his chin. “I really am your friend, you know.” The look he gives me is rife with nostalgia. “Gone to bat for your ass more than once. That means I get to be concerned.”

Pretending my drink is something stronger, I down it and push the glass away, watching it slide through a puddle of condensation.

“Don’t make me go to your funeral, Isaac.”

I widen my eyes in mock surprise. “Wow, two *Isaacs* in one conversation. Feels like a bad omen waiting to happen. Do me a favor and don’t make it three.”

“I’d rather not visit you in prison, either.”

“Consider yourself absolved from both, then.” Sliding out of the booth, I remove my wallet from my back pocket and pull out a couple bills. “No one else will be there, why should you?”

“Is having someone actually give a shit really that painful for you?” His parting shot makes me pause, but only for a second.

I look back over my shoulder. “What’s the point? We’re all here one day and gone the next. No one is permanent. It doesn’t mean anything. Why set yourself up for that?” For this never-ending ache in my chest, is what I mean. The hollowness. “I’m not worth that.” I toss one of the bills onto the table. “No one is.”

The last sentence jabs like a knife in my heart, and I regret it.

Tanner, with an expression like he’s already mourning my impending and likely messy passing, looks away. Pulls out another cigarette.

I've barely made it two steps before Sequin Girl appears, roaming the area. Serendipity. Can't say she isn't persistent.

She stops in her tracks, brow pinching as she finds her balance on heels so high I'm surprised she doesn't topple face-first. Her expression softens when she notices Tanner and his bleeding heart.

Now that I'm less distracted, I see her for what she is. A pretty, doe-eyed thing, a bit on the young side and slightly out of her element. Empathetic to the point that it hurts to see someone upset. In a place like this, that could either serve her well or destroy her.

Her gaze snags on me. The tendons in her neck tighten, her throat moving when she swallows. She sees me for what I am, too. Her foot slides back.

But I'm too fast, and before she has time to make eye contact with the bouncer, I'm close enough to brush those cheap sequins with the crisp bill I hold between us. Close enough that she cranes her neck to accommodate my considerable height, despite the heels.

She tenses as I lean in, my nose inches from her thrumming pulse as I inhale the honey and vanilla of her perfume. Smells like an entire dessert menu.

Perfect.

"Do me a favor and give that guy a dance or two, will you?" I angle my chin toward Tanner, who is visibly debating whether to step in and keep me from scaring the girl.

Her gaze lowers, widening when she sees the one-hundred-dollar bill. With a nod, she slides the bill from between my fingers, hesitating when my breath brushes her ear.

My next words are just for her; a quiet secret between the two of us. "Treat him nice, okay? His wife just left him."

I leave them there without looking back, my plan solidifying with every step.

If the law has officially thrown in the towel, then it's time for me to stop playing by their rules and make up some of my own.

The wheels in my head are turning, rifling through the contacts I've made through years of mingling with the members of society who are less concerned with legalities. I've played my part well enough that they believe I'm one of them, and with every day that goes by, it's closer to the truth.

By the time I've wound past the stage and out the door, I know my next

move and the five after that.

The smoky club air is replaced by a late October bite, sharpening my resolve. I look to my left, toward the main street, then in the other direction, down the alley, where the shadows move. In this unsavory part of town, there are always individuals wandering, some looking for trouble, others with nowhere else to go. Even at two in the morning.

Pulling a secondary cell phone out of my pocket, I bring up a number that can only lead to trouble, gazing at the clear, starry sky as it rings. Then I turn right.

It's time to go hunting.

3

“Keep moving.” I give the guy in front of me a helpful shove.

Stumbling into the ravine, he barely avoids a face-first landing onto the muddy underpass. “What the hell, man?”

“Oh, yeah.” I yank the cloth bag off his head. “Watch your step.”

Red-rimmed eyes blink into the low light, his hollowed cheeks and greasy brown hair completing the look. Weasel, they call him on the streets, and not just because he resembles one. He’s the type whose loyalties are easily bought, which means he’s been used by the department as an informant more than once.

Choosing Weasel as bait was risky; if he’s seen me with the wrong person, he could make the connection. But with the bulk of my days undercover or hidden away in a back office, I’m taking the gamble that my identity is safe.

Came close to blowing that cover publicly during my confrontation with the congressman. Good thing the politicians hushed the encounter to save face.

My arm brushes the gun at my waist. If I’m wrong, I’ll be forced to improvise.

“Why ya got to be like this?” Whatever Weasel’s been taking slurs his words. “I didn’t do nothin’.”

He’s got a line of victims that would disagree.

I push him to his knees in the middle of the largest puddle. “Oh, you’ve

done lots of things, my friend."

That's when he sees where I've brought him. "What the…" His pitch rises an octave. "You asshole. There are no women here. You set me up."

He was sitting in the alley getting high with a minor when I got off the phone with my contact. The perfect patsy; might as well have come gift-wrapped. After shooting a message to Tanner to take care of the teenager, I told Weasel I knew some women who'd love to share their talents in trade for the stash of cocaine he was undoubtedly carrying.

Five minutes later, he was in the trunk of my car.

The guy's a known child molester, among other things. I don't feel sorry for him.

Scanning the graffiti-strewn concrete of the underpass, he spits. "Always had a feeling you were a pig. Turns out you're a rat, too."

Maybe he does know about my former employment, after all.

His face turns a shade of red so dark it's nearly purple, eyes glassy with the combination of chemicals and good old-fashioned hatred. Fucker looks like he wants to tear my face off. Too bad his hands are cuffed behind his back.

I clutch my chest in mock offense. "A rat? Aw, that hurts, *Weasel*." A grin spreads across my face. "I'd rather think of myself as more of a fox…in a henhouse."

Jesus, when did this turn into an animal farm?

Weasel's mouth opens, but the sound of tires grinding on crumbled asphalt interrupts his retort. His head whips around, the sneer collapsing when he sees a dark SUV headed our way.

"Squawk for me, Weasel."

"*Oh, fuck*," he whispers, staring at the man getting out of the passenger's seat in horror. Now he gets it.

After surveying the two of us with a stoic expression, my contact bends down enough to jerk his chin at someone in the car. The driver's door opens, followed by one in the back.

That's when Weasel loses his shit. "Wait…Dolph!" He struggles against his restraints. "Dolph! You don't want me. It's *him.* He's a —"

The butt of my pistol connects with the base of his skull, and he drops like a sack of potatoes. I blow out a breath. That was close.

My contact strides toward me with his puppets close behind. Not one of

them blinks.

Dolph Larsson is a Scandinavian transplant, also known as the Viking. Renowned for his skill in acquisitions, he knows how to find the people with more money than morals who will pay for all manner of fucked-up things. He sources his “products” from all over, but with the surge of black-market organizations spreading through this region of the United States, there’s plenty of work to be found.

Simply put, he’s a freelancer, a middleman, and, after tracing the string of kidnappings, I’ve developed a theory. If I were a betting man, I’d wager Dolph and his crew *acquire* many of the people who have been disappearing. That’s why I need to get in with him first. Then I’ll find out who he’s supplying and offer my services directly.

Once I’m inside, I’ll take them apart piece by piece.

He strolls toward me with measured steps, stopping when his boots touch Weasel’s nose. Running his tongue over yellowed teeth, he evaluates me, stretching the silence out like a rubber band. It’s an intimidation tactic I’m familiar with. On most people, it would be effective, but you have to give a shit about your safety to be intimidated.

I’m way past that.

My heart drums a steady beat. There’s nothing to do but stand here with an unfazed expression while Dolph takes my measure. The butterflies in my stomach are only because I’m winging it. I’m used to being prepared.

“Nick.” His accent gives his voice a lilt that doesn’t match his appearance. “Haven’t seen you around in a while.”

That’s my go-to alias in these circles. I was on the force the last time I dealt with Dolph, facilitating a weapons deal that mysteriously went bad at the last minute. Whoops. Rumor had it that *Nick* was behind bars for a few weeks when it all went down, which kept my cover intact.

Still, I need to tread carefully.

“Been busy.” I smile grimly. “You know how it is.” Better to stay vague, rather than risk talking too much. That’s how you can tell people are making shit up; they keep babbling until they babble themselves right into the ground.

“Ah. Busy. Right.”

I know his game; the trick is to wait it out. Show him I’m in control. My concern is I lost track of his two companions, and there’s no way to look

around without taking my eyes off their boss.

We stare each other down for several minutes.

I cock my head.

You don't scare me, asshole.

He breaks first. "You say you've got something I want?"

"Would I call you out here in the middle of the night for no reason?"

A grunt. "What's with this?" Dolph pokes the guy sprawled out at our feet with his toe.

Snagging street trash like Weasel was a long shot, but surely the guy's got something *someone* needs. A good kidney, maybe. "Word on the street says you've got a client who needs a guy for a thing." An educated guess on my part. "He volunteered."

That earns me a full snort. "He double-cross you or something?"

"Eh, you know." I smirk. "Weasels will be weasels."

"And what are you expecting out of this?" There's a flash of movement to my left. I dare to break eye contact with Dolph enough to glance behind him, where I catch a glimpse of the blond-haired driver. Still no sign of the other guy.

"Call it an offering of good faith." My mouth dries. It's next to impossible to make anything out amid the shadows. "And a proposal." A lift of bushy eyebrows is his only response, so I continue. "Rumor has it, you've got someone big buying these days."

"Rumors, eh?"

Gravel crunches behind me. My gut hardens. This was a bad idea. I didn't do the prep work. But it's too late to go back; I can only forge on and do whatever's necessary to make it out of this. My fingers twitch at my side. "I'm getting bored with the usual. Might be time to branch out. Thought you might need a partner."

"Tempting." His eyes flicker to something behind me. "You're right about one thing: I am looking to fill a specific order for a very important client. But there's one problem."

"What's that?" On the surface, our conversation seems casual, but it's the subtext—the body language, the shady associates creeping around—that have the red flags waving. One wrong move could get me shot, so I hold my ground and play the part. My muscles tense, ready to reach for my gun.

"Your product," he spits right on top of Weasel, "doesn't fit the

requirements."

That's because I was more concerned with grabbing a guy who didn't leave a ding on my conscience. I've still got morals, they're just a little looser than they used to be. It's not like I'm risking an innocent.

Besides, this gets one more criminal off the streets. I call that a win-win.

Glancing at said criminal, I shrug. "You tell me the requirements, and I'll find the right candidate."

"Hmm." His appraising gaze fixes on me, like I'm filet mignon. "We're looking for more of a…challenger."

My heart kicks up a notch.

What in the hell was I thinking, coming out here half-cocked?

"Ah. Who'd you say the buyer is, again?" Like he's going to tell me.

"I didn't." There's a gleam in his eye. "But I'm told there's a hunting expedition involved."

I force a chuckle. "Should I have brought a deer instead of a weasel?"

He stares at me, unnervingly void of expression.

"Well, no worries, man." I regroup. "I'll get this rodent out of your way and get back to you when I find something…challenging."

Time to disappear.

Dolph's smile is cold. "Don't bother. We have *exactly* what we need."

Alarm bells go off in my head. Sirens. Flashing red lights, the same color as the Viking's gnarly mat of hair. "Great. I guess I'll be seeing you, then." I dart a glance around me, but it's too late.

I know what's coming before he opens his mouth. "Hold him."

Shit.

A body brushes against my back. An arm closes around my neck. A chokehold.

I manage a lucky elbow-jab, knocking the wind out of the guy enough to loosen his grip. Then I go for my gun.

But the other guy catches my arm, twisting until something pops. Stars burst in front of my eyes along with a tearing, searing pain in my shoulder. My weapon falls.

I'm fucked.

As both arms are wrenched behind my back, Dolph kicks the gun away, leering with the excitement of a man who's found his big payday. My head is yanked back by my hair. He's saying something, but it's drowned out by the

rush of blood in my ears.

There's a sharp stab at the side of my throat.

A needle.

"Fucking bastards," I grit between my teeth. "You've got the wrong guy. I can h—" A hand around my throat cuts me off.

Oh, fuck, no. I am *not* going out like this.

Pure stubbornness surges through my muscles. A second wind. A Hail Mary. A roar rips from me as I jam my knee into Dolph's gut, then slam my head forward. His nose crunches, spurting hot blood all over the two of us. A cry of pain and outrage sends another rush of energy through my veins. Gritting my teeth against the agony of my shoulder, I twist, dislodging the man behind me enough to make a break for it.

I make it five feet, ten…twenty.

Then everything blurs.

Stumbling, my knees hit the ground with an impact that echoes through my entire body.

Whatever they gave me, I'm suffocating in it. Drowning.

Something flickers in the corner of my vision.

A shadow. A figment. A ghost.

Maybe nothing.

The world tilts, and I fall forward, face first. "I'm…gonna kill…" The words slur into the mud.

A pair of shoes comes into view. One pulls back. Connects with my stomach. My ribcage. Over and over. Something snaps.

Fuck. Oh…fuck.

Then another connects with my face.

A punch lands. A kick.

"Agghh." That's my voice, cracked, broken. Moaning like a dying animal.

I pant through it. Shallow breaths.

Can't get air.

Darkness rushes for me like a tidal wave.

No. I can't lose consciousness.

I can't…

lose…

17

Afternoon light filters through the blinds, painting gold stripes over the file-strewn desk. I haven't used this office since before I started undercover work, years ago.

How—

My attention catches on a flash of blue: a gauzy dress draped like a waterfall over a metal folding chair. Thick waves of espresso-brown hair frame the shocking crystal eyes of a girl I know better than anyone.

I wish I could remember her name.

Relief and dread spread through my chest in equal measure. I want to take her by the shoulders and shake her. Hug her. "How did you get here?"

She has a smile that could make flowers wilt and angels fall from the sky, but today, it breaks my heart. And when her lips part, the words come out as a song. "Where were you?"

"Where was *I*?" I shake my head. "Where are *you*?"

She's right here in front of me. And yet, I know that she isn't.

"I don't know," she whispers, and out of nowhere, her face begins to age.

Slowly, the life vanishes from her eyes until they sink into her skull and dark holes stare back at me. Her skin sags…dissolves. A string of wordless notes float through the room, dark and dissonant. A funeral dirge.

"*Where are you*?" I repeat.

"It's too late." A single tear trickles over the edge of an empty eye socket. "It's too late… It's too late."

Something buzzes in my ear. Lands on my face. Another comes, and another. Flies. I swat at them, but there are too many. The buzzing fills the office.

Blindly, I lunge across the desk to protect the girl.

No. You can't have her. Not her—

The scratch of a record cuts through the buzz. Time glitches. I'm standing behind my desk, where I started. It's quiet as death.

I blink.

The flies are gone. Only a jewel-colored bird flits here and there, poking at the corpse that used to be a girl—now no more than a human-shaped pile of ash.

No.

I can't breathe. Can't speak. I can only gasp and exhale, over and over until my breath becomes a breeze that reaches the Ash Girl. Her remains lift in a swirling gray cloud, floating to the open window and scattering into the world.

Gone.

She's gone.

The bluebird watches me from its perch on the edge of my desk.

I open my mouth and scream. I scream until my throat bleeds and my lungs collapse, and when I stop, the bird is gone, too.

Sinking down into the chair, I stay in the dusty ruins of the office. Alone.

Time fades.

An eternity goes by.

I still can't remember her name.

Then—

"I'm sorry."

Wait.

What was that? Was that a voice?

"Sara?" The name slips out, little more than gravel rattling in my throat.

With some difficulty, I crack an eye open, no more than a slit. A blurry shape swims in front of me. A rectangle. A door?

I'm awake…I think. But I feel like I'm underwater.

When I try to sit up, a lightning bolt of pain tears me in two. The air whooshes from me and I lose myself in a wave of vertigo. A groan vibrates in my ears. That hurts, too.

Fuck. Me.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you."

There it is again. Muffled. Covered, maybe?

"Sara." It's all I can manage to say.

"No, I —"

I stop listening. Can't think of anything but getting to that door. Finding her.

Finding her.

Without giving myself time to think, I roll over until my feet are under me. Ignoring the pain in my chest and the scraping sound behind me, I stumble toward the door like a rogue wrecking ball. Then —

A violent snap. My ankle catches, twists. Obliterating agony. “*Ah, goddammit! Fuck!*”

I hit the floor face first. Hard.

A pathetic moan wheezes out of me as I curl up where I lay.

And I hear it again. A soft voice. Like a jewel-toned bird.

“Sara.” *Oh, God*…she’s here. She’s here, and I can’t lose her again. I can’t let her leave. “Don’t go.” The words slur.

“I’m so sorry,” she says again.

But as the room fades, I decide that maybe I didn’t hear anything at all.

Maybe I didn’t lose the only bright spot in my dark, damned life.

Maybe I’m not trapped in a room, God-knows-where, listening to the apologies of a ghost.

Maybe I’ve been dead for a long

long

time.

4

Sometimes I've wondered if Sara would be waiting for me when I finally got myself killed, which, according to Tanner, was only a matter of time, due to my "chronic dumbassery." Looks like he might've been right, and that pisses me off.

It's dark here. Quiet.

Don't know why I was expecting angels; if a place like that exists, then it isn't meant for guys like me.

I try to shift a foot, just enough to test my body—assuming I still have one. Serrated agony rakes a path from my toes to my knee and keeps going. My groan sounds like a zombie from a Scooby-Doo cartoon.

Wait…

I'm in way too much fucking pain to be dead.

Then, something rattles below me.

Chains?

Was I dreaming? I figured I'd fucked up and binged a bottle of vodka, but no… That asshole Dolph Larsson beat the shit out of me. There was a needle in my neck.

Now I'm here.

There are chains…

A door…

It's coming together now, and —

Fuck.

Panic hovers, but I can't let it take over.

Victimology 101: the second you lose your shit, it'll come right back and bite you in the ass. Before you know it, you're one of those screaming blond chicks with the big tits who are the first to go in every low-budget horror movie.

"You're awake."

"What?" I twist around automatically. "*Ah*, *Christ*." A high-pitched wheeze squeezes out of me. That fucking hurt.

All I can do is lie here, panting, which doesn't help, since my ribcage has apparently been turned inside out like a T-shirt.

Silence settles while I catch my breath. Then, just when I decide I was imagining things, I hear it again:

"Are you…okay?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Really? Does it sound like I'm okay?"

No answer.

At least the voice—the woman, wherever she is—has a sense of self-preservation. I'm not very chatty on a good day, and this is the opposite of a good day.

This is bullshit.

But I need to stay calm and let the analytical side take over.

First, I inventory my injuries. Several ribs are obviously broken, making it hard to take a full breath. My shoulder is sore as hell, but since I'm fairly sure it was dislocated in the fight, I suspect someone fixed it.

I'll have to process that later. Moving on…

One eye is swollen shut, but I still have it, so that's a positive. My toes are wiggling, which is also a good sign. Despite feeling like it's been through a meat grinder, my ankle is likely just sprained.

Bad sign: there's a cuff around it. That's where the chains come in.

In conclusion?

I'm alive. And I'm screwed.

Wincing with every move, I manage to prop myself up on my good elbow. From there, I carefully push up until I can swing my legs over the side of the cot I'm on. Sweating and out of breath, I'm finally sitting up.

Now, assess the scene.

I'm in a small space, enclosed by four white walls with a vent near the ceiling. If the paint wasn't chipped and worn, it would seem almost clinical.

In addition to the cot, there's a toilet and a sink. A small metal cage fits over a single lightbulb on the ceiling, like someone knew the first thing I would do is break it to use as a weapon.

They would be correct.

Then there's the steel door with no handle, indicating outside entry only. Probably a keypad. Fancy. I look at the shackle around my ankle. It connects to a thick chain that's bolted to the floor.

I press my fingers to my forehead. I'm not sure what happened after I almost ripped my foot off, or how I ended up on this cot. I don't remember getting up from the floor.

But I do remember one thing. My eyes lift to the blinking red light in the corner where the wall meets the ceiling. Exhaling a hollow chuckle, I lift my middle finger.

Message received, motherfuckers.

Plenty of modern cameras can be planted invisibly, which means my captors want me to know they're watching. I wonder if there's sound…

None of these factors necessarily exclude your run-of-the-mill serial killer, but since I was brought here by Dolph, it's safe to conclude this is the ring responsible for the disappearances of dozens of people.

Looks like I did it. I got inside.

Unfortunately, I came in on the *wrong* side. This is what I get for rushing things before I had a chance to —

Beep, beep, beep, beep.

With a *click* and a *whoosh,* the door slides open. An older man stands in the frame.

Instincts screaming, my entire body reacts. My muscles coil, preparing to strike. There's a good chance I'm looking at the person I've spent the past two years hunting.

This fucker's going down.

Two measured steps bring him inside the room. Without testing the length of my chain, I know he'll be just out of reach. "Oh good, you're finally awake." A look of perverse delight stretches over his face. "I've been dying to meet you."

I refrain from telling him that's *exactly* what he'll be doing. Though I'd love nothing more than to rip this chain out of the floor and strangle him with it, I need to keep this encounter controlled while I evaluate the situation.

There’s still more to learn.

“So nice to finally make your acquaintance.” He reaches into the pocket of tailored gray dress pants, his hand brushing some kind of hourglass trinket attached to his belt loop by a chain. It’s nearly the size of a cell phone. Fucking weird. A driver’s license materializes in his hand. “Mr. Ford.”

Cool relief washes through my chest. Thank God I remembered to switch wallets before I left—my cover hasn’t been blown. And since I’m still holding *that* card, I can decide how to play the rest until I know exactly what I’m up against.

My observation skills kick into high gear. I got careless with Dolph, but I won’t make the same mistake twice. Getting out of here is going to take logic and strategy, and that’s an arsenal I’ve spent my entire career building. Keeping my breathing steady, I file the details in my brain like it’s an old-school card catalogue.

Fine wrinkles and white hair indicate he could be in his late fifties or sixties. His jaw is clean shaven, his grooming meticulous. The most striking attribute, however, are his eyes—one eerily light, the other dark as coal.

His build is slight, but I have little doubt what he lacks in muscle is made up for in cruelty. And though he’s dressed expensively enough to rival any respectable mafia kingpin, I believe he’s something else entirely.

Curiosity flares in his light-colored eye as he watches me as closely as I do him.

Do I show no fear or act predictably? How would a typical man respond after being drugged, beaten, and abducted? He’d be afraid for his life. Confused. Asking questions and begging to be freed. I consider that for a moment…

Unfortunately, my mouth does what it wants sometimes, so I cross my arms the best I can with the fucked-up shoulder and stare him down. “Wish I could say the same.”

With a hint of amusement, he lifts the card like it’s a proper cup of tea and reads the name and address of my cover alias with all the interest of a stranger’s obituary. “Our mutual friend, Dolph, tells me you’re a freelancer, eager for work.”

I blink my one good eye like I’m bored, internally seething at the mention of Dolph, whose skin I would like to peel away slowly.

“As it turns out,” he continues as though I’ve answered, “I’m a

businessman, and I happen to have a job you're perfect for."

"Lucky me."

"Oh, no, I'm most certainly the lucky one in this scenario." Dollar signs are practically glowing in this man's eyes. "So many candidates have failed to fit the bill. You, on the other hand… Well, my client will be *very* pleased with you."

"Flattering, but I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

"And I'm afraid this isn't a declinable offer, my friend. Apologies."

"Got it. Who the hell are you again?"

"Oh yes, where are my manners?" Sliding my license back into his pocket, he lays one hand over his chest. "I'm the man who determines the amount of time you have left on this earth."

"I thought that job was already taken. By God."

He smooths his palms down a silver-pinstripe suit vest. "You're in my domain; you live or die by my will. I'd say God is a fitting description, now that you mention it."

"No, shit? That's a mental disorder, you know. You and Charles Manson…deities in your own mind." Disregarding the ache in my face, I force my lips to curl into a contemptuous smile. "In case you're wondering, that never ends well."

"Most people end up on their knees, begging for mercy sooner or later." He looks so smug; I can't wait to find out what it takes to rattle him. "We'll see how long it takes you."

"Since I don't plan on reciting the Lord's prayer any time soon, can you tell me what they call you on *this* planet?"

"Not today." The mirth in his expression hardens.

"Ah, don't feel bad." I know I'm walking a fine line, but I can't seem to help myself. "That can happen with advanced age. Let me know if you remember."

"Dolph forgot to mention your delightful sense of humor." Cocking his head, one side of his mouth rises as if he's figured something out. "I know what you're thinking."

"Sure, you do. Because of the God thing." If I didn't have broken ribs, I'd laugh.

"One doesn't need omniscience to see murder in another man's eyes. You think you're going to be the one to kill me." He takes one step forward, and I

almost succumb to the temptation to rush at him and see if the chain will reach.

Almost.

But I know what will happen.

I ball my hands into fists, feeling the muscle in my shoulder twinge.

"You should save that spark for my client," he continues. "He'll be tickled pink by the challenge."

"Sounds like a fun guy. Why don't you tell me about him?" Once I cut the head off the snake, I'm coming back for his *clientele.*

The muscles around his mouth flicker. "As much as I'm enjoying our conversation—and trust me, it's quite an entertaining departure from the usual begging and screaming—I merely stopped by to say hello. For now."

"Right, you must be very busy torturing people and whatnot."

"I suppose you'll find out soon enough." Those mismatched eyes scan me from head to toe. "In the meantime, if you need anything, Roger will be more than happy to lend his assistance." When I raise my one good eyebrow, he looks over his shoulder. "Roger, do come say hello to our guest."

A mammoth emerges from the shadowed hallway, his feet planted shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind his back, and his face devoid of expression. He resembles the ogre warrior I used to play in a video game.

He does not say hello.

"He's shy," the older man explains.

"Obviously." I can only assume that Roger is the answer to the mystery of how I got from the floor to the cot last night. I have a vision of the ogre carrying me like a damsel in distress and decide I don't want to know.

He's just another obstacle to work around—after dealing with the cuff, the door, and the fact that I appear to be on camera twenty-four-seven. For now, I need to keep the conversation going. I still haven't learned enough to help me come up with a plan.

"Wait." I catch the man as he steps into the hallway, making him pause. "This client of yours… Will I be meeting him soon?"

"Not just yet," says the white-haired man. "But don't worry, when the time comes, I'll leave you a souvenir, of sorts. A parting gift. Then you'll know."

What the fuck does that mean?

Superiority oozes from his pores like an oil slick. His lip tips up a notch

on one side.

I've seen too many of his type, these *businessmen* who prey on others. Devoid of empathy. They're fueled by a narcissistic need to reach a goal, no matter who gets used or trampled in the process. They do it for the money, and because they can.

"Do get some rest," he adds. "My client expects you in tip-top shape. And if there's anything I'm known for, it's my knack for acquiring the finest quality merchandise."

My hands shake. I'm seconds from combusting, from incinerating this prison that's held countless people like livestock while they wait for someone to offer the right price. I can't even respond, I'm so —

Fuck.

Maybe I've had this coming, with my suicide missions and poor life choices. But if I'm right, and this is the man who took Sara…

Thinking about her trapped in this nightmare is almost enough to break me, and I can't afford to let that happen.

If there's anything the bullshit I've been through over the years has made me good for, it's being the one to stand against these bastards. Someone's got to, or it will never end. People will keep dying. Justice will never find them.

It has to be me.

"Feel free to wave at that camera up in the corner if you need attending to," he says, heading for the doorway. "Roger will come right over." His tone is polite, but I hear the underlying threat.

We're always watching.

"You're quite fortunate, you know. Most of us have no idea how we'll leave this world. Here, you'll know exactly when you can expect your time to end." He glances over his shoulder before slipping into the hall. "Not even God does that."

My career has been made up of many names. On the force, it was Porter. Then there's my go-to cover, Nick Ford. Marcus Maury convinced a pedophile to drive three states over to a hotel where an underaged birthday present would be waiting.

Spoiler: I took him straight to a prison cell, instead.

Andrew Benson could source any illegal substance known to man, and Lyle, a.k.a. Phantom, was a killer for hire.

He was fun.

There'd been a smattering of other morally dubious characters, all serving to weed out the scum before the innocent fell victim. It's a niche I fell into, courtesy of a childhood packed with guilt I had no control over—that is, if you listen to the department-appointed counselor I was forced to see—and I'm damn good at it.

I'm trembling, but not from fear. Usually, I'd be ten steps ahead of the situation, prepared for anything, and now I'm just…fumbling in the dark.

Pisses me off.

Under the protection of a cover, I've always felt free to do whatever needs to be done. I'm me, but *not* me. And as it turns out, Nick Ford is no less mortal than Isaac Porter.

Now that death seems imminent, I find I might actually care.

Go figure.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Nicholas? Are you there?"

Oh, right. There's a woman on the other side of the wall. And since I'm in no mood to deal with people, she's about to become the lucky recipient of my frustration. "I'm chained to the floor, what do you think?" My throat feels like I've swallowed glass.

"I just wanted to —"

"I'm not interested in talking," I snap.

It's quiet for a long time before I realize that I'm an idiot. That woman over there is a resource, and since it's unlikely my captor will be forthcoming, she might be all I've got.

Shit.

I'm going to have to be fucking charming, aren't I? Where's Tanner when you need him to interact with civilians?

It takes a rough couple of minutes to get to my feet, but I manage to drag myself a few steps over to the bare wall. After staring at it for a moment, I knock. "Hey." There's no answer, so I wait a minute and try again. *Nicely.* "If I scared you before, I'm…sorry."

The last word sticks in my throat. In my opinion, *sorry* should be reserved

for those rare moments when you genuinely commit to changing your behavior. Otherwise, it's meaningless.

Since I hate commitments, it doesn't cross my vocabulary often.

"I thought you didn't want to talk." Wariness laces her tone.

"Yeah, well, if you knew me, you wouldn't take that personally."

"It's fine. No one's in a good mood when they wake up over there."

That brings up a lot of questions. And because I'm me, I don't think before launching into full-interrogation mode. "Exactly how many people have woken up over here?"

"Um… I don't know. Too many."

"Are you with him?" I wish I could see her, so I'd know if she was lying.

"What?"

"The man who just left. Do you work with him?" There's a reason I always played "bad cop" in the partnership.

"N-no. I don't. I'm not…"

"Who are you, then? What are you doing over there?"

Silence.

I've probably given her whiplash.

With a long exhale, I put my back to the wall and slide to the floor. This is why I never dealt with witnesses.

"I'm not working with him," she finally answers. "I'm just like you."

"A fucked-up son of a bitch who just made the dumbest mistake of his life?"

She makes a small sound. More like a sob than a laugh. "A prisoner, Nicholas."

"I'm not a pris—" Glancing at the cuff, I swallow the pointless rebuttal and concede. "Just call me Nick."

Then she says the words that flip my world upside down:

"Hi, Nick. I'm Everly."

The name settles in my bones. I've only heard it one other time, and I can picture the woman it belongs to as clear as if she were standing in front of me —some wannabe model who went viral on social media. The husband was shot, while the woman vanished into thin air.

Thing is, that happened *two years ago,* just before Sara was taken.

Fucking hell. I'd all but lost hope.

I suck a breath in through my nose, but my lungs don't want to fill, and

right now, the air is feeling pretty damn thin.

I just found Everly Cross.

5

Nick.

I had a boyfriend named Nick once. Sophomore year of high school. It was before my braces came off and I discovered the magic of leave-in conditioner, but Nick saw past my awkward phase and embraced the willowy insect guru with wild hair, spurring a year-long romance that included ice cream dates, study sessions, and a Homecoming dance.

He loved iguanas and rap music.

He also loved Maggie Klausner's vagina.

I hate the name Nick.

I wait for him to reply to my name, but all I hear is deafening silence. I'm used to the silence, so, for a moment I forget that I'm not alone.

Staring at the ceiling, I zone out on the wispy sheets of cobwebs in the upper left corner of the room, dangling and still. A few months ago, a spider somehow got in and took up residence there, becoming my roommate until it was evident that its food supply was nonexistent.

It died within weeks.

Yet I'm still here.

I make a humming noise, then turn my cheek to the wall to hear whatever might seep through it. "Nick?"

He makes an unidentifiable sound, and the masculine timbre rumbles through as I sit in the corner with my knees drawn to my chest.

Part of me doesn't want to say anything else; I don't want to get to know

a dead man.

But the bigger part of me can't ignore the nagging tug of loneliness. As prickly as this guy seems, I prefer talking to him over this godforsaken barricade between us. At least he talks back.

Sort of.

So far, it's been mostly rage-infused grunts, a slew of curse words, and growling.

"My name is Everly," I repeat, uncertain if he heard me. "Are you —"

"The people who have come through here… How long do they last?"

I blink, frazzled by the interrogation. No one has ever inquired about the other prisoners before. Normally, the onslaught of initial questions goes something like this:

"Where am I? What the fuck? Where the hell am I? What the fuck*?"*

And then there's a lot of pounding, chain-rattling, wall-punching, and shouting for help.

"Are you awake?" Nick taps the wall beside my head. "I need names."

I chew on the skin around my nail to distract my mouth from the one thing it really wants to do.

Talk. Purge.

Beg for him to get us out of here.

But there's no point. If I talk to him, I'll get to know him.

And if I get to know him, he's only going to become one more thing for me to miss.

I don't say that, though, because it's depressing, and I don't want to be responsible for adding to this guy's ever-growing list of sad things.

I tug at the hem of my white cotton-and-lace nightdress, one of the few items of clothing I have in this quaint room. Roger seems to like it when I wear this, and I've deduced that it's because he can see my nipples through the thin fabric. "Does it matter?" I finally respond, my voice shaky.

He's still tapping the wall. There are a few seconds in between thumps, and I wonder if he's using his head.

"I wouldn't have asked if it didn't matter." The words strain through clenched teeth.

"The details of my imprisonment won't change your fate."

"What is my fate, exactly?"

"I think you already know that answer."

Nick scoffs, the sound edged with bitterness. “I’m not dying in this shithole.”

My eyes water, even though I was certain I had no tears left. “They always say that.”

“Who?”

“Every prisoner that’s come before you.”

Another long silence fills the space between us. Twenty-seven seconds to be exact.

“How many have there been?” He repeats the question I evaded the first time. “Could any of them be alive? Like you?”

“I don’t know.” I bite my lip. “And…I’ve lost count of how many.”

That’s a lie.

And, apparently, he knows that.

“You’re lying.”

My chest squeezes. Exactly forty-three people have come before him, and all forty-three have choked on their noble promises and gallant words.

We’re all doomed.

“The last person in that room was a woman named Joy,” I tell him.

What an awful irony. I bet her mother named her Joy to guarantee her happiness, but even the Joys of the world are susceptible to unspeakable evil.

“Joy,” he echoes, the syllable laced with ridicule.

“Yes.”

“That’s almost as bad as Everly without the B.”

My tears dry up faster than dew under the morning sun, and my eyes slant with disdain. “She was kind. She had a good heart.”

“And now she’s dead.”

Heat burns my cheeks as my breath catches.

Wow.

This guy is the opposite of joy in every way.

I cross my arms, as if the defensive move can shove him out of my atmosphere.

Joy became my friend, as did all the others who came before her. While I never got to see her face, she told me she had violet eyes—a rarity caused by albinism.

She remained my friend for two months before The Timekeeper decided that her time was up and stole her away from me.

He takes things.

And then he takes everything.

Silence spans for another few beats. “Tell me why you’re in here.” He mutters it miserably, as if conversation is an archaic practice, light years outside his wheelhouse. “Why has he kept you so long?”

I consider the question, my eyes narrowing. “I never told you how long I’ve been in here.”

“Longer than Joy.”

Swallowing, I dip my chin and stare at my extended fingernails, brittle and chipped at the ends, my cuticles bitten raw. “I’m a product. We’re all products.” Something tells me I’m the favorite.

“Tell me what he takes.”

“I don’t really know,” I reply. “Different things. Unique to each prisoner.”

“What does he take from you, Beverly?”

I frown, glancing back up. “It’s just Everly.”

“You’re missing a B.”

Right.

His chain rattles. The tone of his voice is rich and deep, reminding me of Jasper. While my memories have grown hazier, I don’t think I’ll ever forget the unique baritone of my husband’s voice.

I used to compare it to a chocolate truffle. I loved chocolate. Mostly because it reminded me of Jasper’s cocoa-butter eyes and velvety words. Sweet and smooth.

A delicacy I miss.

Hesitating, I finally respond. “I think he takes my eggs.”

His chain goes silent. “Egg harvesting?”

“I think so. He doesn’t tell me anything. I’ve just pieced details together.”

“Well, last I checked, I don’t have any fucking eggs.” His laugh has a jagged edge.

“Then it’s something else. I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough.”

Picking at the frayed fringes of my gown, I wait for him to say more. It takes forty-seven seconds. I clock the lapse of silence in my head, as I often do. Time is one of the few things in this world that can be both an ally and an enemy, so I try to use its power for good.

I survived forty-seven more seconds.

“Who else?” he demands. Then I hear his hands plant against the wall near my head, causing me to jump. “Who else has been in here?”

“A lot of people.”

“I need their names.”

“I don’t —”

“Sara?” Emotion bleeds with fury, his voice sounding closer than ever. “Was there someone named Sara?”

I straighten against the wall, twisting toward the sterile sheet of white. My mind reels back in time. I think of the voices, the stories, the names, the cries and pleas.

Sara.

There was a Sara. A long time ago, maybe a few months after I’d been captured. She only lasted a couple of weeks.

God, he knew one of us? Is that why he’s here?

It could have been a different Sara. Part of me wonders if I should say no…

Would that make this more bearable for him? Or less? Does it even matter?

“Speak, dammit.” The command is a physical jab. “Sara Carlisle. Was she here?”

I rub my temples with my index fingers, breathing out a quivery breath. “There might have been a Sara. I’ve been here a long time. Two years.”

“What happened to her?” His voice drops to a desperate growl. Something thumps against the wall. His forehead, I’m guessing. “Where is she now?”

“People come and go. There’s not much I can tell you.”

“Dammit. You’ve got to know *something.”* A slap jars the surface between us. “I’ll take anything. Just tell me —”

“I don’t know. I never leave this room. I’m sorry.”

He throws another curse into the void, and the fury is still there, but it’s laced with a hopeless cadence that stirs my guilt.

“There are lots of women named Sara. It might not be —”

“Fuck.”

“Nick—”

“*Goddammit.*” He slams a fist against the wall. “I told them. I fucking told them.”

I jolt again, scooting forward. Wheeling around on my butt, I face the barrier between us, imagining him on the other side of it. High school Nick had a baby face and golden-blond curls; I picture this man looking different. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark soul. He certainly doesn't act like the others.

But his pain is the same.

Heartbreak, anger, confusion.

And so, my heart cracks a little, another painful divot cleaving through the organ, destined to leave a permanent scar. A tear tracks down my cheek as Nick unleashes a slew of smacks and punches, growling through his agony, his chain clanking against the tile floor.

I suppose he's not so different, after all.

He breaks.

Just like they all do.

6

There might have been a Sara…

Those words sear into my brain until everything blurs, and I don't hear anything else the girl has to say. She should be glad there's a wall between her and the violence simmering in my veins. It's just more proof of the phrase I heard too often growing up: the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

After all, I am the Devil's spawn. I wasn't allowed to forget that.

My swollen eyes rise to that little red light in the corner of the ceiling. It blinks with smug laughter, reminding me I have an audience, like I'm a mildly interesting bug in a reinforced jar.

She was *here.*

And now she isn't.

With that thought, the control I've been grasping with all the strength in my bloody fists disintegrates, and I erupt. "You motherfucking bastards. Fuck you. *FUUUCK YOOOU*." I slam the chain against the tile, the cot, the wall, my voice roaring in my ears as it rips through the room. Even with my vocal cords ready to give out, and all my broken parts screaming in protest, I don't stop.

This rage is for more than my captor; it's for every person who dismissed my instincts.

And it's for me.

"Son of a bitch. You fucking—" I can barely hear myself anymore, my

senses drowned out by the pounding of my heart. My head. My wrath.

If I could spew fire, I'd burn this goddamn place to the ground with myself at the center, and God knows what would be left of me when it burns out. Maybe I'll turn into a pillar of ash and crumble to nothing. Maybe I should be so fucking lucky.

I scream until ragged breaths heave from my lungs. Until my limbs are as useful as cold ramen noodles weighted by iron chains and my chest caves under the hollow reality of failure.

After years of fighting for justice, I'm reduced to ranting harmlessly in a cell while an insane *businessman* plays games with countless lives. Because, for the six-hundred-and-seventy days I've been tracking these disappearances, my gut has told me they were all connected.

Turns out, *I've been right.*

"Fuck!" Spinning toward the wall, I slam my palms against it, again and again. They sting like I've smacked a nest of bees and the strain on my shoulder is enough to make my vision blur, but it's nothing compared to what she went through.

If I could spare her now, I'd gladly switch places. Take every bit of pain and fear and compound it times a hundred. Drown me in it for eternity. I deserve it. I've earned it.

I was born for it.

But Sara…

I'm pretty sure she was an angel, put on this earth as a balance for the darkness I was created from. She invaded my stone-cold world, bringing light, compassion, and music. Enough to fill the abyss that exists inside me—or at least, patch it enough to allow me to breathe for the first time. I would have self-destructed years ago if she hadn't stepped in.

Then she was ripped away, and it was my fault.

With my arms braced against the wall as I catch my breath, I notice its condition—chipped and dented, the once-white paint scratched and discolored. How many people have scraped at, beat on, and mumbled their last confessions through this wall?

Turning my back, I slide down until I collapse on the floor, letting the heavy chains clank against the tile. My hands shake with the need for a cigarette. I let my head thunk backward lightly.

If I'm being honest with myself, what I'm really craving is something

stronger.

Seems safer to admit now that I'm trapped in here with no way to access my poison of choice. But it still feels something like blasphemy.

Like I'm spitting on her unmarked grave…wherever it is.

A long exhale hisses from between my teeth. I've been empty inside for so long, this spark of hope aches worse than the hollow reality I came to terms with a long time ago.

See, I've known she's dead. I'm not some starry-eyed family member holding out hope that my loved one will be found alive and in one piece after years. Being a detective has a way of squelching that naïve positivity early on, and I was never that optimistic to begin with. This has always been about finding the guy who did it and enacting justice.

Until the moment the girl on the other side of this wall told me her name.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Nick?"

And there she is.

Facing that damn security camera, I'm aware that every meltdown, conversation, and flicker of emotion is being witnessed by a sociopath who won't hesitate to use it against me. I've got to squash the outbursts before I draw too much attention to myself and blow my cover. That's the only thing I have going for me right now, no matter how ridiculous that might be. Nick Ford is the face I can hide behind while I stew in the shadows.

While I formulate a plan.

"Is there sound on those cameras?" I ask, knowing it's a dumb question. She wouldn't know. Can't imagine her captors giving a damn about her crying for water or begging for mercy.

She hesitates. "I don't think so… I spent those first few days screaming into the camera, until Roger came in and told me not to bother. No sound. He said when they wanted to hear me scream, I'd know."

"Better theory is he's lying."

"He doesn't have the brains to lie."

Well, she might be right about that.

And I suppose if these fuckers are as arrogant as I think they are, they don't have much use for sound. "Tell me something else, Beverly." My voice has been reduced to a rasp.

"Everly," she corrects.

“Sure.” I bet she’s heard it her whole life. Not my fault her mother gave her one of those *creative* names that screams of trying too hard.

She sighs loudly enough for me to hear it through the wall. That could be my imagination, but I can picture it. I can picture *her*—a tiny little thing, topped off with enough wild, frizzy curls to cover four of her. Like a lion’s mane, treading the boundaries of fashionably ridiculous.

Okay, fine, there’s a reason she attracted attention. The woman is undeniably stunning. Not that it matters in here. I’m sure her beauty has faded, just like her former life.

And that’s the real clincher, isn’t it? The thing sending me into a tailspin and turning all my assumptions upside-down. Everly Cross, the girl who was taken a full two months before Sara, and by all logic should be long dead, is still alive.

Which *should* make me more hopeful.

And yet —

“Hey.” Two taps send vibrations through my aching head. “Nick?”

I can’t shake the thought that if she were alive, I’d feel it. My instincts are better than most; I’d like to think something deep in my gut would have told me there’s reason to hope. And, even now, with this new evidence, this open field of possibility, I feel…

Nothing.

“What did you want to know?”

Oh. Yeah. “Right. Let’s pretend you’re a competent individual who was able to find your way out of here after two years. How would you go about that?”

Silence.

Then, finally, a soft voice, stiff with irritation. “I’m not sure insulting the one person on your team is the best way to go about finding a way out of here. Which, by the way, there is none. Plenty of people have tried. It’s locked down.”

My lips twitch, despite myself. “Oh, we have teams now. I didn’t realize.”

“Yeah.” A forced brightness infuses the word. “I like to call it ‘Team Don’t Die in Here,’ and, might I point out, that as the last known member standing, you might want me on your side.”

I hold back a laugh. She’s got some bite to her. Maybe that’s helped her

stay alive.

"Sorry." Her tone softens a bit, taking the wind from her sails.

"Oh, don't stop now. I'm a big boy; I can handle it."

"Still."

Maybe it's time to change direction.

Try not to antagonize all the time, I remind myself, in Tanner's voice.

"All right, I'll figure it out. Tell me about when you were taken."

Of course, I know more than I'm letting on. The disappearance of Everly Cross is just one of many pieces that ultimately led me here, and unlike most victims, there were plenty of photographs of her activities in the hours before. I pored over every bit of it after Sara was taken, looking for anything that could connect the dots.

In the end, it didn't matter. Everyone was convinced I was reaching. Even with a history of solving cases no one else could, it wasn't enough. The minute someone close to me became a victim, anything I said was tainted with the possibility of emotional bias. My instincts were tossed into the pile of wishful thinking and outlandish connections.

Well, every last one of them can go to hell. After I've dismantled this operation, piece by bloody piece, I'll gladly join the bastards and make them suffer for eternity.

But that's for another day.

"My husband and I were just getting home from a party." Everly recounts the details I asked for. "Someone broke into our house."

"And took you, obviously."

"Well, I didn't exactly volunteer. So, yes, they took me."

I might smile if I weren't so busy examining the cuff that connects my ankle to the heavy chain. Police issue, with a double-locking ratchet system. "Go on." The cuff isn't difficult to spring when you know what you're doing, but I need some kind of tool. I suppose a stray bobby pin lying on the floor is too much to ask for. Shit, I'll take anything at this point—even a piece of duct tape could work in a pinch, but unfortunately, my captors don't seem to be idiots. "Had you felt as though you were being watched that day, or any other?"

"Yes."

Interesting. I don't remember seeing that documented. "Really? Tell me more." I move on from the cuff and down to the chain. I've yanked on it

plenty, but now I study each connecting point for any hint of weakness.

"Well, I was modeling, and an ad I was in went viral. So technically, there were millions of people watching —"

The chain *clanks* to the floor. Now I can't tell if she's being sarcastic or dumb. "I meant, tell me something useful. Like whether you thought you were being stalked or targeted. *Specifically*."

"Okay, but your question wasn't very *specific*."

"Touche." Between the douchebag who put me here, and this conversation with Beverly minus the B, I can't remember the last time I spoke this much in one day. It's exhausting. Pressing two fingers between my eyes, I attempt to massage the ache into something slightly more bearable. "God, I'm bad at this."

"To be fair, it's not every day a person gets kidnapped. This kind of pressure throws all of us off kilter."

A sound akin to a scoff comes from my throat. "I thrive under pressure; it's patience that's not my forte."

"Ah. Then no, not specifically. Occasionally, I'd get a weird message on social media, but nothing that seemed particularly threatening. Someone else usually handled those and called it to our attention if it was something we needed to know about."

Of course, the department had combed through every email, message, and contact on record, looking for leads, and they'd all been cleared. But my interest is in whether there was something she knew that we didn't.

Resting back against the wall, I'm close enough to pick up on the sound of crunching in between pauses. Is she snacking over there? What kind of setup does she have?

When she speaks again, the words sound slightly muffled. "I guess someone who thrives under pressure is probably not bad to have as a neighbor."

"Are you chewing on something?"

"Sorry." Her voice is farther away now, accompanied by the sounds of items being shuffled. "I had some carrot sticks left over from earlier."

Carrot sticks. Not exactly the stale bread and gruel one pictures when they're held prisoner. I'll have to ask more about her life in here later. My setup is sparse, but maybe her accommodations are different. "What do you know about the men who broke in? Do you ever see them here?"

“It’s hard to say.” Her voice is closer, like she’s settled into her spot just behind me. “They were wearing black clothing and masks, and everything happened so fast. But the one who grabbed me had red hair.”

“Let me guess—big guy, but a little smaller than the ogre in the hallway. Like if a Viking and a troll had a baby?”

“I didn’t get a good look at him at the time, but there’s a guy who comes through here that fits that description.”

“Fucking Dolph.” The bastard has been connected to this from the beginning. “Fuck, how do you keep track of the days? I’m already lost.”

“As cliche as it sounds, I mark them on the wall. I’m sure I’ve missed a few.”

“Mark them with what?” If I had a pen, I might be able to get creative and use the spring to get out of this cuff.

“Lipstick.”

“Why do you need lip—” I stop short. I’m getting sidetracked again. “Never mind. What happened after the Viking-troll took you?”

“I woke up here.”

“Well, that’s no help whatsoever.”

She releases an exhale, but it’s closer to a laugh than annoyance. “Just like you, I was drugged—everyone is when they get here. They don’t want to damage the *goods* if they can help it. Sounds like you got yourself banged up, though.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never felt better.” In a moment of shit timing, I stretch my legs out in front of me, causing the cuff to rub against the open wound on my ankle, which doesn’t feel great. It’s the involuntary flinch, twisting my ribcage, that steals my breath. My teeth grind. “Goddammit.”

She spares me the “I told you so.” In fact, she’s quiet for several minutes while I breathe through my nose as calmly as possible, head resting against the wall. My eyelids are so heavy, I stop fighting to keep them open.

“No one remembers much about my disappearance. It was so long ago now…”

My chin dips, hitting my chest, and when I jolt awake, my head starts throbbing all over again. I force my eyes open. There are so many things I need to be doing right now. I need to assess whether I can detect blind spots for the camera, examine the sink and toilet for parts I might covertly

dismantle and utilize. Come up with a concrete plan.

After spending my adult years as an insomniac, it's some kind of irony that my body decides to shut down here.

"It's like the world kept going," she murmurs, her voice fading as I drift away. "But for me…time stopped the minute I entered this room."

7

Blinding fluorescent lights stir me awake, as they always do. Today they mingle with the screams of a woman across the hallway.

"Don't touch me!" the voice shrieks. "Don't you *fucking* touch me!"

My heart stutters.

Remnants of a dream fall away as I jump to my feet and rush toward the oversized metal door, pressing my palms and forehead against it. Gray and cold. Sterile.

I curl my fingers, my nails grazing the surface.

"Please, please, let me go…*stop*! God, stop it!"

"The fuck?" Nick's voice cuts into the commotion, followed by a pounding fist. "Who is that?"

I swallow. "I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know," I repeat louder. "Stay quiet."

He does.

My eyelids squeeze shut as I press closer, wishing I could reach her. Nausea sweeps through me and settles in the pit of my stomach while I listen to her beg and plead for her life. I'm not sure who's in there with her, as I've only witnessed a handful of people breeze in and out of this room.

The Timekeeper. Roger. Nurses. The red-haired guy—Nick said his name was Dolph.

There was a doctor once, who loomed over me as I lay sprawled out and

drowsy-eyed on a frigid steel table, my feet in stirrups. Thin wisps of stark-white hair decorated the sides of his head in sparse patches, leaving him bald on top, and his ears jutted from his head like sails catching wind on a weathered ship. He was cold and rat-like, but in that moment, *I* felt like the rat. A science experiment. Nothing but a vulnerable creature at the mercy of his clinical gaze, stripped of dignity.

My ear remains glued to the door. The mysterious woman's screams fade into heartbreaking whimpers as a deep, unfamiliar voice resonates through me. "She's perfect."

"Fantastic." The Timekeeper. "I thought she would be, knowing your type."

The other man lets out a gritty chuckle. "How soon can we do this?"

"I'll have her ready in ten minutes. We'll take care of the final payment first."

Lightning strikes my heart as horror rains down.

Ten minutes.

Why do I get years, and this woman only gets ten minutes?

I'm wondering how long Nick has left when I'm ambushed by a cacophony of terror and noise.

The woman's panicked screeching. Faraway pounding and anguished shouts, coming from other cells. My wild heartbeats suffocating me.

"Oh, God, please! No, please, no!"

Footsteps. Murmuring. Sick laughter.

"What the fuck! *What the fu —*"

Her voice clips off, followed by a loud *thump*.

I imagine her body hitting the ground.

Pulling away from the door, I drag both hands through my overgrown hair as my nails catch between the tangled strands. The pounding and racket taper off as an eerie silence replaces the horror-movie soundtrack.

Nick remains quiet, which surprises me.

I'm used to screaming, wall-mauling, and baseless threats—especially from the male captives. The men never last long. And the louder they are, the shorter their time is. Given Nick's aloof disposition and penchant for ill-timed sarcasm, part of me wonders if he's been through worse than this.

Impossible.

I step closer to the dividing wall between us, my nose an inch away. "You

listened to me," I say to him. "You were quiet."

A long pause. "What the fuck is yelling going to do?"

"I don't know. What did it do yesterday?"

He doesn't respond, and I wonder if he's smirking or scowling.

"Ever tried busting through this thing?" he finally asks.

"Of course. We all have." I tap a fingernail against the white panel and rub my chapped lips together. "Don't bother; you'll only end up hurting yourself. It's reinforced with something."

"Figures."

"How did you sleep?"

Nick's chain rattles briefly, and I picture him sitting on his mattress, trying to get comfortable in the most comfortless place on earth.

"Like shit. You talk in your sleep."

I blink at the wall, my brows gathering into a frown. "I do not."

"Mm."

"I don't." Traipsing over to my cot, I drop to my knees and inch forward. Then I clear my throat, adding, "What did I say?"

"Since it had nothing to do with how to break out of here, I didn't care enough to take notes. Why don't you have a chain?"

He's as observant as he is unpleasant. "A perk of having been here for two years."

"And you haven't tried to escape? Why? You must have a semblance of a brain, since you've survived this long. Is the food here that good?"

Blowing sections of chaotic hair out of my face, I turn and press my back to the wall. "I haven't had an opportunity."

"Did they remove your legs?"

"I'm compliant. That's why I'm still alive."

"Inactivity has never won a war."

I tug the gown over my knees and drop my head against the wall. "I tried, in the beginning. But I'm five-foot-two and one-hundred-fifteen pounds. Probably less now. Fighting only got me chained and starved, so I've had no choice but to play the long game, using my mind as a tool instead of force. I don't stand a chance against these men."

I realize compliance will only take me so far, but it's kept me breathing, and breathing is the only power I have left in this heartless hell. If I'm breathing, there's a sliver of hope that I'll see the other side of these walls

one day.

If only Jasper was waiting for me.

God, I can't think about that.

About him.

Early on, I demanded the truth from The Timekeeper. I clawed at him, hurled myself at the wall, screamed threats, spat curses, sobbed until my voice gave out. I was relentless in my pain. All it earned me was a chain around my ankle and no answers.

I couldn't trust him anyway.

So, I clung to hope—hope that Jasper was still alive, still looking for me.

Then there was Mary: a pediatric nurse, huddled on the other side of our shared wall. By then, I'd been here a couple of months, begging and pleading for any scrap of news from the other victims. But they'd all shut down, men and women alike, retreating into their silence. I couldn't blame them for not caring about a stranger's disappearance when they were now trapped in the same nightmare. Some weren't even from around here, snatched up from states away, oblivious to my case.

But Mary knew things.

And her words still haunt me, echoing like a grim dirge.

"Jasper Cross, right? He was your husband?" she asked, her voice low and careful, as though the truth might break me. "You're that model who went missing?"

Was.

The word detonated in my chest. "Yes, yes… Is he okay? Was he on the news?" I flung myself at the barrier, fists pounding, tears blurring the edges of my vision. "Did he survive?"

Her silence stretched, suffocating, until it collapsed under the weight of my desperation. When she spoke again, her words carved my greatest fear into stone. "Well, he was on the news, but…he didn't make it. He was found dead at the scene. I'm so sorry."

The ground beneath me crumbled. My world didn't just go up in flames—it disintegrated, leaving nothing but ashes of a life I could never reclaim.

That's when I truly became compliant. Submissive, agreeable, and unassertive.

But time has breached the bubble of despair, and I know I still have plenty of things to hold on to—Allison, my mother, friends, loved ones, and

an endless stretch of opportunities, waiting to be recovered and woven into a bright future.

“If I see a viable way out, I’ll take it,” I finally say, knocking my knees together. “I have one chance to make it count. It needs to be the right time.”

Nick grumbles. “The right time would be now, since yesterday is over. And the day before. And —”

“Who’s Sara?”

Silence answers me. Nick enjoys asking questions as much as he enjoys dodging them. I wonder about his life outside of here. What was his job? Did he have close friends, family, dreams? Everybody has something to lose, things they’re leaving behind.

And that’s what makes this so tragic.

I’m debating my next words when the keypad on my door tings to life. My eyes widen, and I melt into the wall behind me, my lips grazing it as I twist my head to the side. “Keep quiet.” It’s a whisper, but harsh enough to travel over to him. “I’ll handle this.”

Roger trudges through the entryway with a plate of breakfast, wearing his usual attire: inky-dark compression shirt, slacks, belt, heavy boots. Eyes blacker than a moonless night.

I jump to my feet and twirl a lock of hair around my finger, rearranging my face until it reflects what I hope is spine-tingling joy upon seeing him. “Good morning, Roger.”

He grunts at me.

My greeting is cheerful as I straighten my spine, puff my chest, and clasp my hands in front of me. His gaze trails over my willowy curves in a slow pull, lingering on the dusky areolas evident through the thin material of my gown. The overhead lights reflect off his bald head, and he smells like he always does—tobacco and bleach.

“Sounds like it was an interesting morning,” I continue, harnessing an agreeable smile.

A grin flickers on his mouth, his gaze finally sliding up to my face. He hardly ever speaks, but I’m certain he has a soft spot for me. He brings me things: trinkets, treasures, treats. I plan to use that to my advantage one day.

But only when the time is right.

Roger closes the door behind him, and my shoulders slacken. I’m waiting for the day he leaves it open long enough for me to duck underneath his

meaty arm and bolt.

Bending over, he deposits the meal near my mattress. It consists of a yellow lump of scrambled eggs and seasonal fruit. Neatly peeled apple slices and pineapple chunks.

It's autumn.

Somewhere out there, leaves are turning red and golden, while I'm trapped inside this monochrome bubble.

"Thank you. That looks delicious." I send him another smile, one that borders on flirtatiousness. Two weeks ago, he snuck a chocolate bar into my room. It wasn't freedom, but it sure tasted like it. "Will Nick be eating, as well?"

He doesn't respond, but I didn't expect him to.

His beady eyes glimmer with equal parts pity and lust as he stares at me. Reaching into the front pocket of his pants, he pulls out a little friendship bracelet braided with turquoise and lavender yarn. Three beads roll between his thick fingers and thumb, and I glance at the letters, assuming they're someone's initials.

My stomach sinks, but I refuse to show it.

I have a trove of souvenirs stashed away in the corner of my room. Multicolored jewelry, barrettes, and even a sparkly blue guitar pick. They come from the victims.

Sick, morbid gifts.

With a final lecherous leer at my breasts, Roger tosses me the bracelet and turns around, lumbering toward the door and swiping a keycard through the reader.

Beep.

A plastic card is used for leaving, while a four-digit PIN allows entry.

Four numbers. I've tried to memorize them.

3, 2, 4…8.

The last number still eludes me. It hasn't done me any good yet on this side of the door—but that doesn't mean it never will. All I have is time to observe and take notes.

The moment the door seals me inside, I rush over to the wall separating me from Nick. My palms plant against it, fingers splaying, while I press a curious ear to the surface.

I wait, my pulse galloping as I drink in shallow breaths.

Then I hear it.

Nick's door opens.

Breakfast.

My eyes flare with a shot of elation, knowing that Nick will be kept around for a little while. It shouldn't matter to me, considering he's been rude, callous, and cruel…but he's someone. A human being, just like me, and I wouldn't wish his future fate on my worst enemy.

The sound of a plastic plate clinking against tile is music to my ears. No words pass between the two men, just a shuffle of feet and rustling noises.

And the moment the door closes, I hear the plate clang against the wall. Of course, they wouldn't have given him something breakable that could be used as a weapon.

I wince. "You should eat."

"Oddly, not hungry."

"It's a good sign. It means they're keeping you around."

"Yay."

Sighing, I drop my forehead to the wall. "Some of the others aren't fed, which means their time is limited to hours. Days, if they're lucky."

"Lucky," he parrots, the word sluiced in kerosine. "Is that what you think I am?"

"You're luckier than that woman across the hall this morning."

"Did you know her? Who was she?"

"I don't know anyone in here. Just you, and the others who were in that room before you."

Nick's chain drags across the floor like a rusty anchor, each link heavy with the weight of a daunting, unknown future. I imagine him picking remnants of soggy eggs off the white tiles.

"Does that guy touch you?"

I shake my head, even though he can't see it. "No."

"He hasn't raped you?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

"You ask a lot of questions." I plop down on my cot and reach for the plate, sucking a pineapple chunk into my mouth. "Are you a lawyer?"

He scoffs. "No, I have a soul."

"Good. I was questioning that."

“You wouldn’t be the first one.”

I can’t help a tiny smirk from unfolding. Genuine and voluntary; such a rare, rare thing. Chewing the fruit, I lean back against the wall and cross my legs at the ankles. “I’ve never been assaulted sexually,” I say. “Like I said, I’m a product. My purpose goes beyond that. If I got pregnant, I’d become useless to their buyer, and then these vultures wouldn’t get paid. It’s a business.”

He makes a humming sound, like he’s processing my answer. “You were flirting with the ogre.”

“He’s a potential way out of here. The Timekeeper has no conscience, no heartstrings to tug on. Roger has shown weakness, so I use that to my advantage whenever I can. He likes me.”

“The Timekeeper.” Nick tests the name on his tongue, releasing a single syllable of derisive laughter. “Sounds like the name of a self-important super villain from an omniverse far, far away. Please tell me he doesn’t call himself that.”

“No. I don’t know his real name. When I first got here, he told me he was my keeper, so that’s how I came up with it. He’s in charge of our fate; how much time we have left in this world.” The pineapple turns sour on my tongue, tasting like gasoline as it slogs down my throat. “He has these… hourglasses.”

“What, that toy on his belt?”

“He has more than one. He’ll place an hourglass in the room when his victims’ time is almost up, like a countdown to their death. It’s sick.”

Hot pressure burns behind my eyes.

My mind swims with haunting memories. Screams and throat-scraping pleas. A woman named Kara took it the hardest and tried to strangle herself with her ankle chain before the grains of sand filled the bottom of the glass. She must have been caught on camera, because only moments passed before the door barreled open and she was taken, fighting and shrieking until my own lungs nearly shriveled under the weight of her fear.

A shiver rolls through me, and I push the plate of food aside, my appetite gone.

Nick’s tone softens, marginally. “What do you have over there, Beverly? My room is pretty empty.”

I ignore the deliberate name mix-up and reach for the bracelet discarded

on my mattress, skimming the pad of my thumb over carefully knitted sections of yarn.

Someone took the time to make this. It was precious to them.

Now it will be precious to me.

"A mattress, pillow, blanket," I say, my voice a low murmur, hardly loud enough to pass through the wall. "A toilet. Sink. There's a cupboard stocked with a few gowns and pantry staples. Two towels. I have books, too. Those bodice-ripper historical novels from the eighties and nineties."

"Riveting."

"I love reading. I love stories, in general. It passes the time." My focus pans over to the corner of the room, where a stack of worn novels sit in a lopsided stack. "Do you read?"

"Yeah. People."

Again, I wonder what his line of work is.

Psychologist?

No, he has no bedside manner. "What do you do for a living?"

"Whatever gets me by."

"That's broad. And kind of shady." I purse my lips together. "Are we talking…criminal stuff?"

"No, and I'm offended."

He's not.

"Actually," Nick continues, drawing out the word. "I'm a superhero, here to fight the nefarious Timekeeper and save the day."

A sigh leaves me, and I can't decide if I'm more annoyed or amused. "Sounds like you like stories, too."

"Nah. You can be the storyteller; I'll be the trapped audience."

I glare at the wall in front of me.

"*Rapt* audience," he corrects. "That's what I meant. Please, continue."

"Okay. Fine." Leaning back, I tip my chin and stare up at the ceiling until my eyes draw shut. I take his request at face value, still dusting my thumb over the friendship bracelet. "I have a bracelet in my hand. Purple and teal. Three letter beads are woven into the center: D, M, A."

Nick doesn't say anything, and I assume he's confused. Processing my random details, wondering why I'd be holding on to a bracelet.

I keep going, voicing the stories that have always been confined inside my head. Giving them life, making them real. These people were real once.

They deserve a second chance, even if it's through a make-believe fairy tale. "Desiree Marie Anderson. That's what the initials stand for. Her little sister made it for her. Jessie. They were best friends, and I know that someday Jessie will get this bracelet back, knowing her sister still wore it. Even in her final moments." I clutch the bracelet in a clammy palm, piecing a narrative together. "Desiree was a veterinarian. She loved animals. Her heart was strong and empathetic, and the old dogs always made her cry."

"What the hell are you rambling about?"

"Roger brought this to me this morning. He brings me things."

"What does he bring you?"

"Lots of stuff. I have a pile of personal belongings in the corner of my room." I glance at the miscellaneous items, an assortment of gems and bright colors. "He takes them from the victims and gives them to me…after."

A chain jangles behind me. "After they're dead, you mean."

"Yeah," I admit softly. "It seems that way." The silence sinks in a moment before it becomes too heavy. Stories are the best way to keep my mind busy, so I continue where I left off. "I'm thinking the bracelet came from Desiree earlier. The girl who was screaming. She was beautiful. Long, dark hair and big cartoon-princess eyes. She looked like Jasmine from *Aladdin*."

"So, what you're telling me is, you've gone insane."

I huff out a breathy laugh. "You would think I'd have lost my mind by now, right? Sadly, it's still fully intact. Sometimes I wish it wasn't."

"What else do you have?"

"Hair ties. Barrettes. Makeup. Rings and necklaces. There's a little polaroid of a beagle sitting in front of an apple tree. It looks like an old picture." My gaze settles on another item, different from the rest. "That's not my favorite thing, though."

"You have a favorite dead-person keepsake?"

I smile softly, already writing a new story. "Yes."

"What is it?" His tone is cautious.

Music shimmers to life inside my haunted mind. Chords, notes, half-forgotten melodies. I miss so many things in life, but music is at the top of that list. It's weird to think that every day music is being created, even though I'm not there to hear it.

Sometimes I wonder who I'd be right now if I had new songs to carry

with me.

I stare at the sparkling memento, a vibrant cerulean blue.

Shaped like a teardrop.

“A guitar pick.”

8

A guitar pick.

Fuck.

The room closes in. My chest caves with every excruciating breath; I crack with every heartbeat. Meanwhile, Everly is over there chattering away, as though she didn't shatter my entire fucking world with a triangular piece of plastic.

Dead people's things.

My stomach twists, doubling me over where I sit. It's a volatile edge I'm teetering on, and this time I have none of the usual outlets available to temper it. There's nowhere to unleash this churning sea of violence. No obsessions to lose myself in, or substances to binge and regret tomorrow.

No way to dull reality.

With every shift of my leg, the chain scrapes over tile, a reminder that I'm literally welded to the floor. I let my head *thump* against the wall. It doesn't make me feel better, so I do it again.

And again.

I'm trapped. Imprisoned with my ghosts. My demons.

Myself.

"I know it sounds silly," she says with a hint of self-deprecating amusement, "but this little pick has anchored me more than once, when I was sure I was losing my mind. Sometimes I imagine entire concerts pouring out of it. Like it has a life of its —"

“How do you know they’re dead?” The words wrench from my throat, burning like poison.

“What?”

“How do you know? *You’re* still alive. That woman across the way could have been knocked unconscious. We didn’t hear a gunshot. Maybe they’re just transporting their captives somewhere else. Maybe—” I cut myself off, sickened by the sound of my own desperation. This isn’t me. I’m pragmatic. Realistic. And yet…I just want her to tell me she might be wrong. That *I* might be wrong.

“I’m not really sure what you want me to say.” There’s a fragility in her voice, like she’s back on eggshells. “I thought you wanted honesty.”

“I do.” Usually.

“Well…I held out hope for a long time. Surely, if I’m alive, there could be others like me, right? It makes sense. But then little things added up, and…”

“And what?”

She hesitates for too long. “I guess I can’t be sure.”

But she sounds like she’s sure. And that goddamn treasure trove of trinkets says it all, doesn’t it? Just like the feeling in my gut.

She doesn’t say anything else for a long time.

I close my eyes.

In the dead space, the haunted air seeps into my pores. Maybe I really *did* die under that bridge, with Dolph and his goons kicking my limp body into the muddy ground. This cell feels like limbo. Purgatory. The Devil’s waiting room.

I’m no ghost-whisperer, but my life’s work has been based on talking to the deceased—following their footsteps, studying victimology, analyzing their final moments. I’ve just never been *one* of them before.

Feels a lot like drowning.

“Nick?”

The sound of my name—Nick’s name—pulls me to the surface.

“Do you like music?” she asks.

“No.”

“Come on. Tell me one song that makes you feel everything.”

I swallow. It tastes like sour memories and fleeting happiness. Like hopelessness and regret. “I told you,” I mumble. “There’s nothing.”

I haven’t felt anything in a long, long time.

There’s nothing but a deep, black hole where my heart should be. A dull roar in my ears. It suits me. That’s how my life started, and that’s how it’ll end. But just for a little while, there *was* music…

I didn’t hate it back then.

A melody plinks note by note in a far-off memory that feels like a dream. Strings plucked. An acoustic guitar, played with skilled fingers, strummed with a blue guitar pick. That’s the one she would have been using that night. The only one she used since the day I gave it to her.

It’s just an inanimate object. Not much different than any of Everly’s other mementos of the dead: a tube of lip balm, a rubber band, a wad of string braided into a bracelet.

But this one has the power to shake me to my core.

As Everly continues, I imagine a solo female voice joining the phantom chords, like a haunting accompaniment. “Sometimes it’s hard to put your finger on what makes a song special,” she says. “Could be the harmonies, the cadence, or a lyric that reaches in and expresses something you’ve never been able to put into words. But sometimes there’s one that manages to capture that whole package; a song—that reaches into your soul and says *I get you*.”

My lungs slowly deflate. The way she talks about music sounds a lot like Sara.

“Mine is ‘The Scientist,’” she adds.

“The what?”

“‘The Scientist’ by Coldplay. You’d know it if you heard it.”

I know it.

“It’s been my favorite song since middle school,” she explains. “It was Annie’s favorite song, too.”

“Annie?” My voice cracks.

Who the fuck is Annie?

“The girl who carried the pick.”

That wasn’t her name.

As she continues, there’s a dreamy quality to her words that doesn’t belong in this hellhole. “Annie played the guitar. Music was her passion, her love language.”

I suppose her fairy tales are preferable to our reality. I can almost believe it could have belonged to a girl named Annie.

Except…

As her story goes on, I get an image of brown pigtails and crystal-colored eyes, always sparkling with life, understanding more than was natural for her age. Especially when it came to music.

“I think she wrote her own songs. She was a skilled lyricist. Some people have the power to make you come alive with just words, but that wasn’t good enough for her. She needed melodies and harmonies. Annie sang symphonies for the soul. Everyone stopped what they were doing the moment her favorite guitar pick glided across strings. Heads turned, conversations melted away. She sang like an angel.”

That, she did.

“She always played the best songs…the ones that give you that achy chest feeling. You know what I mean?” Her voice is full of warm, fuzzy memories and hopes for a bright future—a future some girls with angelic voices and stars in their eyes will never see.

Because they’re gone now.

“Yeah.” For the first time, I notice the way my hand rests absently over my heart, fingers twisted in the tattered material of my T-shirt. “I know what you mean.” The words come from somewhere dark and hollow.

Everly makes a sound like she understands.

She doesn’t.

9

A vision pops into my head of Allison and me, waiting in line for a ride at an amusement park when we were sixteen. The soles of our shoes were sticky with spilled slushies and gum that had melted on the pavement from the hot sun, and my baseball cap was doing little to protect my pale skin from the angry sunburn I'd inevitably be tending to on my nose and cheekbones.

At our most miserable—when the line seemed never-ending, the funnel cake was making our bellies churn, and the heat was doubling as a crematory—I heard it.

My favorite song trickling out of the earbuds attached to the man in front of us.

I was bold, tapping him on the shoulder and asking him to turn the volume up. Allison swatted my arm, her pearly cheeks pink with embarrassment as she hid behind her hands.

"You like this song?" the man inquired, his eyes twinkling through narrow spectacles. His receding hairline and age spots told me he was at least three decades my senior.

"It's the best song ever. I don't even know why."

I honestly didn't know why at the time. While other teenagers my age were listening to Taylor Swift, I was slow dancing in my bedroom to Coldplay with a confused tarantula as my audience.

"You got it, kid." He pulled the cord from his phone and cranked the

volume as loud as it would go until the theme park chatter was drowned out.

My heart swelled. I pulled Allison into a clumsy hug, moving our bodies back and forth while we stepped on each other's feet and I sang through a big smile, "Tell me you *looove* me!"

"I completely hate you." She laughed instead, her arms circling me tighter to counteract her claim.

As we lazily danced to "The Scientist" in line to ride the Dare Devil Dive, three hours away from home on the hottest day I can remember, dozens of other people in line danced right along with us. People sang the lyrics, mostly off-key, as a little girl bounced on her father's shoulders, her chin propped atop his head, and couples twirled and swayed to my favorite melody.

I feel like the simplest moments in life are the ones we take for granted. We don't appreciate the power in them until they are nothing but soulful memories.

And maybe that's exactly where their power lies.

I careen back into the present moment. "Sometimes you don't just hear a song…you feel it," I carry on, swiping a fallen tear from my cheek, missing so much right now. My heart feels heavy, my soul itching to be relit. "Songs that make you physically feel something become more than words and measures, more than notes. They become a part of you. Engrained. That's 'The Scientist' for me. And I think…Annie and I were a lot alike."

Out of all the people who have come and gone on the other side of the wall, it's Nick who gets me purging this emotional release. Closed-off, stone-cold Nick.

The irony.

Heaving in a shaky breath, I close my eyes.

I wonder what he's thinking. If he agrees.

I wonder if his chest feels achy.

An hour ago, I'd say no. Never. But I sense a shift in him now.

Before I can press him further, I hear the keypad on my door chime to life. My pulse jumps. I scramble off the cot, knocking over my barely touched breakfast.

Anxiety ripples through me.

I don't get many visitors, aside from Roger at mealtime. The last time I had a string of strangers enter my room was when my procedure was beginning.

Oh, God…it's happening again.

A stocky woman stalks through the threshold, quickly closing the door behind her and sealing us in. Her hair is cropped short, her eyes like shards of ice, chilling me to the bone.

She pulls a needle out of her front pocket, and I inch away.

There is no expression on her face—no smirk, no glint of excitement. There is no softness, either. She's blank. A shell of a human.

Watching her move toward me, I curl my fists at my sides, knowing I have nowhere to run. There's no place to hide, no point in resisting.

A firm hand snakes around my upper arm, and she lifts my nightgown with the other. My underwear hardly clings to my hips, my waistline shrinking with every month that rolls by.

When I squeeze my eyes shut, I feel the needle slide into my belly like butter. I lurch backward, my instincts causing me to struggle in her bruising grip. I hate needles. Ever since I witnessed my dog being put to sleep when I was in junior high, the sight of them is frost to my veins.

"Hold still." The woman's words are muffled by the plastic cap between her teeth. Her voice is void of sympathy. She doesn't care about me. "Stop squirming."

My limbs quiver, but I obey.

For a moment I wonder if I can overpower her. She's broad and burly, but smaller than Roger.

My eyes flick to the holster around her waist.

Dammit.

It's pointless; I'd hardly get a decent punch in before she whipped out the pistol and shot me dead.

I glance at the wall beside me, wondering what Nick is doing as the needle glides back out. He's silent, and I'm grateful for that. During the first few months of my captivity, there was a different man on the other side of the wall. Mitchell. I'd been terrified, screaming and kicking while a towering giant with peanut butter on his breath jabbed a needle into my abdomen.

Mitchell shouted. Cursed. Smacked his chain against the wall so hard, I thought he might break through it. He couldn't, of course. Our kidnappers are too smart to build walls made of simple plaster and drywall.

All it got him was a beating from Roger, then an hourglass the next morning.

I'm not sure if Nick is smarter, wiser, or if he's just utterly indifferent to my circumstances. Either way, I'm glad he's quiet.

Hardened and stone-faced, the woman pulls back and caps the needle, not sparing me a single glance. She swivels around and storms out of the room, swiping her keycard and leaving me with a droplet of blood on my stomach and my gown caught in the hem of my underwear.

I exhale a rattled breath and straighten out my clothing. Tears prick behind my eyes at the realization that they'll be stealing more of my eggs.

Nobody in this place has confirmed it. The Timekeeper speaks in riddles and rhymes, and Roger is practically mute. But the memory of my feet in metal stirrups is never far from my mind, paired with that rodent-like doctor who hovered over me as can lights from above illuminated my shivering body. He spread my legs. Removed my underwear. Yanked my gown up to my waist until I was fully exposed and humiliated. A steel tray beside me was littered with what looked like torture devices: speculums, probes, more needles.

And then…

Nothing.

I woke up in my cell, my belly cramped, and my inner thighs caked in dried blood.

Then the pediatric nurse, Mary, took up residence in the room beside me. I gave her the details surrounding my procedure.

Egg retrieval.

The injections were filled with medication, causing multiple eggs to grow and mature, followed by a dose of hCG. Then my follicles were stolen from my womb by a needle and a suction device.

It's sick and twisted.

Someone out there has *paid* for this.

Turning, I face the wall, waiting for Nick's inevitable ambush of questions.

They never come.

I step forward and press both palms to the white divider, dropping the tip of my nose against the cool surface. My eyes close. "Nick?"

Nothing.

I slide down the wall until my knees hit the cot, biting my tongue to keep the cry in my throat. "Nick." His name falls out cracked and broken, and I

hate myself for showing weakness. I need to stay strong. Be brave. *I need to be a fighter*. "Say something…"

Seconds trickle by like grains of sand, slipping through an hourglass.

Thirty-seven seconds.

"Who was that?"

I blink my lids back open, my lashes damp. He doesn't sound like himself. The question is strained, too soft, like he's hardly keeping himself together. Empathy pokes holes through my pain. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

He's not fine. I'm not sure why, but I can only assume it has something to do with our conversation from earlier.

The guitar pick. Music.

Annie.

Nick misses somebody.

"It's your turn to tell me a story," I murmur, my lips grazing the wall as I speak.

A beat passes. "I'm the trapped audience, remember? You're the storyteller."

"I think I'm all out of stories right now. Unless you want me to start reading out loud from one of the books I have over here."

"The eighties bodice rippers?"

I stretch a small smile. "Yeah."

"Once upon a time…" Familiar sarcasm laces his tone, but the words trail off quickly. A quiet hum fills the space between us. "So, the owner of this guitar pick…let's say she got her first instrument as a little girl. It was just a toy, impossible to tune. She was so proud that she could make her own music. It never left her sight…tortured her family relentlessly with it."

I imagine Annie as a young girl, around eight or nine years old. Coffee-brown pigtails and hazel-spun eyes. I picture her with thick bangs, dimples, and a charming gap between her two top teeth as she toted around a toy guitar, the strap hanging off a lanky shoulder. My smile grows tenfold as I settle against the wall and brush my thumb along the smooth pick.

"It got to the point where she'd sit at the dinner table and punctuate everyone's sentences with musical interludes. Like a dissonant chord for suspense, or a minor chord during something sad. And different notes for question marks and exclamation points."

“I love that.”

“No, it was completely obnoxious.”

His tone betrays him, and my lips twitch with endearment.

“Soon, she collected other instruments. Some from thrift stores, others hand-me-downs from nice neighbors and whatnot. Her family didn’t have much money, just enough to get by, so they were never great, but she made it work.”

“Resourceful. I like her.”

“She went through this phase with a cheap synthesizer that had all these terrible electronic effects that were meant to sound like an orchestra or a choir. Blasted that thing at top volume in the backyard ‘cause it was banned in the house while she taught herself to play.” A chuckle slips out, organic and pure. “The neighborhood dogs had their own opinions on that. She called them her *background singers*.”

I laugh. The sound startles me for a beat and sends a shot of warmth to my chest. Wrapping my palm around the pick, I place a closed hand to my heart and sink into the wall.

“But her dream was to own something she could make real music on, so she saved up every penny she’d get from holidays and allowances. She refused to blow a single cent of it on bullshit stuff like candy. Real disciplined for a kid, you know?”

“Impressive,” I say softly, lost to the story, his words, everything.

“Eventually, she was able to buy herself a nice guitar. One she could tune that came from an actual music store. It was her prized possession. She played every waking moment until she figured out how to play all the songs she loved.”

My eyelids flutter open in time with a shaky exhale. “Was she a songwriter?”

“Sometimes she wrote her own music,” he tells me, his voice a fusion of controlled emotion. “Her real appreciation was for cover songs she could put her unique twist on.”

“Those are the best.”

“That’s when she started singing. Until something happened and she put it all away for a while.”

I press my cheek against the wall, as if I can get closer to him somehow. “What happened?”

“Some asshole told her she sang off-key and was embarrassing herself.” Nick sounds closer, too. Almost like we’re back-to-back, mimicking the same position, only inches apart. “He had his own issues—no excuse, though. He was just being a jerk and took it out on her. She was actually really good.”

“She doesn’t stop, right? Making music?” The story can’t end here; I’m too invested, too captivated by the girl and her notes and strings to let her tale slip away unfinished.

One of us needs a happy ending.

“Yeah,” he says. “Once the jerk was out of her life, she decided to play for herself, because she loved it, and it didn’t matter whether she was good or not. When she got older, she had a part-time job at a coffee shop and worked up the nerve to sing her favorite song on an open-mic night. Everyone loved it, of course, because she was amazing. And she never stopped.”

I wait for more. My bare toes tap together, my legs stretched out over the edge of the cot.

“Here’s the special thing about this girl: she had this incredible capacity for forgiveness, and she was able to spread that gift to everyone with her music. It was healing. It was magic.”

Swallowing, I blink the mist from my eyes. “The world needs more people like that.”

He hums thoughtfully, his mind far away from here. “She grew up, kept playing, kept shining light in the dark places with this angelic voice she had. And because she had the uncanny ability to see the truth, she realized that some people only hurt others because of their own pain. So, she sought out the asshole who tried to take her music away all those years before…and she forgave him.”

My smile is glowing, entranced, and I’d give anything for him to see it.

“It was a miracle…but when she played her favorite song, something in him broke a little.”

“What song was it?” My voice is breathy and fraught, a pitch above a whisper.

“Her own rendition of ‘Wild Horses.’ Sang the hell out of that thing. Just her voice and her guitar. I swear, it would give you chills.” His control dangles by a thin thread, overpowered by raw emotion. “Damn song. Got to him every fucking time.”

“All because of that toy guitar.”

“Yeah…that blue sparkly plastic guitar.” He hums, thoughtfully. “God knows why she even bothered with the guy, but it’s a good thing she did, because he was a miserable fucking nightmare. After she came around, though, things were better. For a while, at least.”

I don’t notice the tears slipping down my cheeks, not at first, not until they dangle from my jaw like delicate pearls. One drips onto my gown, leaving a salty stain behind. I unfold my palm, staring down at the glittery pick, awareness carving new holes in my heart.

Blue and sparkly.

Inhaling sharply, I swipe at my face, breathless. “Then what happened?”

“She vanished, taking all the music in the world with her. The end.”

The end.

It can’t end there.

God…it *can’t.*

But everything inside me shrivels with realization, with understanding, with soul-numbing pain.

And I know that it does.

“What was her name?”

“Could be anything. Make one up.” The usual bite to his voice is gone, leaving something brittle.

“Was it Sara?” The words unfurl so softly, I’m not sure he hears me. Especially after a handful of heartbeats go by.

Five.

“There are lots of Saras in the world, Beverly without the B.”

I close my eyes as the tears fall, and I imagine Sara on the other side of this wall. Sara, with the sweet, angelic voice. Sara with a heart so vivid and pure, alive with songful beats. She was as close as I’d come to hearing music in a long time.

Nick goes quiet.

I feel his pain as deeply as I feel my own, even with this barrier between us. It’s tangible. Heartbreaking.

And I’m not sure if my next words will only make it worse, or if they will offer a glimmer of solace through the darkness that closes us in.

I clutch the precious pick inside my hand and whisper softly, “She sang for me, too.”

10

"What did you want to be when you grew up, Nick?"

It's just one of a thousand subjects Everly has been curious about since I woke up chained in this room a couple of weeks ago. Telling her that thinly veiled story about Sara was strangely cathartic, and after that, I began tolerating her conversations more often.

Now, this stolen woman trapped in a cell the size of a goldfish bowl knows me better than almost anyone alive.

It's been a difficult adjustment, going from being an intensely private, constantly busy man, to this. Who'd have thought I'd have lasted this long? Not me.

I still have no fucking clue why they're keeping me.

In preparation for my eventual escape, my days are spent exercising as much as my slowly healing body will allow, while absorbing all the information I can from the girl next door. Never spoken so many words in my damn life. Can't say I'm great at it, but I'm learning to play nice. *Mostly*. It's easy enough; a few words here and there from me equals another hour from her. She just doesn't realize mine consist of vague truths and artful dodging, carefully crafted to protect my identity and keep anyone from getting too close.

Building walls is what I do best, after all. Ironic that when I finally begin to reveal bits of myself, it's from behind one.

And yet, she still doesn't know my name.

As for the question about my childhood aspirations, I take the excuse to pause a painfully slow set of push-ups, resting my knees on the floor while I give her a winded answer. “I don’t know…I guess I figured I’d either save the world or destroy it. Typical kid stuff.” Truthfully, the only thing I ever wanted to be was a detective. Sherlock Holmes was my hero. Also, Batman. “How about you? Did you always want to take pretty pictures for strangers to jerk off to?”

“You make it sound like porn.”

She laughs it off as a crude joke, but I remember that swimsuit ad from my research. Doesn’t take much for someone with a good imagination.

“Actually, my career was a complete accident,” she continues. “Right place, right time. It was flattering; I figured I’d take a few pictures, walk a runway or two, and earn some extra cash to help with college loans, but I guess big, frizzy hair is the ‘in’ thing. Shockingly, it took off.”

“A college girl, eh?” She’s still young, in her mid-twenties, I believe. I hadn’t really thought about her life outside of what I saw.

“Yeah, the excitement of modeling pulled me in, but growing up, I always thought of myself as a nerd. Science is my first love.”

“Beauty and brains. I approve.” I picture Everly with her big tits and floofy hair in a lab coat and hot-teacher glasses, and the feeling in my lower body reminds me I’m not that far removed from the teenage boy I once was.

Yeah.…nerdy girls do it for me.

I roll over, doing a few straining sit-ups. My words come out in small puffs of exertion as I question her further. “What kind of science? Astronomy? Medicine?” In my head, the lab coat turns into a sexy nurse’s uniform.

When’s the last time I got laid?

“Spiders.”

I stop mid sit-up. “I’m sorry, what?”

A light laugh; she knows she got me. “I’m not kidding. There’s always been something fascinating about entomology. That’s what I was studying.”

Sitting all the way up, I rest my arms on my knees. Everly Cross is getting more interesting by the minute. “Okay, I did not see that one coming.”

“You should have seen people’s faces when I offered to show them my collection of pets. I had the cutest little jumping spider in an enclosure that

was straight out of *Little Miss Muffet*."

"I have to ask, what got you interested in *that*?"

"Originally? I don't know. Maybe I saw it as a challenge. Girls are expected to be afraid of bugs, and I just liked being different. Then I started learning more. Once you look past the surface and stop thinking of them as scary and off-putting, they're really fascinating."

"Well, that explains why you enjoy talking to me."

She barks out a genuine laugh, then pauses as though pondering this profound truth. "It all makes sense now."

While listening to her talk about the surprisingly interesting breeding habits of arachnids, I brace my palms on the floor, holding myself in a plank position. Between the bad ankle, sore shoulder, and ribs threatening to crack open and dump my chest cavity onto the floor, I collapse onto my face embarrassingly fast.

A physical therapist would be frowning at my rehabilitation technique, but I might have to snap an ogre's neck at any time, so how many options do I have?

Holding my side, I carefully roll until my back rests on the cold tile. My physical recovery is inching forward at a snail's pace. "This is *bullshit*," I groan. "At this rate, I'm never going to have the strength to break out of this place."

Water trickles on the other side of the wall, a sign that Everly is over there taking her twice-daily sponge bath, courtesy of the washcloth and bar of soap I haven't been given. Not that I can blame them. If I got anywhere near that ogre with a bar of soap, I'd shove it so far down his throat he'd be blowing bubbles out his ass every time he farted.

Of course, he'd likely die first.

"My noodle arms are allergic to planks," she says over the water. "You should give yourself some credit."

"Oh, come on, you used to pose in a bikini. Surely you had to exercise on occasion to keep your girlish figure."

Everly's modeling tales have been more interesting than I would have thought. As much as I like to bitch about the constant chitchat, I've been grateful she's content to pass the time spilling all the details of her life. Thanks to police files, I already know more than the average pedestrian. But in here I'm just Nick Ford, some guy off the street, and not Detective Isaac

Porter—*former* detective, that is. I'm constantly reminding myself not to mention anything she hasn't told me herself.

"I did a lot of yoga. But as far as cardio is concerned, I'd rather stay home and count the hairs on my tarantula's legs."

"Is that code for something?"

"I'll let you figure that out." I can practically hear her eyes roll. "Though I do have a tarantula… Or at least, I did two years ago. He was a baby when I got him."

"How long do pet tarantulas live?"

"It varies by the species, but some males can live up to ten years, or so. Females can live to thirty."

Thirty-year-old spiders—*damn*. "In that case, logic says you likely still have a tarantula."

"I appreciate that theory, thank you." Her voice warms with gratitude. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a few." The water turns on full stream.

I wonder if she's naked.

Would she have the guts to strip down with a camera pointed at her twenty-four-seven, or does a person eventually just lose their modesty and not care? On second thought, I can only imagine the problems it would create among these men with questionable morals if she were parading around, sans clothing.

Yeah. Definitely not naked.

Either way, I'm going to pretend she is, just to pass the time.

I let my eyes drift closed, my mind wandering for several minutes. The water turns off, replaced by a few rustling noises. "Everything all right?"

There's no answer.

Then, right on cue, a soft, moaning sound comes from the next room, and I nearly burst out laughing. I realize it's likely *not* what my male imagination is conjuring, but far be it from me to interrupt a welcome fantasy while trapped in a nightmare.

One at a time, I stretch my legs in front of me, ignoring the deep ache that comes with exercising newly healing muscles. If I were another guy—a nice, respectful one—I might worry I'll embarrass her. I'm not, though, and I wonder…

If I made her blush, how far would it go?

Would the tops of her breasts turn the color of —

Another moan reaches my ears. “Whatcha doing over there, B?”

“The downward dog.”

Wait, what?

My eyes narrow through a smirk. “Is *that* what the kids are calling it these days?”

There’s a pause, then the telltale creak as she settles onto her cot. “What?”

“I mean, I’ve heard it called a number of things…flicking the bean, petting the kitty, jilling off. But the *downward dog*, that’s —”

Thunk.

“—creative.” I barely manage not to laugh through the word. “Are you sure you’re doing it right?”

“Are you *kidding* me?” It’s the loudest I’ve heard her speak since we became reluctant neighbors.

“Careful, Roger might hear you and catch you with your pants down.”

Thunk. And then another. “It’s a yoga pose. I’m trying to avoid atrophy, not—” She huffs. “You are unbelievable.”

“Listen, I’m a man, and there’s a naked woman on the other side of the wall. And what are you throwing at me?”

“I’m not naked.” She’s clearly exasperated, while I’m clearly turning into a twelve-year-old boy.

Jesus.

“That was The Lustful Lumberjack.”

She’s throwing her lady porn at me. I can’t stop laughing. “I counted three *thunks*. What were the others?”

“Moonlight Caress and Twelve Knights of Passion. I hope you’re pleased with yourself. I might have damaged them, and they didn’t even hit your hard head.”

I feign an exaggerated gasp. “Not Twelve Knights of Passion!”

“Chadwick and Alessandra are my favorite, too.”

“You should make sure they’re all right. Life in the sixteenth century is difficult enough without being flung at the wall.”

I realize I’m facing the camera with a ridiculous grin on my face. Roger must be wondering what I’m discussing with his favorite girl. I debate sending him a wink and a lewd gesture, but stop myself.

“Let’s see…” Everly hums, rifling through pages, while I picture her

standing on the other side of the wall without pants on. “Oh, here we go…” With an audible breath that functions as a dramatic entrance, she launches herself into a character from another time, another place:

“‘Chadwick—’ Wetting her lips with the tip of her tongue, Alessandra’s gaze flicked to his mouth. Her insides clenched with need. ‘Have you ever been kissed?’”

Curious as to where this will go, I settle back and let the cadence of her voice pull me along.

“His Adam’s apple bobbed as his eyes fluttered closed. When he reopened them, his hand began gliding up her arm, past her shoulder, landing in her crown of chestnut curls. Tightening his fist in her hair, he pressed his forehead to hers and rasped out, ‘In my dreams, I’ve kissed you an infinite number of times.’”

“Please tell me this isn’t what women are looking for in a man,” I groan.

My storyteller shushes me.

“Choking on a small cry, Alessandra leaned forward and crushed her mouth to his, desperate to bring his dreams to life. She’d never acted so boldly before, but when it came to love, there was no place for cowardice. There was no room for holding back.”

“Don’t hold back, Alessandra.”

Everly clears her throat.

“Groaning with wild abandon, Chadwick parted his lips instantly, his tongue seeking and hungry. Urgent. Alessandra crawled her way into his lap, straddling him, her arms linking behind his neck as their mouths made beautiful love. She kissed him with passion, with tenderness, moving to clasp his cheeks between her palms and cherishing him like he wholly deserved. His arousal, hard like a steel pipe, teased the juncture between her thighs, causing her to moan with wanton need.”

“Did you really just compare his dick to a steel pipe?”

“Don’t interrupt. I’m making sure they’re okay.” Barely contained amusement dances through her reprimand. “And those were Alessandra’s words, not mine.”

“‘Alessandra,’ he hissed with lust, pulling back for a breath. ‘We’re being foolish. This will destroy us.’

She kissed his bottom lip once, then twice. ‘If I had to choose between this, or anything else in this world, I’d rather be a fool in love.’”

I interrupt the cheesy dialogue with several slow claps. “Look at that; they seem to be doing just fine. We should give them some privacy.”

Okay, so listening to her is kind of entertaining and I might not mind letting her go on longer—though I will not be admitting that. Just like I would never say that her laugh reminds me of the gentle tinkle of wind chimes on a breezy spring day.

My eyes close.

With my ear pressed against the wall, I barely process the series of beeps preceding a quiet click at my door. It opens, and before I have time to orient myself, the embodiment of Satan wrapped in purple satin, silvery hair, and pure, sadistic evil invades my space with a flourish.

All the air is sucked from the room.

Instantly, I switch to defensive mode, narrowing my gaze on the man keeping us prisoner.

“Well, you seem to be settling right in.” His voice leaves an oily film everywhere it touches. That one dark eye roves over me like a black hole, an unfeeling void, while its icy opposite holds secrets I don’t want to ponder long enough to process.

“I’m sorry.” My focus homes in, every muscle tensed and ready. “Visiting hours are over. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

There’s a flatness in the way he observes me. Different from the smug glee he showed during our first conversation. Like I’ve done something to annoy him.

Maybe he’s just not a morning person.

“Oh, come now, it’s barely breakfast.” The smile he gives me oozes promises of death as he fiddles with the ornate hourglass dangling from his belt.

I mirror his expression. “We’re closed.”

“I won’t stay long; I just came to bring you a little gift. Your new friend can explain its meaning.” He gestures at the wall flippantly, while reaching in the breast pocket of his suit jacket and pulling out —

Well, fuck.

Another small hourglass sits in his palm like a prize. It’s only a few inches tall, but I haven’t forgotten the conversation with Everly about the former residents of this room.

When their time is up, they receive an hourglass.

My heart kicks up with a surge of adrenaline. I've been passing the days with plans of a grand breakout, but sometimes I forget that my life is as fragile as any of the others.

I school my face into the picture of boredom; I'll be damned if I let him see me crack now. "That's cute."

"You *are* difficult to fluster, aren't you?" His mouth stretches in a grim smile. "Or maybe you're just well-trained."

My mind falters. *Well-trained?*

That smile turns sinister. "Alas, while I would love nothing more than to begin your countdown, your buyer has been delayed."

Exhaling with mock disappointment, I make a production of pondering his dilemma. "Well, I suppose you could count them as a no-show and just let me go. I won't tell anyone, of course. And I *definitely* won't come back and kill you with a blunt object. Or a sharp one." I hold up my foot, ignoring the pain as I wiggle it enough to rattle the chain against the floor. "Now, if you wouldn't mind unchaining me, I'll be on my way."

"You really are set on being a pain in my impeccably clothed derrière, aren't you?" His lips pull back to bare his teeth, and I'm not entirely sure whether he's smiling or preparing to bite my head off. "Quite frankly, I would prefer to call this a wash and dispose of you right now. I even went to the trouble of procuring an alternate selection of challengers for my client to choose from. But, as it turns out, they're rather enamored with your resume and won't accept substitutes."

"Well, don't I feel special."

"I'm sure you do." Holding the hourglass between two fingers, he admires it longingly. "Unfortunately, no matter how grating I find you, I've been offered a price far too tempting to refuse."

With his feet behind the invisible line that keeps him out of reach, he splays his hand like a magician performing a vanishing act. The hourglass plinks to the tile and rolls.

My muscles coil, preparing to spring, snatch, dismantle, and use it to my advantage.

But it's not close enough. Not quite.

His foot comes down with a stomp that shatters the hourglass beneath. I get the distinct feeling he's pictured doing the same to my head.

"Message received, cocksucker." My tone stays even. "I know what

you’re capable of.”

His shoulders stiffen. “Oh, but that’s the thing, my friend… You have no *idea*.” With the arrogance of a man who doesn’t appreciate being underestimated, he takes a step forward.

My body tenses.

“I know this, because if you did…” The sole of his shoe crunches splintered glass, his temper rising to a boiling point.

Come on…just a little closer.

His face twists. “You would have the sense to show —”

Crunch.

“—a little —”

Crunch.

“—RESPECT.”

The word explodes from him, echoing around the room. I half expect the fires of hell to rain down on me at any moment.

I poked the snake, but I may have awakened something much worse.

If he were any closer, I could yank him over that invisible line and snap his neck. But he knows. Every move is calculated, down to the centimeter.

“You see, my dear, helpless man.” The tone is part kindergarten teacher, part loose cannon. “*You* have no power here.”

I drop my eyes to the tile where shards of glass glint in the light, taunting me. Tiny, delicate looking slivers. The things I could do with just one…

Fingers laced, he slowly paces that intangible boundary. “I know you think you’re smarter, that you can sit there with your careless attitude and goad me until I make a mistake.”

Watch me, asshole.

He sneers. “But there’s a flaw in that plan.”

With raised eyebrows, I wait for him to enlighten me.

“I don’t make mistakes.”

“Impressive,” I reply coolly.

“See, I feel you fail to appreciate the scope of my capabilities.” With a swivel of his foot, he grinds the glass into powder under the soles of his overpriced shoes. “I could, for instance, steal a high-powered lawyer from his penthouse suite, simply because his rare blood type matches that of an aging billionaire who needs his organs.”

Thinking back through the missing persons cases, I realize exactly who

he’s referring to. My jaw clenches.

I knew it.

“Or I could acquire a particularly stunning would-be celebrity and use her to make beautiful babies for those willing to pay for the right genetics.”

There’s no sound from the other side of the wall—of course, there isn’t—but she’s there, listening.

“She should be grateful, you know.” He levels a cruel smirk at the wall, as though he’s looking straight at her. “I could have used her as a proper brood mare and sent men straight to her room.”

An unexpected protectiveness rises in me. “That’s enough.”

There’s an insidious twinkle in his glare, and I know I’m not going to like what’s coming.

“I could even take a pretty little musician off the sidewalk while she waits for a ride from a man who’s too obsessed with his work to show.”

The air empties from my lungs. “What did you say?”

“That one was disappointing…she ended up being useless to me.”

My vision tunnels, and through it, I see that night.

It’ll have been two years next week.

Sara slings her guitar over her shoulder, her favorite blue dress billowing out behind her as she breezes by. “You should come see me play. It’s been ages.”

I hit Send on a text to Tanner, arranging for him to join me for a witness interview, since no one wants me taking the lead on those. “Can’t get away tonight. You know how it’s been lately.”

The public was in a panic after a recent, high-profile break-in ending in a shooting and abduction of someone well known. The media were like vultures. I couldn’t afford taking time to watch a concert, even if my favorite musician was playing.

“I know those missing people need you, I’m just concerned you’re going to work yourself straight into a breakdown. One of these days, you need to take a day off. Normal people call it a weekend.”

“I’ve never been normal. Work is all I have.”

“No, Isaac.” Her face turns serious. “It isn’t.”

“Call me and I'll pick you up. I don’t care that it’s a few blocks; you’re not walking home after dark.”

She laughs. “You’re being a helicopter brother again.”

“Better than becoming a statistic. Promise me.”

“Fine. I promise.” Hoisting the guitar higher, she reaches for the door handle. “Love you.”

I toss a cheese puff, which she artfully dodges. It’s as close as I come to sentiment, but it’s fine; she gets me.

Before the door closes, her head pokes back in, giving me what I had no idea would be my last glimpse. “If you can get there by ten, I’ll save ‘Wild Horses’ for you.”

The hours flew by, and I put my phone down. Somewhere. By the time the owner of the venue called the department, concerned when they found her guitar case abandoned outside, I had four messages saying she was still waiting on that ride.

When I arrived, she wasn’t there.

She wasn’t anywhere.

“Then again, I suppose she wasn’t so useless, after all.” The man’s chuckle yanks me from the memory and back into the cell that trapped us both. “She led you to me, didn’t she? Eventually. And *you* turned out to be worth far more.”

My eyes snap to his. “What did you do with her?” It’s a hoarse whisper.

“I told you, my dear *Isaac*.” He watches every emotion reflect on my face as the revelation sinks in. “I have the power here. *I* control what happens; *I* determine your fate. If it suits me, I’ll put an end to your meaningless little life right where you sit.”

A weight crashes down on me. Ten tons of a reality I thought I’d been hiding behind a fake ID and a false sense of bravado.

He said my name.

Not Nicholas. Not Nick. He said…

“Isaac?” Everly repeats. It’s so soft I can barely hear.

But the psychopath hears, and slowly his eyes raise, focusing just above my head. “Or maybe…” His smile grows into something I’ve only seen in horror movies. He runs his tongue along his bottom lip, contemplating. “Maybe I’ll take hers, instead.”

I open my mouth, but for the first time, I find myself speechless. There

are too many things to process. Too many revelations bombarding me in the space of seconds.

Before reality catches up with me, he's turning on his heel. Pushing past Roger, who appears in the doorway holding a dustpan and broom like he was on standby for cleanup duty following his boss' tantrum.

Time slows like I'm underwater. Like the black hole of his left eye sucked me in and spit me out into space.

I can't breathe.

The man Everly calls The Timekeeper makes a hard right into the hallway, heading toward her room.

I should warn her, but I can't form the words.

Glass tinkles as Roger sweeps shards of hourglass into the dustpan. I sit there in a daze as the door to the next room opens.

She sees him coming.

Yells.

That's what sends me crashing back into my body and jumping to my feet.

"Hey!" The side of my fist connects with the wall, and again, as she shouts at him to stay away. Nerves quiver through her warning.

I pound three more times. "Hey, you motherfucking coward. Come back here and deal with *me*."

She's screaming now. Trying to fight him. Is this how it ended for Sara? Did Everly stand there, a last witness to my sister's final cries, while this murderous bastard played the role of a mad God, deciding who lives, and who dies?

Something inside me snaps.

Sound warps.

The world is cast in a shade of crimson.

I don't even process the words coming out of my mouth, or how long I pound on that damn wall, but when I pause to catch my breath, my hands are bruised, my throat burns, and I'm seriously considering tearing my own foot off to get out of this cuff.

Then I realize I'm not alone.

Near the open door, a hulking shadow stands, glowering at me, broom still in hand.

Being I haven't yet heard a word from the ogre, let alone seen an

emotion, I’m caught off guard by his glare.

“Got something to say, Rog?” My voice is a dry rasp.

His jaw tics, eyes narrowing with disdain. “I didn’t think you were that fucking stupid.”

He exits, leaving me to marinate in my failure.

11

Isaac?

I step away from the wall, frowning.

Did I hear that right?

Isaac.

The notion of an alias brings with it an assortment of new questions. Who is he? Why would he lie about his name? Is he undercover? Why is he *really* here?

Is he a part of this?

No.

That's impossible. He's trapped, chained, a prisoner like me. Like all of us.

I go silent, waiting to hear it again, but The Timekeeper only says it once.

Maybe I misheard.

My mind is still racing when I flinch in place, and my attention whips right.

3, 2, 4…8.

I think the last number is eight.

Four pings, and then —

"No—" I lurch backward and scream just as the door whooshes open. My unstable feet carry me toward the far wall, until my spine is flush against it. *Silly.* I have nowhere to go, except for wherever he takes me—and he's going to take me. "Don't touch me!"

“Testy today.” Marching forward, The Timekeeper fiddles with the cufflink of his suit, tailored and fitted with indulgent royal-purple satin. He’s dressed to the nines, costumed more for an eccentric social function, instead of an execution. “It’s too early for solicitations. I haven’t had my coffee yet.”

I try to dodge him.

Fail.

He snatches me by the bicep and hauls me away from the wall, dragging me toward the open door. My heart hammers between my ribs, a heavy bass drum. Twisting and squirming, I do everything I can to pry myself from his grip, desperate for escape. “No!” He squeezes tighter, bruising my arm. “Get your hands off me!”

Nick—*Isaac?*—pounds on the wall beside me. “You’re a fucking coward.” He’s pissed-off, rattled, unlike the typically calm and controlled man I’ve come to know. “Pathetic. Preying on someone helpless because you’re weak. It’s *me* you want, you impotent bastard.”

The Timekeeper says nothing and continues to drag me toward the doorway, while I trip over loose books.

I dig my heels into the tile, skin burning. Body writhing. Limbs flailing.

Fruitless.

I’m going to die today.

Using his opposite hand, he fists me by the hair for better leverage.

My lungs squeeze, scalp stings, and my stomach drops to the sterile floor. I scream. “Nick!” There’s nothing Nick can do. Self-preservation and instinct take over, trumping logic and sound reason. “No, stop, please! *Nick*!”

Nick’s pounding tapers off with a final hard *smack*. “Fine! Take her. I don’t care. It doesn’t fucking matter.”

Something inside of me withers. Wilts.

What the hell?

“Nothing appealing will come from acting rebellious,” my captor drawls, a picture of contentment as he effortlessly schleps me through the threshold by the roots of my hair. His pitch rises an octave, his words carrying over to Nick through the wall. “Let this be your lesson in practicing good behavior, my friend.”

The door swings shut behind me, and I’m in a hallway.

My objective brain clicks on as I push the terror aside, canting my head in every direction, drinking in the sights and sounds. I only have seconds,

moments. If I manage to break free, I can describe my surroundings and get help for the others.

Stay calm, Everly.

I've never seen the outside of my room before. Every other time, I'd been drugged, a broken doll being transported away like a bag of trash on garbage day.

Dampness coats my cheeks with sweat and tears. I loosen my muscles, feigning obedience, as my kidnapper breezily sweeps me down a long corridor. It's well-lit, pristine. The scent of lemon cleaning product wafts under my nose as I gaze at the barren walls: two doors, a large gap between them, another two doors. Several voices wail with mourning like lonely ghosts unable to cross over. A chain clashes. My skin prickles with goosebumps and bone-deep dread.

Victims.

People.

People with stories and dreams, subjected to this horrific fate. I stay quiet, only letting out a squeak when my feet stumble over themselves and I almost face-plant. The Timekeeper hardly flinches, lifting me back to wobbly legs while I try to remain balanced.

"Where are you taking me?" I demand, though I know he won't tell me. He gets off on my fear.

"That would spoil the fun, now, wouldn't it?"

"Did you call him Isaac?"

Unbothered, he keeps going, pulling me forward. "Did I? There are a lot of things you don't know about your new sidekick," he says. "Maybe you'll find out…maybe you won't."

"What are your plans for him?" I grunt and resist, my bare feet sliding every which way. "Why is he here?"

"You're a curious thing." He clicks his tongue as we veer around a corner, the hallway an exact replica of the one we were just in. "Your concern is touching. Truly."

We reach the end of the hall, topped off with a steel door. My insides pitch with apprehension. Fear. "Please, you don't need to do this."

"Presumptuous of you to assume you understand my needs." He opens the door with a keycard, then roughly hauls me through it. "I'd say a time-out is in order."

Stairs.

Darkness.

I trip on the first step, simultaneously trying to rotate from his grasp. In one fluid motion, he picks me up like I'm a sack of flour and plants me atop his shoulder.

I flash back to that night.

Bouncing on a madman's back as I'm carried from my beautiful home.

Drugs coursing through my bloodstream.

Jasper, sprawled out in the middle of our foyer, drowning in a pool of his own mortality.

I start fighting. Claws out, feet thrashing, teeth bared. "You bastard. You *monster*. Let me go. Let me *go*!"

He ignores me as easily as he trots me through the chasm of darkness, my hair tumbling in front of my face, blotting out any possibility of sight. I can't visualize anything as I rake my nails up and down his back, hardly penetrating the lavish satin fabric. It smells dank, musty, and old. A basement, likely skittering with hungry rats and roaches. Tears burst from my eyes in a geyser of terror, and my screams morph into panicked cries. "No, no, please…" It's a wail, a begging plea for mercy. "Don't kill me. I'm not ready to die. Please…*please*."

He sighs with boredom as we turn a corner, the sound of his shiny shoes scuffing against the cement echoing through me. "So dramatic. It grates me."

I wonder how I'll go.

I've imagined every scenario—from gruesome, to quick and painless. A hacksaw to my jugular. A needle in my arm. A bullet through my forehead.

Starvation.

Eaten alive by blood-thirsty rodents.

Drowning. Burning.

A broken heart.

My nostrils flare, my chest inflating with volatile breaths.

No.

I can't die like this, not now, not after surviving in this prison for two years. I refuse. "You're not done with me yet," I hiss through clenched teeth. "I know you're not. I just started a new cycle."

"How observant of you."

"You still need me."

“Again, you presume my needs. That’s never wise.” Hauling me off his shoulder, he spins me around, then grips me by the nape of my neck and propels me forward. “I’ll have Roger bring you a glass of water and a slice of bread. Multi-grain. It’s the least I can do.”

I drop to my knees, skidding across the dirty, cold pavement as tiny pebbles leave scrapes along my shins and kneecaps. I’m on my feet in an instant, lurching through the darkness, just as a steel-barred door slams in my face and a key quickly locks me in.

“No!” I curl both hands around the iron bars, shaking them fruitlessly. “Don’t leave me here. Please. I’ll be good. I’ll —”

He starts whistling as his shadow retreats from my new cell. “This will be beneficial for you, Everly. You’ve become too comfortable here, too spoiled. I hope you take this opportunity to appreciate the luxuries you’ve been given.” Pivoting away, The Timekeeper tosses a few final words over his shoulder before disappearing into obscurity like a predator swallowed by the night. “Not everyone is so lucky.”

I scream so loud I feel my throat chafing with raw agony. Wailing, bellowing, screeching like a banshee, I pound frail fists against the iron grates, pulling, tugging, doing nothing but wearing myself down. It’s no use. I’m trapped, isolated, and terrified.

I drop down on my butt and curl my knees to my chest.

Shadows move and roam.

Creatures lurk.

Animal? Human?

I’d take ghosts and monsters over these inhumane *humans* any day. I’d let the rats chew through my bones before I’d let The Timekeeper snuff out my life. He doesn’t deserve the privilege.

Minutes tick by as the darkness devours my whimpers and cries.

My eyes play tricks on me.

How long has it been?

I forgot to count the seconds.

When I hear footsteps from above, my head snaps up, but I can’t even see the ceiling. It’s a pitch-black sky of endless uncertainty. Oppressive. Icy fear trickles through me, and I start to shiver, rocking back and forth on the stony cement. My nightgown is hardly a worthy substitute for my mattress, providing no cushion, no insulation.

Something crawls along my toes.

Anyone else might flick it away, stomp on it, but I revel at the contact. Likely a spider. Another lifeform, keeping me company. I'm not alone.

I scoot backward until my spine meets with stone. My limbs tremble, aching for warmth, and I do everything in my power to shut off my mind. I retreat into blankness, much like I did during my first few weeks here. It's my only power.

Roger finds me sometime later—*minutes, hours?*—and I scramble to my feet, stumbling toward the iron-clad door as I wrap my palms around the bars. "Roger."

Nothing.

His shadow is massive, looming across from me as a hand reaches between the slats with a plastic cup of room-temperature water. Part of me wants to slap it away, but I'd only be hurting myself.

I take it and drink.

He tosses a slice of dry bread into the cell.

Dropping the cup, I shoot forward and snatch his arm before he pulls away. "Roger, please." My voice is soft, melodic, a picture of sincerity. "Help me."

I can't see his face.

Is he smiling?

Am I reaching him?

My touch remains gentle, my fingers loosely coiling around his meaty forearm. Coarse hairs tickle me as I brush the pad of my thumb across his skin.

But I wince when he violently rips his arm from my grip with a furious grunt, the force of it sending me staggering back. "No…no, please. You have a heart; I know you do. You can do the right thing. I won't tell. I won't tell anyone. I—" The shadow retreats, evaporating into the blackness as I grab my hair with both hands. "Roger, please!"

A heavy door claps shut.

He's gone.

He left me here to rot.

I collapse to the unforgiving floor and burrow into a one-person huddle, my arms around my knees, head bowed. Time trudges by in agonizing increments.

I start counting the seconds.

I count out loud, my raspy, torn-up voice reminding me that I'm still here, still breathing, still capable of surviving this.

Fifty-two, fifty-three…

My hand sifts around for the stale piece of bread, and I nibble on the ends, counting between bites.

One-thousand-eighty-seven…

I think of Nick.

Isaac.

Whoever he is.

I envision what he looks like, try to put a face to the gritty, masculine voice that often cracks with veiled vulnerability. He's not immune to this. He's hurting, too.

But he told the monster to take me away.

I wonder if he's already forgotten about me.

His image is hazy; a blurry, foggy face with dark eyes and darker hair.

Handsome.

I bet he's handsome in that rugged, unapproachable way. Tall. Well-muscled. While Jasper wore form-fitting slacks and silken ties, always groomed to perfection, I picture Nick in a different way. Ratty jeans and T-shirts, with a disheveled tousle of inky hair. He's messy. Disorder. A nightmare disguised as a dream.

Ten-thousand-thirty-nine…

My eyes begin to draw shut like age-old blinds, all sound drowning out. Even my voice fades into nothingness as vivid flashes creep into my psyche and haunt me with images of men in black cloaks. A ritual of blood and fire. Daggers gleam and torches burn, while I lie strapped to a wooden table, naked and carved, as The Timekeeper looms over me with a smile.

I'm the sacrifice.

I startle awake moments later, sprawled out across the cold cement.

I've lost track of the seconds, so I start over.

One, two, three…

Wiggling my toes, I think of the spider. Wonder if it's near, keeping an eye on me.

But I don't feel it anymore.

Even it has left me.

12

The chain rattles as I drag it across the tile, scuffing a pathway over the piddly number of square feet I'm forced to exist in now.

Five, ten, a hundred-thousand paces—a chant pounding in my head with every step.

What. The. Fuck.

Clank, clank, clank.

What. The. Fuck.

I've officially lost my damn mind.

Isaac, he called me.

Isaac.

Me.

Time blurs. I don't know how long I've been here. How long I've been pacing. Back and forth.

Back

and

forth.

My ankle nearly gives out, but I keep going until my walk turns into a pathetic sort of hobble. My muscles itch with the need to run several miles, injuries be damned. My brain can't process when I'm just sitting around like a useless asshole.

So, I hobble some more. Back and forth.

Trapped.

Trapped and alone.

This place has turned me into the proverbial caged tiger, and I swear I'm going to rip my motherfucking keeper's throat out the next time he gets within my line of sight.

Fifty thousand laps around my room—more, or less, I don't know—and I keep rehashing everything he said. My name, the details of the night my sister disappeared, the desperate sounds Everly made as he was dragging her away…

But first, she said my name.

I wonder if Sara called my name. Called and called, and I never came.

Like an adder, my hand strikes out, slamming into the wall.

"*Fuck.*"

There's no response from the other side. Hasn't been all day.

Hoisting the chain to shoulder level, I hurl it at the wall, cursing the monster who's keeping us here, the loss of everything that matters, and my miserable fucking existence.

The chain clunks harmlessly to the ground. So, I do it again.

And again.

That blank white barrier taunts me.

I lift a hand and place it there. Bruises are already beginning to color the side. I'm not sure how long I beat on that wall, the names I called him, or what I threatened. But I remember the sound she made when I stopped.

If it weren't for Everly's ominous tales of impenetrable reinforcements, I might bust my way through. After all, it's thin enough to carry on a damn conversation, and it wouldn't be the first time I've punched a hole in a wall. But the fact is, we don't know what's between these harmless looking slabs, and the possibility of another injury wouldn't help my escape mission.

And if I were to break through…then what?

A vision materializes: me, stretched to the limit of my chain, snatching her away from that purple-suited bastard and perching on the mattress while I hold her above my head. Out of reach.

My own doomed version of King-Kong and Fay Wray.

Me and Beverly without the B.

Normally, that would amuse me, but nothing is fucking funny right now, and anything I might have tried would have only made things worse. Everly told me about one of the men who did his best to tear down the wall. He got

nowhere.

Spoiler alert: he's dead now.

I guess that can be said for everyone, though. Except her. She seems to be the only one exempt from an untimely death in this hellhole, and that's only because she's got her own special nightmare going on.

He's not going to hurt her. You don't keep a person alive for two years, only to kill them for the sake of a temper tantrum.

She's worth too much.

More than Sara, apparently. My head nearly exploded when he said that about her.

"She ended up being useless to me."

My chest seizes.

Everything I thought I understood was flipped on its head in the span of minutes, and I've got no idea what is happening anymore.

He called me Isaac, not Nick.

Isaac, the detective who was investigating a rash of serial disappearances.

Isaac, whose younger sister was waiting for him to pick her up the night she disappeared from in front of the coffee shop, where she'd been playing a gig that evening.

She was *here*.

And now she's gone.

My breaths are shallow, uneven rasps. Splinters in my side. Spots swim in front of my eyes. It's not until I begin to sway that I realize I'm hyperventilating. On the edge of passing out.

I lean forward until my forehead rests on the wall. My breathing slows, but my thoughts keep spinning.

Spin, spin, spin. Like a whirlpool bent on taking me under.

He knows.

That motherfucking kidnapping, human trafficking, murderer knows who I am. And *I don't know what that means.*

I don't know… I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, I don't

fucking

know.

There's only one thing I do know. One thing I swear to this wall, to Sara, and to the girl who is no longer chattering a mile a minute from the room next door.

I’m going to kill this bastard.
I’m going to kill him for all of us.

13

Roger hurls me back into my room the following morning, and I fall to my knees with a strangled cry, weakened and sapped, as the door shuts behind me. His clunky footfalls echo down the hallway, waning from earshot.

Bastard.

My chest heaves with weighty breaths, my body limp and fatigued. I've only eaten a slice of bread in the last thirty-six hours, paired with whatever dirt particles and mouse droppings came along with it.

Rooted in place on the floor, I curl my fingers into the shiny tile, grateful I can't see my reflection staring back.

I'm certain my blue eyes have dimmed to gray.

My complexion has faded to ash.

Hair brittle. Face gaunt.

"Are you in one piece over there?"

I freeze.

Slowly, I lift my chin and look up.

A stinging lump forms in the center of my throat. More than thirst pangs, more than day-old bruising from my lung-crushing cries. I gaze at the white separator beside me, my greatest foe, wanting nothing more than to smash it to bits, turn it into rubble, and burn it to the ground.

That damn wall.

It's separated me from all the other men and women who have come

through here. My companions in death. Tragic transients.

Friends.

Right now, it separates me from him—the man I want to strangle.

A hurricane of anger funnels through me as I jump to my feet and storm over to the wall between us, slamming a fist against it. “Screw you.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” My eyes spit fire, my tongue spews wrath. I pace back and forth, my hands curled into fists at my sides, blood pumping, heart galloping with indignation. “You told him to just *take me*. That it *doesn’t fucking matter*.”

His chain jangles as it slides across smooth tile, like he’s moving toward the wall. “I knew he wouldn’t hurt you. You’re too valuable. Precious goods.”

“And you’re an asshole.”

“Not a revelation.”

“I can’t believe you were so flippant about my life,” I bite back, white-hot tears nibbling at my eyes. I’m still pacing, vibrating with residual fear. My hand slaps the wall again, because I’ll take this fury over the cloud of defeat raining down on me. “He could have killed me.”

“Could have; wouldn’t have.” He pauses for a beat. “And didn’t.”

“That’s beside the point.”

I hear his hands plant against the wall, inches from my face, causing me to flinch.

“What’s the point, then?” His voice sounds closer than ever. Like it’s a tangible thing I can reach out and touch. “You’re pissed because I didn’t tear down the wall with my bare hands? Call him more names? Threaten his life when I’m shackled like an animal to this goddamn chain?”

My lip wobbles pathetically, my fight draining. I swipe sections of unwashed hair out of my eyes, blinking at the wall as my rage fizzles out.

He’s right. I’m acting on emotion, and that will be my downfall. Emotion is feeling. And, in this bleak corner of the world, feeling is nothing but a guillotine inching its way toward my neck.

A shuddery breath slips past my lips in a plume of resignation.

Nick can’t help me; only I can help myself.

Nick.

Swallowing, I gaze down at my soot-stained toes, then flick my eyes back

up. “Why did he call you Isaac?”

Silence.

I knew it.

Stepping closer to the wall, I school my voice into something softer. “Isaac.”

More silence.

“That’s your name, isn’t it? Your real name?”

“Doesn’t matter.” A gritty undertone steals his words, like rocks between his teeth.

“It *does* matter.”

“Why?”

I press a flat palm to the surface, to the space where his voice vibrates. My forehead follows, and I let out a long exhale, allowing my misplaced tension to thaw out. “Our name is all we have left.”

“Ever the poet. Must be the bodice-rippers.”

He’s deflecting. “It’s the truth.”

“The truth is, I get bored easily. I have a different identity for every day of the week. Andrew Benson. Marcus Maury. Lyle Jenks. That Thursday just happened to be a Nick day.”

My lips twist. “Lyle?”

“Don’t underestimate Lyle. He’s a badass.”

“No.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m a criminal. Let’s not make a big deal about it.”

Honestly, that wouldn’t surprise me. But… “Try again.”

A few beats go by, and then I hear a *thump*, telling me he’s making himself comfortable against the wall. I mimic the same position and press my back to it, waiting for more as I play with the dirty fringe along the hem of my gown.

“Fine,” he relents, fiddling with his chain. “I dabbled in the investigative field a while back. The day I ended up here, I had an unfortunate run-in with the wrong guy. Evidently, he works for this eccentric, smug piece of shit. That guy knew me as Nick, so I played the role. Then I woke up here…and I went with it.” Faltering, he lets out a sigh of frustration. “Guess I’m not as clever as I thought.”

I consider his explanation. Elements of it ring true, but he’s holding something back. “Sounds dubious.”

“Yeah, well, waking up chained to a wall in Alan Cumming’s evil twin’s funhouse, forced to listen to erotic excerpts from trashy, outdated porno books by a presumed-dead model, also sounds dubious. But here I am.”

My lips twitch.

Touché.

I settle back against the wall, my hair a tangled curtain around my face. “Isaac…” I murmur. The name falls out effortlessly.

I like it.

His tone dips, veering into that place of vulnerability he loathes to idle in. “You don’t need to say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“All sweet and soft, like it’s your new favorite word.” There’s a notable edge to his tone, gravelly and raw. “It’s just a name.”

“It’s a good name. Makes me think of Isaac Newton, the scientist.” I twist my head to the side, curious about him. “Were you named after him?”

“No.” A bitter huff. “It’s more of a hopeful Biblical reference I failed to live up to.”

“Your parents were religious?”

“My mother was, once. I was her penance for being sullied by the devil. She hated me from the second I was conceived.”

I hesitate.

That’s a lot to unpack.

I’m about to press for more, but another thought strikes me. “Who was Sara?”

There’s a long pause, and I know he won’t indulge me. “You ask a lot of questions, Bee.”

Bee.

Something shimmers inside my chest when I hear him call me that nickname again.

A flutter. A little pirouette.

But then the metaphorical guillotine flashes through my mind, glinting silver and flaunting razor-sharp edges, so I press the heel of my hand to my heart and rub away the tickle. “You’re one to talk. Was she your girlfriend?” I wonder. “Wife?”

“If I’ve led you to believe I’m secretly a romantic, I apologize.”

Sighing, I stretch out my legs. “Sister?”

More silence answers me. No rattling chains, no grumbles or sighs of disdain. A handful of seconds tick by in time with my heartbeats as I wait for the sound of his voice.

For something.

"She was…the closest I ever came to hope."

I kick away the itchy blanket as it tangles between my ankles. I'm restless. On edge. The fluorescent lights have flickered out, signaling nighttime, and the room is now bathed in a muted red glow from my full-spectrum vitamin D lamp.

For being such a depraved psychopath, my captor evidently cares about my bone density. Can't have me withering away before more costly follicles are suctioned from my womb.

I turn over onto my side and face the wall. The mattress rustles, the only sound penetrating the eerie quiet. While these accommodations are like an all-inclusive beach resort compared to last night's sleep arrangements, I can't seem to get comfortable. Peace won't come, and maybe it's because I'm too afraid of the grisly nightmares, ready to strike the moment I close my eyes.

Propping my cheek in my hand, I stare at the crimson-tinted divider beside me. "Isaac?"

A light clinking sound breaks through the silence. "Hmm."

"I can't sleep."

"Congratulations, now neither can I."

I collapse back down to the cot, letting out a sigh that makes my loose curls take flight. "Want to play a game?"

"No."

"Twenty Questions or something. You like questions."

"Not as much as I like sleep."

"Never Have I Ever?"

Isaac grumbles something incoherent, his chain rattling louder as he shifts in place. He's annoyed. I don't care.

"Sure," he replies, tone flatter than a deflated balloon. "Never have I ever wanted to go back to sleep more than I do right now."

My lips pucker as I twist a strand of hair around my index finger, then roll onto my back. “Fine,” I say, dipping my toes underneath the blanket and casting my gaze skyward. “Goodnight.”

The ceiling looks like it comes alive with moving shadows. Black and scarlet shapes. I squint, missing the mahogany ceiling fan above my bed. I used to follow the blades around in distorted circles until a dreamworld dragged me away, Jasper’s arm sliding around my midsection and tucking me into the crook of his arm.

I miss that. I miss so many things.

As the minutes pass by, the boredom rises, making me feel fidgety. Itchy. I sit back up, gathering my mound of hair in both hands and pulling it over one shoulder to make a braid. I secure it with a glittery lilac hair tie given to me by Roger. But the task only takes two minutes, and I’m bored again.

I sigh.

Leaning over the mattress, I reach for a book, knowing I can just barely make out the words through the dim lighting.

Reading helps when my brain won’t shut off.

I’ve read these books countless times, yet there is always something new to discover. Sometimes I’ll imagine myself as the main character. A grand regency lady, a small-town spinster, or a sea wench on a storm-charged sail.

Anywhere but here.

But when the last page is flipped, I return to this torture chamber. This lonely, empty cell. And in that moment, I always feel undoubtedly worse.

I prop myself up, my back to the wall, and bring the pages of warped ink close to my face. The words blur and jumble as I skim through a chapter filled with erotic prose.

Soft caresses, molten heat, heady moans. Throbbing rods and moist centers.

My nose wrinkles.

Biting my lip, I plunk the book on my lap and glance up. “Do you miss sex?”

A long pause.

The longer it stretches, the more I second-guess myself.

But I’m not shy about it, and it’s not like I’ll ever have to make eye contact with this guy. Something tells me he’s not shy, either.

Finally, he responds, “Do you?”

A smile hints. If only he could manifest his top-notch deflecting abilities into finding us a way out of here. “Yes.”

“Go on.”

“I’m reading a sex scene.”

“How are you reading in the dark?”

“I have a LED light,” I tell him. “It’s a vitamin D lamp—not glass, though. Apparently, I live here now, and the sun doesn’t exist in my world.”

Isaac’s chain starts moving as he approaches the wall, newly intrigued by the shift in subject matter. Typical man. “Read it to me.”

I glance down at the pages and make a face, scanning the chunky paragraphs filled with steely erections, aching cores, and quivering breasts.

Do breasts quiver?

“I don’t know.” Slapping the book shut, I toss it onto the mattress and lean back. “I don’t think it’s your cup of tea.”

“Mm. And how exactly do I take my tea?”

“With whisky or bourbon. These characters prefer their tea with a splash of warm, low-fat milk.”

I hear a low chuckle rumble through the wall. “How do you like your tea?”

Hesitation nips at me. I pull my feet up, moving into a cross-legged position while my head rests against the wall. My cheeks grow warm as I mull over a response. “Use your imagination.”

He doesn’t answer right away.

I’m positive he’s using his imagination, and the notion has my heart rate kicking up speed.

Am I flirting?

A stab of guilt clobbers me in the chest. My mind fills with Jasper. His gentle touches, tender embrace, the love seeping from every word, from each soft stroke of his hand. He cherished me. Adored me. And a dark, traitorous feeling still yearned for more.

How I’d give *anything* to be lying in his arms again, appreciating what I had while I had it.

“Tell me a story, Bee.”

Isaac’s voice is raspier, thick with implication, triggering a tingle to ignite deep in my belly. Something long-since dead, shriveled up and rotted.

“Bet you can do better than the vanilla adventures of Alessandra and

Chadwick," he adds.

Swallowing, I force a feigned huff. "I'm not talking dirty to you."

"Wildly disappointing."

His darker tone bleeds with a dash of teasing, but even that doesn't erase the foreign feeling from thumping in my chest and tightening my stomach.

I hate it.

I embrace it.

"Fine." I squeeze the skirt of my nightgown in two hands, blowing out a shaky breath. "There was this girl. Her name was…Chloe."

"Describe her."

Nervous energy filters through my veins, but not the harrowing kind. Not the anxiety that comes along with being here, listening to the screams and fearful moans that echo through these hallways and freeze my blood to black ice.

It's different…it's a flutter of anticipation.

"She's known for her big hair," I explain. "It's a disaster most days, but she owns it. It's not quite blond, but not brown, either. Dirty blond, I guess. All curls and waves spilling down her back. She's petite, but strong. And her eyes are blue."

"What kind of blue?"

"I don't know…just blue."

"So, she's small, and she has not-brown but not-blond hair and just-blue eyes. Got it."

"You make my descriptive abilities sound really subpar."

A quiet beat, and I imagine him smiling. "Keep going."

The tickling nerves return as I close my eyes and exhale through my nose. "She's married to a wonderful man. The best. She's his world, and he's hers. A romance straight out of a fairy tale."

"But…" Isaac prompts.

"But she's always wanted just a little bit more."

"Chloe likes it kinky."

I scoff at him, my skin ablaze. "You keep interrupting."

"Are you blushing over there?"

"No."

"You are."

"Stop trying to read me through a wall." Smacking my hand to the

divider, I reach for the blanket and yank it up my body, as if I can hide the stain on my skin from someone who can't even see me. "I'm going back to sleep."

"You can't. I'm invested now."

My cheeks flush hotter as I snuggle into the blanket, tugging it up to my chin. I have no idea what I'm even doing. Confessing my fantasies to a total stranger? An incorrigible one, at that.

I've lost my mind.

Then again…I've lost everything else.

What's one more thing?

I close my eyes again, picturing Isaac leaning against the wall, directly behind me. Waiting for more. "Well…Chloe had an unconventional upbringing. Her father died when she was a baby, leaving a newborn and a single mother behind. Her mom had dreams, ambitions. Most of all, she loved to dance. It was her favorite way to express herself."

I pause, waiting for him to interject. He doesn't.

"Her mother worked as a waitress for a while, until the low pay and meager tips weren't cutting it anymore. When Chloe turned seven, her mom transitioned into a new line of work." I pick at the frayed edges of the blanket, focusing on the tattered little strings. "She became an exotic dancer."

He's silent. Listening.

"Chloe never resented her mother for it. On the contrary, she was sort of…inspired. She looked up to her mom, appreciating her drive and strong will. Her mother was gone a lot of the time—late nights, absent during the weekends. But the time they shared together was precious, filled with love and attention. You'd think her mother would have kept the truth from her daughter—a dirty secret, hidden in the shadows—but that wasn't the case. Her mom was proud and unashamed, and as Chloe got older, she started asking questions. Her mother always answered them truthfully. Chloe felt emboldened by it all. And while she never wanted that for herself, she respected her mother's choices."

Pausing, I wait for a crass comment, but not even the tinkle of a jangling chain breaks through my words.

"Anyway, I guess sex just became this acceptable thing growing up. It was never taboo. And as Chloe became an adult, the idea of it was exciting. Exhilarating."

I chew on my inner cheek, wondering how much more I should give him. These details are private. Not even Jasper understood the depth of my feelings, and I never wanted to shake things up between us. I was afraid, terrified he'd see me in all the wrong ways and distance himself from me.

Isaac shifts in place behind me, his chain scuffing the tile. "So…what you're saying is, Chloe grew up and found herself employed at a respectable sex club as a hot dominatrix, with whips and handcuffs and —"

And there he is. "No. God, no."

"Right. She was all about the strap-ons."

"You're impossible." I smack the wall again, despite the smile hiking up my lips. "Chloe fell in love. She was studying for an exam at a wine bar. Every Friday night, she'd study by herself with a glass of red wine. Enter Jason. Jason was handsome, charming, smart, and savvy. He knew all the right things to say and how to sweep her off her feet. There was an instant connection that led to a marriage proposal one year later at that same wine bar. It was a dream come true. Something out of a movie." When Isaac falls silent after my words trail off, I tip my face closer to the wall. "Are you still with me?"

"I'm definitely following." He clears his throat. "By day, Chloe wants a nice gentleman who treats her like a queen and spoils her with pretty flowers and sunlit serenades. But by night, she craves a man who demands she gets on her knees, so he can fist her by the hair and shove his massive cock down her throat while calling her his good girl."

My eyes grow twice their size, my skin fizzing with neon heat.

I open my mouth to reply, but I can't seem to conjure up any words.

Isaac taps the wall. "Something I said?"

"That's…" I swallow down the boulder in my throat. "Descriptive."

"You should take notes." He pauses for a breath as a new wave of tension fills the room. "But I'm right, aren't I?"

"You're, um—" Scratching my arm, I notice my skin is newly dappled in a rosy blush. Or maybe it's just the lamplight. "You're not wrong."

"Mmm. Thought so." Another pause. "All right. So, Chloe—she's tied to this marriage that's all love but no fire. She's restless, antsy. Doesn't know how to express her needs to Justin."

"Jason."

"Sure. This Jason guy doesn't understand her. Doesn't see her in the way

she craves to be seen." His chain rattles lightly, but it's loud enough to make me jump. "Then one day, this new guy comes along to give Chloe exactly what she needs. Let's call him…Nick."

"We are *not* calling him Nick."

"Should we call him Isaac, then?"

All moisture leaves my mouth like a sponge squeezed dry. "Nick works."

"Great. So, this Nick fella. Let's say he's around six-foot-three, works out, has a weakness for petite women with big hair and skilled mouths. She catches his ear—I mean, his eye—and knows exactly what she wants. She likes it rough. Dirty and depraved."

My heartbeats skitter as I lick my lips.

God, I almost feel like I'm…*me* again. A young, hot-blooded, robust woman.

There's something freeing about this, talking to this faceless stranger, not feeling judged or condemned.

It's liberating.

"What does he look like?" My voice is husky, my thoughts spinning. "Hair color? Eyes?"

"Dark-brown hair. Kind of shaggy, always messy. Eyes are brown; lighter than his hair."

"The kind that show flecks of gold in the right light?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Clean shaven?"

"Rarely. Facial hair varies by mood."

I paint a picture of him in my mind.

And I realize it's not far off from what I'd already imagined.

"I bet he's attractive," I add.

"He might have heard that a time or two."

"Does he have the women lining up?"

He seems to ponder this. "Lining up, sure. Sticking around? Hell no. This might surprise you, but Nick doesn't really like people."

"Shocking."

"Yeah." He draws out the word in a way that makes me wonder if he's affected by this, too. "But Chloe is different. She's a wild card…she intrigues him."

My breathing is shallow, pulse in overdrive. "Really?"

“Mmhmm. All he can think about is how she’d look sprawled out beneath him, ass in the air, tied to his bedposts.”

I can’t breathe.

All my oxygen feels like a tightly wound knot stuck in the back of my throat. “What would he do? If he had her like that?”

“You tell me.” His voice dips. “What does Chloe need?”

My eyelids flutter closed as I struggle for a full breath. “Cranberry juice.”

“What now?”

“Cranberry juice,” I repeat. “For later. Chloe always needs to have a cold glass of cranberry juice waiting for her after sex.”

Isaac makes a humming sound. “All right. Nick is adaptable.”

“Perfect.” I inhale, trying to regroup. “Where were we?”

“Nick has Chloe tied to the bed.”

“What happens next?” My voice is so low, hardly a whisper, I wonder if he heard me. I wonder if I wanted him to.

“He’d climb behind her on the mattress, run a hand over that delicious bare ass, and he’d ask her… Chloe?”

A pause.

I hold my breath.

The beat drags on longer.

Is he waiting for me?

Mercifully, before I throw caution to the wind and answer for Chloe, he continues. The low intimacy of his tone makes him feel so close, I can imagine his breath against my ear when he says, “Have you been a good girl today?”

14

I picture her there, ear to the wall, nightgown pushed up her thighs, chest heaving in anticipation of what Nick will do next. With my back against the wall and knees spread wide, I sink deeper into my imagination.

Of all the situations I've found myself in, I never imagined I'd wind up chained to a floor, trading dirty stories with a girl whose bikini-clad image has fueled the wet dreams of countless men.

There are certainly worse ways to pass the time…

"Answer me, Chloe." Tipping my voice to a dangerous pitch, I let the demand hang there. Every word of this conversation is a dare. Everly claims she isn't intimidated by sex, so let's test those boundaries, shall we?

Fuck yes, I'm going to have fun with this.

A hum full of dark promises resonates in my throat. "Why do you think he has her tied ass up?"

"Oh." A breathy sound falls from her.

"That's right." My fingers curl into my thighs. "Nick knows what to do with a girl like Chloe…a girl who's spent years dreaming of a man who knows how to handle her."

I allow myself a moment to imagine *handling* her. That smooth, bare skin; the way I could make it heat beneath my hands. The colors it would turn with every pinch and slap and rough caress. I might not have much to offer emotionally, but I have no problem giving a lady a quick and dirty foray into her darkest fantasies.

She says nothing, so I keep going, letting my mind wander out loud. “Behind her, he kneels between her spread legs, running a hand over her ass. Then, his fingers dip lower to find out if the anticipation has made her wet for him.”

She’s got to be pent-up after all this time.

“Has it, Everly?” I can’t resist asking. “Is Chloe wet for him?

“Maybe…a little.” Her pitch is lower in a way that blends sultry heat with just a hint of shyness. I can practically hear the blush rising to her cheeks. “Yeah.”

Perfect.

“A little, huh?” I chuckle. “Okay then. He rubs his fingers through that wet place until she’s squirming, then he reaches forward, grabbing a fistful of her hair and twining it around his fingers, pulling until she’s arched backward as far as the ties on her wrists will allow. ‘*You still haven’t answered me,’* he whispers, then unleashes a series of slaps to her ass and thighs. Hard and fast.”

There’s no response from the girl next door. I almost wonder if I took it too far, but *no*, I feel her there, hanging on every word, hoping I’ll voice the unfulfilled desires she’s been harboring.

And oh, do I plan to.

Fuck, is it getting hotter in here? I shift my position, stretching my legs, but it does nothing to alleviate the painful tent in my pants.

“Still with me, Bee?”

“Don’t stop.” The urgency in her voice makes my dick even harder.

If we were anywhere but here, I’d have my face between her thighs, making her come over and over while she yanked on my hair and screamed, “*Don’t stop, don’t stop*.”

Fuck. I blow out a breath and reel my imagination in. My capabilities are limited here. I need to stay in control.

“Isaac.” Three desperate knocks vibrate against my back. I smile to myself; she’s just as hot and bothered as I am.

“When tears begin to stream down Chloe’s pretty face and she cries, ‘*Please Nick, please,*’ he knows what she’s really begging for.”

“More.” The answer comes without hesitation.

“That’s right.” I angle my face toward the girl behind the wall, careful not to allow whoever may be on the other side of the camera to see how much

I'm enjoying myself. "There's something Chloe needs to remember, though."

"And that is?"

My tone goes to a hard, dark place. "Nick doesn't take orders."

"What *does* he do?"

"He keeps going until her skin is fiery red, beautifully decorated with swollen handprints. And while she's gasping and crying, her eyes hold this glassy, exhilarated look that betrays her. That's how he knows she secretly loves it."

A sound comes from the other side of the wall, accompanied by a soft *thunk* that hints of her head resting there, and I know I've hit the mark.

I keep going.

"Warning her not to move, he unties her arms and legs from the posts. She shudders at the sound of his belt zipping through the loops as he pulls it off."

I swear I hear her whimper.

Fuck, I wish I could order her to take her panties off, spread her legs, and touch herself for me. But this isn't the place for that, and I won't ask her to.

"*Please*," she begs.

God, the things I could do to this woman.

I imagine her, plastered to the barrier, her thighs pressed together, muscles clenching in a poor imitation of what she really needs. Right now, I could command her to take two fingers, push them inside her tight heat, then pull them out and bring them to her lips. Taste the evidence of what I'm doing to her. The image alone has me swallowing a groan.

Shit, how far are we going with this?

There are several reasons why it might be wise to quit before either of us takes it much further, but since I can't currently find it in me to give a fuck, I continue. "Nick waits until she's whimpering, then leans down and licks the path of tears from her chin to her cheek. 'Be good,' he warns her, reaching down to pinch a nipple, hard enough to make her squeal." I toss the next move to Everly, curious whether I'm pushing things too far. "Can you do that, Everly?" I ask. "Can you be a good girl for me?"

I catch my slip—the blur between characters in a story, and what we're really doing—but I don't bother fixing it.

"I'll be good," she promises, not missing a beat.

"That's my girl." I reach down and adjust myself, trying to be covert

about it. Maybe I overestimated how much I could take. If she keeps this up, I'll be ripping this wall down with my bare hands, consequences be damned. "If she really pleases him, maybe she'll earn herself a reward."

"What does she have to do…to please him?" The words turn into a sultry purr that makes every muscle in my lower body tighten.

Fucking hell.

"Whatever he fucking tells her to." I pause, just long enough to get a hold of myself. Wherever this ends up going, I need to stay in control. Of both of us. I plot Nick's next move, playing it all out like a movie in my head. "Moving down to the end of the bed, he clasps his hands around her ankles, sliding them up her legs, to her soft thighs. Kneeling between them, he grasps her by the hips, his fingers digging in hard enough to leave bruises. When she winces, he gives her a devious smile. She should know better than to encourage him."

"Oh, my God," she says. "You're really good at this. Way better than my books."

"You're interrupting." My correction is hard as steel—much like my tortured cock.

Now *I'm* the one whose lips are curling into a devious smile. "Catching her off guard, Nick grabs her by the back of the thighs, pushes them straight back to her chest, and smacks her already sore ass."

"For complimenting you?"

"Disobedience has consequences, Bee."

Now, as much as I'm enjoying this, it's about time to get to the proverbial climax before I lose it.

"Once he's sure Chloe remembers who's in charge, Nick lowers her legs just enough to bend her knees, keeping them tucked up to her chest and spreading them far apart. He bends down and runs his tongue up the inside of one trembling thigh, then the other, and finally through the center, back to front, until she's thrusting her hips into the air and crying for more."

I stop a moment to let the desperation build. Holy fuck, I can practically taste her on my tongue, salty and feminine. Liquid sweetness. Wet and ready for me.

"Keep going." Her voice is full of throaty need; it's making me sweat.

"He's…contemplating," I tell her.

"Contemplating what?"

“Where to stuff his cock. Should he make her choke on it? Or…”

She chokes. Literally. Well, maybe it’s more of a cough, but it makes me chuckle.

“Chloe would probably be okay with that.”

“Oh, I know she would, sweetheart, but good things come to those who wait. Right now, Nick has other plans. Letting her legs go, he runs his tongue along her naked body, headed for those gorgeous tits, taking them in his mouth one at a time, giving each nipple a tug between his teeth, as his hand closes around her throat.”

My dick pulses, knowing the only action it’s getting is through this goddamn story.

“Settling his knees on either side of her chest, he straddles her. ‘You’re fucking beautiful, all wrecked for me like this,’ he tells her, running his thumb along her pulse. ‘Now take my cock out.’”

I’m debating whether to edge her until she’s begging or to bring Nick and Chloe’s bedtime story to its conclusion when she jumps in again.

“What does his body look like?” she wonders. “Without clothing, I mean.”

Christ, I wish I could turn her over my knee right now. “You’re really asking for it, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” she draws the word out. “Does he have tattoos?”

“She doesn’t know. He stays fully clothed, only letting her take his sizable cock out of his pants. Chloe will have to use her imagination on the rest…for now.”

Hey, at least I didn’t use the words “steel pipe.”

She takes the bait. “Exactly how *sizable* are we talking here?”

“I don’t know, should we find a ruler? There must be one over here somewhere. Oh wait, you’re the one with the stash of random objects.”

“I meant Nick’s.”

“Mmhmm.” Like we’re still pretending they aren’t one and the same. “Maybe I’ll find another use for that ruler.”

She slaps the wall, equally amused and frustrated. “Come on, throw me a bone here.”

My shoulders shake with laughter. “That’s the plan.” Instinctively, I look down to where I’m about to bust through my zipper. “To answer your question, it’s *much* thicker than most. Above average in length, as well. I

don’t think Chloe will be disappointed.”

“Chloe can handle that.”

“Oh, she’ll handle that all right. But she’ll have to take it slow first—if Nick decides to give her that option. It all depends on whether she keeps interrupting.”

“Maybe she’s doing it on purpose.” I can tell she’s grinning by the way the words pinch at the edges.

“Both Nick and I are aware of what she’s doing, and she’ll pay for that later. Right now, he stretches out so he’s hovering over her, his hips flush with hers, her legs spread wide. Lowering his mouth to her neck, he whispers, ‘You think you’ve earned this, sweetheart?’”

“She does,” she says on a breath.

“Nick bites down on the curve where her neck and shoulder meet, hard, thrusting his cock into that tight heat at the same time. He isn’t gentle, and she doesn’t want him to be.”

Her nails scratch down the wall slowly; I can imagine them doing the same to my back, and fuck, it’s almost enough to make me blow, hands free.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Fine,” she says on an audible exhale. “Does he make her orgasm?”

“Let’s just say he knows how to make her scream so hard she’ll forget her name, *and* his. Multiple times.”

“That sounds…”

“Like what she’s been missing?”

A long pause, then, “Yeah.”

“He knows.”

I debate detailing the climax, wondering how ragged her breaths would get, how deeply she would flush, how her thighs would press together as she imagines Chloe getting thoroughly railed by Nick. But if I go too much further, I’m either going to be sitting here with my dick in my hand in front of the cameras, or I’m going to bed with blue balls.

And Everly…all I can think about is Roger watching, able to tell how turned on she is right now, and something about that doesn’t sit right. In fact, it kind of makes me want to rip his head off with my bare hands.

In the end, I let us both off the hook.

“When she wakes up in the morning, she’s alone. But just as she’s beginning to wonder if she dreamt the entire thing, she notices something

sitting on her bedside table.”

“What is it?”

“A glass of cranberry juice. Just like she requested. No longer cold, though. Can Chloe live with room-temperature cranberry juice after being fucked so hard she passed out from exhaustion?”

“Yeah,” she says on an exhale. “I think she’ll be all right.”

I, on the other hand, am very close to not being all right. “Of course she will. Chloe’s a good girl.”

With my head resting on the other side of the wall where she sits, I feel my eyes wanting to close. There are so many more things I’d do, if I could, but this will have to hold us. “You can relax now, Bee; it’s time to get some sleep.”

She hesitates but doesn’t argue. “Okay. Goodnight, Ni—Isaac.”

“Sweet dreams,” I tell her, not bothering to keep the suggestion out of my tone.

I roll over on the cot, fully prepared to dream about busting my way through this wall and finishing what Nick started.

Her voice carries over to me one last time:

“See you soon.”

I wake to the incessant glare of fluorescent lights. There’s a fog in my head that comes from the kind of deep sleep I haven’t had since I can remember, and an ache in my balls that reminds me of the trip to an erotic fantasyland I took Everly on last night.

Gotta say, that was the last conversation I’d ever expect to have while being held captive by a twisted black-market ring, but no complaints.

I roll over and lay my hand on the wall. “You awake over there, Bee?”

“It’s late,” she answers. “Breakfast has come and gone, and I’ve been busy for hours.”

“Busy, eh?” I can’t help but chuckle at the innuendo running through my filthy mind. “You shouldn’t do that. Not with eyes on you constantly.” The camera in the corner looms like a threat.

“Oh, my God, give me some credit, will you?”

“I don’t know, you sounded pretty worked up last night. Thought you might have woken up and decided to blow off some steam.”

“Who’s to blame for that?” Thinly veiled laughter weaves through feigned annoyance. “And if I really wanted to *blow off some steam*, as you say, I’d pull up my blanket and no one would be the wiser. Don’t worry, I’m not over here putting on a show for the voyeurs.”

“I’m jealous of your blanket right now. It’s fucking freezing in here.”

“Yeah, well, you’d probably figure out how to kill someone with said blanket, and they know it. I only got mine once I convinced them I had too much will to live to commit suicide.”

“Fair enough. So, what’s been keeping you busy for hours?”

“Strategy. Plans. I’m not creative like you, but I’m trying. I’ve memorized the entry code to the door, in case it ever comes in handy.”

“Smart girl.” I’ve gone too long without a proper strategy, and it’s time to get creative. “I think it’s about time we took inventory of all our options.”

“I’m not strangling Roger with a blanket.”

“Nah, his neck is too thick. Unless you can trip him with it and hope he cracks his head open falling, having you take out the ogre isn’t on my list.”

But that doesn’t mean we can’t still use him…

“I need to know *what* we have to work with first, then we can look at *how*.”

“There’s a barrette. I considered using it as a weapon at one point when that awful nurse came in to give me an injection. Thought about jabbing her in the eye.”

“There’s a thought.” The visual of Everly scooping out the bitchy nurse’s eyeball is mildly entertaining.

“I’m glad you find that funny. I had nightmares for a week thinking about it. Eventually, I decided it was more likely to get me killed.”

She’s not wrong. And while I might be able to make a tool like that work in my favor, expecting Everly to turn into a deadly assassin by way of hair accessories is probably something that works better in movies.

“All right, let’s come back to that one. What else? Anything metal? Sharp objects?”

“Let’s see.”

She begins rifling through her collection, and for a long time, we get lost discussing her treasure trove of the dead.

Maybe, if we’re lucky, one of them can help us.

15

TANNER

With my gun leading the way, I navigate the basement stairs of an old house I don't remember entering. Shadows call to me in voices from the past. People I've lost, loved…failed. The staircase is never-ending, growing darker as I go. Even so, I descend further into my doom.

A hand shoots out between steps, locking onto my ankle like a shackle. It's accompanied by a voice from nowhere.

"Have you forgotten about me already, Tanner?"

"Porter?" My foot slips.

I look down but there's no one, and no bottom in sight. My vision tunnels, spins. There's a distant awareness that I'm dreaming, but I can't open my eyes. Can't make it stop. And I just…keep…slipping…

Tap, tap, tap.

"Tanner."

My eyes fly open, met by a half-finished text I'd started before nodding off. For the third time.

Shit, I hope I'm not too late.

One of the newer officers, Livingston, is headed to a local prep school on a tip an administrator called in. The son of a billionaire known for his questionable moral compass was overheard bragging about his father pushing the boundaries of big-game hunting. Then it got disturbing. For some reason, witnesses got the impression an upcoming expedition may involve human prey, and they swore the *pig* he mentioned didn't sound like wild boar.

Hackles were raised, along with a few red flags. Likely nothing more than a kid running his mouth, but worth a brief interview to see if further questioning is in order, knowing a mess of lawyers will follow.

It's probably unrelated…

But if there's one thing Isaac Porter taught me, it's to trust my intuition, and when I heard a couple of rookies discussing it in the break room earlier, the hair on my arms stood on end. Been nagging at me all morning. Though it's technically not my assignment, I'm tempted to exercise my senior detective liberties and ride along. Question this boy myself.

A throat clears, drawing my attention upward. The imposing figure of Chief Nelson fills the doorway, a gleam of fluorescent lighting reflecting off his bald head. Months ago, the pursed lips and furrowed brow would have been a signal that I needed to wrangle my partner before the shit hit the fan. But I've been a lone wolf for a while now, and lately…

Well, let's just say, he's started dropping subtle hints that it's well-past time to get my head back in the game.

His fingers drum a rhythm on the frame. "Did you get that email?"

"I'll check." Truthfully, I can't even remember when I last looked at my email. I snatch my phone off the desk, hoping I'm not too late to catch Livingston. "Can I get back to you in a few? Just finishing something up."

He doesn't budge.

Right.

With his stare burrowing into my skull, I barely glance at the phone as I finish the text—which I can only hope is intelligible—hit Send, then open my laptop. Skimming past a couple dozen untouched subject lines, I locate the email he's referring to, sent two days ago. My neck heats several degrees.

Striding into my office, my boss skims thick fingers over a pile of neglected paperwork. It's obvious he's biting his tongue.

"Say what you're thinking, Chief. I can take it."

"All right." An amused spark surfaces in his eyes, but there's a deeper concern there, too. "I know there's been a recent vacancy, but I never expected you to take up the mantle of problem child around here."

Ouch.

Hopefully, he was at least half-joking, but there's enough truth that I flinch inwardly. "Just had a lot going on lately. I'll take care of it."

"Uh-huh." He gives me an appraising glance. "When's the last time you

slept?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and exhale, all too aware of my disheveled hair and rumpled dress shirt with one too many buttons undone at the top. Between Dana serving me with divorce papers and my best friend disappearing, it feels like weeks. “Plenty of time for that when I’m dead. Until then, I’ve got shit to do.”

“Listen, I know you’ve been through a lot lately, and I get that you’re concerned about Porter—believe me, I do. But it’s not a crime to be missing, especially for a guy like him.” The look of pity he gives me borders on uncomfortable. “I’m —”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I finish, so I don’t have to hear him say it. “Just off somewhere doing what Porter does.”

Sulking, obsessing, isolating—the usual nonsense. He always comes back. I know that’s what everyone’s thinking. But they weren’t at that table in the back corner of the club on Delancy. They didn’t see Isaac’s face when I broke the news that the justice he’d spent his life serving had turned its back on him.

On Sara.

He looked at me like I’d ripped the entire world out from under him. Like I’d taken a hammer and smashed his last hope to smithereens. Like he’d been betrayed. Then he left me with a pretty stripper in my lap and disappeared.

I don’t think he’s coming back this time. What’s worse is the deep, gnawing feeling that he *can’t.*

What would Isaac do if it were me?

“As understanding as I may be, it’s still my job to keep this place running.” Nelson rubs a hand over his head. “I’ve been giving you a reprieve on the missed messages and late paperwork; ignored the fact that you’re chasing your own mission on company time. But I can’t look the other way for much longer.”

“Won’t happen again, I assure you.” My jaw clenches. With the even temper I used to be known for fading rapidly, I turn back to my email, tap on the mouse pad and open the attached picture. A pretty ocean view fills my screen, the water a dark contrast to the clear sky. Unconsciously braced for a gruesome crime scene, my muscles loosen. “What am I looking at here?”

Nelson reaches over me and enlarges the image. A handful of twenty-somethings stand at the end of a dock in front of a boat bearing the name

Sweet Gwynevere. “See anyone familiar?”

Do I? Work mode flips on like a light switch and my vision tunnels, zeroing in on the couple front and center. Angled in a coy pose, a pretty brunette aims an exaggerated wink at the camera, her lips plastered to the cheek of the young man next to her. There’s something distant in his expression, his body stiff, like he’d rather be anywhere else.

An intangible sense of familiarity nudges me as I focus on his face.

Even in a region where the impossibly beautiful people of the world gather, he’d make a person do a double take. With a long, lean build, fair skin, and a sheath of platinum hair caught on the breeze, there’s an otherworldly air about him, like he could have stepped straight off the set of a fantasy movie…which, in this town, is entirely plausible.

Maybe that’s it. I try to place him, scouring my memory for similar actors, musicians, models…

Then my mind jumps back in time to an encounter I’ve regretted for years, and I realize I’m not looking at a celebrity.

At least, not *that* kind of celebrity.

Incredulous, I zoom in more. The somber face, the haunted green eyes.

Fuck.

“Tell me that isn’t —”

Chief Nelson leans back on my desk, arms crossed in front of him, and nods. “The heir to the Crown family, in the flesh.”

My lungs empty in a dizzying rush. “I thought he committed suicide.”

“Well…” His head tilts toward the picture. “He’s about as pale as a corpse, but I’m fairly sure he’s still breathing.”

We’d been told a different story. But I suppose that’s what I get for believing the word of a cult leader, anxious to get the authorities off his back.

I study the backdrop. “Where was this taken?” Not in the mountains, where his father moved their primary network of followers after his son’s disastrously fatal birthday celebration a decade ago. “And when?”

“Just down from Redondo Beach. Four days ago.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Seems he’s listed on the roster of the philosophy department at UCLA. Master’s program. Building his own throng of groupies out of kids searching for the meaning of life, no doubt.” He huffs an unamused laugh. “I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

His father, Alistair Crown, has a history of being a thorn in the department's side, using his brand of charisma and trendy existential philosophies to sway the displaced hopefuls of Los Angeles into joining his family of freethinkers. But last I saw his son, he was the exact opposite. Shy, withdrawn—even his body language in the picture screams of someone out of their element.

"So, what's the theory?" I tap the desk in a slow rhythm, guessing the Chief's thought pattern. "That Crown's Chosen have been lying low until the dust clears, then Junior came back from the proverbial dead to set up shop here, pulling in the younger generation?"

"Do you have a better one?"

I recall the first time I came across the kid, a ghostly twelve-year-old with wide green eyes hiding under the floorboards while we searched his father's compound.

What was it? Twelve years ago? Fourteen?

Damn.

Social services went out for a welfare check and ended up buying Alistair's claim that his son was on the spectrum and panicked when the cops *invaded* his home. But something about that story always felt…off.

Spinning my chair slowly from side to side, I contemplate the face in the picture; the man he's grown into. I've thought about him over the years. Couldn't help but wonder about the horrors he'd seen growing up in a circus like that.

Having no good answer to his question, I ask my own. "Why bring this to me? Surely, the feds still have their cult expert watching them."

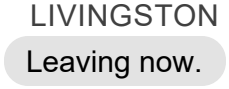
Had something happened? Granted, I managed to get closer to the elusive son than anyone in the department, but that was ages ago. It's not like I have any influence. According to Alistair's allegations, I traumatized him.

"Not yet, but people have a habit of dying when Ash Crown shows his face, and I don't want him here. He's got dubious connections, and he's in our jurisdiction now; we have the right to keep eyes on him."

"And I'm officially your eyes?"

"*Unofficially*. For now." He smirks. "Anyway." He taps the desk twice and heads for the door. "I want to see you get back on track. Maybe start by seeing if you can get an ID on her." He taps on the brunette's face. "Fish for information. Discreetly, of course."

“Of course.” My eyes drift to the phone as it lights up with a text.



My lungs deflate with relief as a new wave of hope straightens my spine. Standing, I look through my open doorway and into the control room. Livingston catches my eye, keys in hand, and I hold up a finger. He nods.

“If you can juggle that along with the rest of your responsibilities,” Chief says on his way out, “I’ll look the other way while you keep hunting for Porter.”

The mention of his name throws me back to the dream, the memory of his voice echoing. *“Have you forgotten about me already, Tanner?”*

Hell no.

Grabbing my phone, I follow the Chief to the door, reminding myself of my purpose. The system—our system—failed one of our own. Sara might not have been my blood, but she felt like it, and I’ll be damned if I lose anyone else.

Not again.

What would Isaac do if our positions were switched? He’d fucking find me, that’s what he’d do. So, while I sit in the passenger seat on the way to grill a spoiled billionaire's son on a hunch that he might lead to the whereabouts of my friend, I vow to do the same.

No matter what it takes.

16

I press a hand to my bloated belly as I nibble an apple slice. A faint swirl of nausea has me uninterested in the fruit, but I've hardly eaten much since Nurse Ratched jabbed me with a trigger shot full of egg stimulants thirty-plus hours ago. I've been counting down the days since my first injection, crossing numbers off on my internal retrieval calendar. Fourteen days. A slew of ultrasound check-ups have been sprinkled in over the past two weeks, where I'm subdued with laughing gas and half-carried to a sterile room for monitoring.

What must be a rewarding, life-fulfilling experience for expectant mothers and egg donors across the world has become a nightmare for me. Cold, unforgiving, and cruel. I feel assaulted. Exploited.

Victimized.

And those babies born from my non-consent will have no knowledge of the woman who will likely be giving her life for them.

Sadness leaks in as I collapse backward onto the mattress, shoving my plate of uneaten lunch aside. Moaning with discomfort, I glance down at my stomach—distended, stretched, and heavy. It feels like I'm carrying an iron basketball.

Isaac's plate clinks against the tile beside me as I massage my swollen belly, imagining it full of Jasper's child. How different that would be. How tragic, knowing it will never come to pass.

What would our baby look like? Fair-skinned, with inky tufts of soft hair?

Hazel eyes, or blue?

"Find anything resourceful yet?"

My eyes lift to the ceiling as I swallow back a wave of queasiness. "Not yet. I'm sure they wouldn't have made it that easy for me."

"There has to be something."

"I've been saying that for over two years. It's useless." Tears blur my vision, and for a moment, the ceiling morphs into a pillowy white sky. Birds tweet and sing from the farthest corner of my mind. Sunlight drapes golden stripes across my face. "Do you think my time is almost up?"

Considering Isaac seems to be the glass-half-empty type, I don't think I want his answer.

Or maybe I do.

After all, hope has gotten me nowhere.

Isaac drags his chain closer to the wall, and I wonder if he senses the defeat bleeding into every broken word.

"Don't know," he says, and it's nothing but honest. "My guess is you're a giant payday for them. It wouldn't be their best interest to get rid of you."

"Lucky me." I close my eyes when the clouds above me fade into hopeless white panels. "Have you ever made a decision that's haunted you?"

"Way more than one."

"I guess we've all been there. My decision just came with a death sentence." Rubbing my lips together, I think back to the gala—my last good night. "Before I was taken, I'd received numerous requests to become a surrogate for a couple. My husband wasn't on board, and I feel like I sealed my fate when I declined."

"Maybe it's unrelated." He pauses, knowing it's not. "Regardless, there was no way for you to know."

"It's funny, though, isn't it? How one simple choice can alter the course of your entire life?" Sighing, I pan my eyes to the little friendship bracelet circled around my wrist. It hangs loosely at the edge of my palm, too big for my shrinking arm. "I wonder what Joy did to end up here. Desiree. Mitchell. You. One wrong move, one split decision, and *poof*…life as we know it is over."

I'm depressing today.

A mere twenty-four hours have passed since our intimate chat that left me feeling bright and tingly—*human*. And now I'm dead inside. Empty.

Things change so quickly when trapped between these walls.

My eyes puddle with more tears as I twist my head to face the wall, wishing for laser-beam eyes. A way to see right through it. “I wish I could see you.”

He’s quiet for a few beats. “That wouldn’t do either of us any good.”

“Maybe not. But I’d give anything for just one look.” I’ve spent hours, days, trying to envision him. I don’t think I’ve ever yearned to know what someone looks like quite this much—not even the countless men who came before him.

Not even Joy.

Not even Sara and her songful voice.

I loathe the connection that’s been growing between us, and I want nothing more than to stomp it out like petals crushed beneath a heavy boot. But I can’t. I’ve given it too much life already.

Isaac’s head thumps against the wall, as if he’s leaning back against it. “There’s only one way for that to happen,” he tells me, his voice edged with a hint of emotion. “Find a way out.”

I hate that answer. “I’ll get right on that.”

“Keep looking. Keep thinking. Work your magic on the ogre. He’s got to crack one of these days. I’ve never given a woman flowers, let alone a trove of twisted hand-me-downs.”

“Would you give me flowers?”

“No. We’ve discussed this.” He chuckles lightly. “I’d give you multiple orgasms, a few spankings, and a collection of well-earned bruises, and then I’d send you on your merry way.”

I bite my lip to tamp down the smile. “Swoon.”

“It’s a wonder I’ve been single my whole life.”

A lightness seeps inside, countering the gloom. I start fiddling with the bracelet again, allowing the pastel yarn to soften my hard edges. I roll the beads between my finger and thumb. Graze my fingertips along the worn fabric. I give it a pinch…

And then I freeze.

I blink down at the bracelet, squeezing again.

“Better yet, I’d —”

“Isaac,” I cut him off, my heartbeats pinwheeling, my cramped stomach doing somersaults. “I think I have something.”

A few tense seconds roll by like a ticking bomb as he processes my words. “What do you mean?”

Swallowing hard, I shoot up into a sitting position and yank the bracelet off my wrist, studying it. Analyzing it. “The bracelet.”

“Elaborate.”

“This friendship bracelet Roger gave me. The yarn is held together by a thin wire. Seems sturdy, though.” Pure elation sweeps through me, and I can hardly catch my breath. “A wire. We can use that, right?”

“Shit.” His voice is strained. Eager. “The cuff… I need you to find a way to get that wire to me.”

“Get it to… I don’t—” Mind whirling with possible scenarios, I glance at my lunch plate. It was delivered an hour ago, meaning Roger will bring me supper in about four more hours. “Okay. I’ll figure something out.”

“Work your flirty mojo on the ogre. Slip it in his pocket somehow. He brings you your food first.”

I pull to my feet and start to pace.

How can I get close enough to him?

Is this even possible?

“Right.” I bob my head, frazzled yet buzzing with new conviction. “Okay. I’ll try. I can do this.”

“You can.” His voice sounds closer, like his lips are a hair’s breadth from the wall. “Get that wire on Roger and I’ll take it from there. I’ll get us out of here.”

Wetness streaks my cheeks.

I’m crying.

I’m crying because…

I believe him.

Not once have I ever believed any of them. I’d always disregard their gallant words and false promises.

“I’m not sure how long it will take me to pick the ankle lock, especially since I’ll have to be covert about it,” he continues. “But I will. Then I’ll tear the bastard’s head off and snatch his keycard.”

A new thought strikes me, and I halt my pacing feet. “Isaac…you need to get out fast. The cameras. You won’t have much time before someone sees.”

“I’m aware.”

“I’m serious. You can’t…” My ribs ache from the weight of what I’m

about to say. “You can’t try to save me, too. Run. Get help. Tell them to come back for me.” More tears. More choked-up words. “For all of us.”

Isaac doesn’t speak for a while. Twenty-two harrowing seconds.

And then…

“I know.” Voice dipping with a trace of regret, he clears his throat. “I’ve already thought this through.”

Of course he has. He’s smart, resourceful.

Trying to take me with him would be suicide.

I nod through an ambush of conflicting emotions, even though I want to shake my head, slap the wall, scream until my throat is shredded raw, and reject every word I just purged. I want to take them all back.

Bring me with you, Isaac. I’m begging you.

But I can’t.

He can’t.

All I can do is believe that he’ll send help, and soon, I will see the other side of these walls.

Because, somehow, despite everything…I trust him.

With my life.

“Okay,” I croak out, placing my fate in the hands of this elusive stranger. This brash, brilliant, confusing man. “Roger will bring me dinner in a few hours. I’ll make it happen. And then…I’ll see you soon.”

A few beats pass. “Yeah.”

I glance up at the camera. All video, no sound. Thank God for that. My captors feel untouchable, too arrogant to ever suspect that this broken-down model would have the brains to concoct an escape plan with the unruly man next door.

They’ll regret that one day.

I spend the next few hours pacing. I try to read, but the words bleed together, becoming illegible drivel, and I obtain nothing. Pacing some more, I fill my cheeks with a heavy breath and blow it out slowly. Isaac and I don’t talk much. I’m too on edge for chitchat, the anticipation of what I’m about to do spiraling me into a mess of anxious jitters. There is no room for slip-ups or falters. Everything hinges on this moment.

I can do this.

“I hear you pacing over there,” Isaac says, nearly three hours later.

I move in aimless circles, wringing my hands together. “I’m nervous.”

“I can distract you, if you want.”

Biting my lip, I almost smile. I’ve become well-versed in his version of *distractions,* and the offer is tempting. But I’m too wired for that. I can hardly remember how to breathe properly. “Sorry, but Chloe is out of the office at the moment.”

A light laugh travels over to me. “Nick must’ve really worn her out.”

“We can go with that.”

He hesitates. “You can do this, Everly.”

I stop pacing. A shaky breath journeys up my windpipe and hits the air like hope. Eyes falling shut, I drop my arms at my sides and curl my fists, allowing his words to give me strength. My body is weak, but I’ve spent years keeping my mind sharp, my wits keen.

Maybe all I needed was someone else to believe in me.

Licking my lips, I resume my pacing, walking up and down the length of the wall and dragging my fingertips along the cool surface. “I know how you can distract me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep.”

“Conveniently enough, I’ve come prepared for bondage.” He rattles his cuff chain for effect.

This time, I do smile. “I’ll name a song, and you tell me something you associate with it.”

Isaac’s chain jingles again, lighter this time, and I imagine him twisting on his mattress to face our wall. “Not what I had in mind, but if that’s what gets you going.”

“All right.” I clear my throat, surprised he agreed. “‘Bad Moon Rising’ by Credence Clearwater.”

“A buddy of mine. He turned into an old married guy and got a boat. We’d go out on the lake every summer and blast CCR.”

A smile hints. “So, you *do* have friends.”

“I had one, once upon a time, before life fucked me over and nothing mattered anymore.”

A twinge of heartache pinches me.

I want to know more; I want to know everything about him.

But that would be a mistake, and I’ve made far too many of those already. Even knowing his real name feels like something that will come back to

haunt me one day.

“Do you think he’s looking for you right now?” I wonder.

“That’s the kind of guy he is.” He says it almost regrettably. “I would do the same for him.”

I allow his answer to sink in before I inhale a breath and continue, “‘Separate Ways’ by Journey.”

“Mm. My sister playing that cringey music video that goes with the song in an endless loop. She was obsessed with eighties music. Drove me insane.”

Sara?

I don’t push the subject, too afraid to snap the moment like a delicate thread. “‘I Kissed a Girl’ by Katy Perry.”

He scoffs. “No.”

“‘Hey, Soul Sister’ by Train.”

“You have terrible taste in music. Next.”

A laugh slips out. “‘Blackbird’ by The Beatles.”

He pauses long enough that I nearly give up. When his voice finally reaches me, it’s low, strained with a tension that wasn’t there a moment ago. “My mother used to sing it while doing the dishes.”

Twenty responses sit on my tongue, everything from “that’s nice” to “I love that song” to “tell me about your mother.” That’s the one I want to ask —the one his tone tells me *not* to ask. The silence has grown thick, and I’m not sure how to bridge it.

Then he adds, “It made me feel…jealous.”

“Jealous?” I want to cry, and I’m not entirely sure why.

“It’s a song about hope. It always felt like she was rubbing it in.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter now.” He pauses. “Give me another.”

Inhaling softly, I turn my face toward the divide between us and offer him one final song, my hand pressing firmly against it. “‘The Scientist’ by Coldplay.”

He goes quiet.

Seven charged beats pass between us, sounding as loud as my heart.

When he replies, I’m already calmer, the low rumble of his voice the strangest lullaby.

But I hear it, clear as day.

“You.”

And when the door whooshes open a half-hour later, I have all the courage in the world.

11

It's not Roger.

Why isn't it Roger?

Terror infiltrates me, siphoning every bit of courage from my bones. I stumble backward until my spine hits the wall, shaking my head.

Was there sound on the video, after all?

Did we just seal our fate?

Do they know?

The nurse stalks over to me, her face unreadable, and pulls a needle from her front pocket. I glance at my cold plate of untouched lunch, knowing it's dinnertime. Roger should have been the one coming through that door, bringing me supper, not her.

Where is he?

I swallow back the acid in my throat, shifting my petrified gaze to the long needle glinting under the overhead lights. Sharp, merciless. It doesn't look like my medication.

It looks like…

"Time to go," she says, her voice cold. There's nothing there—she can't be human. "I suggest you cooperate."

Cooperate.

All I've done is cooperate, and it's gotten me nowhere. I'm still here. Trapped and helpless, a caged bird with broken wings.

"Stay away from me." Tears well in my eyes, blurring her wretched face. "Where's Roger?"

Isaac's chain moves, dragging toward the wall. He's listening, waiting. He knows there's been a change of plans. A plot twist, dismantling our escape.

But he can't help me right now.

I need to get out of here.

My pulse thrashes as my attention ping-pongs between the still-open door, the needle, and the nurse. I swallow again. It burns my throat, tastes

like ashes. “Please,” I beg, eyeing the doorway. I can run. I’ll make a break for it, consequences be damned. “Don’t touch me.”

The woman sighs, almost boredly, and advances on me.

I recognize the needle. The moment it pricks my vein, I’ll be gone. Paralyzed. Dragged unconscious into that operating room with Doctor Frankenstein, then mutilated from the inside out.

It’s procedure day.

And I can’t help but worry it’ll be the last one. My time might be up.

She steps forward.

I dodge.

An annoyed glare gleams in her eyes as she reaches for me again. She misses. My eyes flick to the cracked door, and it’s then she realizes she left it open. Her attention is stolen for a beat. A glimmer of panic. I use it to my advantage and make my move.

Smaller and faster, I dip underneath her thick arm and run for my life.

“Hey!” she barks.

Stars twinkle behind my eyes. Self-preservation fuels me. Isaac pounds on the wall, the sounds muffled by the shrill beats of my heart. My feet skid across the floor, but I stay standing, keep running, and reach for the door handle, flinging it open wider.

But I don’t get far.

A scream tears through me when I crash into a massive body.

Roger.

He grabs me.

And it all happens so fast.

“Isaac!” I screech.

Two meaty hands fist my upper arms, bruising and unbreakable. I can’t move, can’t flee. I can only scream his name.

“Isaac!”

The needle finds my neck before I can take another breath.

It’s over.

I failed.

I blink slowly as the drugs take over, and I sag against Roger’s chest, succumbing.

The last thing I hear is my name.

His nickname for me.

Bee.

17

Clipped words. A garble of sound. Blurry faces and streaks of light.

I'm being moved. Carried away.

My eyelids feel like leaden paper weights as I struggle to keep them open long enough to identify something. Voices seep into my psyche, unidentifiable and strange.

Gibberish.

I part my lips to speak, but only a frayed moan flutters past my lips. No words make it through. Just agony.

It feels like I'm underwater, a mermaid, floating through vivid coral and schools of fish. I become a character in a book with fins and jewels and water-spun hair, soaring skyward toward a happy ending. Sunlight on my skin, legs made for running, a voice that holds power and new songs to sing.

But the dull ache pounding between my legs squashes the fantasy. Sweat trickles down my temple in a slow-motion glide as I teeter on a rolling cot, my belly in cramps and my weightless arms glued to my sides. Strapped down and tied.

I'm not swimming.

I'm sinking.

The agony falls out again; a cry for help, a plea for mercy. "Please…"

Please, set me free.

Please, let me go.

Please, carry me to the room next door, so I can release my dying breath

in the arms of someone I trust. He can sing me my favorite song, and I'll have a final moment of peace before I slip away for good. I've earned that. I deserve that.

I don't want to die here.

Mostly…I don't want to die alone.

Minutes trudge by in a painful haze as I'm carted through the door and into my familiar hell. The straps release. My body is no more than a lifeless sack of skin and bones when I'm rolled off the gurney and deposited on my stiff cot. I land in a heap, strings of hair scattered across my face, legs half-dangling over the mattress, and one arm sprawled out while the other drapes across my chest.

I blink countless times, but everything is still a fog. I think it's Roger walking away from me. A mass of lumbering cruelness. "Roger," I call out, my voice full of scrapes and holes.

The figure pauses midway to the open door.

It is him.

My only chance at getting out of here.

"Please," I croak. "Please, don't leave me." I try to soften him with sympathy. Appeal to a part of him I know must be there, hidden deep and buried.

He makes a sound that's part-grunt, part-sigh. His hesitation sends a meager wave of strength through me, and I inch up on my elbows as they shiver and shake. I can hardly move, remnants of the anesthesia still coursing through my blood.

I glance at my wrist, where the bracelet used to reside. I'd taken it off earlier, hiding it underneath my pillow. If I can find it, I can lure him closer, slip it into his pocket, and —

The door slams shut.

No.

I collapse backward with a wail, just as a chain drags across tile on the other side of the wall, and I curl my knees to my chest and cry.

"Everly." His voice sounds far away, but there's no mistaking the urgency bleeding into my name. Isaac taps the partition between us. "Bee… Hey, talk to me."

"I…I can't…"

"Tell me what they did to you. Where they took you."

“I don’t know. They knocked me out…I don’t…” I squeeze my thighs together, hissing through the sting. “They took my eggs.”

Hopelessly, I sob.

My vision clouds, adding to my unraveling. My voice cracks, and my sanity splits. The drugs are still pumping through my veins, rendering me sluggish. Vulnerable. If they tried to kill me now, I’d be helpless to stop it.

I wrap my arms around my knees and weep into the starchy pillow. Isaac is right beside me. I feel him there, closer than ever. If I zoned out long enough, I could imagine his breath fanning across my face, his voice right next to my ear, vibrating through me.

How could I let this happen?

He’s a number.

A casualty.

A tragedy waiting to happen.

And somehow, I’ve come to care about his well-being just as much as my own. Twice the pain, double the loss.

“You need to keep it together. This isn’t over yet.” His tone is calm yet firm. He’s trying to reach me, but he can’t. “Listen to me. We’re not done. We have a plan. The next time that brainless fuckhead brings you food, get the bracelet on him, and I’ll…”

His voice fades out.

My cries taper off, weakening to sniffles, then to nothing. I inhale a breath as my eyes shut, Isaac’s words lulling me back underwater, where sunshine kisses the surface with a golden glow. My fingers lift as bubbles churn, and I reach for the dappled light, anxious to breach it.

But it’s just another wall.

Darkness finds me the moment my eyelids peel back open.

It’s quiet. Too quiet.

My muscles ache, and I realize I fell asleep as a tangled mess of limbs. Eyes dry and burning, I blink half-a-dozen times and extract my sticky cheek from the pillowtop as my body pulses with residual pain. When I try to move, my equilibrium wobbles, and I tip off the mattress, the cold floor a shock to

my skin.

Everything hurts.

Groaning, I flick my lamp on until the room is bathed in crimson lowlight, then crawl back on the cot. I pull the blanket up over me as my teeth chatter from the chill.

The silence turns eerie when I twist to face the wall.

Issac.

He was talking to me, trying to soothe my sadness before I drifted away, lost to the void.

Panic creeps inside me, and I slap a hand to the wall, eager to hear his voice again. But it hardly makes a sound, my strength no more than a feeble breeze against a brick pillar. “Isaac?”

Nothing.

Oh, God…did they take him?

Anxious heat filters through me, only heightening the cramps and knots in my stomach. If he’s gone, I won’t survive it. I can’t do this alone. Not anymore.

I curl my hand into a fist and start pounding. “Isaac.” My voice sounds like I’ve smoked ten packs a day through a permanent lung infection. “Isaac, say something. Please.”

Slap, slap, slap.

His chain moves.

Relief sweeps through me so hard I collapse back to the mattress like a puppet with its strings cut. “You’re still there.”

He makes a drowsy, grumbling sound, telling me he was asleep. “To my profound excitement.”

“I thought… I thought you…” Tears prickle the back of my throat as I curl closer to the wall. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

His shackles drag over to me and his voice loudens. “You okay?”

Okay is code for *alive*.

Neither of us is okay. I’m not sure we ever will be again. “I-I don’t think I have much time left,” I say brokenly, splaying a flat palm to the divider, pretending it’s his hand to mine. Human touch. “They took what they needed from me. They —”

“They still need to implant the eggs into the recipient, yeah? That’s how it works?” He pauses. “You have time. They aren’t getting rid of you before

the transfer is successful. And who's to say there won't be more?"

I swipe the wetness off my cheeks, absorbing his words.

Maybe he's right.

Maybe there is still time.

For me, anyway…

"What…what about you? Do you have an hourglass?" I realize I don't even know how long I was in that operating room. My plate of lunch still sits beside me, ice cold. "How long was I gone?"

"Few hours, maybe. Then you slept another three or four." A short pause. "No hourglass."

I swallow, closing my eyes as I sprawl out on my back, pulling the blanket to my chin. "I'm cold," I murmur. The pain in my abdomen throbs, and my teeth chatter at double the speed. "I hurt all over. It feels like they eviscerated me."

"Fight through it."

My eyes water again. "I don't know if I can."

"You have to. There's no other choice."

Choice.

I had the power of choice once. My choices led me here. "I don't have any fight left. Everything is…so hard."

He goes silent, and I wonder what he's thinking. His mind is a labyrinth. I'm constantly anticipating his next words—what he'll say to make me laugh, muse, question, or rage. Isaac has seen things. Worse things than me; I'm certain of it.

When he doesn't respond after a few minutes, a stab of loneliness tugs at me. Maybe I was fishing for a reaction. A grand speech or wise words. A shot of conviction to my despair.

I should know him better than that.

My fingers curl around the edge of the blanket. "You have nothing to say?"

"What, that you're done fighting?" He makes an abrasive sound. "I'm not the kind of guy to talk anyone off the ledge, Bee."

Frowning, I pull myself up on unsteady forearms. "You're the only guy I have."

"And for that, I'm sorry."

"Isaac, stop." I inch closer to the wall, wincing as my body pulses with

resistance. “I know you care. You don’t need to put up a wall with me.” My nose wrinkles as I clear my throat. “Figuratively.”

“You think you know me, huh?”

I waver, lowering back down to the cot. “I know enough.”

“Enlighten me, then.”

“I think, at your core, you’re a good man,” I say, tucking my hands underneath my cheek. “Decent, honest. Fiercely protective of the ones you love. But you wear a mask, so people can’t see the real you. To you, vulnerability is a disease, a weakness.” My eyes begin to adjust as I stare at the barrier of red-stained white. “Something bad happened to you. Something awful. And maybe you’ve always blamed yourself for it, even though it wasn’t your fault. It couldn’t be. But you feel deeply, more than you let on. You’ve internalized your losses to the point where you reject genuine emotion, connection…feeling. It’s easier that way. Safer.”

No response.

I scan the wall, my heartbeats more alive as I drink in the reflective stillness. “Am I on the right track?”

“Hmm,” he grouses, shifting in place. “Are you my therapist now?”

“Do you have a therapist?”

“People see therapists so they can change. That would imply there’s a point in trying. Or that I care.”

“Change isn’t the word I would use. Therapy is about growth. That’s something anyone can benefit from, right?” When he doesn’t reply, I chew on my cheek, hoping I’m reaching him in some small way. “Closing yourself off doesn’t do you any favors, Isaac. It’s lonely. Cold. Life will always be filled with loss and heartache, but that’s what makes us stronger. We carry those hardships with us, always, but we don’t let them define us.”

“Easy for you to say.” His tone is clipped and bitter. “You’ve led a privileged life up till now. A pretty face with pretty people catering to your every whim. Fame and fortune.”

“My *pretty face* is what put me here, rotting away in this prison.” My chest heaves, my emotions heightening. “It’s a curse, not a gift.”

“And it’s what’s keeping you alive right now.”

I release a humorless laugh. “You think I haven’t suffered? Grieved? Struggled?”

He doesn’t reply.

I sit up, wincing when I cross my legs. He's shutting me out again, pushing me away. A defense mechanism to dull his pain and avoid letting any more inside. "Talk to me," I plead softly, pressing my forehead and hand to the wall. "Tell me what hurt you."

Still, nothing.

"Isaac." I inhale a shuddery breath, curling my fingers. "Tell me why you hate the world."

Twenty-two seconds go by before he admits it. "Maybe I do hate the world."

Laced through the bitterness, there's a trace of vulnerability I've been longing to hear.

A tear leaks from my eye and travels down my cheek, warm and light. Swallowing, I close my eyes and wait for more.

He pauses. Five more beats until he says the words that break my heart.

"But the world hated me first."

18

I know my mistake the second the words leave my mouth.

My head thumps against the wall.

Good job, Porter. That's not going to set her curiosity off at all.

"Isaac…"

Yep, I've done it now. "Forget I said anything."

"Why would anyone—" She shifts against the wall, and I hear the strain she's trying to mask. That procedure fucked her up. "You really feel that way? That's —"

"I didn't mean anything by it. We can let it go." I say it harsher than I mean to. Snappy.

"Okay."

She's quiet for several minutes, and I know well enough that it's *not* because she's letting it go. Once you've piqued this woman's interest, she'll persist until her inquiring mind is satisfied. But since she's not pushing it just yet, I close my eyes and wait.

Before long, I'm imagining sinking into the wall behind me. I do that sometimes. Even more since Nick and Chloe had their night of fun. Our dynamic has changed—and not just in the sexy, flirtatious way. There's a different level of intimacy I usually don't go anywhere near. Maybe it has something to do with being forced to rely on words instead of…body parts.

I don't hate it as much as I thought I would.

But right now, the things I'm imagining doing if I could materialize in

that other room have nothing to do with our kinky alter egos. We're both injured and exhausted. Tired, down to the bone. For my own sanity, I've been throwing myself into escape preparations, dreaming of creative ways to murder the man holding us captive.

But the longer the days drag on, it's harder to believe our lives will end any differently than the others who found themselves here.

The mental and emotional strain is real.

In the end, I'm just a man. My life will be as easy to snuff out as the rest of them.

I hear her over there, shifting around, trying to find a position that makes her feel less like a stranger had just gone in and poked around her insides. If I could sink into this wall right now, I'd scoop Everly into my arms and just hold her.

And then we'd sleep.

I'm very near unconsciousness when she speaks again. "You know what I keep thinking about?"

Is it what I'm thinking about?

Likely not.

Knowing her, she's magically deciphered everything I've kept buried just by the few telling sentences I let slip. She's good like that. From what I've seen, there aren't many people with better natural instincts…except for me.

Maybe Tanner, but I'd never admit that. It's good to keep the guy on his toes.

I wait for her to spill my entire life story down to the letter when she says, "Bubble tea."

Well, that wasn't anything I expected. "That overly sweet stuff with those solid balls of goo that come up through the straw, so you have to chew your drink or choke on it?" I never understood the appeal.

"You haven't tried it, have you?"

"God, no."

"You should sometime."

There's a heaviness in that statement. The same weight that anchors the words *see you soon.* She's still trying to convince herself there's a chance of a sometime…or a soon. It's how she's survived this long, after all.

I'm just not sure either of us really believes it anymore.

"Sounds awful. What else do you miss?"

“Anything chocolate. I have a bit of a sweet tooth. How about you?”

I see this conversation for the reprieve it is. We were beginning to delve into heavy territory, and as usual, my involuntary reflex kicked in and I got surly. This is my out. A way to keep our connection without dwelling on the heavy stuff.

Thanks for that, Everly.

“Eh,” I say, flippantly. “I don’t really —”

“Before you go any further with that thought, you should know that I’m dubious about anyone who doesn’t like chocolate, tacos, or dogs.”

“So, two out of three makes me around sixty-six percent passable?” Truthfully, I’m more of a cat person. Any animal that can tell you to fuck off just by blinking is right up my alley. Whatever. At least I’m safe on tacos.

Who doesn’t like tacos?

“I guess I can’t afford to be too picky.” Her laugh ends in a pained groan that makes me wonder if she really has been eviscerated.

“Are we playing the game of ‘torture ourselves by salivating over things we can’t have’ now?”

“Yep. Let’s see, are you a steak and potatoes kind of guy?”

I scoff. “Doesn’t matter much. Food is food. Gotta eat, or you die. What I really want is a cigarette and a bottle of whisky.” I used to keep a bottle of my favorite whisky in my apartment just to prove I could resist it.

“So, if a gourmet chef offered to cook whatever you wanted right now, you’re telling me you’d ask for whisky and cigarettes.”

“Just cigarettes. I don’t drink anymore.”

“Okay.” She lets that little tidbit go without further questioning. “That settles it. You can bring the bubble tea, and I’ll bring the cigarettes.” It’s tinged with a thread of hopelessness that breaks my heart.

Getting us out of here will take a fucking miracle.

In the quiet space that follows, I can’t help but dwell a little too long on the thought of that whisky, until I blurt something just as dangerous. “Chicken pot pie.”

“What?”

“That’s what I miss.” *Turn around, Porter, you don’t want to start this…* “Sara’s chicken pot pie.”

And there it is.

I just pushed on a boulder that’s balanced at the edge of a mountain, and

there’s no going back.

“Sara.” Everly swoops in on the subject, but she clearly doesn’t know what to do with it. “She…she was…”

“My younger sister. Half-sister, technically, but since she was the only member of my family who cared to claim me, it didn’t matter.”

And now I’m all in.

I can almost hear Everly trip over the thoughts. Sifting, discarding, needing to know more, but treading very carefully so I don’t shut down. She knows me too well by now. “Your sister… She liked to cook?”

“No, she was terrible.” I laugh. “But she figured out how to make chicken pot pie, and it was the only kind worth eating. It was the first thing she made for me after she grew up and got out of the house.”

It was also the last, but I’m not touching that one.

“So, she sang, played the guitar, and made chicken pot pie.”

“That about sums it up.”

I’m full of shit. It doesn’t even come close to summing it up.

“Will you tell me more? What else did she do?” The desperation in that question makes me remember just how lonely the girl next door is. Sometimes I forget that my sister was one of her companions for a few fleeting moments. One she didn’t have time to get to know well enough.

Under different circumstances, there’s no doubt they would have been friends.

That’s what she wants from me now—a lifeline, a connection to the girl who sang to her on the other side of the wall.

“She saved me.” That’s the raw truth of it, really. “She saved my life.”

“What did she do?” There’s a detectable undertone of awe there, and suddenly, I can’t remember why I hid her away for so long. Why I refused to talk about her. Maybe I didn’t want to bring her memory into this place of darkness and death. But the thing is, she was already here.

“For some reason, she believed I was worth something. God knows why—most of the time, I wasn’t very nice to her, but once she made a decision, you couldn’t do much to change her mind. One day when she was six, I beat up this bully on the playground, and she was convinced I was meant to be a superhero.”

“I’ll be your sidekick,” she announced, swinging from her knees on the monkey bars. “I can even have a nickname. What should it be?”

“I don’t want a sidekick. You’d probably pee your pants at the first sight of the Joker.”

“No, I won’t. I can be brave like you. Oh, I know!” She pointed to a nest settled in the branches of an aspen tree. “I could be a bluebird.”

“Nobody’s afraid of a bluebird.” I pulled one of the braids hanging upside down. “Besides, that name is taken.”

I spent my weekends sitting on the floor of the local comic bookstore, reading. I knew these things.

“Why? If no one is scared of them?”

“Because…you’re a pain in the butt. That’s why.”

The next day when she went to school, she asked her first-grade teacher to help her come up with a name inspired by the birds, and when she returned, she announced herself as the Blue Jewel.

Of course, I thought that was ridiculous.

“She followed me around for years after that. Always afraid she’d miss out on helping me do something heroic.” Objectively speaking, my fists were just prone to finding trouble, but in Sara’s imagination, I was fighting for justice. Protecting the defenseless.

“That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I didn’t think so at the time.”

“Sounds like a typical big brother, little sister relationship.”

It wasn’t.

Truth is, I had very complicated feelings toward my younger sibling. As we grew up, she was treated like a princess—like she was solely responsible for all the light and hope in the world, while I was born with a shadow attached to me. One I could never escape.

I wanted to hate Sara for what she represented.

And I tried.

But in the end, she was everything her parents saw in her, and as I lean back against the barricade, my gaze fixed on the cot where she once slept, I let the essence of her bleed through my words.

I bring her back to life, if only in memory.

“When I was finishing high school and deciding on a career, my mother looked me dead in the eyes and told me I shouldn’t bother, because I was destined for prison, anyway.”

“How could she say that to her own child?”

“She had her reasons.” My mother was a complex human. Damaged, in her own right.

I believe she was hopeful once, but when life let her down, she turned bitter. Unfortunately, I symbolized the beginning of that. “Anyway, it was Sara who followed me out—who told me she thought I had a different destiny. That I was meant to save people.”

She believed in me so hard, it started feeling…possible.

Her dreams gave me this little pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel—just enough to keep me from giving up. I enrolled in the police academy because of my sister and her audacious dreams, but that’s a secret I’m holding on to for several reasons.

It doesn’t really matter. That was a different life.

Now I’m a prisoner, just like Everly. Like Sara.

Our lives, threaded together between two cells. Devoid of light. Destined to end the same.

“Good.” Everly’s voice carries the same hard conviction my sister’s used to. “Because you *are* worth something. You’re worth so much more than you give yourself credit for.”

“Yeah.” I smile to myself. “You two are alike in a lot of ways.”

She ponders this for a few minutes, her inevitable question lurking in shadow. “Why was your mother so cruel to you? What excuse could she possibly have?”

“It’s because of the way I was brought into the world,” I tell her, since there’s no reason not to anymore. “I was the constant, enduring symbol of everything that went wrong for her.”

“Did that have something to do with your father?”

“It had everything to do with him.” The boulder keeps rolling. Picking up speed. Tumbling down the cliffs.

“He wasn’t a good man?”

“He was a rapist, Everly.”

Silence.

Seconds upon seconds of empty air.

And finally, “Isaac… I don’t know what to —”

“It is what it is, Bee. You don’t have to say anything.” What can be said for a man who made a career out of violently destroying other humans? Who got off on it.

“Did you know him?”

“Only by name. Court reports. Convictions. He took his own life in prison while serving thirty counts of sexual assault. There were more victims, undoubtedly, but that was all they could prove.” I don’t tell her that he was so notorious, if I said his name, she’d likely know it. I refuse to give that name power.

I’ve always imagined him serving eternity being eaten by maggots in the pits of Hell.

His legacy should go with him.

As I stare at the chain anchoring me to the floor, the similarity to my feelings about the man who forced me into this world isn’t lost on me. There’s no response from the other side of the wall, and I don’t expect one.

I’d rather there wasn’t.

My palms are slick, the back of my neck sticky. But the tile is cold, even through my jeans. This place is kept fucking frigid, so I don’t think it’s the air temperature. It’s more like —

Fuck, I could really use a cigarette.

It’s the first time I’ve said any of this out loud. Tanner found out by digging around, as detectives do, but aside from a brief acknowledgment when the bastard died, he knew to leave the subject alone.

Other than that, there was my mother, my stepfather—who was indifferent toward me as long as I wasn’t causing trouble for the family—and Sara.

Now that it’s out, I feel…empty. As empty as this room.

“I didn’t even know who he was, at first, until my mother felt the need to explain what was inherently wrong with me.”

“That’s horrible. No child should have to go through that.”

“They shouldn’t. But that’s life. It’s a crapshoot, and some people roll a shit hand.”

The day it all finally sank in is burned into my memory like it happened yesterday. It was the first time I got suspended from school for fighting, and my mother was livid. She retaliated by making sure I knew how much I’d

ruined her life. What a mistake I was.

In the past, when I'd asked about my father, she'd been evasive.

But not that day.

That day, she led me to her room, opened the very bottom dresser drawer where the evidence was hidden, and spread it all out across the bed. The court reports. The testimonies of women who sat on that stand when he was finally brought to justice.

The pictures…

I look too much like him to ever let her forget.

When I asked her why she even kept me, she explained that she was young and naïve, and thought it was meant to be. Her family had been religious; they raised her to believe in the sanctity of life and told her everything happened for a reason. At the time, she was falling apart, grasping for something to believe in, so she convinced herself the conception of a baby —a new life, a clean slate—was a symbol of redemption.

She named me Isaac.

Then, her family decided that sometimes bad things happen because of hidden sin, and they rejected her.

And there I was.

We were stuck with each other.

To top it off, I wasn't an easy child to raise, and never met her expectations. Over time, I became a symbol of an event that ruined her life. A bad decision that put her in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A sin.

She was an ocean of PTSD and ruined dreams, and my presence was a toxic oil spill. We didn't mix, and as a kid, I never had a chance.

"Well…" I let my eyes close again, pressing my fingers into the pressure points just above my eyebrows. "Now that I've dumped all my —"

"It isn't genetic, you know. That kind of evil. I don't believe that."

I shouldn't be surprised that she so easily uncovered the fear that dogged me through life, but it feels kind of like she's been rifling through the long-archived files of my brain.

"Okay."

"I just wanted to make sure you knew."

Whether I believe it is a different story. Depends on the day. "Thanks."

Mercifully, she drops the subject of my parentage, because I've gone way

past my quota for dwelling on this bullshit. My head feels like that proverbial boulder was dropped right on top of it.

"Did Sara make music for a living?"

"She was a barista, actually, but that was just a convenience so she could be close to the adjoined cafe where she liked to play."

"I can picture that for her. Sitting on a little corner stage under a light. Everyone stopping mid-conversation, mesmerized when she played her favorite song, and then running back behind the counter to make someone a half-caf nonfat iced mocha with a splash of sugar-free caramel."

"Nailed it."

"And that story of the jerk who made her stop playing for a while?"

"I'm sure you'll be shocked to find out that was me." Of course, I only said that to get her to back off. I'd spiraled into one of my self-loathing phases, and being around her innocent positivity just drove the knife in deeper. I'd moved out and needed to leave my childhood baggage behind. "Turned out all right, though. She found me again, once she was out on her own. Barged back into my life with the same enthusiasm and hounded me until I came to see her play."

"Made you chicken pot pie."

"That stuff was the shit." Now my mouth really is watering. And, oddly enough, I feel lighter than I have since the day she made me my last chicken pot pie, walked out the door, and never came back.

Even while sitting here, chained to the floor.

Thanks for that, too, Everly.

"Isaac?"

I hum a response around the lump constricting my throat. All these memories… I don't trust my voice right now.

"Thank you for sharing her with me." Everly's voice is softer, closer, like she's entered the temple of something sacred. "I knew I liked her. I just wish I could have known her better."

"I'm glad she had you to keep her company…at the end."

I need to rest. To sit with my ghosts and be prepared to battle my way out of here. Because whether I believe there's a chance I'll get out in one piece or not, I still owe that bastard for taking my sister out of this world before her time.

And then there's Everly…

I’m not sure why I feel compelled to bring it up when I already know the answer. “That guitar pick you have over there. It’s blue, right? Sparkly?”

“Yeah.”

I picture Everly cradling it in her hands like it’s something priceless. Her favorite memento. One I bought myself, years ago. It was special. Sara even gave it a name.

Jewel.

“It’s hers.”

My sidekick.

“I know.”

“Take care of it for her, okay?

Her answer is no more than a whisper.

“Always.”

19

Six days.

Six days of failure after failure.

Roger has delivered my meals—morning, noon, and night—and I've done everything in my power to get that bracelet on him. Batted lashes, coy smiles, flirtatious words. A faux yearning for conversation and company.

Nothing's worked.

My only chance of getting out of here has been a wall more impenetrable than the four walls closing in on me.

I swear they're shrinking.

Or maybe that's just hope.

My stomach tightens with a sharp pain as I lay on my mattress, curled up in a shivery ball. Over the past few days, my health has declined. I'm not sure what's going on, but this morning I woke up with a fever that feels like red-hot lava bubbling beneath my skin.

Pulling the blanket up over my swollen belly, all the way to my chin, I moan when another wave of searing pain contracts in my abdomen.

Isaac's voice is a whirr of muddled noise beside me. "…and then his head will be on my breakfast plate."

I blink slowly. "What?"

"The ogre. Decapitation is inevitable."

"That sounds…nice." My eyelids close like curtains, drawing over the stage of my foggy eyes. "I don't want breakfast. I'm not hungry."

He pauses. “You good over there?”

“Pancakes are good.”

“What now?”

When I reopen my eyes, happy-faced pancakes are dancing above my head, drizzled in syrup and melted butter. Warm goo drips into my eyes.

Luckily, I have enough cognitive sense to realize I’m losing my damn mind.

I swipe at my face; it’s only sweat.

“Isaac…I’m sick.” Ice-cold chills filter through me, a contrast to my burning skin. The mattress moves underneath me as I relentlessly shake, my knees tucked to my chest.

Another long pause festers before his voice sounds closer. “Sick? Like the flu?”

“Worse, I think,” I croak. “My procedure…something’s wrong.”

A thump against the wall. “Fuck.”

I can’t determine if the worry in his tone is for my health, or for the rusty wrench thrusted into our escape plan. I can hardly move, let alone woo Roger. I’ve already failed, and now I’m deteriorating by the minute. “I’m… freezing,” I tell him, my teeth clicking together. “High fever. A-and my stomach…it hurts. Dull pain and nausea. I think I might puke.”

“Goddammit.” The curse is a harsh, gritty whisper forced through clenched teeth.

I want to believe he cares.

About me.

My mind swims with fruitless fantasies and daydreams. If we were to escape, would we keep in touch? Would there be monthly coffee dates, or playing catch-up over lunch at cutesy cafes?

What would we talk about?

Our common thread is nothing but a wall, a madman, and a boatload of shared trauma—not exactly the foundation from which long-lasting friendships are grown.

Then I wonder if we’d ever become…*more*.

For a moment, guilt trickles through me as tears sting my eyes, the physical and emotional turmoil ruining me from the inside out.

I never imagined a life without him.

Without Jasper.

Isaac breaks into my pendulating thoughts. “How do you usually feel after the procedure?”

He sounds so far away, like a distant echo carried by the wind. “A little sore. Some cramping, no worse than menstrual cramps. But now…” I attempt to catch my breath, like I can’t hold on to it long enough, and the wind is carrying that, too. “The pain is a lot worse. I can’t stop sh-shaking. Feels like…I’m dying.” I whimper, helplessly. “Can you imagine? All these years, surviving the clutches of twisted serial killers, and a stupid infection takes me out.”

“*No*.” He slaps the wall, and it sounds like both of his hands. “Fuck that. Not happening.”

“Would you miss me?”

It’s a silly question, utterly pointless. Yet a dopey smile steals my lips as I gaze up at the ceiling, watching it blur and move, morphing into a star-studded galaxy. I think I hear laughter. Children. My mother is beside me, stroking my sweat-slicked hair back as she feeds me spoonfuls of soup.

Does my mother miss me?

Allison? Colleagues?

Faceless fans and followers?

I imagine how many people have unfollowed my social media accounts because I’m no longer relevant. I’m gone. I’m not sure why, but the notion is excruciating. A hollow ache.

All my life, I thought the worst feeling was to be hated, judged, despised —resented just for existing. But now I know I’d take all of that over this.

The worst thing in the world is to be forgotten.

I curl into myself and face the wall, waiting for Isaac’s reply. He’s silent, and the ache only grows. “You don’t have to say anything,” I murmur, unsure if he can even hear me. “I don’t think your answer would make me feel any better.” There’s a low hum purring in my ears. Ocean waves. “No one is looking for me. I shouldn’t expect you to care, either.”

“Mm,” he drones. “Sounds like you’re giving up.”

“Why shouldn’t I? The world thinks I’m dead. I don’t matter anymore.”

“Who the fuck cares what the world thinks? They’re irrelevant. Outliers,” he says. “Your worth isn’t determined by external validation. That’s bullshit.”

“You don’t have to —”

He slaps the wall, hard. “You still matter.”

My breath catches. I squeeze the front of my nightdress as my eyes fall shut. “I just think…I feel like —”

“No. Fuck whatever you’re about to say.” Two more slaps. “You. Matter.”

“Isaac…”

“Your name is Everly Cross, and you fucking matter. Believe it. Own it. And start fighting like you do.”

I want to cry.

His tone is hard, yet his words make me feel soft inside, gooey and warm. It could be the fever, but I think it’s him.

It takes all my strength just to lift my arm and press my hand to the wall. “I didn’t take you as someone…who gave pep talks.”

He grumbles. “Better theory is, I’m smart enough to know that my best chance of survival relies on the mopey girl next door.”

A drowsy smile lifts. “Weird way to say you like me.”

His tone softens, betraying his words. “I tolerate you.”

“Yeah…” My eyes drift closed again, the infection stealing me away. “I tolerate you, too, Isaac.”

Before I’m fully immersed in fever dreams, the door to my room unlocks. I barely manage to open my eyes all the way as I regard the hulking figure standing before me. *Two figures?* No…just one. My vision is distorted and I’m seeing double.

I swallow the sandpaper in my throat. “Roger?”

He grunts. “Breakfast.”

“I…I’m sick. Can you…” I reach for him, for something, but all I do is slide off the mattress. My head pounds, my body aches. As I inch myself back up, my hand slides underneath my pillow for support. For leverage.

And that’s when I feel it. I remember.

I have to do this.

Right now.

Roger trudges forward with a blurry platter, and the sound of it clinking against the tile mingles with the feel of yarn-spun wire sliding into my palm. I cup my hand around it as I lift up, collapsing onto the cot.

“Roger…please.” I squeeze the bracelet, my heart ping-ponging between my ribs. “I need medicine.”

Another caveman grunt. “You’ll live.”

“I won’t. It’s serious. Something went wrong…with my procedure.”

Hesitating, Roger stares down at me with beady eyes, his bald head morphing into two heads, then back into one. I can’t read him. His expression is stone, but he’s still here.

I raise my weakened arm, our precious escape plan hidden inside my fist. “Can you…help me sit up?” He can tell I’m not faking it. I’m truly sick—sweating, shivering, and wrecked. My skin feels hot and flushed, and I can only imagine how I look to him. “Please. I…need you.”

It hurts to say the words, but rotting in this cell hurts more.

Isaac is quiet.

He’s listening, waiting, silently begging for me to get this bracelet on Roger.

My heart races with adrenaline, a reminder that I’m still alive.

Still here.

I still matter.

“Roger…” Reaching for him, I try to move on my own but drop backward with a small cry. “I can’t do it. I-I’m hungry.”

Finally, to my heart-rending relief, Roger approaches. I catch him glancing over his shoulder at the camera before he looks back down at me. He doesn’t say anything as he bends over and wraps his thick arms around my torso, heaving me upward, onto my knees.

I cling to him.

I hold him tight, pressing my warm cheek to his chest. “Thank you.”

His big body freezes in my grip as I hug him, feigning care and comfort. He smells like bleach and cigarette smoke, like death and decay. But as my hands trail down his waist in a slow descent, I carefully slip the bracelet into his back pocket and give his butt a squeeze.

Roger tenses on a low moan. Pulls me closer, holds me tighter.

“Mmm,” he groans, a lewd, grotesque sound that coils around my insides like a disease worse than this infection. A meaty paw cups my ass, feeling me up through the thin gown.

Oh, God.

What if he takes this further?

What if he…?

“Hey.” A sudden ruckus unfolds beside me. Isaac starts pounding on the

wall, rattling his chain, creating a scene.

A distraction.

My breath is quick and shallow as I try to wiggle free from Roger's grasp. His fingers tighten on my ass, almost bruising, as he glares at the wall. "Shut the fuck up over there."

Isaac continues.

Noise, yelling, cursing.

"You're a spineless fucking prick. Come over here and deal with me, you low-life, tiny-dicked bastard." He slams his chain against the wall so hard he almost breaks through. "Get the fuck over here so I can put my fist in your ugly fucking face."

Roger releases me, and I fall back, slumping against the wall.

The room spins.

I watch as he charges toward the door, moving faster than I've ever seen him move.

Everything is a blur.

Chaos.

I droop sideways, landing on the cot as my body shakes, my pulse hammers, and my mind vaguely takes in the havoc unleashing beside me. I hear Isaac's door unlock. Chains jangle. His voice heightens, insults spewing from his mouth like snake venom.

Fists. Punches. Rattling iron. Grunts and groans.

I peer up at the camera, wondering if anyone is watching. If anyone hears what I'm hearing.

Did Isaac overpower him? Is Roger killing him?

Curling into a ball, I try to stay awake. I cling to reality while my body threatens to succumb to darkness.

No…not now. Please, not now.

I whisper through chattering teeth, "Back pocket."

A final crunching sound rings out, and then everything goes quiet.

I wait for footsteps. Alarms. The Timekeeper's voice telling us our time is up.

But there's nothing.

My eyes flutter closed as nightmares swoop in to carry me away. But before I pass out, I hear Isaac's voice on the other side of the wall.

"Stay with me."

20

I don’t have time to think about her. To stress over how sick she might be or wonder if she’s lying over there unconscious…dying. “Stay with me. We’re almost there.”

With my cuffed ankle draped across the opposite knee, I maneuver the wire through the lock, twisting to get just the right angle. Unfortunately for me, my captors aren’t complete idiots; they’ve used a cuff with a double-locking system—the kind police issue.

Unfortunately for *them,* I know my way around those.

If I can get this damn wire to cooperate.

Come on…come on…

I feel it when the wire catches on the right spot, and with a little tension and a steady hand, the first lock moves out of the way.

One down.

Exhaling, I go to work on the other one.

My eyes keep darting to the camera, like I’ll be able to see if someone’s about to come busting through the door. Several yards away, Roger’s chest rises and falls. I dropped him in one of the camera’s blind spots, hoping no one saw the scuffle. If I’m lucky, Roger was the guy watching the monitors, but I can't count on that.

“I’d feel a whole lot better if you’d answer me, Everly.”

I had no way of knowing if she’d managed to get the bracelet on him at the time, but I heard the two of them over there—knew she was weak, and he

was touching her, and I took a gamble.

The way he came barreling in here, all pissed off, like I'd interrupted something—it set the violence in me off like a nuclear bomb. My taunting made him careless, and the second he crossed that invisible line, I rushed him.

Big as he is, once his air was cut off, he hit the ground like anyone else.

It was a relief when I found the bracelet—I could have ruined everything if I'd interrupted before she had the chance. But she was fucking brilliant, and there it was, in his back pocket, woven around a nice thick wire, just like she said.

While I was at it, I snagged his keycard, because God only knows what I'm going to find outside this room. I also pulled his shoes off and shoved them on my feet. They don't quite fit, but I'm not running out of here barefoot like a dumbass.

Assuming I ever get this —

"Fuck yes!" With a hook and a twist, the second lock lifts and I rip the damn thing off me, letting it *clank* to the floor. I'm free, but there's no time to celebrate.

I've got to go.

"Hang on for me. I'm getting us out of here." But I hesitate a second longer than I should, laying my hand on the wall one last time. "See you soon."

Maybe there's a part of her that can hear me.

Turning away, I push off that damn barrier and dart for the door, practically leaping over the ogre's limp body on the way out.

The hallway is quiet, and Everly's door is *right there,* but I know death lurks around every corner. Stopping now would be a fool's mission, and I haven't come this far to screw it all up.

It's disorienting, seeing the outside of the room for the first time. The plain, sterile-looking hallway appears to be an extension of the room I've been locked in, with the same tile floors and white walls. An industrial-type building, then. Glancing right, then left, I turn away from Everly's door and toward the stairwell sign at the opposite end.

I'm exiting onto the lower level, moving as quickly as possible while trying not to draw undue attention, when an alarm goes off.

Shit. Someone found Roger.

21

Arctic water splashes across my face.

Gasping, I shoot up with a start as cold liquid dribbles down my face and neck, drenching my nightgown. I'm disoriented. Chilled to the bone. I blink icy droplets out of my eyes as I glance up, and a blurry face slowly comes into focus.

An orange plastic bucket dangles from freckled fingers as a man towers over me.

I'm still gasping for breath, choking on water and words. "Wh-what…?"

Just like that, my senses click back on, one by one.

Briny well water coating my tongue. The scent of sweat and body odor. Chattering teeth and puckered skin. Alarms, sirens, footsteps. Men barking orders from the hallways.

The red-haired man.

Dolph.

My instincts kick in and I scramble to my feet, slipping on a puddle and abruptly dropping to my butt. Pain shoots all the way up my spine, my tailbone throbbing.

Dolph moves like lightning and grabs me by the front of my wet gown, yanking me back up. I struggle, my eyes pinging wide when I notice a pistol fisted in his right hand. "No, please, no —"

He shoves me to the mattress.

I'm still fevering, weak, and frozen as I glance at the wall.

Isaac.

Alarms blare, my heart skipping with each screechy siren.

Did he escape? Is he out?

Will they kill me before he brings back help?

I crawl off my mattress, toward the open door, as a low chuckle rumbles from Dolph. His leg lashes out until a heavy boot connects with my side. More pain slithers through my body like a hot-iron brand, and I roll onto my back, his foot holding me down by the chest. Wriggling and writhing, I grasp at his ankle with both hands, trying to push him off me. I can't breathe. My ribs burn from the pressure as I helplessly slide against the slick tile.

Another figure crashes through the doorway.

Two figures.

I twist my head, my eyes landing on The Timekeeper.

And Roger.

"Roger!" I shout, still squirming beneath Dolph's dirty black boot. "Roger, please…"

Roger is shoved into the room, stumbling. Dolph lifts off me, snatching me by the hair and pulling me to my feet. Scalp burning, I try to flee, but his hold is too firm.

The Timekeeper *tsks* from the threshold. "Many things grate me, Everly," he drawls, adjusting the collar of his pink-and-navy-checkered suit. "Morons talking on speaker phone in public places. Chronic tardiness. Crying babies. Incorrect usage of the word 'seen.'" A slight pause. "But would you like to know what's at the top of that list?"

I kick at Dolph's shins, to no avail.

Sneering, The Timekeeper glances at me. "*Inconveniences*."

"Please, you don't have to —"

"Enough!" His voice echoes loud enough to make me flinch. "I highly suggest you keep that mouth shut before I slice you open from chin to cunt."

My blood runs colder than the water at my feet as he plucks a pocketknife from his front pocket and gives it a flick. The blade gleams under the fluorescent lights.

I stop squirming, my throat burning as I swallow down acid.

"That's better." His tone dips lower, more composed, the veins in his neck shrinking. "You think you're intelligent, don't you? Beauty *and* brains."

I grit my teeth. "You're a psychopath."

“Yes, well, there’s a name for everything these days.” An easy smile tilts his lips as he grazes his thumb and finger along his chin. “Would you believe there’s something called a thimblerigger? One who shuttles a pea among three thimbles, then bets on which one the pea was under.” He chuckles with feigned amusement. “Truly asinine.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“That hardly matters if you don’t manage to get away yourself. And you won’t.” Two mismatched eyes glint with menace. “I own you, Everly—just like I own your new friend, who’s being captured as we speak.” He flicks the pocketknife again. Once, twice. “My, my…how I cannot wait to hear the sounds he makes when I gut him, like a fisherman filleting his catch.”

My eyes burn with razor-like tears.

Isaac…

I whip my head back and forth. “He’s going to kill you. *Painfully*,” I say, hissing the words through my teeth. “I promise you that.”

The Timekeeper blinks at me and returns the knife to his pocket. Hesitating for effect, he then pulls out a familiar thin wire.

Crooked and used.

My breathing shallows.

“You think I don’t know what you did?” Taking a step forward, he turns his attention to Roger and holds up the wire, dangling it back and forth. “What you *both* did.”

Eyes panning between the two men, I claw at Dolph’s meaty forearm, leaving angry nail marks behind. His hold only tightens. I can’t break free.

“I’m a man of many gifts, but leniency is not one of them.” He sighs, halting a foot away from Roger. “I have little tolerance for incompetent staff.”

Roger stiffens, having been silently watching the scene unfold. “I didn’t —”

Shiny metal is pulled from The Timekeeper’s waistband.

A shot rings out.

I don’t have time to process anything before Roger’s head explodes.

Blood erupts like a geyser, brains flying every which way.

It’s a blur, a smog of horror.

I scream.

The sound is a faraway howl, diminished by the ringing in my ears.

Gunpowder chokes me. Brain matter lands on my skin and dress. I sag to the floor, held up by my hair as Roger's body twitches and drops to the blood-smeared tile.

Dolph doesn't even blink.

His red-smattered face remains expressionless as he stares at the mutilated body at our feet.

I'm numb.

Sound drowns out.

Wailing, alarms, sobs—all a pitchy hum of terror. Background noise.

"Look what you made me do, Everly." The Timekeeper bristles, shaking his head. "Now my favorite suit is ruined." His jaw tics with distaste as he swipes chunks of brain matter off his jacket. Then he pivots toward me, pointing the weapon at my forehead. "*Inconvenient*."

I go still.

I'm staring down the barrel of a gun.

This is it.

I squeeze my eyes shut, returning to the foyer of my home. Jasper, lying in a pool of blood with a bullet in his back.

My husband, dead.

My life, over.

Memories unfurl, sweeping through my mind in vivid Technicolor. Dinner dates, wine mixers, inside jokes, future-planning. Dancing on street corners with my best friend. Falling asleep in my mother's arms as she strokes my hair and sings my favorite song.

So many moments. So many dreams.

But memories are fleeting, and now I dream in black and white, my colors running dry. Everything is gray…everything except for him.

Isaac.

He's going to make it.

It's too late for me, but he'll get out of here. He's going to be okay.

I open my eyes and stare at the smoking barrel, a sense of peace washing over me. Finality. This was always in the cards for me. I know that.

But there's hope for Isaac. He's already on the other side of these walls, bringing back help. Not for me, but for the other trapped souls who deserve a second chance at life.

My dying wish is that Isaac will burn this murderous hell house to the

motherfucking ground, and The Timekeeper will become nothing but ashes in the wind. A stain.

Justice will be served.

Justice for Isaac. For Joy. For Mitchell, Kara, Mary, and all the others.

For Sara.

I inhale sharply and watch as he presses a finger to the trigger, and then…

Nothing.

The Timekeeper winks at me with his crystalline eye, returning the pistol to his waistband. “As you can see, I can be a merciful man when warranted. Roger was a dutiful soldier for many years. Perhaps I gained a soft spot for him.” He nudges Roger’s corpse with the toe of his shoe, then looks back over at me. “But I assure you, lover boy won’t have it quite as easy. I reckon his painful screams will be a worthy soundtrack to your nightmares tonight.”

No.

Tears pour down my cheeks.

I choke on my cries, thrashing and twisting in Dolph’s grip as my bare feet streak through a pool of blood.

“Give her some antibiotics,” my captor orders. Straightening his tie, he spares Dolph a quick glance before aiming his attention at me, a grin curling his lips. “I’m not done with her yet.”

22

Shouts echo from another part of the building, mingling with the deafening ring. I've got to disappear, right fucking now.

With my heart speeding out ahead of me, I pick a direction and pray it's the right one—if such a thing exists around here. Way down at the end of this hall, a door without a keypad catches my eye. Though it might lead to more trouble, or a dead end, the footsteps heading in my direction give me no time to second guess it.

I break into a run, speeding away from my pursuers in search of a place to hide, the ogre's untied clodhoppers making me stumble over my own feet. When I reach the end, I keep going, like a battering ram. The closed door barely slows my fall as it swings open into an unmarked stairway.

With nothing on the other side to slow my trajectory, I tumble forward—and down. Bouncing and rolling, gaining momentum, until I'm stopped abruptly by an especially cold, hard floor. Concrete.

The last reserves of air in my lungs leaves on a groan. *Goddamn, that hurt.*

I lie there, blinking through the stunned haze. The door I fell through swings shut, leaving me in the dark. I'm bruised but whole, I think, and there's no time to do more than roll out of the way in case someone spotted me. I flatten myself next to the stairs and regroup.

After a few seconds, my eyes adjust enough to realize that it's not as pitch black as I first thought. A few dim squares of light filter through high,

rectangular windows on one side of the expansive space.

I seem to have found my way into a basement.

One with windows that have a chance of opening.

Fuck, please open.

Overhead, on the main floor, the alarm still blares, gathering the forces in search of the escapee. Me. I have no idea how many people work in this place, as I've never seen more than a few, but they must all be out hunting now. The trick will be to stay out of their way while they're distracted, so I can work on finding the best way out of here.

Everly's life might depend on how quickly I can bring help back. There was something in her voice before Roger came in, and she faded out. Like she didn't have much left in her.

I swear, if she gives up five minutes before I get us the fuck out of here…

The thought makes me vaguely nauseous.

It's just a fever; she'll be fine.

Rising into a crouch, I pan my gaze from left to right. The room sprawls out behind me into complete darkness—there's no telling what's back there—but beneath the windows, I can make out a few shapes lining the walls. Shelves stacked with supplies, some cages big enough to house very large animals, and a table in the center.

Keeping myself bent enough to move forward, yet able to dive under something if that door at the top of the stairs opens, I head for the windows.

Passing the table, I see the glint of light off metal, and the adjustable legs ending in wheels that indicate medical equipment.

My mind pings to Everly's procedures, and whatever else might happen down here.

I'm not going to think too hard about that.

The windows are high enough that it will be tricky to pull myself up and out, especially considering my shoulder injury, and dingy enough to obscure my vision. Not optimal, but my other choice is going upstairs and out the front door. Balancing on my toes, I push up on the window frame.

Nothing. Fuck.

Next, I try pushing out. It sticks for a second but gives, pushing out at an angle that stops halfway, which is going to be tricky to squeeze my ass through. That explains why they don't have this area secured better.

Fortunately for me, there's a wire-shelving unit close enough for me to

wheel over and give myself a boost. Then, just as I get my head through the opening and take a breath of air that's less fresh than I anticipated, there's a noise at the top of the stairs.

My heart hammers, my first instinct being to keep going and run, but my gut says that's a good way to get caught. I don't know what's out there. So, I pull back in and drop down, squeezing behind the shelf, which does little to hide me, just as a sliver of light shines through the cracked door.

The alarm stops abruptly.

I don't dare breathe; if someone shines a flashlight in this direction, I'm done for.

The light widens. A pair of shoes appear on the top step. I glance at the shelf in hopes there's something easy to use as a weapon if needed, but all I see are boxes of useless medical supplies. Gauze and shit.

"What're you doing, Harris?" The voice comes from somewhere beyond the door.

"Checking the basement." The man pauses on the stairs, aiming a beam of light toward the right, the opposite direction from where I stand smashed against the wall.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Perimeter first," the voice calls. "There are a zillion other buildings we need to go through. Gonzalez is already making the rounds inside. He's almost done in the east wing and will head here next. You're outside, with me."

The feet move back. The light disappears.

My throat dries. I've got to get out of this window and hide before Harris and his partner make it around to this side of the perimeter. If I stay here any longer, I'll have Gonzalez to deal with. Good news is it sounds like there are plenty of places to hunker down outside, as long as I pick one that's already been searched.

Using the shelving as a ladder, I'm able to push my upper body up and out the window, watching for signs of anyone within my line of sight. From the look of the dumpsters, which are in serious need of emptying, I'm at the back of the building. After a precarious push-pull-shimmy maneuver—made more painful over a bed of gravel—I stand, pressing my back to a wall of old, white-painted brick.

In front of me, a tall wooden fence surrounds a square area, and from the

rank, burnt smell, I'm guessing it houses an incinerator. We appear to be in the middle of nowhere. There are no visible roads, no buildings besides the numerous sheds and shipping containers that belong to whatever this place is. I have no fucking clue.

The tree line looms an acre away. An oasis, with a stretch of dry, brown grass in between. It feels like a taunt—*you can hide here, but good luck making it that far without being seen.*

The crunch of footsteps alerts me to the presence of one of the men searching the perimeter. My nerves tingle, but panicking will do me no good, and I'd be a fool to try to make it to the trees in time. My options basically consist of taking him down and hoping his partner isn't nearby, or finding a place to hide, fast.

When he walks through the gate of the fenced area, I know he won't be in there long. That leaves only one place to go, and it's one they may not thoroughly search.

Several seconds later, I'm buried among bags of stinking, rotting garbage. Not ideal, but it's better than being dead. Probably.

I'm going to have to wait these fuckers out, possibly until nightfall, and hope this place isn't well-lit. Then I'll sneak away, find a road, and get the hell out.

But when my stomach curdles again, it has nothing to do with the stench surrounding me. Because once I leave here, there will be nothing I can do to help Everly until I get back with reinforcements. She'll be on her own, and I —

"How the hell did this happen?" That's Harris, standing right outside my dumpster. "We've never had a problem with security."

"It was that fucking cop. I knew keeping him around for so long was going to be trouble."

Well, I guess that answers the question of how much they know about me.

There's the sound of someone rifling around garbage bags in a dumpster nearby. Flies buzz above me. Bile rises in my throat. My muscles coil, prepared to fight amid the garbage. Maybe I can vomit on them as a distraction; that seems legitimate right about now.

"Had a bad feeling about that motherfucker. How'd he get out?"

"He was working with the bitch in the room next to him. The hot one."

“Damn, I hope she doesn’t have a bullet in her brain yet. I was hoping to get a piece of that before she’s finally offed. Been waiting for them to be done with her.”

From the depths of the dumpster, I seethe. I’m truly considering my odds of popping out of this pile of trash, catching them off guard, and snapping their goddamn necks before anyone has a chance to pull a gun on me.

Then the sound of footsteps moves away.

“Come on, man. He ain’t in there. Let’s check the other buildings, so we can say we did.”

“Yeah. He’s probably reached the road already. It’s been at least fifteen minutes since he knocked Oxley out. Maybe more.”

A laugh. “Wouldn’t want to be him right now. That guy is so fucked.”

Oxley… He must mean Roger.

Shit, I should have killed that bastard, rather than running the risk of him causing trouble later. It might have taken extra time, but I could have taken him, then picked off everyone else in this godforsaken place, one by one. Then I’d find that hourglass-wielding motherfucker they answer to, lock him in one of those cages in the basement, and take my time before dropping him in the incinerator where he belongs.

It’s kind of funny how easy it’s been to go from being an enforcer of justice to what the guys on the force would refer to as vigilantism, but from the moment I decided I wasn’t waiting any longer for them to take their heads out of their asses, it was always the plan. To wipe this organization off the face of the earth myself.

I didn’t care if it was a suicide mission.

I’m fucking over it.

Hell, a couple months ago, I would have blown this place sky-high—taken them all out in one fell swoop—without much thought of innocents getting caught in the crossfire, as long as these assholes were gone.

And now…

Now, rather than taking the opportunity to smash these motherfuckers like the cockroaches they are, I’m running the risk of letting Sara’s killers get away while I go off to bring back *help,* of all things. It’s a waste of time, when I could take care of this on my own, the messy way.

But all that time spent talking to the girl in the next room shifted my plans. The innocents are more than nameless, faceless casualties. And then

there’s Everly, who knows me down to the depths of my festering soul.

Christ, I have a problem.

I exhale, immediately regretting it, since it means taking another breath of garbage air.

Forget the girl, Porter. You’re a dumbass.

But being out of that room has given me clarity, and I can’t shake the feeling that after two years of surviving in that tiny room, Everly Cross won’t be leaving this building alive. That after coming this close, she won’t be seeing me, or anyone else, at all.

I feel it in my gut.

As the men leave, and I lift myself out of the dumpster, I remember something she once said:

“Have you ever made a decision you regret, Isaac?”

I look out into the expanse of dry grass and freedom, then back to the basement window.

And I’m afraid I’m about to.

23

Four-hundred-and-seventy seconds.

That's how long I've been trapped inside my room with Roger's body. His head is in fragments, and the stench is suffocating. At the five-hundred-second mark, I pull myself up from the mattress, rush over to the toilet, and heave. Sweat and tears trickle down my face as I hold my hair back, emptying my stomach contents into the bowl.

Depleted, I slide down to the tile floor and collapse.

I spare a quick glance at Roger.

Then I yank myself back up and vomit again.

Alarm bells continue to sing from ghostly hallways, making the building come alive. Pressing forward on the toilet rim, weak and out of breath, I turn to look at the wall, imagining Isaac's voice seeping through. My eyes water. The sirens give me hope that he hasn't been caught yet. My captor was bluffing, trying to shake me. That monster would love nothing more than to watch me crumble before slitting my throat as my final breath falls out like heartbreak.

I start to pace.

Medicine churns through my bloodstream, keeping my fever at bay. Antibiotics were also given. I'm not sure why, but they have a plan for me.

Or maybe they're just waiting for the egg transfer to prove successful before tossing me in an incinerator.

Combing my hair back with trembling fingers, I move in tight circles,

avoiding the bloodbath at my feet. I refuse to give up, fall, or break. Not yet. I'm not dead, and Isaac is free. He's hiding. Assessing his surroundings, constructing a plan. I just need to hold out for a little while longer until he —

My head snaps up when I hear something.

No!

They've come for me.

Thinking quickly, I rush over to Roger's corpse, hoping he has a weapon on him. A gun, a knife, anything. Something for protection. I try not to gag as I search his pockets. I need to —

"Everly."

I freeze, my hands stalling midair. Instinctively, I glance up at the wall, blinking rapidly as the voice registers. It can't be him. "Isaac…?"

Nearly tripping over Roger, I rush over to the wall and plant both hands against it.

But he speaks again.

And he's not on the other side of the wall—he's at my door.

"You said you knew the code. I need it. *Fast*."

Holy shit.

I whip my head right as my heart ricochets inside my torn-up chest. I hear my blood pumping in my ears, my pulse in overdrive.

I move.

Scampering to the door, I reach for the handle and pull, over and over. "Isaac! What are you doing here?"

"Code."

My brain feels like scrambled eggs. "I-I… three, two, four…"

Beep, beep, beep.

"I think…eight?" I've memorized the tonal composition of the first three digits, but the fourth number has always remained elusive. It's farther away from the others.

Beep.

I tug on the handle.

Nothing.

Panic buzzes through my veins as tears glide down my cheeks in salty streaks. "Isaac… You came back."

He presses the numbers again, but they don't work.

I choke out another cry and press my forehead to the metal door. “Try nine.”

Error.

“Seven.”

Error.

“Fuck,” he curses, his panic evident. “Stupid fucking thing. *Goddammit*.”

I hear him shimmying the handle.

So close. One number away.

My knees wobble as I bounce up and down, frantic. “Please, hurry. Oh, God…”

In another second, I’ll see him. He’ll take my hand, and we’ll run. We’ll breach the other side of these walls together.

I start second-guessing the first order of numbers as we both jiggle the door handle with sickly desperation. “Try two, three, four…”

“I’m such an idiot.” He practically growls the words as he fumbles through more number sequences. “Fucking *idiot*.”

I sob his name. “Isaac…”

Beep, beep, beep, beep.

Error.

“This is stupid. This is so fucking stupid —”

“I would have to agree with you there.” Another voice registers; a different voice.

The monster. Our sentencer.

Blood drains from my face as my breath lodges in my throat like a jagged cork in a bottleneck. “No—wait, wait…”

A scuffle, a strange noise.

Isaac makes a sound.

Pain.

“No…please!” I scream, screech, pound on the door with both fists. “Leave him alone! No, no! *Isaac*!”

Commotion answers me.

Footsteps, a muddle of unfamiliar voices.

I don’t hear him.

I don’t hear Isaac.

“*No*!” Madness fuses with my pleas as I process the awful permanence of this moment. A heroic rescue eclipsed by goodbye. “Don’t touch him!” I cry

out, still pounding on the door, praying it will disintegrate beneath the weight of my agony. “Don’t you *touch him*!”

The Timekeeper sneers at me. “Apologies for changing the code, but I couldn’t risk a daring rescue with a loose end running around,” he says, feigning regret. “Shame this didn’t pan out for you—as much as I do respect the valiant effort.”

Wailing, I fall forward, my lips kissing the surface of the door, hoping that the closer I get to him, the more power my words will carry.

But it’s too late.

Only silence greets me.

I drop to the floor beside Roger’s lifeless body, curling into a shivering, hopeless ball, surrendering to the creeping numbness of my slow death.

He came back.

Isaac came back for me.

And that choice cost him his life.

24

Reality swims in front of me, then darts out of my grasp, like a fish in murky water.

Christ, did someone toss my brain in a blender?

I blink until the pieces fit together. I'm sitting on a chair under a haze of dingy lighting. Ratchet straps around my chest and thighs keep me stuck fast. My wrists are locked behind my neck, and my legs…

I try to stretch but get nowhere. Cuffed together at the ankles.

Fantastic.

I remember…being outside Everly's door.

That's right. I did it. *I escaped.*

But the fog continues to lift and the shit I've gotten myself into becomes clear. Groaning, I look around as much as my position allows. The shapes are familiar: cages, a table, medical supplies…

The basement.

This time, I'm in an enormous, barred enclosure, the door swung wide open.

Dammit, I was *right there.* But just as I realized I wasn't alone, a surge of lightning zapped through me. Static in my ears. Burning in my veins.

My muscles are seized up in one big Charley horse. A stun gun. Damn thing dropped me like a rock, allowing them to drag my useless body away.

"Well," I mumble, "I was right. I regret that decision with every fiber of my being."

“Yes, well, I like to call that *reaping the consequences of your actions.*” A smug face appears in front of me. The Timekeeper.

Fuck, I really need to find out this asshole’s name.

“Or, as our late friend Roger Oxley might say, ‘stupid should hurt.’ And unfortunately for you, I’m afraid we haven’t even gotten started.”

Late friend… *I killed Roger?*

Could have sworn he was alive when I left him.

“You’ll have to forgive me if I’m not in the mood for comedy hour just yet.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine in a minute.” He waves me off like I’ve been stung by a bee. “Say, don’t they hit you with a taser in police training? I thought you’d be used to it.”

And there it is.

He’s probably been champing at the bit to spill everything he knows about me.

“You don’t exactly develop an immunity to electricity surging through your body, dumbass.”

“Good to know.”

At the snap of his fingers, I catch movement to my side. Someone stands just outside my line of vision. A long metal rod comes into view, aimed at the exposed skin of my upper arm —

Zzzzt.

“Ahh. Fuck!” I jolt in place. A cramp in my shoulder, then burning.

A guttural sound wrenches from between my teeth. I writhe in my bonds, sputtering curses. Panting.

A cattle prod.

My teeth bare in a predator’s smile. “That tickles.”

With a cock of his head, he grins right back. “Would you believe they left this here? Comes in handy.”

“Thoughtful of them. Where is *here*, exactly?”

He smacks his hands together. “Well, I suppose that’s all for now.”

“Hey, douche nozzle.” I prepare myself for another zap from the cattle prod.

It doesn’t come.

Freezing in place, he looks at me over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised.

“Since you’re here, I’ve been meaning to ask. What the *fuck* did you do

with my sister?"

"I'm sorry, who?" He cups a hand around his ear.

"Don't play games with me, you miserable piece of shit. You know what I'm —"

"Dear lord." He grimaces, waving a hand in front of his nose. "Your aroma is offensive. What have you been crawling in?"

"Why don't we take a walk out back, and I'll show you?" Menace oozes through every word.

"Childish taunts." He clicks his tongue. "Really, I expected better. But I suppose you *have* been through the wringer lately. And I'm sorry to break this to you, but you don't even know the half of it."

"Kidnapping me, my sister, and murdering countless people isn't enough? Answer my question. Where is she?"

"Still so fixated on one girl."

"My. *Sister*," I roar the words. "Sara. Not *one girl.* Sara Carlisle."

I hear her voice in my head, *"My father should have adopted you. Then you could be a Carlisle, too."* She had just come back into my life, eager to make up for our family's sins. *"I could change my name to Porter. It's only fair."*

My sweet, justice-loving sister. I didn't deserve her.

I'll give you justice, Sara.

"Why her?" It's practically a sob. "Why did you have to take her?"

A flippant shrug. "I don't know. Why do I choose anybody? She came to my attention and had the qualities I was looking for. After our pretty little birdie Everly proved so lucrative, I thought a crooning canary with striking genetics might fetch a good penny, too. It was a disappointment when she wasn't compatible."

"You killed her because she wasn't *compatible*?"

"I killed her because her prolonged upkeep no longer suited my purposes. I needed to free up a spot." He shrugs matter-of-factly. "But you'll be happy to know, I respected the wishes on her driver's license to donate her organs. Not a part of her went to waste."

"You motherfucking—" I swallow the rising bile. "I'm going to disembowel you." Seething, I let him see the truth in my eyes.

He chuckles as though my threats are no more than a swat from a kitten.

He'll find out.

“You really would rip my head right off my shoulders if you could, wouldn’t you?”

“With my bare hands.”

“Such violence. Your buyer is going to love that.” Excitement glimmers in his eyes. “Now, I hate to dash, but I must prepare. First impressions and all that. However, I do have a memento for your entertainment while we’re waiting for him to arrive.”

I don’t react. He’ll tell me anyway.

“Oh yes, did I forget to mention? The man paying for you is on his way. In the meantime, movies!” He claps his hands. “Chop, chop.”

This guy is unhinged.

Dolph wheels something into the cage while I slump, limp and numb. Still feeling the aftershocks.

“Sit him up,” he orders. “He won’t want to miss this.”

I’m turned abruptly to face a television, my head lifted by the hair.

The thought clicks: *has Everly suffered for my actions?*

If she’s on that screen…

Dread curdles my insides. “Everly.” My voice is wrecked, but I need to know. “Where is she? What have you done to her?” I shouldn’t show him I care. Hell, I shouldn’t care, *period*. But it’s too late for that. It’s too goddamn —

“What do you want from me?” a woman’s voice calls from the screen.

My head snaps up.

It’s not Everly.

“You’ve made a big mistake.” On the screen, my sister stands with her chin lifted and eyes blazing. “You have no *idea* what you’ve gotten yourselves into.”

Confusion swims in my head. Thumps in my chest.

Is she alive?

No.

I see now, as she stands with her feet planted firmly, telling them exactly how fucked they are. It’s the same room I spent the last two months in. She’s wearing a flowing blue dress—the one she wore when she walked out the door for the last time. One shoulder is ripped and hanging, and it looks like someone tackled her into the mud. “My brother is going to find you and make you wish you were never born.”

My heart shatters, lodging in my throat.

I'm so sorry, Sara. I was two years too late.

She curses them, calmly. Fiercely. Her voice is low and dangerous. And despite the ache in my chest, despite knowing she never made it out, seeing her like this fills me with —

Wait.

I can hear her. I can hear her from inside the room.

"The cameras."

How?

All those things Everly and I said to each other…the plans we made. She was sure there was no volume. Were we wrong the whole time? Was this part of his game?

"Oh…you thought there was no sound." The asshole chuckles lightly. "Incorrect, but it only picks up louder noises. Yelling and the like. It's an old facility, you know, and replacing the original security system was hardly worth the cost, since I can't find it in me to care about your pointless chitchat."

This tracks when Sara moves to the familiar wall, laying her hand against it. I know exactly who is speaking from the other side.

When she speaks, I can't hear a thing.

A surge of emotion wells up inside me. Sticks in the back of my throat. For several minutes, all I can do is watch.

Reluctantly, I take my eyes off Sara long enough to slide a look toward my tormentor. "So, this is what you do? Lock people up and watch them suffer?"

"Goodness, no. I pay people to do that for me. This is just to keep an eye on things. I don't get my jollies from sitting around watching your boring, everyday lives. I'm a busy man, you know; there are better things to do with my time." Then a hideous grin pulls across his lips. "But it is quite interesting to watch a person's behavior when they know their death is impending."

The hourglass.

"You sick bastard."

He chuckles. "It's a wonder those lovely women ever put up with your limited vocabulary and crude vulgarity…not that Everly has options. You should be thanking me for allowing you to spend your last days with such a gem."

That's another thing I've been wondering about. "Tell me something." If I can do nothing else from this chair, I'm going to get some answers. "With a place this big, isn't it pretty fucking stupid to put two people in rooms next to each other, only separated by a thin wall, when they could be plotting against you?"

"Oh, that." He moves in front of the screen, blocking my view of Sara as she wanders the room, skimming her fingers over the wall. "I do love how you assume that wasn't on purpose."

"I do love how you make no sense whatsoever." My voice drips venom. "Wait…no, I don't. It's obnoxious."

"I find myself easily bored. Obviously, this isn't my only facility—I'm too brilliant to keep all my eggs in one basket—but since I do spend a good amount of time here, I like to keep things fresh. Your little neighbor girl might be pretty to look at, but she's about as interesting as watching paint dry, sitting in that room, talking to herself. Most of the others haven't been much different, once they give up and stop screaming. So, when the opportunity came up, I thought I might put a wild card in the mix and see what happened."

A wild card.

Me.

"Well, you saw what happened."

He gestures to my helpless, bound body. "As did you."

"You only caught me," I simmer, "because I came back for —"

He's smiling—broad and knowing.

Fuck.

Rage coils in my gut, but I keep it on a leash. For now. "You're playing with me."

"Yes, well, that is what I do."

"You kidnap people to play games with them?"

"Oh, no. I choose people based on their value to my business. Everything else is more of a hobby; a personal quirk, if you will."

He unclips the hourglass from his belt loop and holds it to the light.

My stomach drops.

But he merely admires it. "That's why I fancy these, you see. Sure, I could have an employee simply shoot someone in the head when I'm done with them, but it's so much more interesting to set one of these down in front

of a person and watch them go." His finger spins in the air.

I open my mouth to reply, but it's Sara who interrupts, planted in front of the camera again, her sweet face livid. "Hey, assholes. You want me to explain how stupid you are? You took the sister of the best detective in the city. And now you're completely fucked."

"Ah, yes." He waves a hand at the screen. "I almost forgot how vulgar that pretty mouth was." He eyes me disdainfully. "I guess we see where she got that from. Lots of swearing and threatening the retribution of her brother, the *detective*."

"You knew I wasn't Nick Ford from the beginning. How?"

"It's called the internet. Maybe you've heard of it?" Condescension oozes from his lips. "When one of my assets came in here blabbering about her brother, *the detective*, I researched all possible threats. I've known who you were for two years, but you were of no interest to me as long as you remained clueless about my operation. Imagine my surprise when Rudolph brought you in the hard way."

"I'm surprised you didn't just kill me."

"Oh, no, I was delighted, actually. I'd been looking for the perfect fit for my client. Someone well-trained—police, military, it didn't really matter. You happened to pop in at just the right time."

"How fortunate for me."

"Indeed." He glances at the hourglass. "Oh, look at the time. I've dawdled too long, I'm afraid, so I'll leave you with the lovely Sara for now. How about we just fast-forward to the good part?" He picks up a remote from next to the television and presses a button.

"I'm going to kill you," I tell him calmly.

"Yes, you mentioned that a time or two."

"Consider that a promise."

"Mmm." His eyes are on the screen. "Any minute now…" He forwards the recording to an image of him walking into Sara's room. My heart kicks up pointlessly. "Ah. Here we go." Pressing play, he watches himself casually set an hourglass on the floor, just out of Sara's reach.

"What is this? What does it mean?" she yells as he exits. She tries to lunge for the hourglass—to snatch it away—but no matter how she stretches, her fingers fall just short. "What kind of sick game are you playing?"

No. Fuck no. Don't make me watch this.

“Fear not,” he calls over his shoulder. “Things are about to get interesting soon enough.”

I’m left alone in the cage with the ghost of my sister talking on screen, and a surly Scandinavian. And when I smile, I make sure he sees all my teeth. “Hello, Rudolph.”

This time, when the instrument is held to my skin, I barely flinch.

⇌

My sister sits cross-legged, as close to the hourglass as the cuff on her ankle will allow, her eyes glued to the thing like it’s a black mamba ready to strike if she does so much as blink.

I watch her like she could disappear any minute. Because I already know she will.

There’s a temptation to close my eyes—to rebel against this insidious method of torture. But Sara deserves more than that, more than being locked up in a room to face the end alone. It’s the past, and with no way to change the outcome, she should at least have a witness to her last moments, no matter how painful they might be.

That witness was always meant to be me.

Not *allowing* it to be torture is how I rebel.

“You’re a sad, sorry motherfucker, you know that?” The Viking’s deep voice is garbled as he chews what smells like a greasy fast-food burger. My empty stomach twists painfully, but I refuse to acknowledge him.

She doesn’t have much time.

It’s just me and Sara now. Holding a vigil, as she waits for the end.

She knows what comes next. I can see it as the minutes drain in a slow stream of sand. As her uneven breathing and restless fingers turn into drooping shoulders and a slow drizzle of tears.

Then, finally, as the level in the hourglass drops to less than half, she raises her chin, straightens her spine, and takes a deep breath. Her eyes drift closed.

Another breath, then two, and she begins to sing.

Though all but a few higher notes are too soft for the camera to pick up, I can see it in the way she throws her head back, rocking back and forth to the

rhythm.

Through the wet blur in front of my eyes, I can almost picture her on an empty stage, illuminated by a single spotlight as she plays her acoustic guitar with that blue pick that matches her dress. The one I gave her all those years ago, for her birthday.

The one that made her decide there was something in me worth saving.

Her tears flow freely through closed lashes, soaking flushed cheeks and dripping from her chin. But there's a fierce resolution in her expression. The knowledge that she fought as hard as she could, and when she saw the inevitable end, she chose to meet it on her own terms. Peacefully, with the thing she loved most.

Music.

The air burns my lungs, every breath pushing my chest against the unforgiving straps that hold me to this chair. They say life flashes before your eyes when you know you're about to die, and I don't know if that's what she saw as she sang, but it's what I see now.

The life of Sara Carlisle plays like a movie on fast-forward in my head, slowing at the part that changed the trajectory of my own.

"I won't let you kill yourself this way, Isaac." She storms over to the couch where I lie and yanks the whisky bottle from my loose grip. In a daze, I follow her to the kitchen, where she's pouring the contents of several bottles into the sink. "I've been here a month, and you've done this every single night."

"Why does it matter?" I don't bother stopping her. Getting more is easy.

"It matters—" She spins to face me, her eyes ferocious. "Because you bought into a lie that you're inherently bad, and now you're on a mission to destroy yourself. And I'm sick of it."

Sliding onto the barstool, I rest my head on the countertop. She's wrong.

"I called Tanner." The bottles clink *as she tosses them into the trash. "He said it's been like this for the last year, but that you won't listen to him, either."*

"I'm fine at work. I only drink at night."

"That's not the point. You can't keep going like this."

I roll my head and look at her through a haze. "Why am I letting you stay here again?"

“Well, I thought it was because I needed a place temporarily, but now I suspect it’s because you need to hear the truth.”

“Whatever you say.”

Her eyes narrow. “You have a purpose in this world, Isaac Porter, and this isn’t it.” Grabbing my keys off the counter, she pulls on my arm. “There’s a meeting a few blocks away that starts in an hour. I’m driving.”

I’ll humor her, but I don’t plan to stop. I enjoy being numb too much.

Still, I let her take me to that meeting, and the one after that, because maybe…

Maybe I hope she’s right.

Sara’s door opens.

The Timekeeper walks into the room.

Seconds later, the same man is standing between the television and my chair, blocking my view. I didn’t even notice him enter the cage. “Oh, look at that. Perfect timing.” He picks up the remote.

My heart is a swollen, throbbing weight in my chest. “Wait,” I mumble, barely comprehending who I’m talking to. “I’m not finished.”

He aims the remote at the screen like a loaded weapon. “Oh, but I’m afraid *she* is.”

But his goading can’t shake me, because at that moment, Sara turns and looks straight at the camera.

As if she knew, one day, I would be watching.

That’s why, as I’m dragged away, I take one last look at her face.

I smile.

And I swear she smiles back.

25

Dark thoughts ooze through me like sticky black tar.

Day two brings with it another round of antibiotics, daily meals by a no-name musclehead I've dubbed Roger II, and a sense of detachment that has been festering to a boiling point.

My ankle chain rattles as I shift in place, leaning against the wall and missing his voice. All my tears have dried up, my throat raw from pain-laden screams.

I've become a liability. No freedom, no perks. I'm shackled now by silver manacles—an irony, considering I've been bound to this wall since the day Isaac first appeared on the other side.

Tethered to him.

Chained to the hope he brought with him.

Sighing, I rest my head back and close my eyes, rolling the smooth blue guitar pick between my thumb and finger. A small comfort. The scent of bacon and eggs makes my stomach curdle. I haven't eaten, which has only caused the antibiotics to sit in the pit of my stomach like toxic bricks. I'm nauseous, tired, and done. I don't want to do this anymore.

I can't.

My eyelids squeeze tighter when the keypad on my door chimes to life, those evasive numbers forever haunting me. Isaac was so close.

He returned for me…and I failed him.

When the door pushes open, I make a hasty decision and shove the guitar

pick into my knotted mound of hair, securing it between the mats.

It's probably pointless.

But if there's even the *smallest chance* we both make it out of here alive…

"Rise and shine." The Timekeeper traipses into my room, latching the door behind him. He fiddles with the cufflink of his silver-sequined sleeve, his tone sickeningly cheerful.

I smooth down my hair and glare at him with deadened eyes. "Kill me."

"Well, you're extra chipper this morning. Must be the eggs. There's a touch of goat cheese." He mimics a chef's kiss.

I kick the plate of breakfast with my heel, and the eggs and bacon go flying. "Kill me," I repeat, my expression a mask of indifference. "I know you want to."

"Do I?" He clasps his hands behind his back and paces in front of me, his glossy black shoes scuffing across the floor. "Interesting fact about me: if you beg me for something, I'll be inclined to do the exact opposite. And I'll do it the most extravagant way possible." He hums through a chuckle. "It's always been a quirk of mine."

Just as I'd hoped.

I pull to a stand, my chains clattering.

My throat thickens with bitterness, pulse revving with rage.

"I've always been drawn to the melodramatics," he continues, removing the hourglass attached to his belt. "My mother thought I'd be a showman one day. She called me an 'attention-seeker.'" He does a one-handed air quote while spinning the hourglass in his opposite hand with long, manicured fingers. "I prefer the term *opportunist*. And, well, I've always believed that even the savviest of businessmen should aim to stretch their imaginations from time to time. Professions become nothing but tedious labor when you don't allow yourself a little fun." Smirking, he fondly studies the hourglass in a loose grip before glancing at me. "Don't you agree?"

I curl my hands at my sides. "Is that for me?" Swallowing, I look at the hourglass and shrug. "I don't need a timer. Just get it over with."

He tilts his head to the side, studying me with an air of pity. "It's as if you haven't heard a word I've said."

"Oh, I heard you, loud and clear. You're a spineless, evil stain on humanity. You enjoy pain, torture, and death. You're a cavity; an infected

wound that rots and spreads, poisoning everything around you.” I spit at his shoes but miss. “You can’t hurt me anymore.”

He lifts a finger with glee. “Ooh. I do detect a challenge.”

“You’ve already killed me,” I volley back, stepping closer. “Might as well make it official.”

Licking his lips, he rolls his gaze over me from head to toe as excitement gleams in his multicolored eyes. One brown, one clear-blue.

Both might as well be black.

“Oh, Everly…you’re not dead yet. Not even close.” He meets me in the center of the room, just out of reach. “And I’d like to prove that to you.”

Something icy prickles the back of my neck.

Fear.

“Let’s go for a walk, shall we?”

I frown, my heart thumping. “What?”

The Timekeeper returns the hourglass to its chain, then removes a piece of black cloth and a key. He approaches me.

My eyes narrow as I inch away. He’s dressed to impress, wearing a tailored suit and a mint green tie. But the scar that travels along the side of his neck like a jagged river tells me he failed to impress somebody.

Lifting the cloth, he grabs me by the hair and starts tying it around my eyes.

A blindfold.

“Don’t touch me.” I try shimmying out of his grip, but he’s stronger than he looks. And I’m weak, broken-down, and battered.

“Now, now…no need to waste your strength. If I wanted to kill you, I would.”

“You want to watch me suffer,” I spit out, my vision blackening.

“That is more fun.”

I hear the key breach the cuff around my ankle, and I’m free. I shove at him, moving to get away, but he snatches me by the arm and hauls me forward.

“Let me go.” Kicking my legs, hoping to connect with something, I hardly manage a light knock to his knees. “Stop, please. I don’t want to go. Just let me rot away in this cell.”

I’d rather die here.

This was the last place I heard his voice.

Tears moisten the fabric of my blindfold, my survival instincts peaking. The Timekeeper curls his vile fingers around my arm, then grips me by the hair with the other. We're moving. I'm stumbling. He holds me upright as I kick and punch the air, shouting and cursing through clenched teeth. My equilibrium teeters, my lack of sight throwing me off balance.

"Such a feisty thing," he snarls against my ear. Warm, noxious breath makes my skin crawl. "Save that fighting spirit. You'll need it."

I cry out as he drags me down long corridors, my feet sliding, toes stubbing on cool tile. A minute passes, and I'm thrown into a room, landing on my hands and knees. The sound of a door shuts behind me. I curl my fingers into the floor as I try to catch my breath, fear coiling around every inch of me. I hear my life force pumping in my ears. My skin puckers with goosebumps. The Timekeeper holds the blindfold tightly around my head as I try to yank it off and scratch at his hands.

And then I hear it.

I go still.

A song.

The first few notes ring out, freezing me to the floor. I stop moving, stop clawing, my heartbeats a frenzied dance to a melody that's never far from my mind.

The Scientist.

I'm breathing heavily, drinking in the chords and lyrics as the singer croons the theme song to my soul. Tears well, trapped by the itchy cloth.

"What is this…" I croak out, weeping with bone-deep emotion.

"Oh, you know, silly." He chuckles, tugging the blindfold off my eyes. "It's your favorite song. I thought this moment was deserving of a soundtrack."

"How—how did you…?" *Has he been listening to us, after all?* I blink rapidly, trying to rein in my muddy vision. We're in a tiny holding room—sterile, blank, no different from my cell. Glancing around, I try to make out something of relevance, but there's nothing.

"Well, it would be irresponsible of me not to educate myself on the ins and outs of my long-term residents, don't you think? Especially when it takes nothing more than a quick Google search to pull up that interview you did on social media, just before your life took such an unfortunate turn."

Bile burns the back of my throat.

He’s toying with me.

“Stand up.” He nudges me with his foot until I rise to shaky legs. “Walk.”

Moisture slides down my cheeks as I step forward, the song playing from an overhead speaker system. He jabs me again, toward another door.

“Please.” It’s a whisper, a plea for something. For anything other than this. I know death looms on the other side of that blank door. It’s a trick, an illusion. A doorway to hell. “Please don’t do this.”

A hand meets my back, shoving me forward. Stumbling, I move closer to the door, holding my breath as my hand pulls the handle.

I open it.

My eyes lock on a man tied to a chair with a bag over his head.

Dolph stands beside the man, his barreling arms crossed over his chest as he stares at me with emotionless dark eyes.

I part my lips to say something, but only a squeak falls out.

I’m pushed farther inside, and the door shuts behind me. I glance at The Timekeeper, taking in the look of pure enchantment on his face.

Then I look back over at the man.

His head is bowed, both corded arms locked behind his back with thick rope. Dirty jeans taper two long legs, his feet bare, ankles chained to chair legs. A navy T-shirt is glued to his muscled torso, torn and tattered, stained with dark-brown blood.

My chin quivers. “Who is this?”

The man’s head snaps up—every muscle tightens, his veins popping. “Everly.”

My eyes widen as all the air whooshes out of me.

I can’t breathe.

The song plays, my heart twists, and my body lurches forward. “Isaac!”

He’s alive.

He’s alive.

My tears fall harder as I rush over to him, desperate to pull the bag off his head. Needing to see his face. But I’m caught by my hair the moment I’m within reaching distance. “No!”

Isaac works his chains and ropes, shaking the chair so hard it nearly tips over. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

“Isaac,” I wail, held back by a firm hand as I twist and writhe to break free. “Let me go. Let me *fucking* go!”

The Timekeeper sighs. “Sweetie, vulgarity really isn’t becoming on you.” Then he clicks his tongue. Dolph saunters forward, taking over, extracting me from my captor’s grasp and holding me with two solid arms.

I keep fighting, kicking, screaming.

“I’m going to skin you alive,” Isaac seethes, his words muffled by the bag.

“So dramatic. The both of you.” He unhooks the hourglass from his belt and holds it in the palm of his hand, his head tilting as he studies it with whimsy. “They say life is like an hourglass. Poetic drivel if you ask me.”

Isaac yanks and tugs on his binds through angry grunts, his muscles bulging with fury.

I bite Dolph’s arm, causing him to shove me to my knees as he palms the back of my neck in a deathlike grip.

Whistling the chorus of “The Scientist,” our captor strolls over to Isaac and sets the timepiece in front of him, far enough away from his flailing chair legs.

Sand gently pours from top to bottom.

I sob, my heart caving in on itself with every passing second.

“You see, I have this client,” he presses on, pacing back and forth, a picture of composure. “A big-game hunter, if you will. He’s looking for a challenger. A worthy prey.”

Ice trickles through my bloodstream.

A hunter.

Of people.

I gaze helplessly at Isaac, knowing where this story is going. “Take me,” I blurt out, squirming in Dolph’s hold. “I’ll do it.”

“You.” The Timekeeper smiles, assessing me. “How noble. I admire that.”

“I’m small. Fast. Quick on my feet.” My stomach lurches with crippling anxiety. “I…I can be a worthy challenger.”

“Not a fucking chance,” Isaac growls. “Everly, stop talking.” The chair jerks and shudders, scraping against the floor. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

“No, please, let me do it,” I beg through my tears.

“Everyone is so quick to fall on the sword.” The monster purses his lips, glancing between me and Isaac. “However, I do have a better idea. I’ll give

you a choice, Everly. You can decide who this hourglass belongs to."

I stop thrashing, waiting for the punchline. "I told you, I'll do it —"

The Timekeeper gestures at the door. Dolph tightens his hold on me as he steps backward, then pulls it open by the handle.

Twisting around, I watch in confusion as two guards drag another man into the room by his armpits.

Khaki pants. A burgundy button-down dress shirt. Black socks.

There's a burlap bag covering his head, just like Isaac's.

A frown bends my brows as my heart rate escalates.

What is this?

The stranger is tossed into the room like a sack of rice, passed out cold. He lies sprawled across the white tile, a few feet away from me, while the two guards slam the door shut. Silence echoes, save for the song chiming overhead. It starts over, the opening chords replaying.

I swallow hard. "I don't understand."

"No worries. I'll explain." The Timekeeper bends to pick up the hourglass, then floats across the floor toward the second man. He pauses before walking back to Isaac, the glass piece gleaming under the can lights. "I have a proposition for you, Everly. Until recently, you've been a well-trained prisoner. Zero hassles. I appreciate that." He grins with omen. "I thought I'd reward you for your years of good behavior."

Adrenaline spikes, and my stomach cramps.

"As I said, my client is looking for his next challenge, and these two men have made the cut. But I only need one." His eyes slice to mine. "I'll let you choose who is set free. Your new friend, Isaac…or this man."

My gazes ping-pongs between the two men.

No.

"I'm not choosing," I hiss. "That's sick."

"Then they both die, and I'll find a new contender." A shrug. "At least this way, you won't have two senseless murders plaguing that pretty conscience of yours." He places a flat palm against his chest. "I'll let the other man go home. You have my word."

Oh, God.

I can't see through my tears. "No…please, I can't."

Isaac's arms twist, legs kicking, chest heaving. "Pick me," he grits out. "Choose me, Bee. I'll tear his fucking head off and get us all out of here. You

know I will."

My wide, teary eyes remain fixed on him as liquid heat swims through my veins.

Of course I need to choose him.

It's Isaac.

He would do the same for me. In a heartbeat.

He already did.

I whip my head back and forth, nails digging into Dolph's flesh so hard blood seeps to the surface. "Isaac," I say, forcing back the guilty bile. "I choose Isaac."

A smile lifts on The Timekeeper's mouth. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Let him go."

Our captor stalks forward, approaching the body lying motionless in front of me as the man's chest lightly expands with each shallow breath.

He leans over to set the hourglass in front of him…

And hesitates.

"You're certain? This one looks a bit…scrawny." He pokes the man's hip with the toe of his shoe. "I don't reckon he'll last very long. Isaac seems to be the wiser participant."

White-hot guilt filters through me, and I do everything in my power to keep myself from vomiting. I look back over at Isaac, who is still trying to escape his binds.

He won't.

He can't.

"Everly, listen to me," Isaac pleads, tone gritty with desperation. "I. Will. Get. Us. Out. Of. Here. *All of us*." He's growling, spitting against the bag. "Pick me. I've got this. Trust me."

"Isaac," I shout again, slamming a fist to the floor. My throat is scraped raw with my cries as I internally beg for this moment to be over. "I've made my choice. Please. End this."

"Mmm, I don't know." A sly look is sent to one of the guards. "Perhaps you need more context."

He flicks his finger.

A burly guard crosses the room toward the other man.

"I'll give you one more chance to make a final decision, so choose wisely. Once the choice is made, it cannot be reversed." The Timekeeper

sneers in my direction. “I hope you can live with yours.”

I watch with a flimsy heart and tear-glazed eyes as the guard bends over the man, reaching for his bag.

Time stops.

My blood freezes.

In a blink, everything changes. Shifts.

The walls shrink. The room closes in on me.

I stare, shellshocked, as the burlap sack is removed from the man’s head.

Slapping a hand over my mouth, I let out a strangled cry of disbelief while horror surges through me like a deadly tsunami.

It can’t be.

This isn’t real.

No.

No, no…

NO!

Isaac goes still, taking in the moment.

Drinking in the sound of my blood-curdling screams.

My devastated heart.

Everything around me spins and blurs as I collapse to the floor with a thunderous wail.

“Jasper.”

Well…

Fuck.

27

This.

Isn’t.

Real.

Both hands clamp around my mouth, doing little to stifle my cries. I’m rattled to the bone. Shocked. Siphoned of strength, unable to keep my legs from crumpling underneath me.

He’s dead.

Jasper is *dead*.

Falling to my knees, I race back in time to those first few harrowing months in captivity. I recall my broken heart, my weepy, mournful pleas to the other victims.

Mary.

She had no reason to lie to me.

I *saw* Jasper that night with my own eyes—motionless, clinging to breath, bleeding out all over our tile floors. Red on white. A forever stain on my memory.

I felt him leave me…though not right away.

In the beginning, I still held on to hope. Ambulance sirens had whistled through the dark night like a promise as I was schlepped through the back door of my home, barely clinging to life. Help had been on the way. A fighting chance.

But as days turned into months, and months into years, the hope

dwindled.

Faded.

Something snapped.

It was my lifeline…*to him.*

But here he is.

Alive.

My husband is alive.

I'm hauled back up to my feet by the hair, a ragdoll in Dolph's grip. My cheeks are soaked with tears, and my eyelids sting like lemon peels. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

Isaac leans back in the chair, biceps straining, veins protruding in his forearms.

He shakes his head.

I watch the sobering disappointment filter through his body—he knows I can't say his name now.

The Timekeeper chuckles under his breath, watching my agony play out in vivid color. He's loving this. He *lives* for this.

"Well, well, well," he says breezily, a new bounce to his step as he skips between both men, dangling the hourglass in front of each of them. "This is quite the predicament, wouldn't you say?"

"There was a woman—a captive. Her name was Mary." My voice shakes, sunk with disbelief. "She… She said he was *dead*."

The devil smiles.

"She *told* me!" I shriek. "She saw it on the news. Jasper didn't make it. This doesn't make any sense."

"Ah, Mary," The Timekeeper says, nodding with approval. "She really sold that performance, didn't she? I almost regret wasting her talent here—she could've made a fine actress."

Realization slams into me.

Mary was a plant.

He put her in that room.

My captor was subduing me. Draining me of fight, forcing me to believe I had nothing left to live for.

And it worked.

I bare my teeth. "I. *Hate*. You."

"I'm flattered, truly. Although I'm afraid your opinion of me has little to

do with the choice you're going to make." Flipping the timepiece upside down, he glances at me with a glimmer in his eyes. "And your time is running out."

"I'm not choosing." Sickness swirls in my stomach, my throat. "I can't."

"Oh, but you must. I'm not sure I have it in me to kill both men. I do have a heart, you know." He presses a hand to the dead, rotted organ inside his chest, sneering with wicked joy. "What's it going to be, Everly? Your beloved husband? Or Isaac, the man who risked his life for you. Who tasted freedom and still returned, unable to leave you behind. Something tells me he wouldn't do that for just *anybody*. Our surly prisoner acquired a soft spot for the pretty girl behind the wall." He kicks Isaac's tethered leg and laughs, the sound echoing through the room like a howl of wind through a desolate canyon. "For as much as I loathe inconveniences, I love a twisted dose of irony just as much."

"You're *sick*," I hiss through clenched teeth, my insides shriveling. "I can't choose. Please…I can't. You'll kill us all anyway."

Another flick of his finger, summoning a guard.

I watch as the tall, broad-shouldered lackey with graying hair approaches Jasper. He pulls a cloth napkin out of his pocket and jabs it under my husband's nose.

Three seconds span.

Then, with a gasp and a start, Jasper jolts awake.

His chest expands, eyes pinging open as he lurches into a sitting position, scrambling backward on the tile floor. "What… What is this…?" His voice is low and scratchy as his senses click back on.

I nearly choke.

I haven't heard that voice in two years.

Frantic, Jasper looks right, left. Forward and behind. And when he does a double take, head swinging back in my direction, he blinks rapidly. Squints, frowns. Blinks some more. "No…"

I stare at him, my expression in ruins. "Jasper."

"Everly?" His eyes round to twice their size. He's still gasping for breath, shivering and stunned. "Everly…"

The moment he jumps to his feet, he's restrained by the guard. Two meaty arms circle his torso as Jasper writhes and jerks, trying to reach me.

I reach back, sobbing. "Jasper…"

“You…you’re alive…” His eyes dart around the room, from face to face. “I d-don’t…”

The Timekeeper sighs, giving the hourglass a slight shake. “Boring. Let’s get on with it, shall we?”

I growl, fighting Dolph’s firm hold. “Please, God, just let me touch him. Let me —”

“That’s your final choice, then? You’re choosing your husband?”

“I…” I look over at Isaac—tied, shattered, and helpless. Tears fall like violent rain as I curl into myself. “No… Isaac…”

“So, you’re choosing Isaac to be set free?” He bends to place the hourglass in front of Jasper.

Panic ripples through me. “No!”

“No?” Another sigh, his cheeks puffing with a taxing breath. “You’re giving me whiplash.”

“Don’t make me do this. Send me on the hunt.” I stomp on Dolph’s boots with limp, bare feet. “Send *me*!”

“That’s not an option. We’ve been over this.” He points at Isaac, then Jasper. “One of these men will be hunted, and the other will be let go. Make your choice. And pray you can live with it.”

I close my eyes.

Images unfurl, brimming to the surface.

I hear Isaac’s voice, gritty and vulnerable. His words.

Bee.

Trust me.

You matter.

He’s right in front of me, so close, and yet there’s still a wall between us.

The unbreakable kind.

I think of Jasper, imagining our last moments together, lips locked, limbs tangled, as we swayed in the foyer to a silent song. All our life’s memories careen through me like a warm wave.

He’s the love of my life.

Always. Forever.

When I open my eyes, Jasper’s lips are moving, but all I hear are the thumps of my heart and a pitchy ringing sound, howling in my ears. A dirge.

No, I won’t be able to live with myself after this moment.

But it won’t matter. I don’t have much time left. My heartache will be

short-lived, scattered to the wind in a few days' time.

My chin wobbles as I glance between Isaac and Jasper.

Sound whirrs back to life, suffocating me.

Noise. Shouting. Scuffing feet and haggard breaths.

"Time is ticking. Ten seconds…"

"Everly, God, please." Jasper begs for his life as he fights against the guard. "Fuck, please, what is this? No…no, let me go!"

"Five seconds…"

Isaac says nothing. He just sits there, already knowing the end of this story.

"Three, two…"

"Everly! Everly, goddammit!"

"One…"

My eyes land on Isaac as I give my final answer, knowing there's only one name I can say: "Jasper."

The timepiece is placed in front of Isaac, just as the final grains of sand breach the bottom of the glass.

Time is up.

My vision goes white. Guilt eats away at everything vital. My stomach contracts, bile crawling up my throat in bitter waves.

Isaac has no reaction.

He just sits there, slumped over in the chair, breathing heavily through the bag.

I turn away.

I can't look at him.

The Timekeeper smirks, glancing at Isaac. "Looks like she made her choice. And as the kids say—no backsies." Then he turns and barks an order at the guard, snapping a hand at me and Jasper. "Lock these two up."

Tendrils of icy fear coil around my heart. Pure dread.

Jasper is hauled through the door first, calling my name. Fighting and kicking.

"No!" My feet slide every which way, panic climbing. "Please, no!"

I'm flailing.

Failing.

I'm carried out next, a hollow lump in my throat.

Regret and horror turn everything around me black. The gravity of what

comes next tears holes through my chest.

"Isaac!" I shout, my voice shaking with grief. "Please, please, forgive me." I claw and scratch at the arms squeezing my midsection as they lift me off the ground like I weigh nothing. "Keep fighting. You can do this. Don't give up." Hot tears burn my eyes, streaming down my face and neck. I feel sick. Gutted. "I'm sorry…I'm *so* sorry. Please, don't give up. It's not over yet." I wail his name one last time as I'm dragged out of the room by the guard, arms outstretched, begging for forgiveness. "*Isaac*!"

But he remains silent.

Gravely still.

The image of his sagged shoulders and bowed head, his body a picture of defeat, is the last thing I see as I'm pulled through the doorway, a thrashing mess of limbs and screams.

He's given up.

And it's the saddest thing I've ever seen.

⇄

Metal bars slam shut after I'm shoved inside a cage. My ass hits the dirty cement floor, the heels of my palms nicking on rocks and debris as I catch myself. It's a cage designed for animals, too small for me to even stand in. Scooting backward, I curl my knees to my chest and watch as the gray-haired guard inserts a key into the padlock.

He locks me in.

Jasper is tossed into his own enclosure at the same time, residing two cages to my left. I can see him through the slats of the one between us.

He's on his knees, both hands wrapped around the bars. Shaking them. Shouting obscenities. He looks over at me, then at the other guard as the man steps away. Both guards retreat, whistling as they go, and then the main door closes with a *bang*, echoing through the industrial room.

I'm in a daze.

Part of me is numb. Part of me feels *everything*.

I hear my heartbeat in my ears. My throat. My stomach. It's pounding like a sledgehammer against a steel door.

Hysteria bubbles to the surface. I try to choke it down, but it's a relentless

beast.

"Everly…my God, are you all right?" Jasper twists toward me, gripping the bars that face my cage. "Jesus Christ. Where are we? What is this?"

My eyes are wide and glazed. I'm in shock; I know that. Whimpers crawl up my windpipe like tiny razor blades.

"Everly!" He shakes his cage so hard it crashes against the one between us, ramming into mine. "Goddammit. Tell me you're okay. I thought…"

I blink, my lips parting on a silent scream.

"I thought you were *dead*."

Heaving in a breath, I slowly turn my head to look at him. I swallow. "I wasn't."

We stare at each other for a heavy beat.

Jasper.

My husband.

The man I chose.

Conflicting emotions are tearing me apart like a riptide. A seesaw of guilt and sweet relief.

Jasper is here.

Alive. Breathing. Flesh and blood.

Isaac is gone.

He tried to save me…and I *killed* him.

I stare blankly at my husband from ten feet away. This is not the reunion I'd dreamed of. No party hats or confetti. Only a slow kiss of death.

Jasper's face is full of shadows, dark circles rimming jade-green eyes. His skin is sapped of its golden color, looking chalky. He's lost weight. Jet-black hair, normally slicked back and styled to perfection, lays haphazardly across his forehead, stray pieces sticking straight up.

He gives the bars another fruitless shake. "Talk to me. Please. Tell me what this is…what happened to you?"

I can't.

I'm not a storyteller anymore. All my stories have dried up, turning to ashes on my tongue.

He lets out a growl of frustration. "*Fuck*, Everly! Say something. Please."

"Where were you?" I demand on a sob, a hot wave of tears brewing behind my eyes. "I…I waited for you. I waited for *two years*."

Shaking his head, he gazes at me with tortured eyes. "I tried, baby. I tried

to find you." A frown bends, creasing his dark brows. "I looked everywhere. Your case went cold. There…there was nothing more I could do. They said you were dead."

The tears fall.

All this time, I've been in here.

And he's been out there…living his life without me.

I shouldn't blame him. It's not fair. He's been grieving, too, and one man can only do so much. I was a needle in a haystack. A teardrop in the ocean.

But these feelings are surging through me, ready to combust, and I don't know what to do with them.

"There was no evidence," he continues, his voice cracking on the words. "Just me, my blood. The police had no leads, nothing to go on, and I…I didn't know what else to do."

I look away and squeeze my eyes shut as more tears leak out.

"Everly, please… What did they mean when they said a *hunt*? Who was that other man tied to the chair?"

He was everything.

And I let him slip through my fingers like water.

"Isaac," I croak out. "His name was Isaac."

Is.

His name *is* Isaac. He's not dead yet.

"Was he…" Jasper pauses. "Your friend?"

I cup a hand over my mouth as my shoulders shake. "Yes."

"God…I'm sorry. I should have fought harder for answers. I'll never forgive myself for this."

I look back over at him when his voice trails off with mourning. Jasper's forehead falls to the slats, his grip loosening on the bars as he deflates.

Empathy trickles its way inside me. Swiping at my tears, I crawl over to the side of the cage and lift to my knees, facing him. "It's okay," I whisper. "I'm sorry. I don't blame you." My words quiver. I bite my lip, keeping more cries from spilling out. "It's okay, Jasper."

"It's not. I should have torn the whole goddamn world apart until I found you."

I rest my temple against the cool bar. "How is Mom? And Allison?"

He lifts his chin, his throat bobbing. "They're coping. It hasn't been easy for any of us." His fingers curl around the metal wire. "There's been a void.

A gaping hole we can't fill."

"Are you taking care of them?"

Hesitating, he nods slowly. "Of course." Then he reroutes back to our current predicament. "Is this where they kept you? In this…*cage*?"

I shake my head. "No, I had a room. A mattress, toiletries. Books. I was a product, so they treated me as such."

He looks up at me. "A product?"

"My eggs. They were taking my eggs for some underground surrogacy business."

"They told you that?"

"No. I figured it out." I lick my dry lips. "After two years, it was easy to put the pieces together."

Wild eyes gaze back at me. "Are there others? Like that man in the chair?"

"Yes. Many men and women have come and gone. Killed, I'm assuming. I guess I was the lucky one."

"Jesus." His head falls forward, shaking from side to side. "This is a nightmare."

"It's been my nightmare for a long time," I tell him. "I'm sorry it's become yours."

Jasper doesn't respond for a while, but I'm too frazzled to count the seconds. Time spins in clipped movements. A blur. At least a minute or more passes before he blows out a breath and drops back to his butt, crossing his legs. "We're going to get out of here. I promise. I won't let you go again."

Tears sting and chafe. If I've learned anything in this place, it's that promises are destined to die here. They hold no weight and have no wings. A promise is nothing but a doomed whisper in the dark.

But hope was the only thing that kept me going, so I won't take that from him. "Yes," I reply, brokenly. "We're going to get out of here."

A sad smile pulls on his lips, unable to reach his eyes. He extends a hand through the opening. Slowly, painfully, I reach back. Our fingers dangle a few feet away, a mountain between us. Too far apart to touch.

Jasper exhales a shaky breath. "I missed you," he says, his arm stretched out. "So much."

Little rivers glide down my cheeks. I curl my fingers in and pull my arm back, sagging forward against the bars. "I missed you, too."

I imagine a life outside of this place.

A new life.

Difficult, at first. An uphill climb.

But *life*, nonetheless.

A real bed to sleep in. My husband by my side, his strong arms curled around me. A ceiling fan spinning overhead, lulling me away to kinder dreams.

Allison—I can't wait to hug her, to see her pretty face, to stroke my fingers through her dark-red hair and tell her how much I've missed our talks and laughter-filled sleepovers.

My mother—I need to hear her voice, feel her arms around me. She's my comfort. My home.

Even my pet tarantula seeps into my thoughts. My quirky little arachnid, always a steadfast friend.

Jasper.

Delving back into married life won't be easy, but it'll be worth it. We can get through anything together. We promised each other that as we stood beneath a floral arch, our smiles glimmering in the midday sun. White tulle and lace fluttered in the breeze as sacred vows warmed us with unconditional love.

And yet…

The ghost of someone else compromises the sweetness.

The man behind the wall.

The man I sentenced to death.

My crime soils the tendrils of hope blooming within me, and I know the weight of my guilt will haunt me forever. Even if I make it out of here alive, I'll never be the same.

Once a choice is made, it cannot be undone.

And that, I fear, is a fate worse than death.

28

This damn bag clings to my nose and mouth with every shallow breath. Limiting my oxygen. Stealing my sense of time and place.

The suffocating darkness is just one more reminder of my impending death. Claustrophobia is no joke when your head is covered, and the restraints only make it worse. Vertigo hits, spinning me around until I'm nauseated. Sweat runs down my neck and forehead, gathering beneath the straps on my chest.

It should be noted that hiding in a dumpster before being restrained to a chair with no way to wash off the stench was a terrible idea. Not that one plans for these things.

Combined, it might be enough to break my spirit—were I less enraged.

But I have my hate to keep me alive.

Good thing, too, because I'm about to lose my damn mind. Every minute is an exercise in mental discipline, in restraint, my limbs itching to thrash, desperate to break the bonds. To rip the bag off my head and breathe and breathe…and breathe.

Fuck, I just need some air.

A metal object *clangs* against the bars, but I don't jump. Don't react.

"Hey, you in there. No sleeping. Your buyers will be here soon." Dolph's derisive amusement goads me, but I refuse to engage. He's been taunting incessantly since they tossed me back in this cage, still pissed that I got the best of him a few years ago. Now, he thinks the tables are turned.

There’s one thing he’s forgetting: I’m not dead yet.

I may be bound and virtually helpless now, but if this is to be a game—if I’m to be a challenger—I figure they’ll have to let me loose. Not much sport otherwise.

That’s when things will turn back in my favor.

That’s when I kill them all.

It’s been hours—an endless stretch of anticipation, sitting here alone. All I can do is wait for the next step; the one that brings me closer to my fate.

Prey. That’s what I’m meant to be. A “challenge” for some asshole with so much money and so little empathy, he can’t think of anything better to do with it than use it to purchase the most dangerous adversary of all.

I should be using the time I have left to center myself, to plan. Hell, some would say I should make amends with whatever higher power might be willing to work a miracle on my behalf, but right now, there’s only one thing in my head.

Everly’s goddamned voice.

Isaac… Please forgive me.

Daring to beg for my forgiveness, just after she gave the order for my execution.

Well, fuck that.

Fuck her.

Fuck them all.

If I could take more than a small sip of air, I’d scream. If I had the use of my hands, I’d throw things. I’d tear this building apart brick by brick. But I’m trapped, and not just physically. Mentally, I’m caught in a place between fury, demoralization, and logic.

It’s turning me inside out.

On one hand, why the hell would this woman pick me? Why pick a stranger over the man she married? She wouldn’t.

I’m pissed, but I’m not an idiot. I know better. And to be honest, it would kind of make her a shitty person if she didn’t choose him.

On the other hand, I’d stopped thinking of her as a stranger a while ago. I told her everything and sensed her acceptance. I fucking *came back for this woman*.

I couldn’t leave her, even though I knew I should, and she thanked me by practically tossing me into the incinerator herself.

I'm livid…and I know how utterly stupid that is.

I also knew none of us were ever going to be set free, no matter what choice she made, but still.

She sentenced me to death.

This is what I get for letting myself care about someone. I was so much better off when I cared about nothing.

This whole no-win situation is shit.

My chest heaves with more than labored breaths.

If the long stretch of silence is to be believed, Dolph has gone off to torment someone else—though I'm his obvious favorite—and I'm left to simmer for what could easily be a year, or two, or ten.

Maybe I'll die here, tied to this chair.

Maybe I don't care.

No, a nudge of conscience whispers. *You still owe them.*

And they owe me. They owe me for Sara's life. And they will pay.

To keep my sanity, I allow myself to drift through daydreams ranging from impaling my captors on the cattle prod, to locking them in their own rooms and throwing away the key. Flirting with a dozen possibilities of ways to make them suffer.

But the mumble of distant voices hurtles me into the bleak reality. I open my eyes to the cloying darkness. I can't see a damn thing, but I can hear them.

People. A group of them, from the sound of it.

"Thank you for being willing to meet at this hour." The unfamiliar voice of an older man rumbles somewhere above, growing closer by the second. "Between me and the boys, our schedule is difficult to coordinate, as you can imagine. But we've been anxious to see this acquisition of yours in person for a long time."

"Naturally, I'm at your service, day or night." *That* voice I know all too well. My fists clench, tingling from their awkward position behind my head. The mere reminder of the motherfucking Timekeeper makes my teeth grind, and he's coming this way.

Footsteps thunder on the stairs.

"Of course, we're happy to have him shipped to the location you're planning to hold the expedition. For the price you've so generously offered, I'll even have him gift-wrapped, if you like." The hourglass-wielding

psychopath panders to his clients like a pathetic kiss-ass.

My body tenses. I guess it's that time.

"Delightful that you've made this a family affair," he says. "I wasn't aware you had more than one son."

"Yes, Langford is my oldest from my first marriage."

The billionaire, I assume.

"He spends most of his time managing my businesses in Asia, but since he shares the family affinity for big game, he made time to fly in for this occasion."

Another man responds in a low voice I can't make out. The air in the room changes as a handful of people crowd in. I feel them there, evaluating me from a safe distance.

Come a little closer, motherfuckers. I dare *you.*

"Well, here he is." Excitement practically oozes from the voice of my seller. It makes me wonder how much money he's getting from this deal.

I stay quiet, assessing what I can from beneath the bag.

Then he has the audacity to address me. "What do you say, Mr. Porter? Are you ready to meet your new master?"

"I don't know. Are you ready to die today?" The threat oozes from my raw throat. "Because mark my words, I'm coming after every last one of you."

The Timekeeper chuckles. "You did say you were looking for a worthy challenger," he tells the gathered men. "I'm afraid this one comes with an attitude to match."

"All the better." Amusement laces through the buyer's words. "We aren't looking for someone to roll over and play dead without a fight."

I open my mouth to promise more violence than he can handle, but —

"Are we just going to stand around and chat for a while, or will we be seeing what we paid for someday?" A voice that hasn't spoken until now interjects.

Stagnant air catches in my throat.

For a moment, the world goes completely still.

"I'm afraid patience isn't Langford's strong suit," his father explains.

Langford. The older son.

The one my captor had never heard of.

Because…

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

This changes everything.

My battered heart races inside my chest. Tension coils in my muscles, ready to spring at the first chance I get. Because the tables have just been turned. I'm not alone, praying to the powers-that-be for an unlikely miracle.

It's already here.

The bag is ripped off my head, and my blurry eyes land on a tall blond man standing several feet away.

"You smell like shit." Tanner grimaces.

I nearly weep.

But there's no time for a reunion. Instead, our eyes slide to the man who has tortured and tormented me. Who has taken untold numbers of people. Who killed my sister.

The man who is about to fucking *go down.*

He's too busy pandering to his guests—apologizing for the unkempt condition of their purchase, promising I will be cleaned up before delivery—to realize that "Langford" and I aren't strangers. He doesn't catch the shadow of movement in the doorway or notice the billionaire's entourage reaching for their guns.

Tanner goes for his. "*HANDS IN THE AIR*!"

Chaos erupts. Shouts ring out, echoing off the concrete.

But the men who work for my captor are here, too. And they have weapons.

Everything moves in slow motion, like we're underwater. Dammit, I should be in the thick of it, taking people down, doing *something.* But I'm trapped here, on this chair, watching the black-clad members of a SWAT team rush down the stairs like an army of giant ants.

My head is swimming.

Someone is behind me, unlocking the handcuffs, cutting the straps. Catching my shoulders when I slump forward, depleted of energy. "Are you okay, sir?" It's a young guy, a kid I don't know, propping me up.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

All I can do is breathe and breathe…and breathe.

There are more shouts. Gunshots. Resistance. My ears ring.

Barely able to keep my head up, I look around for the man himself, hoping someone secured him first.

Where is he?

Tanner is in the fray, handcuffing a man on his stomach, who is being held at gunpoint by a member of the SWAT team.

He makes eye contact for the briefest second. I shake my head, glancing around the room. That's when I see it… Maybe I'm hallucinating, but I swear I catch a glimpse of silver hair. A flash of bright color. But then I blink, and it's gone.

Fuck.

The thought of his escape is like a shot of adrenaline to the heart, and though every movement is excruciating, I bury it and lurch out of the chair. My name rings out as Tanner yells for me to wait, as he calls for backup, but he's occupied. Everyone is, and I will be damned to hell if that bastard walks away from this.

It's sheer will that powers my stiff legs. That keeps me upright despite numerous injuries and a dangerous lack of blood sugar, as I stumble in the only direction he could have gone—through the basement, passing room after room of cages and equipment without stopping to search them. He wouldn't have risked hiding in the building, not with an entire team of law enforcement agents here. There's got to be a way out.

After being tased, prodded, and bound for three days with no food, I'm anything but fast. But I *am* stubborn as fuck, and if I see that asshole, I won't hesitate.

The end of the sprawling building comes into view when I see it: a slightly cracked door near the end of the hall. Nothing more than a supply closet, by all appearances, but I'm drawn there like a magnet. When I look inside, I notice the shelving unit along the back wall—it's pulled aside at an odd angle, enough for someone to squeeze behind. So, I do, and there's another door in the back wall of a closet, hidden by a shelf of supplies.

Not fishy at all.

When I push *that* door open, I'm met by a set of concrete stairs leading up to a trapdoor.

Fuck. Yes.

I hurl myself up those stairs, barreling at the door like a wrecking ball. Then, I'm out into the night, the door slamming closed behind me. A wave of

lightheadedness hits me, but I fight it with a clenched jaw, breathing deeply through my nose. I only allow a second to orient myself. To figure out my next move.

If I'd been thinking clearly, I would have taken the time to grab a weapon off one of the rescue team, but all I could see was the man behind this murderous *business* escaping. Freedom means nothing until I've wiped this bastard off the face of the earth, and I'll be damned if I let the lack of a weapon stop me.

I still have my hands.

A quick scan of the area tells me I'm on a different side of the building than the other day. For such a large complex, the outside is devoid of lighting. Since escaping the first time, I've developed some suspicions about what this building was once used for, and if I'm right, it relied on isolation to avoid attracting unwanted attention. The rest of the world either never knew it existed or forgot about it altogether.

The perfect squatting place for a black-market operation.

It's surprisingly quiet back here, considering the takedown happening inside. But the darkness and nearby tree line explain how Tanner's team was able to get close enough to catch those on security duty off guard, while everyone inside remained distracted by the arriving clients.

Now the bastard intends to use that cover of darkness to slip away…

But tonight, someone up there is on my side, moving the cloud cover just enough to allow a swath of moonlight to fall over the field.

I choose to believe it's Sara, throwing a spotlight on her murderer, as he runs toward the trees.

Pausing only briefly, he throws a glance over his shoulder.

And when he sees *me* standing there, he takes off like a rabbit.

Oh, no you don't.

I may be in terrible condition, but the power of vengeance should never be underestimated, and now it carries me faster than I've ever run before.

For a minute, I forget the pain and exhaustion in my body.

I forget that I once relied on the system to provide justice; now it's just me.

I lean into the dark pit in my soul, letting it swallow me whole. Leaving my humanity behind, I —

A force like a freight train slams into my side, taking me to the ground

mid-stride. Rolling several times, I'm smashed flat to the dry grass, staring up at Dolph's twisted expression.

"You're *mine* now." With his forearm pinning my neck to the point where I can't breathe, he pulls a gun from his back pocket.

One on one, I should be able to take him, but I'm too weak. Too…

Fuck.

I did *not* survive this long to go out at the hands of this asshole. There are more important things that still need to be taken care of, and I'm not leaving this world until the man currently escaping across the field is out of it.

Someone from SWAT needs to come out here. I need backup.

Tanner.

The metal barrel digs into my forehead. His arm presses down on my throat. Quickly, I assess the least dangerous method of dislodging that gun before it goes off or I run out of air. Both will kill me, but one is faster. Messier.

"Did you think, Mr. Porter, that I don't already have a contingency plan?" A fancy shoe covers my fingers. Steps down.

I grind my teeth as something crunches.

The Viking pinning me doesn't move, but the pressure on my throat eases a touch. My attention shifts from Dolph to the smug bastard standing over us.

He grins, unflustered, not a hair out of place. "I suppose you can have him now, Rudolph. I'm done here."

"Contingency…plan?" I push the words through my constricted throat.

"Police interference was only a matter of time, really." The Timekeeper practically leers in triumph. "I'm a genius, Isaac. Of course, I have emergency exits and certain precautions in place in case such a thing should happen. We should be seeing the first round of them any second now." His gaze lifts.

"You—"

"Wait for it." He holds a finger in the air. "Aaaand…" His hands flare outward in a dramatic, explosive gesture that he mirrors with a sound effect, just as —

BOOM.

Explosions burst through the windows of at least four rooms on this side of the building. They're echoed by others I can hear, but not see.

Glass rains down. I turn my head, oddly grateful Dolph is on top of me.

He grunts as he takes the brunt of it.

I have only one thought:

Everly is in there.

No.

My heart rate kicks up so fast, it nearly vibrates my chest. Because no matter how betrayed I may feel, or how pissed off I am, I *cannot* let her die like this.

I won't lose another person again. Not to him.

Flames shoot from the empty windows, giving the ground an orange cast. Dolph's grip falters, just for a second. Just long enough.

When I ram my knee upward, he isn't ready.

He isn't ready when I take that moment to yank his gun-wielding arm straight up and twist as I roll, switching our positions. He isn't ready when the gun slips from his grip and transfers to mine.

And he really isn't ready when I blow his goddamned head to pieces.

For a split second, my hearing goes out. I blink, dazed. Staring at what's left of Dolph.

There's blood in my eyes.

As a piercing squeal takes the place of the silence, I blink again. Push up to my knees, wobbly, but still moving. Rub my arm over my face.

Then I remember.

Dolph was just a distraction.

I look up. Scan the field.

It's empty.

"Fuck." The voice is muffled. Distant. But— "Fuck, Porter." Tanner is there. Crouching alongside me, his hand on my shoulder. He barely gives the pieces of Dolph a second glance. "Are you okay?"

I stare at the field until it starts to spin, then my eyes drift to my old friend. I've never been so happy to see someone in my life, but I don't have time to answer ridiculous questions. If I don't keep moving, I'll crash, and if that happens…

It can't. I'm not done.

As long as he breathes, I'll never be done.

I force my shaky legs to stand. Then, wiping the gore from my hands onto my shirt, I pocket the gun.

It's mine now.

“I’ve got to go.” I head for the trees, but barely make it two steps.

“Porter, look at me.” Grabbing me by the shoulders, Tanner spins me around. “Isaac.”

“The Timekeeper,” I mumble.

His brows pull in. “The *what*?”

I shake my head. Dammit, I’ve gotten so used to calling him that stupid fucking supervillain name. “The ringleader,” I clarify, gesturing to the tree line. “I have to find him.” Every second I take to explain this, the farther he gets. “Now.”

He pulls out his radio. “I’m on it.”

“No.” I grab his wrist.

“The only place you’re going is to a hospital. You’re lucky to be alive, for Christ’s sake.”

“No,” I growl. “He’s *mine*.”

I don’t want help. Help will only keep me from doing what needs to be done.

I see the realization as it hits. As he looks down at the wreckage that was Dolph, and back to me. “Jesus, man. I mean, *that* can be chalked up to self-defense, but—” He rubs his hand over his jaw, confliction in his eyes. “I shouldn’t let you do this. You know that.”

“But you will.”

“You can’t do it alone, not in this condition.”

“Go back inside and get the civilians out. I’m not losing him.”

“The fire department is here. I’ve got plenty of others on the civilians. You’re my concern right now. Fuck, Porter, don’t make me knock you out.”

My glare says everything.

There’s a *whoosh* and a *pop* from the second floor. More glass shatters. Tanner flinches, but nothing can shake my resolve. Not now.

“Everly.” I wrap the lapels of his suit in my fists, getting right in his face. “Find Everly. Get her out of there. Make sure she’s okay.”

“Ever—”

“Everly Cross.” I give him a shake that almost takes my balance with it. “That model that disappeared two years ago.” I need to get moving before I collapse.

“Two years… The fuck?” His eyes go wide. “Shit. Is Sara…?”

I shake my head, cursing the pressure behind my eyes. All I can see is her

sitting in front of that hourglass, knowing those were her final moments. It'll haunt me for the rest of my life. "Find Everly. Make sure she gets out safe. I want you to *personally* make sure, do you hear me?"

"Fine." His hands wrap around my wrists. "Let's find her together, and then I'm getting you to a hospital. We'll catch the guy. I promise. He went into the woods in the middle of nowhere; I'll get teams to canvas the area."

"No." Twisting out of his grip, I back away. I've taken too long already. "It doesn't matter what happens to me. I don't *care.* Not if he goes free. He killed Sara, Tanner. She was here, and he killed her." My chest heaves. "I have to go."

I leave him standing there, trusting he'll do as I asked. Breaking into a jog that jars my bones and threatens to buckle my knees, I push for the tree line.

Nothing will deter me from my mission. I have a promise to keep.

"Porter!" Tanner calls out, one last time. "Isaac!"

But I'm already gone.

29

Hours roll by.

It feels like hours. Each one stretches painfully, like the elastic balloon of grief inside my chest. I stare at Jasper through the bars. He's slumped sideways, his shoulder pressed to the right side of his cage as his chest slowly heaves in and out.

"What do you think they'll do to us?" he asks as I aimlessly draw patterns on the dusty floor with my big toe. "Torture? Dismemberment?" He tilts his face toward me and frowns. "That man in the silver suit…he strikes me as the creative type. A satanic ritual, acid baths, Medieval torture methods. Something twisted like that." Cringing, Jasper adds, "Scaphism. Do they still do scaphism?"

My nose scrunches. "I don't think so."

"Maybe they'll sell us to the highest bidder, and we'll become circus entertainers."

I've spent the last hour filling him in on the details of my captivity.

The injections, the blackouts.

Roger.

Books, mementos, evil nurses, and the doctor with beady eyes and rat ears.

Screams. Terror. The other victims.

I dodge the subject of Isaac to the best of my ability, only giving him minor details. I don't know why, but Isaac feels too personal, like a cherished

secret. All I tell him is that he was the last prisoner on the other side of my wall.

I don't tell him I never got to see his face.

And I don't tell him his face is the one thing I wanted to see *most* over the past couple of months. More than I craved fresh air in my lungs and sunlight on my skin.

But I realize it's for the best that I never got to memorize the color of his eyes, or the texture of his hair, or the angles of his jaw. If I had a face to put to the name, I'd be eaten alive. Gutted from the inside out.

And then there would be nothing left of me.

Jasper needs me right now. He needs me to be strong, capable, and vigilant. I've had practice with this kind of pain. Two harrowing years of it.

His words register as I lean back against the cage. The unknowns of my future play out in morbid color, but I can't imagine a fate worse than this.

Worse than my own self-inflicted guilt.

"I don't know," I murmur. "I never thought about becoming circus entertainers."

"Mm. Sounds like the most palatable option."

I doubt that. "I never know what comes next. This place is unpredictable."

He looks over at me, a mix of longing and despair dulling his green eyes. "How have you managed to cope? Mentally?"

A reasonable question.

The truth is, I just did. Human beings have no idea what they're capable of until they're thrown into the pits of hell with no armor, no reinforcements, and no way out. When your back is against the wall, you use that wall to stay standing. When your life flashes before your eyes, you turn those flickers into light—a light at the end of the tunnel. You take each day as it comes, knowing it's another chance to make your way to the other side.

Nobody ever prepares for the worst-case scenario. But our survival instincts are our greatest weapon; a weapon that remains dormant until we're faced with the unimaginable.

And then we fight.

My breathing steadies as I close my eyes and whisper, "I had no other choice."

Time presses on.

Fifty-seven seconds.

Jasper's voice sounds farther away with every second that ticks by, until, eventually, I doze. Exhaustion carries me into fire-drenched nightmares, and I hear Isaac calling my name as flames lick the walls and charred beams crumble from the ceiling.

I'm trapped.

My skin melts, my hair singes.

"Everly," he calls out, a garbled jumble of syllables. He sings my name like the opening chords to a bleak overture. "You're looking in the wrong place."

I search for him, pushing through the wall of thick smoke. I'm moving in slow motion, fiery streaks blurring past me, everything ablaze.

I can't find him. I can't —

There.

A shadow moves. It's him. I can't see his face…but I *feel* him.

Comfort. Reprieve.

Isaac.

An arm extends through the flickering heat. His hand reaching for mine. Our fingers finally about to touch. No more walls, no more barriers. I reach and reach and *reach*…

But his hand disintegrates.

Turns to ashes the moment we clasp.

I open my mouth to scream but nothing comes out. My words are ashes, too. Everything is dust and debris. It's too late.

His voice is the last thing I hear before I'm startled awake, and reality punctures me.

But it's not Isaac's voice bellowing my name.

It's Jasper's.

And I don't feel fire…I *smell* it.

My eyelids flutter as the scent of smoke wafts underneath my nose and everything comes whirling back to me in a cloud of fear.

"Everly, wake up." Jasper is frantic. "Everly!"

I jolt upright, my eyes flaring all the way open. Jasper scrambles to his knees, both hands curled around the bars as he gapes at the doorway. Following his stare, I nearly choke when I see a chalky plume of gray filtering into the room.

Alarms go off, blaring and shrieking.

Oh, my God.

I crawl on my hands and knees and start yanking on the bars. “Help! Somebody help us!”

Nobody can hear us. No one is coming.

This is the worst-case scenario—one I never truly considered. A slow, painful demise as I burn alive with the echo of my husband’s screams haunting me as I take my last breath.

No, no, no.

Panic washes over me. I pull and tug on the bars to no avail. Reaching through the opening, I jerk the padlock until my fingers nearly bleed.

The Timekeeper.

He wouldn’t let me die in here like this. I’m his *product*. He still needs me.

“Help!” I shriek, heaving in a smoke-laced breath. “*Help us*!”

“Christ…Jesus. Everly, what do we do?” Jasper mimics my movements, trying to get his padlock to release. It won’t. It’s useless. “*Fuck*!”

There’s a small window shaped like a rectangle, giving me a narrow view of the hallway. Orange firelight flickers on the other side of it. The building is going up in flames, and we’re trapped.

Doomed to die in these cages.

Tears burst from my eyes. I turn to Jasper, crawling toward him, as close as I can get. “Jasper…”

“Everly.” His eyes glisten with terror and remorse. “I just got you back. I can’t lose you again. I *refuse*.”

“Jasper.” My voice trembles through a moan of despair. I clutch the bars in two tight fists as salt pours down my cheeks. “Tell me a story.”

He parts his lips, hesitating. A quick shake of his head tells me he’s all out of words.

Jasper glances at the doorway, expression steeped in shock.

“Please,” I beg, a fraught whisper. I bounce on my knees. “Talk to me.”

Heaving in a long breath, he presses his forehead to the bars and closes his eyes. “Once upon a time…there was a woman. Sitting in a wine bar with a stack of papers and notebooks strewn across the table, a pencil between her teeth. I noticed her right away. Her blue eyes, big hair, pretty face. I had to know her name.” He swallows a moan. “I had to know her.”

I nod, my eyes squeezing shut as more tears leak out. “Keep going.”

“She didn’t want to talk to me at first. She was busy working on an essay about beetles.”

“The bombardier beetle.” I force a tear-filled laugh as alarm bells explode throughout the hallways. “When threatened, it can eject a boiling, noxious chemical spray from its abdomen with startling accuracy.”

“That’s right.” Smoke fills the room in a thickening cloud. Jasper coughs before continuing. “I said, ‘A girl as pretty as yourself should be on billboards, not hiding away in a wine bar researching the defense mechanisms of bugs.’”

“I said I liked bugs.”

“I said I liked you.” He sends me a sad smile, his eyes watering with grief and fumes. “I gave you my business card. A month later, you gave me your heart.”

I cough through my tears, my lungs burning. “Jasper, I —”

The door barrels open. Voices shout.

My heart bottoms out of me.

“Over here!”

I jump to my feet and hit my head on the top of the cage. Jasper calls out, waving his arms through the bars as men in fire-resistant suits barge into the room.

I can’t believe it.

I’m dreaming.

“Help us!” Jasper yells. “Get us the fuck out of here!”

Bolt cutters slice through the padlocks.

Mine. Jasper’s.

We’re free.

As I’m crawling out of the enclosure, I’m pulled to my feet.

I’m numb. Alive. Moving.

Coughing and choking, I run toward my husband as one of the men intercepts and scoops me up, carrying me out the open door. Jasper follows behind, leaning on a firefighter for support. Flames crackle throughout the hallways as my eyes sting with smoke and tears. There’s an exit up ahead. Freedom. It’s everything I’ve wanted, craved, *yearned* for…

“Wait!” I beg, scrambling from the man’s grip. “Isaac. We need to find Isaac!”

He holds me tighter, his voice muffled through a face shield. “We’re getting everybody out, ma’am. Stay calm.”

But I can’t stay calm. Isaac might still be inside this burning building. “No, please, we need to go back.” I’m wiggling, writhing, pleading. “Please! We must go back!”

He doesn’t respond and keeps stalking ahead.

I glance behind me, watching Jasper cover his mouth and nose with the front of his shirt. He’s stumbling forward, chin tucked to his chest. The alarms are deafening. My desperate calls are drowned out by the noise. “Isaac!”

Maybe he’s already made it out.

Maybe he’s free.

God, please…

As we breach the warm, musky air, I slam my eyes shut, the swirl of police lights too bright, too intense. Burrowing my face against the man’s shoulder, I drink in my first nature-doused breath in two years.

I swallow it. Savor it.

I do it again, lifting my face toward the night sky, my eyes sealed shut. A breeze dances across my skin. My hair takes flight. Sound carries on all around me, but I’m lost to this moment. Something so simple, so ordinary, so pure…something I’ll never take for granted again.

I’m set on my feet, still gripping the arm of the firefighter as I fight for balance. I squint one eye open through the flashing police lights, but it hurts. It’s too much. Intrusive. Rubbing the heels of my palms to my eye sockets, I take a few minutes to adjust to the new environment.

Then, slowly, my eyelids peel open. One at a time. A fog of people comes into focus: SWAT teams, police officers, firefighters, hoses, ambulances.

Where’s Isaac?

Jasper grabs me from behind.

I let out a hoarse cry as I’m pulled into his arms, and I inhale another scent I’ll never take for granted again—him. Remnants of oaky cologne and tea-tree shampoo assault my senses, mingling with smoke and sweat.

I break down, sobbing against his chest, my arms coiling around his neck and bringing him closer.

“Everly…my God.” He peppers kisses to my hair, stroking both hands along my spine. “I’ve got you, baby. I’ve got you.”

Squeezing him tighter, I press a kiss to the side of his neck, above his collar. He cups my shoulder with one hand and inches me backward, skimming his gaze across my soot-stained face. A look of pure awe spills across his features, furrowing his brow, parting his lips.

I stare back at him, dumbstruck.

He's aged.

His eyes don't look the same.

Cradling his face in both hands, I dust my thumbs over his lightly stubbled jaw. "I thought you were dead," I croak out, more tears threatening. "I never thought I'd get to touch you again."

Something passes through him, fills his eyes.

Anguish.

He swallows hard. "I thought *you* were dead." Long fingers graze through my knotted hair. "I believed it. Everly, I —"

His words are cut short when an officer approaches, gripping me by the elbow. "Miss, we need to get you both to a hospital. The ambulance is waiting."

I'm pried away from Jasper as I glance around. The expansive stretch of grass and weeds is fenced by a lush tree line. No other buildings to be seen. We're in the middle of nowhere.

My eyes search, desperate.

I'm looking for someone. A faceless man.

A voice.

There are two men in handcuffs being led to a police cruiser. Behind me, a woman is wailing in an officer's arms, her nightgown in tatters, soot and blood coating her skin.

The officer pulls me away, guiding us to the ambulance. I keep looking around with urgency, hoping I spot a man with dark hair, wearing jeans and a navy T-shirt. But I don't see him.

As my feet catch up to the officer, I peer up at the man in uniform. "Did you rescue a man named Isaac?" I try to pull away, but he holds on to my wrist. "He was a prisoner, like me. I can't find him…"

"Everyone made it out, Miss."

Lies.

Not everyone.

"Please, I can't find him. I —"

A second man approaches, who looks like a detective. Dark-blond hair and warm brown eyes come into view as he cuts in front of us, stopping me with an extended hand.

"Can I get your name?" he prompts.

"I…" My mind is in a daze, a dreamworld. "Everly. Everly Cross."

Recognition lights up his gaze for a beat.

He knows me. From the news reports. The media.

But he doesn't say anything else, only giving me a short nod before his attention is pulled away.

"Wait…wait, no, please. I'm looking for someone!" I call to his retreating back. "I need to find Isa —"

"Right this way, please," an officer interrupts.

The detective disappears into the chaos. Hopelessness slams into me as the ambulance doors open and a gurney is rolled out.

I don't need a gurney. I just need to know he survived.

I can't leave him behind.

I can't.

Jasper takes my hand in his, twining our fingers together. "It's okay." He gives my palm a comforting squeeze, watching the agony splay across my face. "They'll find your friend."

"I…I can't leave him. Jasper, you don't understand, I —"

"It'll be okay. Your mother will meet us at the hospital. Everything's okay now." Our fingers unlink as I'm pulled away from him. "You're going home."

Home.

Tears moisten my cheeks as I look over Jasper's shoulder at the flame-engulfed building. Smoke billows up to the sky, warping the star-studded canvas with graphite spirals. I feel the heat on my skin.

Fire. People. Jasper.

Warmth.

But a chill snakes down the back of my neck. My teeth chatter. I wrap both arms around my body as shivers encompass me from toes to top.

I've dreamt of this moment every day for years.

Years.

Every second counted, I manifested this very scene.

Freedom. Safety. Rescue.

The bad guys lose.

I win.

But as I’m placed into the ambulance with my husband at my side and my whole life ahead of me…

I can’t help but feel defeat.

30

I squint through the myriad of flashing lights.

Cameras snap and click.

But I'm not on a runway. I'm not in a studio with professional photographers and made-up models. No galas, no champagne, no expensive gowns and glitzy high heels.

I'm being carted up a sidewalk in a wheelchair toward a hospital door, while reporters ambush me. Cupping a hand over my forehead, I glance left and right. They're everywhere.

It's blinding.

"Everly Cross!"

"How do you feel?"

"Mrs. Cross! What happened to you?"

"Where have you been?"

"Was this a media stunt?"

The last question has me jumping out of my chair. An EMT grips me by the shoulder, pushing me back down, but I resist and scramble free. I fly out of the wheelchair and storm over to the sea of cameras, my bare feet scuffing on the pavement.

"Ma'am, let's get you inside," the EMT calls over to me.

I ignore him. Indignation burns my blood as I drink in the eager faces. Microphones are shoved at me.

"A statement, please," says a brunette with a prim bun, red lips, and black

glasses.

I blink slowly. Processing.

My stomach cramps, my body weak. A fever threatens, but my fury is louder. “This wasn’t a *stunt*.” Everyone goes silent, save for the clicking cameras. “I was held captive. Used and operated on by horrible people. Monsters.”

A slew of follow-up questions pour out.

“Who were they?”

“How did you survive?”

“Are there other victims?”

Before I can respond, Jasper is by my side, tugging me away from the overzealous crowd.

“Everly, let’s go. You look like you’re about to collapse.” He ushers me away, using his body to shield me from dizzying camera flashes. “It’s not the time for a statement.”

“They…they think I was faking it.”

“Let them. It doesn’t matter.”

I’m guided back to the wheelchair and pushed through the mechanical door. Jasper shoos away his own wheelchair and takes my hand, holding on to me as I’m wheeled through hallways, my heart in my throat.

He swipes a hand over his dirt-smudged face, then flicks his attention to me. “I'm sure you have questions, too.”

My eyes water as I squeeze his hand. “I saw you get shot. You weren’t moving, barely breathing. I was told you were dead.”

“Felt like I was. I barely survived.” Shaking his head, he stares down at his staggering feet, his throat rolling. “And for a long time, I wished the bullet *had* taken my life because I couldn’t fathom living a life without you.”

Our eyes meet for a hollow beat as I’m trekked through the hallway. “How long was your recovery?”

His jaw ticks through the pain. “Eternal,” he says bleakly. “But now you’re back, so maybe there’s an end in sight.”

Our hands squeeze again, paralleling the feeling in my heart.

I can’t help but glance around as we approach my room, searching for a man with dark hair. I spot someone, late thirties, with inky black hair long enough to tease his shoulders. My eyes flare as I jolt upright, twisting my neck to get a better view.

He looks at me.

And I know it’s not him.

He’s too skinny, too short. His eyes aren’t brown.

I deflate.

Soon I’m pushed through a powder-blue curtain and deposited in a small room. My gown is replaced by a new gown made of itchy cotton and translucent buttons. Jasper pulls a chair over to my cot as I dive underneath the covers, my teeth chattering. The adrenaline peters out, leaving me boneless, and I feel the fever raging in my bloodstream. Pain commandeers my lower abdomen, causing me to hiss as I curl my knees to my chest.

“Everly.” My husband’s voice is soothing as the sound of my name pitches with a raspy hitch. He cradles my palm in two hands and leans over, pressing his chin to his clasped fist.

My eyelids flutter as I try to center myself, try to overcome the pain. A nurse floats over to my bedside, fiddling with machines and wires. I hardly feel the needle slide into the back of my hand. “I missed you…so much.” I feel myself fading. I don’t want to go. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Did you miss me, too?” Exhaustion waters down my words, carrying me away. I hold Jasper’s hand. My anchor.

“More than you know.”

His words are a backdrop to better dreams.

I’m alive.

I’m here.

I’m free…

I drift awake sometime later, thinking I’m in my white-walled cell. Fluorescent overhead lights tickle my eyes as I rub away the fog, fighting for a full breath. I hear a beeping noise. Rustling sounds. Faraway whispers.

A voice.

“Sweetheart?”

My eyes ping open, my heart doing cartwheels between my ribs. A paneled ceiling comes into view, and I’m scared to look left. I’m terrified this

bubble will pop and I'll be…*there*.

Warm fingers tangle with mine.

Everything comes rushing back to me.

It's real.

She's real.

"Mom?" My head turns, and my gaze lands on my mother. My beautiful, teary-eyed mother. Golden hair is peppered with silver, pulled up in a loose twist. Crow's feet frame her sunken-in eyes as she stares at me in dumbstruck wonder. "Mom…"

She launches herself at me, draping her body over mine.

We cry together. Two years' worth of bottled-up tears.

My frail arms encompass her larger body as she shakes above me, her grief and love dampening the curve of my neck. She's put on weight.

She's stunning.

"Oh, Everly." She presses a kiss to my collarbone before lifting off me. "Am I hurting you? God, I'm sorry, I —"

"No, you're not hurting me." My voice is low and cracked. "I can't believe you're here."

She holds me at arm's length, studying every crease, every pocket of exposed emotion that filters across my face. "My baby girl," she whispers. "You're alive."

I send her a delirious nod, more tears pouring out. "I'm alive."

"I never doubted it. Not for a goddamn second." Giving me a little shake, she hugs me again, and we stay like that. Chest to chest, heart to heart. I let her life force warm me. A mother's love. When she inches back up minutes later, she cups my cheeks in her hands as multicolored rings and baubles press into my skin. "Look at you, honey. Just *look* at you."

My bottom lip wobbles. "Do I look different?"

I haven't even glanced in a mirror.

I'm thinner; I know that much. But are my eyes still blue? Or have they dulled to a miserable shade of gray? Is my hair thinning? Falling out? My skin must look sickly. I don't think I'd recognize myself.

"You look perfect."

A smile crests, the first smile I've worn since my hand was last pressed to a wall. My mom is here. This moment is everything I could want and more.

She scoots closer to the bed, taking my hand again. "You don't have to

tell me anything. Not yet." A thumb dusts across my knuckles. "Take all the time you need."

Time.

I don't need any more time.

All I need is right now.

I tell her everything. Everything I recall, from the harrowing, gruesome ins and outs of my captivity to The Timekeeper and his horde of evil minions. The egg transfers. The men and women who appeared on the other side of the wall, only to vanish into thin air.

Mom has always been the best listener. She'd tell me that all a person ever truly wanted was to be heard. So, she made it an artform, her own special love language. There's solace in her silence, and it fuels my words and pain-steeped stories.

When my strength is depleted and my voice is raw, she climbs into the small bed with me and curls an arm around my waist. I prop myself up against two stacked pillows and glance down at her fingers as they graze the length of my arm, wrist to elbow. My mother loves jewelry. Rings, bracelets, necklaces. There's a new jewel circled around her index finger that catches my eye. It's shaped like a dragonfly. "What's this?" I touch my fingertips to the gold and cerulean ring with curiosity.

She glances at it, wiggling her finger. "It reminded me of you. Your love for insects." She smiles. "Dragonflies represent resilience and change. It kept me grounded. Close to you."

My eyes water through a nod.

"I never believed you were dead, Everly." Her chin lifts, gaze connecting with mine. "Never. Lost, yes…but not gone. I would have known. I would have *felt* it."

Mom is the intuitive type.

She loves nature, crystals, incense.

When I was stressed, she'd tell me to stand outside in the grass, barefoot. When I was sad, she'd encourage me to hug a tree and breathe in the crisp bark. Nature is a healer, she'd say. It's our essence. For years, I had none of that. No sunlight, no grass blades, no flowers stretching toward an open sky. I became a hollow shell.

Heaving in a frayed breath, I look up at the ceiling and think of Jasper. The snap. The clipped tether. I'd convinced myself he was dead because I felt

him leave me. It was a bone-deep dread that consumed me for months.

But he's alive.

My instincts were wrong. The truth couldn't reach me inside of that place.

"Have you talked to Allison?" I wonder, reaching for my mother's hand. She stiffens a bit. "Does she know?"

Mom nods slowly. "Yes. She's in the waiting room. They would only allow one person in at a time."

"I missed her."

"She missed you. Terribly."

I swipe away a stray tear. "Have you stayed in touch?"

"Of course. We've had coffee dates, shopping trips, lunches out on the patio. Less frequently, lately…"

Swallowing, I close my eyes. "Why?"

She doesn't reply for a while. Then she whispers, "She's been busy."

"Can I see her?"

"Sure." Mom untangles herself from my arms and stands, smoothing out her blush-hued blouse. "I'll send her in."

She leaves the room, and I pull the starchy blanket up to my chin. Seconds tick by, turning into minutes.

Ninety-two, ninety-three…

I push my hair off my face, tucking it under my head. When I lay back down, something pokes at my scalp.

My eyes round.

The guitar pick.

A tsunami of emotion hurls into my chest as I sit up straight and drag my fingers through my giant mess of hair, searching for the priceless treasure. It's still secured, just barely. Tangled in a few loose strands. Wincing, I slowly pull it free, my heartbeats skipping as it comes into view inside the palm of my hand. A shimmering blue teardrop.

Sara's.

His.

I make it my mission to find him.

I won't give up, won't stop looking—not until I've memorized the shape of his eyes and the curve of his lips. Isaac is still alive, and this guitar pick is meant for him.

I'll track him down.

Tell him I'm sorry.

And then we'll both make music again.

The curtain shuffles, and I reach behind me to tuck the pick underneath my pillow, just as a shock of familiar auburn hair catches my eye.

Allison stands at the edge of my bed. Eyes huge. Freckled cheeks glistening with tears.

My best friend.

"Ev…" She takes a cautious step forward, almost like I'm a mirage she's terrified to watch dissipate before her eyes. "God…it's really you."

I hold out my hand, needing to feel her. To hold her. "Allison."

"Ev," she croaks again before rushing forward. She collapses against me, sobbing into my hair. "You're real. You're alive. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

I close my eyes and inhale her scent. Lilacs and vanilla. "Don't be sorry."

"I d-didn't fight…hard enough." More sobs, more desperate squeezes. "You were alive…this whole time."

"You didn't know."

"I *should* have." Another firm hug. "Some mornings I would wake up believing you were still alive, lost, waiting for us to find you, and the guilt would sucker-punch me. Crush me, body and soul. And then I'd go to sleep at night, deciding you were floating somewhere among the stars, looking down on me. At peace."

It's funny how everyone's perspective has been so different. Jasper thought I was dead. Mom was convinced I was alive. Allison was riddled with uncertainty, torn in both directions.

Loss is so subjective.

And disappearances are a specific kind of loss. No closure, no answers. Just a gaping hole of unknowns and heartache.

Death is easier. Death is tangible.

Loose ends are just tragic, the threads dangling forever out of reach.

I can't imagine how it's been for any of them. I watch through blurry eyes as Allison sits up, perched at the edge of my mattress. Her normally tanned skin is sallow. Sapped of life. I want to bring the color back to her cheeks. "Tell me what I've missed," I prompt, reaching for her hand.

Her eyes drift closed, a swallow catching in her throat. "So much. Everything."

“Did you break up with Erik?”

Erik was the man she was seeing at the time of my abduction. They’d been on the outs after a seemingly disastrous vacation in Belize. I still remember our playful text messages that night. Our final conversation.

Allison curls her thin reddish hair behind her ears and bobs her head. “Yes. It was over the moment we landed at the airport. I broke up with him at baggage claim.”

“The irony.”

She forces a light laugh. “Yeah.” Casting her gaze away, she rubs her lips together. “Your mom has been a rock for me. She’s a piece of you…a beautiful piece. She took me under her wing, and we grieved together. There was comfort in that.”

“I’m glad,” I say softly. “I’m glad you were there for each other.”

“Are you going to stay with your mother for a while, until you get back on your feet?” She glances at me, her eyes wide and glossy.

I frown. “Oh…well, I figured I’d move back into my house.”

She nods. “Right…right, of course. That’s a good plan.”

A sickly thought coils through me. “Are my things still there? My clothes? Personal items?” I hadn’t considered the notion that Jasper may have donated my things. Sold them. Discarded them. He thought I was dead, so I wouldn’t hold it against him. Still, my stomach pitches at the thought. “It’s okay if he did. I can start over.”

“No, no, he didn’t.” Her hand tightens on my fingers. “Everything’s in storage. Your mother wouldn’t let him get rid of anything. But…” She trails off, worries her lip between her teeth. “It was painful for him. Living in that house all alone, surrounded by your memory, your magic sprinkled into every room. It was…too much. I hope you understand.”

My throat burns. “I get it. We can all start over.” My eyes glaze over as I send her a melancholy smile. “Together.”

Pain coasts across her pretty face. Raw, physical pain. “Together,” she whispers back.

We spend the next hour catching up, starting over, telling stories, and weaving endings into new beginnings. For a moment, it feels like old times. Giggles break through. Tears of joy and belly laughter. She tells me about the three puppies she adopted, a bonded trio—Pepper, Jack, and Cheese. I scroll through images on her phone, a genuine smile brimming with life. It sticks.

This is what I missed.
This is what I craved.
And now I have a second chance.
It’s finally time to live the life I dreamed about for two painful years.

31

On the fourth day post-captivity, I'm woken by a stream of golden light. "Christ, make it stop."

"Morning, sunshine." The blinds lift all the way, blasting through my eyelids like fire.

"Mother of…*fuck."* I pull the pillow from behind my head and throw it in the direction of the voice. Nine weeks and three days trapped in that windowless room have given me a new appreciation for sunlight, but —

"Nice to see you, too, Luke. Chipper as always."

I'm significantly less enthusiastic about Nurse Rebecca.

"It's oh-stupid-thirty in the morning and I feel like I've been hit by a train," I grumble. "My chipper is hibernating. Forever."

"Mmhmm." She moves away from the blinds and strides to the bed, prodding the tubing connected to my hand. My new torturer may wear pink scrubs and a smile, but I swear she still likes to make me suffer. "How are we feeling today?"

"*We* are feeling like we're trapped in a tiny room with an intrusive person who won't leave us alone…" *Why does this seem familiar?* "Never mind. I'm going back to sleep." I roll to my side—scratch that, I *try*—but after doing an award-worthy impression of a turtle stuck on its back, I lay there cursing, instead.

My caregiver stands over me, her expression lacking sympathy. "When you're finished trying to rip your stitches open, take those." She nods at the

horse pills sitting next to a plate of scrambled eggs and fruit on the bedside tray. “And eat your breakfast.”

After more than sixty straight days of similar breakfasts delivered by the ogre, I don’t want to see another scrambled egg as long as I live. I’ve made this no secret. “You’re a sadist, Rebecca.”

“And you’re a ray of sunshine, Mr. Tanner.” After raising the bed to a sitting position, she breezes toward the exit, giving the man entering a long-suffering grimace. It quickly turns to a melting smile as he greets her with his dimples on display.

She’s got no idea she’s having heart palpitations over the *real* Mr. Tanner.

I roll my eyes. “Your natural charm is nauseating.”

“It’s probably not a great idea to make the nurses hate you.” Tanner stops by the side of my bed, his leather briefcase in tow. “Just saying.”

“Technically, it’s *you* the nurses hate.” I grin with a full show of teeth. “And *that* one is a monster; don’t let her fool you.”

“She’s actually very nice; you’re just a miserable patient. Now, I’d appreciate you not ruining my good name, thanks.”

“It’s like you’ve never met me.”

He raises an eyebrow.

I shrug. “I’m not sure what you expected, tossing me in here under your name…but I’ll do my best.”

In this case, my best is nothing.

“So, I should expect the nurses to start cursing the name Luke Tanner. Got it.” He glances at the untouched plate of food and back at me. “How are you holding up?”

“It’s better than my previous accommodations, I suppose.” That’s all I can give him for now. “I’m alive.”

There are no chains, cuffs, or continual threats of death here, but I’m still a prisoner—both in this bed, and my own mind. The bastard that eluded me is living rent-free in my head, taunting my helplessness while he gets farther and farther away. Meanwhile, I’m bored out of my skull. It turns out I actually miss having an incessant conversationalist in the room next door.

I wonder what she’s doing right now. If she thinks I died in there.

Dammit, stop thinking about her.

Throwing my head back against the pillow, I exhale. “I’m about to lose

my shit in here."

After Tanner and the FBI busted the ring wide open, I spent the night combing the woods, hunting futilely for my sister's murderer. My old partner finally found me the next morning, face down on the side of a road. When I woke, I was in a medical facility, groggy from anesthesia after undergoing surgery to repair my broken body.

And the man Everly dubbed The Timekeeper?

He was long gone.

Interestingly enough, my old friend had me discreetly transported to a private medical facility under his name. Aside from him, no one has come to visit or question me, which means the authorities don't know I'm here.

Obviously, he has something up his sleeve, but he isn't sharing. Granted, I haven't been in the best shape. In the beginning, I was so delirious that hearing medical staff call me by the name Luke sent me into an identity crisis, triggering dreams that I was a mild-mannered man named Luke Tanner, who had a dissociative personality named Isaac Porter, a vigilante who spent his nights fighting supervillains with his sidekick, a shapeshifting songbird named Jewel.

It's possible I got a little violent…

I earned myself a heavy sedative and a long nap, which I don't have time for.

"I figured you were a little stir-crazy." Tanner brings his briefcase closer, flicking the latches open. "Now that you've had a few days to recover, I thought you might be interested in the information I've pieced together."

"It's about fucking time." So far, he's told me nothing, except that Everly Cross and her husband are alive and well, and the leader of the ring is in the wind. Wincing, I shift higher on the bed. Tanner snags the paper cup from the table, offering me the pain medication, but I knock it out of his hand, desperate to be lucid for the first time in days.

"Don't be dramatic. You're no good to anyone until you've recovered." Handing me a file, he sits in the chair next to the bed. The vinyl creaks beneath him. "I'm not sure how much you already know, but you were being held in a wilderness area, in an abandoned lab once used for —"

"Animal testing," I finish. That became obvious once I saw outside the room I'd been locked in.

"Right. It hadn't been used since the late '80s—until your black-market

kingpin found it several years ago and set up shop." He nods at the file in my lap, and I open it. A glossy black-and-white photograph sits on top.

My blood pressure rises. "The bastard has a professional headshot?" I look up, incredulous, though I suppose I shouldn't be. "Does he have a resume, too?"

"Of sorts." He leans over and taps the next page. "Your guy's name is Leonard B. Vincent. Once had a failed stint in the fashion industry, then tried his hand at being an actor. When Hollywood didn't embrace him, he got a master's degree in business and followed his true passion: black-market trafficking. He's good. No police record, genius IQ, sociopathic tendencies, et cetera, et cetera. Seems he found a niche filling special requests for the very rich, dealing in anything he could get paid for: illegal adoptions, egg and organ harvesting, the sex trade."

I hear an echo of Everly's voice through the wall.

"I think they take my eggs."

"…and then there was you," Tanner finishes. "That was creative."

"Leonard B. Vincent." I growl the name through my teeth and push the picture away. "If the B stands for Bruce, my life is ruined."

"Your Batman thing is weird," he deadpans.

"Spoken like a Captain America fan."

He gives me an exasperated sigh. "Listen, the *Captain* represented the American dream during a tumultuous time for the country. He's an icon. Do you really want to have this argument right now?"

"No argument to be had; I already knew you had terrible taste." Suddenly exhausted, I lean back onto the pillows and exhale. "I guess I should be thanking you."

"For saving your ass before you ended up on the wrong end of a big-game hunt? Or for that time I found you on your face on the side of the road?" He lifts his finger like he's had an epiphany. "Oh wait, that was the *same day.*"

"Point taken. You're my hero."

"You know what they say: every brunette needs a blond best friend who has their back. Even Batman."

"That's what people with vaginas say on Instagram." I glare at him. "How'd you find me, anyway?"

"Lucky break, mostly. Some rich high school kid was overheard bragging

about his dad setting up the ultimate big-game hunt. The *prey* sounded… suspicious. You'd been gone several weeks, and, well…you're not the only one who gets gut feelings."

"Guess I've finally rubbed off on you."

His lips twitch. Fortunately for me, Tanner is really fucking good at his job. Most people would have assumed that kid was full of shit and ignored the report until it was too late.

"The kid's father was so afraid of losing everything, he made a deal to help us bust the operation. The Feds showed up, and you were a hundred miles outside our jurisdiction, but since I was the original point of contact with our informant —"

"You talked your way in."

"Couldn't let someone else take the bragging rights for saving you, could I?"

Silent laughter twinges my ribcage. "God forbid. So, what do we know?"

"Well, while you've been playing Sleeping Beauty, I've been conducting interviews."

I tap my fingers on the tray next to the cold eggs. "And?"

"For one thing, Everly Cross is as worried about you as you were about her."

My heart thumps in a way I don't appreciate at the sound of her name. "I wasn't worried."

Shoving the file back in his briefcase, Tanner raises an eyebrow. "Bullshit. You don't send me to check on someone personally if you're not invested." He ignores my glare. "Also, during my five-minute briefing with her, she said your name at least ten times. She was very insistent. Frantic, even. She was convinced she killed you."

"Isaac. Please, please forgive me."

My mood darkens. "She has a husband to comfort her. She'll be fine."

There's a knowing glint in his eye. "Ah, it was like *that*, was it? I didn't think you'd admit it."

"I didn't admit anything, jackass."

"Come on, no one would blame you. That woman is hot, even after two years locked in a room."

"I'm about to punch you in the fucking throat," I growl. "What did you tell her about me?"

He laughs until I nearly get out of bed and throttle him. Then his smile drops. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Oh, come on, I’ve seen you spill your guts the second a pretty woman bats her eyelashes your way.”

“Not this time, my friend.” He shakes his head. “As far as we’re concerned, there was no evidence of a person named Isaac in the building.”

“So, the department?”

“Doesn’t know you were there. Same with the Feds.”

“Well, shit.” A spontaneous smile overtakes me. I’d been wondering if there would be repercussions for going in there without police jurisdiction, since I’m no longer employed. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Listen, Porter.” He braces his elbows on his knees and leans closer. “When you dropped off the radar after our conversation that night, I had a bad feeling. Rumors on the street said something went down between Dolph and Nick Ford, but the trail dropped from there. When the report came in about that kid running his mouth, my instincts said you’d found a way in undercover and ran into trouble.”

My chest warms. I’m a jackass, but Tanner looked for me anyway.

“Once I interviewed the father and we traced other disappearances to the same ring, I was able to get in while keeping your name out of it. And now, with the guy still out there, it’s helpful if you can trail him as covertly as possible. Let him think you died back there.”

And there’s the plan. “Fuck, I guess you really are my hero.”

“The only time the name Isaac has come up was with Everly Cross, and since you’d already mentioned her, I made sure I was the one on her interviews so I could find out how much she knew. Turns out, it was next to nothing.”

I rub my overgrown beard, anxious for a shave. Honestly, I told her more than I’ve told anyone—I just didn’t give her anything that could be easily traced. Thank God.

Regret softens his eyes. “She’s pretty upset. Kept insisting that she didn’t make you up. That we must have missed getting someone out of the building. I hated lying to her.”

For a split second, I feel a twinge of guilt…until I remember the way she said Jasper’s name.

She has a husband, dumbass. What did you think was going to happen?

Since I haven't been coherent enough before now, I give him the rundown on everything I gathered about Vincent and his mind games, and the details of what went on in that building.

Then, with an ache in my chest, I tell him about Sara.

He's quiet after I tell him about the video. Horrified. Apologetic. We sit there in silence for a while.

In mourning.

An incoming call breaks it. He answers, leaning back in the chair. "Hey, Mom… Yeah, I'm with him now." He moves the phone to his chin. "My mother says she's glad you're okay, and she'll send some of her turtle brownies with me next time." He mouths *sorry* with a shrug.

I laugh quietly. Guess he's not hiding me from everyone. Setting all mama's boy jokes aside, the woman's brownies really are the best, and she's a steel trap when it comes to secrets. I can respect that.

"Wait." Tanner hops to his feet, tension entering his voice. "She's in *our* town? Where did you hear this?" Wide-eyed, he paces the floor. "I'll see what I can find out, but unless something has changed, she's not going to be happy about it."

He looks up, catching my raised eyebrow, and answers it with a frustrated shake of his head.

"Don't worry, Mom. It's not you she hates. I'll find out what I can and come by later. Isaac says hi, and he'll take a double batch of brownies. Love you, too." Shoving the phone in his pocket, he exhales harshly. "Fuck me."

"Everything okay with the family?" I push the eggs to the far corner of the small table. The smell is killing me.

"The family is fine. I guess Shay is back in town."

"Oh, shit. Finally came back to kick your ass after all these years?"

"Not funny. My mother was heartbroken. Wants me to check on her."

I don't see that going well. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I'd love to, but you don't exist, remember? And the sooner you get better, the sooner you can go after the bastard."

A smile spreads as the implication sinks in. I was always going to go after Vincent, but I wasn't sure whether I'd have Tanner's support. "Frankly, I thought you'd tell me to leave it to the Feds."

"But we both know you won't." He packs the papers back into the briefcase, exchanging them for a laptop, which he sets on the end of the bed.

“Might as well embrace it. This way, I can help you. If you want to go about it officially, or need funding, I *might* be able to hire you as a subcontractor due to your expertise. But then you’d be on the books, and there would be questions.”

“I have a good amount of savings. I’d rather do it on my own until we’re forced to cross that bridge.”

“I figured as much.” He nods toward the laptop. “There’s a file on there, containing the details I’ve compiled on Vincent’s operation and everything else I’ve found. I might be able to get you some extra cash. Just don’t go dark on me, okay? I can’t do that again.”

“Sure.”

The look he gives me is dubious. “Try not to get me fired,” he adds. “And if you trust the girl, I can let her in on it.”

“I don’t.”

But Tanner is like a dog hunting a bone. He senses one buried in the vicinity, and he doesn’t let up. “She’s scheduled to come down to the station when she’s out of the hospital. I could tell her the minimum.”

“I said no.” It’s forceful enough to stop one of the nurses in her tracks as she passes by my door. “I don’t trust her, got it? She can think I’m dead for all I care.” Blind trust ends badly. I still can’t believe I let my guard down. I look away from his curious gaze, knowing he’s too astute. I’m not giving him an invitation to probe further. “Go ahead and tell her that.”

Tell her she killed me. Let her stew on that while she’s beneath her husband.

Fuck, I’m petty. My head falls back on the pillow.

“How about I just stick with the original plan? There’s no evidence of a man named Isaac.”

I try to swallow, but my throat is too dry. “Fine with me.”

We’ll pretend I was never there. That I never laid myself bare before Everly Cross. I’m a figment of her imagination. A story.

A ghost.

“Okay then, I’m going to head out.” He taps the top of the laptop. “I’ve left you plenty of reading material when you’re up for it. I mean it, though—if we do this, you have to stay in contact. You *cannot* go dark on me.”

I shrug. We both know what I’m like when I isolate, and I don’t make promises I’m not sure I can keep.

Basically, I don’t make them at all…except one.

I will kill you. Consider that a promise.

Tanner pauses like he can read my mind. Like he might already suspect this is a bad idea. But it’s better he stays in the loop by helping me than wasting his breath telling me to stay out of it.

“Rest up.” With one last look of caution, he hands me a bottle of water from the bedside table and heads for the door. “I’ll be back later.”

There’s an unwelcome pressure behind my eyes as I watch him go. It’s the realization that I would be dead now if my friend hadn’t moved heaven and earth and gone into hell to find me. It compels me to stop him.

“Tanner?”

He pauses in the doorway. Turns.

Exhaling through my nose, I dip my chin. “Thank you.”

A grin curls at the corners of his mouth. “You’d have done the same for me.” With a half salute, he walks out the door.

Yeah…

Opening the laptop, I glance at the file titled, “Saving Porter’s Stubborn Ass. Again.”

I would have.

32

I stare at my reflection in the smudged hospital mirror.

Hollow cheeks. Dark circles shadowing my jaded, red-rimmed eyes. Pale skin surrounded by a mound of dirty-blond hair that looks like it was on the receiving end of an unfortunate lightning strike. My lips are chapped, my nails long and brittle. My body is frail and malnourished.

But I'm still here.

I matter.

I press both palms to my cheeks and practice a series of different expressions in the mirror. Wonder, joy, anger, shock. My mouth still knows how to smile, my eyes still know how to gleam.

I'm going to be okay.

When the water runs warm, I discard my gown and step underneath the jets for the first time in years. A real shower.

Gel soap. Shampoo. Conditioner.

God…*conditioner*.

I want to drown myself in it. I leave it in my hair for twenty minutes too long while I shave my legs and let the scent of clean citrus and honeysuckle wash away the remnants of my captivity. An hour rolls by before I'm towel-dried and tucked back into bed, spooning a mouthful of lime Jello between my freshly brushed teeth.

A nurse glides into the room a moment later, her smile bright and cheery. "Good morning, Mrs. Cross. How are you feeling today?"

I swallow the Jello. “A little better. The pain meds are working, and my fever finally broke overnight.”

“That’s good news. Any other symptoms?”

“Just loss of appetite. The Jello is good, though.”

She nods.

My diagnosis came through last night: ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, or OHSS for short. It’s when the ovaries swell to a dangerous size—a rare and potentially deadly complication that can occur in women who take fertility drugs to stimulate egg growth.

The egg transfer almost killed me.

If my captor hadn’t given me that initial dose of antibiotics, it likely would have.

I set the empty bowl of Jello aside while the nurse checks my vitals and takes notes. “I’m thinking you’ll be with us for another day or two. You’re right, your temperature is back to normal. The doctor just wants to monitor you for any setbacks.”

My legs itch to walk through that curtain and never look back, but I send her a tight smile. “I understand. Thank you.”

“Get some rest. I’ll check on you again shortly.”

I curl up under the covers and search for the television remote as external noise echoes all around me. Other patients with different stories. Doctors chatting, nurses laughing. Sighing, I flip through the stations, hoping the sight of colorful, flickering images and the sound of laugh tracks might lull me into a sense of normalcy. But my mind is scattered, my attention flimsy. It’s too much; an assault on my senses.

I turn off the TV and collapse back down to the bed, begging for sleep to steal me away for a few hours until the next round of tests.

Not a moment later, Jasper strolls into the room. “Everly.”

Glancing up at him, I scoot back into a sitting position and grin widely. “Hey. Good morning.”

“I brought you something. It’s not much…” He unwraps an arm from behind his back, showcasing a bouquet of fresh pink, violet, and cream flowers. A timid shrug claims his shoulders. “Feels silly, really. But I thought maybe they would cheer you up.”

“They’re beautiful.” Tears moisten my eyes. “Thank you.”

He cautiously approaches my bedside, setting the vase atop the adjacent

table. Uncertainty filters through him, seizing his steps, his gaze, his movements. Glancing over at me, he swallows, then looks away. Taps at his thighs with tense fingers. Shuffles in place.

I hate this.

This limbo we're in.

He's my husband; I'm his wife.

And yet, we feel like strangers.

Years have come between us, and I don't know how to get them back.

Wetting my lips, I gesture toward the nearby chair. "You can sit."

He clears his throat. "Right." Jasper moves the chair over to my bed, the legs scraping against linoleum. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. I took a shower. It was heavenly."

A smile spreads. "I can imagine. You smell divine."

"I'm sorry I stank yesterday. I'm sure you needed to take ten showers to eliminate the stench by association."

"No. You smelled exactly like I remembered."

God, I hope not. "Like what?"

He pauses, a flash of poignancy lighting up his eyes. "Home." We stare at each other for a few tension-filled heartbeats before Jasper takes my hand and links our fingers together. "The doctor said you'll be out of here in a day or two. How do you feel about that?"

"I'm more than ready to get on with my life. Being here feels no different than being there. I feel trapped."

"You're not," he murmurs. "You're safe. I promise."

"I don't think everything has sunk in yet. I might still be in shock." I press my lips together as my eyes glaze over. "Someone was screaming last night, across the hall. Crying and wailing. I thought I was still there; that I never left. I pictured a woman taking her final breath while I was locked inside my cell, helpless to stop it. Part of me wonders if that feeling will ever go away."

There's a wrinkle between his eyes. Worry lines tease the bridge of his nose and mar his forehead. "It might take a little while to adjust. You don't have to rush anything. We'll get you situated and take things slow."

I consider his double meaning.

Take things slow.

A life adjustment.

A marriage adjustment.

My mind spins. Will we still sleep together in the same bed? Will he go back to work right away? Will I go back to work…*ever*?

I'm too much of a coward to ask those questions right now. All I want to do is savor each moment as it comes.

Jasper squeezes my palm, centering me again. "We'll get through this, okay? Don't worry. Don't overthink anything. Baby steps."

I glance at our intertwined hands. "Yeah. I think I just —"

My words fall off, clipped at the edges.

A lump forms in the back of my throat.

Inhaling a shaky breath, I twist our tethered hands side to side, studying his ring finger.

The lack of a ring. On his finger.

I hadn't noticed yesterday, too absorbed with everything else. Too bushwhacked and blindsided. My eyes pan up to his. "Where's your wedding ring?"

Jasper blinks at me, registering the question one word at a time. It's like he hadn't realized he wasn't wearing it. Instinct has him pulling our hands apart and rubbing his empty, ringless finger, as if he can hide what I've already noticed.

"Oh…I, uh…" His brows bend deeper, his face draining of color. "I'm sorry. I forgot to put it back on."

I don't know why, but it feels like a small death.

A knife in my gut. A lasso around my neck.

I grind my teeth together, keeping the whimper in my throat. "I see."

"It doesn't mean anything. I just…I thought you were gone. It wasn't intentional."

"I mean, it was." Inching away from him, I burrow underneath the covers and try to keep my expression neutral. This shouldn't hurt so much. "You *intentionally* removed it from your finger."

"Not because I don't love you anymore."

"No. Because you gave up on that love."

"Everly." He shakes his head with sorrow, regret etched into every line decorating his face. "Baby, please. I didn't —"

"I'm tired." I stare at the ceiling. My bottom lip wobbles, so I chomp down on it to quell the quiver. "The nurse said I should get some rest."

I can’t see his reaction, but I hear the sound he makes.

A choked gasp. Despair.

He stands from his seat, looming over me and pressing a trembling palm to my blanket-covered shoulder. “Everly…I’m sorry.”

I close my eyes through a slow nod, fighting back tears. “Me, too.”

Jasper lingers for a few more seconds.

Twenty-two.

Then his hand slides off my shoulder with absolute defeat, and he turns to leave the room.

I watch him disappear from my periphery. The curtain shuffles, his loafers pausing on the other side as hesitation grips him. I wonder if he’s about to come back inside, ambush me with more apologies, plead his case.

But he doesn’t.

He walks away.

A tear trickles down my temple as I glance at the spray of pastel flowers resting on the side table, glimmering under the can lights.

My throat tightens.

I asked Isaac if he would ever get me flowers one day.

I wonder if he would have.

Two more days slog by like thickening molasses. I’m restless, antsy.

I want to go home.

Thankfully, the news comes in when I’m a minute into brushing my teeth, zoned out and staring blankly in the mirror.

A nurse’s voice pulls me from the void. “Your discharge paperwork is in. Today’s the day.”

Today’s the day.

A new chapter begins.

I spit out a mouthful of toothpaste and rinse the sink, combing my fingers through my hair while a trickling of nerves race through me. My mother has been in and out of my room over the last forty-eight hours, bringing me homemade treats and warm smiles, and telling me she spruced up the guest room of her quaint bungalow, located on the outskirts of Los Angeles.

Just in case.

I'm assuming Jasper filled her in on my discovery the other day, spurring the *just in case*.

My heart teeters at the memory.

The flowers at my bedside are already wilting as I traipse back into the room, still weak and underfed. I managed to keep down oatmeal this morning while the antibiotics do what they can to rid me of this infection.

When the nurse disappears, my mother enters minutes later with a duffel bag stuffed with a change of clothes. *Real clothes*. Something other than nightgowns made of ivory and lace.

"I'm thinking you can spend the first few nights with me," Mom says, her eyes aimed downward as she pulls out a pair of jeans and a sky-blue blouse. She spreads the outfit across the wrinkled bedcovers, smoothing out the collar of one of my old favorite tops adorned with a daisy print. "Just until you get acclimated. And maybe because I'm a worried mother who doesn't want to let you out of her sight for at *least* a month." She shoots me an affectionate side-eye. "How did that interview go with the detective?"

"It was fine." I clear my throat and pad over to the side of the bed, plucking a rectangular business card off the table beside the vase. Studying it, I graze the pad of my thumb over the lettering: Detective Lucas Tanner. It was the same man I spoke to amid the tumultuous rescue, the one who asked for my name. I don't think I'd recognize a single other face from that five-minute blur, but, for some reason, Detective Tanner stood out. "It wasn't much of an interview. Just a briefing," I clarify. "I'm going to follow-up with him once I'm settled. My brain was mush."

All I could really manage was a stream of fruitless questions about Isaac.

Is he alive?

Where is he?

Who is he?

The detective didn't offer much. Nothing, really. It appears the elusive man on the other side of my wall will forever remain elusive. A figment of my imagination.

That's what I choose to believe, anyway.

The other option—the undoubtedly *worse* option—is that he never made it out of there.

Aside from asking about Isaac, the other burning question on my mind

was about the babies and the faceless recipients who paid to have my eggs stolen. Unfortunately, there is no trail to follow. Everything about that black-market prison was designed to be anonymous—no records, no names, no faces. Just shadows and whispers. I'll never know who they are, where they live, or what became of the pregnancies.

Those children could be anywhere in the world, oblivious to the horror tied to their existence. And as much as I ache for answers, I cling to one grim reassurance: they can't find me. The anonymity that erased their origins also protects mine.

All I can do is hope they have a good life.

My eyes meet with Mom's as I return the card to the table and swivel around. "Have you talked to Jasper?"

Humming under her breath, she pauses before answering. "Yes."

She doesn't elaborate.

I glance down at my own ringless hand—empty, but not because of free will, and only because it was pried off my shaking finger as I hollered and cried, while a giant man gripped me around the waist and forced me into compliance. It was stolen, likely sold.

I blink back to the hospital room and reach for the new set of clothes to change into. Moments later, I'm dressed, my hair pulled back into a slack ponytail. The jeans are loose around my waist, heavy and weighing me down. My favorite blouse itches my skin as I fiddle with the collar and release the top button so I can breathe.

A wretched thought filters through me: *I miss my nightgowns.*

Not knowing what that means, I clear the madness from my mind and focus on the moments ahead. I try to stay present. Grounded. Today will be a good day.

Allison joins us twenty minutes later as a female doctor with white hair rattles off instructions. She gives me a prescription for at-home antibiotics and pain relievers, then tells me to take it easy for the next week. No heavy lifting, no strenuous activity. I stare at her, nodding absently, while only comprehending every other word. I'm in a daze, a fog of unknowns.

"I bought you a new phone." Allison holds out a cell phone after the doctor leaves, a dimpled smile brightening her eyes. "I thought you might need one."

I gawk at it like it's an ancient relic dug up from a burial ground. "Oh.

Thank you.”

“I’m not great with the techy stuff, but I can try to help you set it up. I’ll add my number back in.”

“Perfect.” I take the phone and wrap my fingers around it. A cumbersome, foreign weight. “I’m not sure if I remember how to even use it.”

“It’ll come back to you.”

Allison and Mom chat easily beside me as I take a seat on the edge of the bed and gaze at the vase of flowers. Do I take them with me? They’re going to die soon.

Then again, everything dies eventually.

People.

Dreams.

Love.

“Everly?”

I glance at my mother with a slow blink. My thoughts are scrambled, edging toward morbid. I’m not sure what’s wrong with me. This is a happy moment; the best moment. “Sorry, I’m spacey. It’s a lot to take in.”

The two women share a worried glance, and I hate it.

I’ll be fine. I’m adjusting, learning to live in the real world again. Very few people can confidently say they crawled their way out of a hell like mine, still intact and still whole. All my tainted pieces need time to heal. That doesn’t happen in three days.

I’m fine.

My chin jerks up when another presence enters the room. I hold my breath, my attention landing on my husband. He’s freshly showered, dressed to impress in a charcoal-and-white pinstripe polo, tucked into ironed black slacks. Loafers adorn his feet, as always. His hair is styled with gel, looking glossy under the lights, not a strand out of place.

Jasper freezes, glancing around like he expected me to be alone.

The energy in the room changes.

A palpable shift.

Sliding his hands into his pockets, he looks over at Allison as she quickly turns away and starts typing something on her cell phone.

Mom clears her throat, moves to the other side of the room.

I frown. It suddenly feels like I’m an outlier, the only one in the room not

privy to a secret or an inside joke. The ensuing silence is painful as I stand from the bed and pull my ponytail over my shoulder, fiddling with the split ends. “Good morning. I’m a free woman, at last.” Nobody laughs. Nobody speaks. “Tough crowd,” I mutter through a strained chuckle.

Jasper finally sends me a half smile, sauntering in my direction, looking stiff and out of place. “This is a big day.”

“It is. I’m trying to decide what I should do first.” I purse my lips to the side. “I already got the exciting stuff out of the way. A shower. A clean toothbrush. Jello. I’m thinking a hot cup of coffee is next on the list.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Mom cuts in. “I have your favorite at the house. Peanut butter crunch.”

My mouth waters at the thought, my appetite creeping back to the surface.

Jasper steps closer, sweeping a hand over his slicked-back hair. “I’m on my way to the office, but I heard you were discharged. I wanted to stop by and give you a proper sendoff.”

My lips twitch. “So formal.”

His voice quiets as he glances around, then looks back at me, his throat bobbing. “Listen…I’d like to give you some space while you get back on your feet. I know this is a lot. I’m thinking we can grab dinner next week to talk. Reconnect.”

My throat buzzes like a beehive. “Sure.”

That’s not what I want.

I want to hug him. Kiss him. Sleep beside him as his heartbeats subdue my troubled mind and carry me away to sun-drenched dreams. I want to dance in the kitchen to the scent of freshly cooked breakfast and eat Chinese takeout by the crackling fireplace.

But there’s a gap between us. A rickety old bridge I can’t seem to get across without plummeting into deep, dark water. All I can do is hold on for dear life while the planks teeter precariously beneath my feet.

I reach for him. My fingers curl around his wrist, and my heart caves in on itself when he flinches and pulls back. It’s brief but damaging. A catastrophic blow to my barely stitched-back-together heart.

Regret fills his eyes. A flash of guilt. He tries to erase the misfire by pressing a hand to my bicep and giving me an apologetic squeeze.

Instinct has my eyes panning over to Allison.

I don’t know why.

I catch the way her posture stiffens, a strange look coasting across her features. Turning her back to us, she bows her head to stare down at her phone.

I glance back up at Jasper. “What’s going on?”

He winces, an involuntary reaction. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, everything got weird when you walked in.”

“You’re reading into things. You just need some time to —”

“Don’t do that.” Panic dances across my skin, burrowing inside me. I swallow, my pulse quickening with anxiety. “Something’s going on.”

My mother skips over to us, interjecting, “Let’s get you home, Everly. I want to show you the new addition I added onto the house. A little sunroom that —”

I inch backward. “Please. Someone tell me what I’m missing here.” My teeth start chattering against my will. “Did someone die?” *That can’t be right*—everyone I cherish is in this room. “Was there a tragic world event? An apocalypse?”

It feels like there was.

My intuition is telling me something is wrong, that *everything* is wrong. There’s debris in my lungs, craters in my chest, bloodshed at my feet.

Jasper shakes his head and scrubs a hand over his face. “It’s nothing,” he breathes out.

Lies.

It’s something, and that something is going to kill me before I’ve had a chance to truly live.

I know it.

I *feel* it.

I peer over at Allison again. Her back is still facing me, but she’s no longer engrossed in her cell phone. It dangles at her side in a clenched fist, both of her arms trembling.

“Jasper,” I rasp out, my eyes lifting to his ashen face. “Why won’t you touch me? Hold me? Kiss me? Why aren’t you wearing your ring?”

“It’s just…so soon.” He shakes his head again, his Adam’s apple rolling in his throat. “I don’t know how to do this. What’s right, what’s wrong. It’s confusing… It’s…”

My gaze dances between my favorite people. The only people I’ve

thought about for two years, waiting for me on the other side of my torture chamber. My lights at the end of a dark, suffocating tunnel. They're hiding something from me.

They're traitors.

Balling my hands at my sides, I heave in a breath, looking back up at Jasper and seeing him. Truly seeing him.

And I think I know. It hits me like a hurricane.

I know, I know, I know.

I don't want to know.

Guilt stares back at me in pools of dark green.

Betrayal.

I feel sick. My stomach cramps, clenches, implodes. Bile burns my throat, my chest collapses.

"No." It's a whisper, a quiet scream, as everything suddenly becomes crystal clear. "No…"

Allison starts to cry.

My mother stands off to the side, clutching her chest as tears trickle down her face.

Confirmation.

Jasper grips me by the shoulders and bends down, staring right into my eyes. "I didn't want you to find out like this." His voice is tortured grit, gravel and brimstone. "God, Everly, I'm so sorry."

I wrench myself from his grasp and plummet to the bed. I'm shaking, shivering from head to toe. Time warps, my vision clouds.

I hear a scream, and I think it's mine, as nurses race into the room in streaks of black and gray, a colorless haze. Hands reach out, faces blur above me, and an oxygen mask is pressed to my nose and mouth. My wails are a distant whirring in my ears as someone takes my hand and squeezes. My mother. She's sobbing, her grief mingling with mine, until it's all I feel.

Grief.

Mind-numbing grief.

"No," I cry through the mask, as a needle glides into the underside of my elbow. "No!"

My husband.

My husband and my best friend.

They're together.

A nurse holds me down while the other tinkers with my IV. Thrashing and moaning, I wail, tears blotting my vision.

I slide my hand underneath the pillow and latch on to the blue guitar pick, curling into a ball and trembling with soul-crushing pain. Medication flows through my veins, doing what it can to calm my agonized mind. This can't be real. I traded a nightmare for a new nightmare.

As my cries weaken to whimpers, I think about the snap—the loss of him—while sedatives steal me away. I see it in a whole new light, my greatest fear bursting to life in vivid color.

Jasper and Allison moved on. Left me behind, like a ghost tethered to a place no one visits anymore.

I see it now: the world didn't forget about me.

But they did.

PART 2

"LIFE IS AN IRREVERSIBLE PROCESS AND FOR THAT REASON ITS FUTURE CAN NEVER BE A REPETITION OF THE PAST." — WALTER LIPPMAN

33

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, 2125

With my arm in a sling and my mind buzzing, I follow Dad into his office the next day, eager to uncover my mysterious treasure. It'd better be cool—I've earned it.

After all, last night's adventure landed me in the ER for a sprained wrist, this ugly sling, and mild dehydration. As much as I wanted to go straight to the lab when we got home, Mom and Dad insisted I was in no condition to play detective until I'd gotten some rest.

Closing the door behind me, I hear the sound echo through the bright, sterile office that smells like latex and science experiments. The whole room feels serious, like a place where age-old mysteries get solved.

And standing in the middle of it, I'm pretty sure I'm about to crack one of them.

Dad sets the box down on his massive oak desk, careful not to damage the frame. Dirt crumbles off the edges, scattering across a few manila folders, but the face remains caked in stubborn patches of mud.

My gaze locks onto the carved letters etched into the wood: *FOREVER.*

Definitely suspicious.

While my little sister was more intrigued by the assortment of stringy cobwebs dangling from the box, I was laser-focused on the contents inside. The box is old, the kind of old that smells like damp wood and secrets. A miniature coffin.

I watch as my dad studies the box, his eyes doing that thing they do when

he’s analyzing the data—squinting slightly, flicking back and forth between the object and his mental notes, as if he’s piecing together a puzzle only he can see.

“What do you think’s inside?” I ask, leaning my hip against the desk. “Old love letters? Treasure? A mummified body?”

The box isn’t big enough to hold a body, but there could be a head.

Maybe a femur or two.

Dad’s mouth quirks as he throws me a sidelong look and runs a hand through his mop of curly brown hair. “Why do I get the feeling you’re rooting for the last one?”

“Because I’m your kid, and you have the coolest job in the world.”

His expression softens, a hint of something wistful crossing his face. “Doesn’t always feel that way.” He rubs his palms together and sighs, nodding at something across the room. “Hand me that precision rotary tool kit. The one with the fine diamond-tipped bits.”

I grab the sleek case and place it on the desk.

Dad selects a tool with the care of a surgeon, fitting a delicate bit into place. “This should get us past the lock without damaging anything.”

My pulse quickens as the tool hums to life, its sound a soft promise of discovery. I watch, transfixed, as Dad works the bit along the edge of the rusted lock. Sparks jump like tiny fireflies, and the scent of warmed metal mixes with earthiness. He pauses to inspect his progress, then delicately applies a final nudge.

With a satisfying *click*, the lock pops open, and Dad leans back with a triumphant grin. He turns to me, setting the tool aside. “Ready?”

Most fathers would probably want to look inside first for fear of traumatizing their twelve-year-old son with a severed finger or a collection of teeth, but not Dad. He might not know I’ve been sneaking peeks at his crime-scene photos since I was five, but he knows I’m into all the weird, gritty details of his job.

I nod, my heart hammering.

Finally, he eases the lid open, and a faint musty smell escapes, like the ghost of something ancient. Inside, nestled in a thin layer of decayed velvet, lies…

Whoa…what is this?

It looks like a small hourglass attached to a tarnished silver chain.

The glass is smudged, and there's something inside, something I can't make out. "What the…" I breathe, reaching out before stopping myself. "Can I touch it?"

Dad studies the hourglass for a moment before nodding. "Carefully."

I scoop it up gently, the chain foreign against my fingers. The hourglass is small, and it feels oddly…alive.

"An hourglass on a chain?" I tilt it, watching the contents inside trickle slowly. "What do you think it's for?"

Dad leans closer, his brow furrowed. "It could be decorative, or maybe ceremonial. Hard to say."

"It's creepy." I smile faintly, holding it up to the light. "I like it."

Dad straightens, his tone growing thoughtful. "Let's not jump to conclusions. I'll run a few tests on the materials and see if we can trace its origin."

"Do you think it's cursed?"

His lips quirk into a half-smile. "Let's hope not."

But as he watches me cradle the tiny hourglass, a shadow flickers across his face, brief but unmistakable.

I'm pretty sure this is a mystery even he wasn't prepared for.

34

Present Day—One Year Later

My smile is brighter than the midday California sun as I saunter into the station with a ceramic plate wrapped in tinfoil. Astrid greets me at the front desk with a grin to match mine. “Must be a new month.” She stands from her rolling chair and eyes the hidden treats. “He’s with the chief now. You might be waiting a while.”

I glance at my invisible watch. “I have a Kindle, plenty of snacks, and nowhere else to be.” Plopping down in a waiting room chair, I settle in with a contented sigh. “Thanks, Astrid.”

“Any leads yet?”

“Not yet, but I’m patient.”

“Tanner uses a different word.” She purses her lips, tilting her head. “Relentless, is it?”

Inspecting my cuticles, I answer breezily, “Obnoxious.”

“That’s the one.”

Twenty minutes roll by as I tap my feet and whistle under my breath, playing on my phone while detectives and various office personnel stroll by with waves and cheery chitchat. When Tanner opens the door and spots me sitting in the waiting room with a platter of brownies in my lap, his shoulders drop. Exasperation steals his expression as he shakes his head and flicks his

hand my way, trudging through the central room, toward his office.

I follow, my head held high and black pumps clapping in time with my steps, the double-fudge brownies glimmering against the window light.

Dropping the plate onto his work desk, I flip my curls over my shoulder and lift my chin with a pleasant smile. “Good morning.”

He glares at me. “Right.”

“I’m not sure why you’re always so grouchy. I bring you food.” I shrug, chin lifting. “Your co-workers love me.”

“That’s because they don’t have to deal with you. They only get to reap the benefits of your above-average baking abilities.” He looks down at the covered plate, unwrapping one of the edges and plucking a brownie from the pile. Powdered sugar dusts his fingers as he takes a big bite. “You’re a master manipulator, Everly Cross.”

“It’s Mayfield now.” I plant my hands on my hips and arch an eyebrow. “Are you profiling me?”

“Just stating the obvious. You’ve had a bug up your ass since our follow-up meeting, and now you’re trying to pull answers out of me—answers I clearly don’t have, mind you—with sugar and carbs.”

He’s not wrong.

Two weeks after I moved in with my mother, reduced to a broken-down mess of heartache, I scheduled that interview with Detective Tanner. I pressed him about Isaac. He was a stone block for most of the conversation, but then there was a moment I’ll never forget; a subtle interaction I can’t let go of.

I mentioned Sara, Isaac’s sister, and a look traveled across his face.

Painful.

Personal.

He blinked away what I’d already noticed and cleared his throat. “… So, did he tell you anything about her?”

My breath caught. I stared back at him, trying to see beyond the ruse. “You tell me.”

Tanner shut down and recovered quickly. “Listen…I’m sorry, but we found no evidence of him. I believe you, and I’m not saying you imagined this guy, but we did a thorough search of that place. All remains discovered were identified. He wasn’t there. If he made it out, he’s gone. Maybe he got on a plane, left the country. Changed his identity. You said he had multiple;

sounds like he could be some sort of con artist."

His words rang true, but…

My instincts are strong, and I trust them more than anything. I saw something that day. Felt a niggling intuition pinging in my bones. Tanner knows more than he's letting on.

Now I've made it my mission to uncover the truth.

I'm not sure if he's protecting me and withholding a death confirmation to spare me from more potential heartache, or if something more complex is simmering in the background. Either way, I'm stubborn. Once a month, I make the five-plus-hour commute from San Francisco to Los Angeles and stop by the station—a pitstop on the way to my mother's house.

I bring treats. I bring smiles.

I bring a constant reminder that I'm not going away.

Before I can say anything else, another woman comes barging into Tanner's office with box-dye red hair hacked off at the shoulders, tattoos covering both arms, and pillowy crimson lips. Fire spews from pale-green eyes.

"You need to back off," she hisses, sweeping past me and planting both palms on his desk as she lurches forward. "I mean it."

Tanner's posture changes when he sees her, a new look inhabiting his gaze. Softness at first, but then something more volatile. "I'm busy, Shay."

"Clear your schedule. I'll wait." The woman glances at me, doing a double take, as if just noticing my presence. She deflates a bit. "Hey."

"Hi."

"Is he giving you trouble, too?"

Tanner moves around the desk and grips her arm, leading her out of the office. "Vice versa. I don't have time for either of you today." They exit the room as Shay pries herself out of his hold. "You can make an appointment with Astrid. I'll be available sometime next year."

It appears I'm not the only one with a bug up her ass.

The inflamed redhead gets right in his face. "You have no right. Keep meddling in my business, and I'll make your life hell."

"I'm seeing that."

"I'm serious, Luke."

Tanner waves over a fellow detective, who approaches with an exasperated sigh. "You need to go. We can talk later. I'm in the middle of an

appointment.”

“Another innocent victim you’re harassing, I’m sure.” She holds a hand up to the detective, an offer of compliance. “I’m leaving. No need to send your bodyguards after me.”

“I would never.” Tanner crosses his arms, eyes flickering with emotion. “I’ll be the one putting those handcuffs on you.”

“Your wet dream.” A smile paints her lips as she gazes up at him with otherworldly jade eyes. Then the smile morphs into hard steel. “Stay away from me, Luke.”

She storms off, her leather-clad hips and flaming-red hair sashaying behind her.

Tanner stares after her, tapping a hand on his thigh, before returning a moment later, looking rattled as he rubs his forehead with two fingers. “Sorry. Old friend.”

“Seemed very friendly.”

“You were on your way out?”

“Nope. Just got here. Tell me what you know.”

Tanner’s lips vibrate as he blows out a long breath and collapses into his work chair. Swiveling it from side to side, he studies me, brushing the pad of his index finger across his lips. “Okay. Fine.”

My eyes flare.

A surge of hope sweeps through me as I go still, waiting for what he’ll say next.

“You know, these unwarranted, excessive visits really did light a fire under me. I found him for you.” He pulls open a drawer, sifts around inside, and tosses a manila folder on the desk. “You’re welcome. Please never return.”

Bending forward, I rush to open the folder, my heart rate tripling. Then my eyes narrow with disdain when they land on the photograph inside. “You’re an asshole.”

“What? Why?” He feigns outrage. “It’s Isaac.”

I slam the folder shut. “Isaac Maurice Nottingham is ancient. He’s clearly in his late eighties. Minimum.”

“Ninety-one.”

“I hate you.”

“You said he was likely older than you. I’m not one to rule out a potential

suspect based on how society perceives age gaps.” Leaning back in his chair, he folds both arms over his khaki button down and smiles with faux charm. “His family reported him missing for a few weeks about a year ago. The timeframe checked out.”

“He was probably napping.”

A noncommittal shrug. “Well, he stood out. He was found on his boat. Women love men with boats.”

“He’s missing all his teeth.”

“Teeth are overrated. Boats are not.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Huffing, I gape at him with fury in my eyes. He thinks this is a joke. “You’re making a mockery out of this. It’s not fair.”

Tanner’s lips part to speak, but nothing comes out. He falters, and I swear a flash of guilt skates across his face. “Everly, I’m sorry. I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to say what you know. Tell me the truth. I didn’t make this man up. He was real. Isaac, Nick, whatever his name was.” *Isaac*—his real name was Isaac. “Dark hair. Brown eyes. Rough around the edges. Over six feet tall with a muscular build.”

He sighs, looks away.

I step closer to the desk. “He wasn’t my imaginary friend; he was my *real* friend. And if he’s dead…please, just tell me. I can’t live with these unknowns. They’re horrible, and they’re rotting me from the inside out.” My voice wavers. “It’s bad enough that my captor is still out there…I need closure.”

He cups a hand over his jaw and scratches at his stubble, his eyes glazing with sympathy. “I wish I could give you that. Truly. We’re still tracking Leonard Vincent. My team hasn’t stopped. But for now, that’s all I can promise.”

My stomach tightens, and a sharp pressure builds in my chest.

The name catches in my mind—*Leonard Vincent*. When Tanner first said it, I almost laughed. It sounded too ordinary, too human. Not like the monster I’ve always called “The Timekeeper.”

I remind myself he’s gone, that he’s forgotten me. He’s a businessman, the worst kind of narcissist, and I’m just a loose thread in his web. He wouldn’t waste his time chasing down a woman tied to his black-market ring. It’s too risky, too stupid, too…beneath him.

My lungs deflate.

I gaze at Tanner for several seconds, waiting for more, waiting for *something*. I try to read him, try to peel back every dirt-shrouded layer.

And I see it, clear as day, hiding in the depths of his regretful brown eyes.

I'm not wrong.

He knows exactly who Isaac is, and not even his well-trained detective mask can hide the truth from my inherent instincts.

One day, he'll cave.

But today is not that day.

"Fine," I murmur, peering down at my feet and grinding my teeth together. I pause for a moment before I spin around, my hair flying with me as I shoot him a halfhearted wave over my shoulder. "See you next month, Detective. I'll bring blueberry scones."

A few members of the department whoop and cheer.

Tanner's grumble sees me out the door. "Can't wait."

35

Meanwhile...

I find her waiting for me in a hotel in Bucharest.

I'm buying a pack of Chesterfields from a twenty-four-hour tobacco shop when a boy of around eight taps my elbow, hands me a keycard, and points to the building across the road. Then he darts away, leaving me to decide whether this is a trap or something else. For some reason, my gut goes with the latter.

Something else, it is.

With my heart beating heavily, I cross the city street, quietly letting myself into room 238.

Illuminated by soft lamplight, she's pale-limbed and petite, spread out like an offering in black lace. Long, bronze-gold curls fan out over the edge of the bed like a waterfall, painted with streaks of grisly red. A steady drip falls from the ends onto the floor.

Tap, tap, tap.

Her blue eyes are empty, her throat slashed open from ear to ear.

I cross the room and pick up the tiny glass trinket sitting on the side table.

Then I smash it under my boot.

Necks are much more difficult to snap than the movies make it look. The one beneath my hands now is thick and muscley, like the guy it belongs to. Not worth the effort. His trachea will be much easier to crush, and suffocation is just as effective.

But first…

"Perhaps you didn't hear me." I lean in inches from his ear. "*Where are they*?"

His lips clamp shut. It's the third time I've asked. Mind you, this is after shattering one of his knees, breaking an arm, dislocating the other shoulder, and busting his nose.

Still, nothing.

"Okay then, let's try a different question: where's your boss?" Digging my knees into his chest until I hear something crack, I loosen my hands to give him *just* enough air.

His voice is like fingernails on a chalkboard. "Kill me."

"If you insist."

Pressing down, I put all my weight onto his throat until his face turns purple and he loses consciousness. Then I keep going. When the guy's heart stops, I get up and walk away.

Mercy is a thing of the past.

I didn't start this mission with the intent to kill anyone other than my ultimate target, but if you're going to work for a motherfucking serial murderer, you're accepting the high risk of becoming a casualty.

As Tanner has warned me repeatedly, it's a slippery slope. Sliding into the role of executioner is getting easier to embrace each time.

Our little game of cat and mouse began the minute I left the hospital. Using the information gathered on the other facilities in his international ring, I began hitting them, one by one. Releasing victims, burning buildings to the ground, taking away his source of income.

Let's be honest: what I'm really hitting is his ego.

He first emerged in Brazil, oozing through the underground like the poisonous slime he is. Scouring the continent, I followed rumors of an American on the run that fit his description. That's where I made the mistake of leaving survivors who work for him. Tracked me across several continents before I had enough and finally killed them.

Lesson fucking learned.

Of course, Vincent ran again—first to Africa, then Indonesia, and now, Europe. That's okay, I'm still on his trail, taking his businesses out as I go. Including the lab in California, I've dismantled four of his black-market sites, and I have no plans to stop until his legacy is a pile of smoldering ash.

Then I'll watch him burn, too.

With my gun posed to shoot first and ask questions later, I silently move down the hall, one foot in front of the other. All it would take is the tiniest slip-up, and I'd be fucked. The main floor may be deserted, but there's still a basement and an upper level to check.

A door to my left stands open a crack, leaving a shaft of dim light to streak across the aged hardwood. Staying hyper aware of my surroundings, I glance inside. A rickety-looking staircase drops down, lit only by a single bare bulb.

Basement it is.

I take each step slowly, cringing with every creak until I reach the bottom. Unlike the other places I've infiltrated, I don't find captives—dead or alive—but between the smell and a scatter of discarded belongings, I know they were here.

Judging by the items, there appear to have been children in the group. That's something I haven't seen from him before.

It sends my temper through the goddamn roof.

When I leave the basement and search the upper level, I'm less careful about moving silently. I'm way too fucking pissed.

Turns out, it doesn't matter, because I only find one person left.

"Yes sir, nineteen of them." At the sound of a voice, I slide along the wall in the upper-level hallway and peek into an open room.

A short, scrawny guy sits in a small office, illuminated only by computer light. At a glance, there's no obvious sign of a weapon, and he's too absorbed in a phone conversation to notice when I creep up behind him.

"They're waiting in a holding area near the docks. The boat will be leaving in two hours." I look over his shoulder at the computer screen, catching an address followed by a numbered list of genders and ages.

I was right. They're kids.

"Nope, no sign of your guy. Are you sure he made it out of Jakarta?"

Ah, Jakarta. His guys almost took me out there, *but*…

"If you're talking about me," I say near his ear, "I made it out of Jakarta."

His last breath is a soft gasp.

With the gun pressed to his head, I remove the phone from his hand and lift it to my lips. “Five down, motherfucker.”

Then I pull the trigger and hang up.

Heat sears my face, pushing me back several steps. No sirens yet, so I let myself linger long enough to pull out my phone and send a message, staying in the shadows just outside the flickering orange glow.

Sometimes it’s nice to take a minute to enjoy the spoils of war.

Jesus, I sound like I belong in one of Everly’s historical romances.

Blood-soaked curls and lifeless eyes flash through my mind.

I shake my head and remind myself it isn’t —

It *wasn’t*—

Why can’t I just be allowed to forget?

But it’s a game now, a fucking dangerous one, and every facility I destroy raises the stakes even higher. I need to find that bastard before he takes his next turn. Because now, I’m playing with fire.

Literally.

It crackles as I send the information to a contact from a local agency who assists trafficking victims. I’ve already advised the police of the dock location where Vincent’s latest “sale” is awaiting transport. They should be on their way.

The flames crawl up over the roof just as the distant whine of sirens tells me it’s time to move on. I give one last look and pull the hood of my sweatshirt tighter around my head, leaving the wreckage behind.

The blaze roars louder, devouring everything in its path. With the fire at my back and sirens on the wind, I walk away, blending into the shadows. Let them pick through the ruins—I’m already hunting the next piece.

This isn’t over.

Not until he’s burning, too.

36

Fifty-thousand plants, an aviary, two cats, and a partridge in a pear tree greet me as I traipse through the front door of my mother's house with a bag of kitty litter. Macaroni, a high-strung macaw, squawks at me as I drop the bag in the entryway, while two tabbies, Jojo and Juju, curl around my ankles. "Mom?" I look around the small bungalow, drinking in the bold prints and eccentric knickknacks, as the smell of sage and incense wafts underneath my nose.

"Out back!"

I set down my duffel bag and wind around to the back of the house, exiting through a door off the kitchen. My mother is sprawled out in a lawn chair, sipping iced tea. "Hey. You look cozy." I send her a smile as I gather my hair over my shoulder.

She smiles back through neon-red sunglasses and tips her head toward the sky. "You know what's underrated?"

"Kinetic sand?"

She frowns, twisting toward me. "Good one. But I was going to say aging."

I saunter toward her, plopping down in the adjacent chair that's already stocked with my own sweating glass of tea. Fiddling with the straw, I follow her gaze as she peers back up at the cloud-spattered sky. "Yeah," I murmur before taking a sip. "I'm on board with that."

"There's something so liberating about not giving a crap anymore, you

know?” She drapes both arms over her head as sunlight bathes her in a golden glow. “I’ve gained twenty pounds, stopped dyeing my hair, and updated all my pictures on social media to a selfie I took last week, finally replacing that yearbook photo from high school. It’s beautiful.”

My mother is beautiful.

Right down to her soul.

Mom removes her sunglasses and glances my way, her eyes mirroring her smile. “How was the drive?”

I settle back in the chair and cross my leg over my knee. “Long. I was listening to a podcast about how spiders function as indicator species for habitats and ecosystems.”

“That’s my girl.” She chuckles under her breath as ice cubes clink against her glass. “I’m sure Festus is living his best life.”

Festus McGarrity IV is my pet tarantula.

The day I packed my meager belongings in my car and made the trek from Los Angeles to San Francisco to start over, I considered leaving the arachnid behind. After all, my mother had been taking good care of him during my absence, and I felt unfit to take care of anything with a heartbeat—including myself. In the end, I ran back into the house and gathered up the giant terrarium, bringing the pet I deeply missed with me.

I couldn’t leave another thing I cared about behind.

“He is.” I twirl my straw around in circles. “I miss you.”

The mood fills with melancholy as we both gaze up at the shimmying treetops. “You’re welcome over any time, Everly. It kills me that you’re so far. I understand it, but…”

“I know.”

The past year winds through me in a tangle of icy tendrils.

After my hospital stay, I moved in with my mother for four months, until a black cloud of depression, too many painful reminders, and a slew of zealous reporters obsessed with following my every move became too much to bear. I packed my things and hit the road, landing in the San Francisco Bay area. Nobody recognizes me there. I can be invisible, blend in.

It’s not the life I imagined while hidden away, trapped between four walls with only my name to keep me tethered to my identity, but it’s what I needed. The transition has kept me sane, functional, and alive.

The divorce was finalized two months ago.

I'm officially Everly Mayfield now: ex-model and ex-wife of renowned talent agent, Jasper Cross. The split was as amicable as it could have been, given the circumstances and my torn, obliterated heart. I never saw it coming. And I think those are the moments when you find out who you really are. What you're made of and what you're capable of overcoming. The blindsides keep us grounded, reminding us of our resilience.

Jasper still texts me.

Allison still calls.

I haven't responded to either of them.

Mom's sigh filters over to me, a doleful backdrop to my thoughts. "Allison stayed over for a few days to take care of the animals while I was in Puerto Rico. She asked about you."

"I'm sure she did." My lips flatten into a thin line. Part of me resents the fact that Allison is still a big part of my mother's life. My mother is *mine*, and my best friend has already stolen so much from me. I don't want her to have Mom, too. Still, there's another part of me that claws for understanding and forgiveness. It's a toxic teeter-totter of emotion that often gets the better of me. "I haven't spoken to her since that day at the hospital."

"Maybe you should. Maybe it'll help you heal."

"I'm healing in my own way."

"Which sounds a lot like running."

I grind my molars so hard my jaw aches. Mom has always been honest, to the point of contention sometimes. I don't want her honesty. I did what I needed to for survival, and survival can be ruthless. No one knows what an uphill, knuckle-bleeding battle it is until they're in the thick of it. "You should be on my side," I tell her, my words shaky. "I'm your daughter."

"Sweetheart, I am on your side. Always and forever. But I *see* both sides, too. I'm only offering a different perspective."

"And I'm living on the side nobody wants to be on. I was held captive for years while my husband and best friend declared me dead, then started screwing each other behind my back. It's a betrayal I can't fathom, a pain that will never go away."

Tears glitter in my mother's eyes as her face falls, her light brows gathering into a desolate frown. "They grew close when they lost you. It was traumatic for everybody. They latched on to each other *because* of you, not to spite you. It wasn't planned; it wasn't a calculated arrow to your heart. It was

just…a common thread. A form of solace."

"I can't listen to this again." I stand from the chair as tea splashes over the rim of my glass. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Everly."

"Please. I can't." I falter, my back facing my mother. "Maybe I should stop coming over every month. It's too…hard. These reminders and lectures."

She sits up in the chair. "Don't say that. These visits mean everything to me."

"Then maybe you should stop tainting them with your misplaced opinions."

"I'm only trying to help," she reasons, her voice hitching.

"Help whom? The two people who shredded me to a pulp? Who ripped my future out from under me like a dirty old rug?"

"*You.* Always you."

"It doesn't feel like it."

Standing, Mom steps over to me, her bare feet rattling the deck planks. "I know you, honey. I know your heart, your soul. I know this is killing you, and that kills me." She reaches for me, her ring-laden fingers curling around my wrists. "You're a forgiver. An empath. You've always spun your pain into peace, and I know, deep down, you're not at peace. Your light is gone."

I stare at her, internalizing her words and trying to make sense of them. But none of this makes sense. I've lost everything: my husband, my best friend, my career, my home. Even Isaac, the only person who understood what I've gone through. There's no peace in that. There's only a bleak chasm of missteps and no-way-outs. "My light isn't gone," I mutter, wriggling my arms free from her grip. "It just dimmed."

Her eyes close as I pull away and turn to enter the house. The cats follow me into the foyer when I go to retrieve my duffel bag, then shuffle down the hall to the spare bedroom. I take a shower, trying to cleanse myself of the last ten minutes. When I return to the bedroom in a bath towel, I sift through my bag and pull out an assortment of night gowns. The sun begins to set behind mulberry drapes as I lay each gown atop the bed, smoothing out the wrinkles.

All ivory.

All made of silk and lace.

None of them are right. I've searched high and low, looking for the

perfect one, but they all fall short.

An hour later, my mother knocks on the door, stepping inside the room with a plate of chicken and rice. “I brought you dinner.”

I glance up from the book I’m reading. “Thank you.”

Hesitating for a beat, she fully enters, setting the rose-patterned plate on the nightstand. She takes a seat beside me as I inch up the headboard and toss the book beside me on the mattress.

I stare at her. Mascara streaks line her cheeks, her eyes puffy and red. My heart stutters at the sight. “I’m sorry.” Extending my hand, I link our fingers together. “I’m trying.”

“I know you are. I’m trying, too.”

“I never expected it would be this hard…living on the other side of that place.”

She nods, knowingly. “Expectation is a thief of joy—it hinders living. You need to take every moment as it comes, knowing some moments will be difficult and some will be beautiful. We only thrive when we’re fully present.”

My thumb dusts over her sun-spotted knuckles. “I’m starting a new job next week. I’m nervous.”

“Really?” A smile hints. “I thought you wanted to take some time off.”

“I was getting antsy. Bored. I need the distraction.”

“That’s understandable. Are you getting back into modeling?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not sure that’s the right path for me, or if it ever was.” Too many cameras, bright lights. Gossip and superficial smiles. While it was fun and exciting at the time, it was never something that made my soul sing. “I want to put myself out there again. Be seen. Hiding out in my apartment for the last few months hasn’t been the therapeutic remedy I imagined it would be.”

I miss people.

Connections.

I don’t want anyone to know who I am…I just want them to know I’m still here.

I still matter.

“Tell me about the new job,” Mom implores, settling back on the bed. “I need details.”

My pulse quickens as I bite my lip, my hand trembling in hers. Nerves

race through me. Indecision. “Let me see how this first night goes.” Clearing my throat, I look away, wondering if this new direction will be a life-altering mistake. “Then I’ll tell you everything.”

37

A slate-gray building with a flashing marquee comes into view when I curve around the corner, clutching the strap of my purse in a deathlike grip. The distant aroma of sizzling street food gives off a semblance of normalcy as it mingles with the metallic tang of the auto repair shop across the street.

I glance around, my anxiety a twisted knot of uncertainty lodged in my throat.

God, what am I doing?

Pausing in front of the steel door attached to my new workplace, I raise my chin and drink in the magenta and royal-blue lights. I'm not sure why I couldn't apply at a restaurant or an easy, carefree desk job. A headset would be weighing me down far less than this glitzy headband gouging my scalp. I squeeze the strap of my purse, my bright yellow nails leaving half-moon prints on my palm.

You can do this. Deep breath. No turning back now.

With a sharp exhale, I yank open the heavy door and am immediately struck with an elixir of lily of the valley, jasmine, and warm amber. It's a soothing balm to my rattled nerves.

A rust-haired man with apricot freckles nods at me as I traipse through the dimly lit hallway. I likely look just as lost as I feel. "Hi." I swerve in front of him, visibly flustered. "I'm trying to remember where the dressing room is?"

The man eyes me, heels to hair. “You’re the new hire?”

“I am.” I swallow hard. “I’m Bee.”

He takes the hand I offer in a firm grip. “Fitting,” he says, still giving me a once-over. “Queenie was just asking about you. She’s excited to see what you can do.”

“She told me to get here an hour early. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yep. Take a left at the end of the hall and it’s the first door on the right. Can’t miss it.”

“Thank you.”

“Name’s Len,” he adds before I sweep past him. “If you need anything, I’m your guy.”

The man is huge and intimidating, but his eyes are soft and safe. “Noted.”

I nibble my thumbnail as I send him a nervous smile, then continue my trek down the darkened hall. Voices chatter, laughter rings out. Music thumps in the distance, almost loud enough to override my pounding heartbeats.

An unfamiliar woman greets me like we’ve been friends for years, halting me just before I reach the dressing room. Raven-black hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, the shiny tresses falling over one shoulder. “Hey! Bee, right?” She scans her gaze over me, her teeth flashing white. “Girl, there’s a big crowd out there. Not to freak you out, but Halloween weekend is our busiest next to the Super Bowl. Your tips are going to be insane.”

She’s dressed up like some sort of spider queen as glittery web-like lace spills off her light-brown skin.

“No pressure.” I breathe out a strained laugh, catching a whiff of honeysuckle perfume. “Where’s Queenie?”

“In the dressing room, asking about you every two minutes.” She waggles her eyebrows. “This is such a full-circle moment for her. She says you’re going to make big waves.”

I wring my hands together. The only waves coursing through me right now are riddled with nausea. “Well, thanks for the warm welcome. You look gorgeous.”

“Oh, thanks.” She flips her ponytail over her shoulder and snaps a wad of pink bubblegum. “We’re a family here. Zero competition. We build each other up, like a sisterhood.”

“I love that.”

Smacking me on the butt, she shoots me a wink. “I’m Ariel, the resident

shoe hoarder. If you ever need a spare pair of heels, my locker is jam-packed. Help yourself."

Watching her skip away, I smile at her retreating back before turning toward the door adorned with a silver plaque titled "Dressing Room."

Here we go…

I push through the doorway and step into the room, quickly spotting Queenie near the beauty counter. One of the girls is helping her pick out a wig. Her golden-brown eyes follow me as I toss my purse into one of the empty lockers and pop it shut, then glance at the adjacent locker that showcases the name *Ariel* crossed out and replaced with *Shoes, Shoes, and More Shoes*.

"You came," Queenie says, puffing on a cigarette, looking regal and composed. "I questioned it."

Sauntering over to her, I swipe my sweaty palms down my outfit. "The truth?"

"Always."

"I questioned it, too."

Crossing one leg over the other, she sends me a smile, her dark-brown skin glowing with beauty oil. "I know." Then she waves a hand at the girl tending to her wig as she stands from the rolling chair and approaches me like a graceful gazelle. "You look just like your mama."

My skin warms at the sentiment. "Her hair isn't as big."

"No, but her heart is." Her eyes dance over me with affection. "I have two rules, so listen up, Angel Baby."

I shuffle on both feet. "Okay."

"One: always carry pepper spray with you."

My nose wrinkles. I don't have any pepper spray.

I figure if the universe fought to keep me alive through an abduction, years of captivity, and the subsequent horrors that made my imprisonment feel like a spa-therapy getaway, it's unlikely I'll be taken out by some thug lurking behind a dumpster in the alleyway.

But I nod anyway, smiling politely.

"Two…" She gives me a once-over. "Embrace it."

"Embrace it?"

"Yes. All of it. The highs and lows. The good days and bad days. Don't let that shame creep inside you. Don't overthink," she tells me. "This is about

empowerment. Release. Feel the music, the crowd, the movement. Allow it to guide you; allow it to nurture you."

A fluttery feeling dances across my chest like a defibrillator paddle. Swallowing, I bob my chin while I study her, seeing the love shimmering in her eyes. It's nice to feel cared about.

Like I still matter.

Giving my hand a squeeze, Queenie returns to her chair as the woman beside her swaps out her wig, fluffing the long ribbons of fire-engine-red hair. "You're nervous." She smiles, teeth gleaming stark white against her dark skin. "Embrace that, too. Nerves give you power."

Nodding, I inch forward, gathering my hair over my shoulder. "I've never done anything like this before. But running into you at the coffee shop felt like…fate, or something. I don't know."

"Could be," she says, stamping out her cigarette. "Or maybe it was all you, finally deciding to take life by the shorthairs and pave a new path for yourself."

"Why couldn't I start by waiting tables?" My lips twist to the side. "You know, something more palatable. Normal."

"Normal doesn't suit you, Angel Baby. You're a Mayfield." Her eyes glitter against the atmospheric lighting. "Besides, you're sick of hiding. You want to be seen again."

I let her words flow through me as I take a seat in the adjacent chair and glance at my reflection in the bulb-studded mirror.

Queenie is aware of my history.

She used to work with my mother decades ago, often babysitting me when Mom was on the clock. I adored her. She always had this calming aura about her, like she was a warm hug in human form. When Mom secured a different job and moved us both to L.A. for a fresh start, I never forgot about her. She'd visit from time to time, bringing me sweet treats from a San Francisco bakery, and I'd tell her stories.

Queenie loved my stories.

She's older than me, well into her forties, but she looks ageless and refined. Her black hair is cropped short, nearly buzzed to the scalp, and she's one of those beauties with perfect bone structure who can pull off the bold look.

Her full crimson lips pucker with regard as she drinks me in from the

white chair beside me. “You used to be scared of the dark,” she says, memories sparking between us. “I’d tuck you into bed at night while you cried into your stuffed spider toy.”

I laugh, rolling up to the beauty counter and assessing the collection of makeup products. “Mr. Webs.”

“That’s right.” She swivels her chair back and forth, eyeing me with tenderness. “Remember what we’d do whenever that fear set in?”

“You said I should tell you a story.”

It would distract me. My imagination would steal me away, taking me to sunnier places until the fear subsided, and peaceful dreams eclipsed the notion of boogiemen and ghosts tiptoeing in the shadows.

“You’re scared right now,” she continues. “Your hands are shaking.”

I curl my trembling fingers into fists. “Yeah.”

“So, tell me a story.”

I allow a smile to crest at the familiar prompt as I straighten my spine and reach for the makeup brushes. “All right.”

Inhaling a full breath, I begin spinning a tale that transports us to a bustling cityscape under the cover of night. I paint strokes of foundation onto my skin, setting the stage. The city comes alive in my words, its alleys teeming with shadowy figures and secrets. I speak of a mysterious man, driven by a haunted past, whose steely-brown eyes pierce the darkness like a beacon of justice.

He’s strong, brave.

He’s all hard edges but with a vulnerable heart.

With each sweep of eyeliner, I reveal the web that binds the city’s underbelly. The tension rises as my protagonist peels back layers of corruption. As I apply a shade of deep-berry lipstick, the man confronts the mastermind behind it all—a cunning, eccentric manipulator whose motives remain shrouded until the final act. The room crackles with an air of suspense as my surly hero faces a choice that will determine the fate of the city and his own redemption.

In this moment, our friendship blossoms. My heart comes alive, pumping with remnants of a girl I used to know. Of a girl I miss, desperately.

As Queenie watches me transform, I know that our bond is more than just lipstick and imagination. She’s my anchor, letting me believe for just a few minutes that I have exciting and interesting things to share.

And I suppose grief is interesting.

Heartbreak is full of fascinating complexities.

But I try to shove my real-world baggage aside as I step into my alter ego named “Bee” and pretend to be somebody else.

I hope it will last.

The guilt I carry is powerful and all-consuming. Sometimes it feels like a deadly infection with no cure, only growing more terminal with each passing day.

It starts as a painful ache in my chest, something like a tickle. A warning spasm. Then it spreads to my bloodstream and blackens my vital organs. Before I know it, it’ll travel to my heart, and once it reaches my heart, I’m a goner. It’ll only be a matter of time before I’m shriveled up on the cold ground, that once-flourishing heart dead and lifeless.

I close my eyes and swallow down the feeling.

I can’t let that happen.

“I liked that story.” Queenie is newly adorned in a chestnut wig with spiral curls and honeyed highlights. “I think it’s my favorite one yet.”

A genuine smile blooms on my lips, only to fade the moment I stand from the stool and glance at the wall clock.

It’s showtime.

And that’s the damnedest thing about guilt. It infects everything within reach, anything it can sink its teeth into. Even a tiny, innocent smile.

Even a fairy tale.

October used to be my favorite month, but now it’s just dead leaves, gray skies, and apple cider donuts that taste like dirt. It’s that time of year when my ghosts come out to play, dancing in a graveyard of grief while I howl at the moon.

I want to crawl back into my coffin until November.

But I worry it’ll just be another October.

11

The lights are blazing, causing my skin to dampen with sweat as I stare out at the crowd. My heart rate doubles as a jackhammer, pounding relentlessly in my chest.

This is a mistake.

I'm not cut out for this.

The music starts, and I'm a deer in headlights, frozen to the stage as my hand curls around the pole. Patrons whoop and holler, fists pumping in the air, strobes blinding me and making me dizzy.

I can't breathe.

I'm going to be sick.

Dollar bills flutter at my stilettoed feet. Piles of them. I force a timid smile and aim it at a middle-aged man with one of those handlebar mustaches who just tossed me a one-hundred-dollar bill.

Can they see me shaking?

Are they privy to the terror in my eyes?

I'm used to men gawking and drooling as they watch me pose and bat my lashes, but this is different. This is taking it to a new level—one I was undoubtedly not prepared for. I try to remember my practice runs, though they did little to quell my anxiety.

Swallowing, I close my eyes and try to center myself. A Halsey song is playing—an over-produced rendition of "Bells in Sante Fe." The music has my insides buzzing, giving me a zap of courage that allows me to zone out and perfect my routine.

Orange and purple lights douse me in colorful heat as I slither out of the bumblebee bralette and let the sparkly piece of fabric fall to the stage. The crowd goes wild. I latch on to the applause and lower to my hands and knees, arching my back, swinging my head, while my thick mane of fake blond hair flies all around me and an added tinsel kit causes the wig to shimmer against the strobes.

This gentlemen's club features topless performances only, so my black lace underwear stays firmly in place. Closing my eyes, I throw my head back then pull to my knees, cupping both breasts in my hands. More catcalls, more whistles and cheers. I glide back up to my feet and strut down to the front of the stage, dancing and swaying, tangling my fingers in the synthetic hair as I scan the crowd.

When I glance out into the sea of lights and obscured faces…

I notice a man.

I notice a lot of men, but one stands out.

I'm not sure why he snags my attention as he stands off to the side,

watching me dance. His arms are crossed, one hip parked against the wall a few feet away. Two long legs are tapered in dark denim, and a gunmetal-gray Henley looks like it's glued onto him. Muscles bulge against the thin fabric, twitching in time with his stubbled jaw. The man exudes intensity. Something heady and almost…alarming.

I can't see the color of his eyes through the strobe lights and a cloud of smoke, but I feel them dig into me like a pickaxe.

My breath hitches.

Gazes locked, I squeeze my breasts then drag my fingertips up my chest, my collarbone, and through my hair in an upward, sensual glide. I bite my lip as I stare at him.

He stares back, unflinching. Unblinking.

Unreadable.

The girls gave me a rundown on the types of men who watch us dance—they've been labeled. Ariel rattled them all off to me as we sat together behind the stage, waiting for our respective cues.

The Hotshot: They think they're too good-looking and respectable to pay us. The hot ones are the cheap ones.

The W.O.G.: Wrinkly old guys. They usually respect *us* too much to get a lap dance, but they tip well when we're on stage.

The Rookie: They've never been to a strip club before. Rookies are usually the most fun and make the job that much more enjoyable.

The Ball and Chain: Typical married man. Most of the time, they talk to us more than they care about seeing our tits, because they think we're more fascinating than their wives.

We also get an assortment of bachelor parties, frat boys, and stags, who are a cross between nervous and eager.

But this guy…

I can't place him.

His gaze devours me, and I swear it simmers with something other than lust.

It looks like —

Anger.

A hotshot with a chip on his shoulder, apparently.

I whip back around and move toward the pole, curling my calf around it and flinging my body into multiple rotations as my hair follows. The crowd

claps as the music fades out, and I finish my routine with a megawatt smile and send a little wave into the flashing lights.

For a moment, I'm on the runway again.

Everly Cross: the next big thing.

Photographers clamor to get the perfect shot. Models glare at me with envy. Industry bigwigs watch with interest as I strut around in the latest fashion trends.

My husband smiles at me, proud and adoring.

I am loved.

I force back tears as I step off stage and own the new life I'm building for myself.

I did it.

And I'm pretty sure I killed it.

Adrenaline soars through me, harnessing my smile, as Queenie greets me behind the stage in a tiny back room. I race over to her, hooking my bralette back into place, out of breath. "Holy shit."

"Holy shit, indeed." She props her shoulder against the wall and grins. "I'm impressed. It's rare a new dancer delivers such a flawless routine on her first night."

I've always enjoyed dancing. Generally, it was in front of my full-length mirror while Coldplay poured from my playlist and my tarantula silently judged me from his terrarium, but it's always been a part of me. I'm becoming more like my mother every day.

Ariel gives me a high-five, while Latte, another fellow dancer, lifts her hands with spirit fingers. I already feel a kinship. A new family unit.

"That was terrifying," I breathe out, feeling wild-eyed and dazed. "But liberating in a way. I felt…human again."

"You looked so confident up there." Ariel tightens her ponytail, gearing up for her own routine. "A total pro. You're going to outshine all of us in no time."

I swallow, nodding my thanks. "Good luck. You're going to do amazing."

"Yeah, I got this." The DJ announces her, and she takes off, sweeping past me.

Queenie takes me by the hand and leads me back to the dressing room. "Let's get you changed. I just had you scheduled for one dance tonight. When can you come back?"

“I’m free all week.”

“Fabulous. I’ll work on your schedule. Can you be here tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

I spend the next twenty minutes changing into athletic shorts and a tank top while I scrub the makeup off my face, listening to the roar of the crowd from down the hall.

Queenie approaches as I grab my purse out of the locker. “Do you need a ride home, Angel Baby?”

“No, I’m good. I walked.” I give her a firm hug before turning around. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

The October night air is warm and fragrant as I make my way out through a side door. My street shoes clap against the metal steps, rattling in time with my pulse. I’m still feeling the high, the confidence. The telltale buzz of new beginnings.

As I turn the corner, there’s a man leaning against the weathered brick, smoking a cigarette.

I falter.

Our eyes meet through the glow of an overhead streetlamp.

Slowing my steps, I squeeze my purse strap, glancing around at the still-lively street as cars whiz by and people gather in small groups.

My attention flicks back to the man.

The same man I noticed watching me.

He lowers the cigarette, blowing a plume of smoke up toward the sky before settling his dark eyes on me. He doesn’t speak.

“Hey. I saw you in the club.” I’m a few feet away, but I feel the heat emanating from him. Something potent.

I wait for his reply, for the sound of his voice, but his mouth snaps closed. Jaw tight, he just stares at me, wordless. A muscle in his cheek jumps as his eyes roll over me.

He’s incredibly attractive.

Stunning, even.

My skin prickles with goosebumps. I wonder if he heard me over the heavy bass seeping out through the main door. Chewing on my lip, I take a cautious step forward.

I clear my throat, peering down at my sneakers before glancing back up.

“I’m Bee. Do you —”

He turns and stalks away.

I frown, rooted to the sidewalk, watching the shadows dance across his retreating back.

Okay then.

Forcing my frozen feet to move, I focus on the uneven cracks in the pavement to guide me away.

I glance back once, over my shoulder.

The man is gone. Vanished into the night.

My heart pounds harder as I quicken my pace, breaking into a jog until I turn the corner.

But he lingers.

Even after I’m tucked inside my apartment, reheating a plate of leftovers and withdrawing to my bedroom with a glass of red wine…

I can’t shake the feeling that those eyes followed me home.

38

I drag myself through the front door of my apartment at six a.m. the following week, exhausted and bleary-eyed. My vision still sparks with multicolored strobes, and my feet ache from long nights prancing around onstage in stupidly high heels.

Sighing with burnout, I reach down to unbuckle my bejeweled stilettos. I'm mid-bend when I catch a black lump in my periphery, perched on my countertop, causing me to jolt to an upright position and whip my head to the right.

There's a cat in my kitchen.

Staring at me.

I stare back, offering two slow blinks.

Mrrooww.

The animal looks far less lost than I am.

Also…I don't have a cat.

"How did you get in here?" I ask like I'm expecting an answer.

Anxiety is a constant companion at home, keeping me awake most nights with a kitchen knife tucked under my pillow, bracing for the imagined sound of armed intruders, burglars, or serial killers breaking through the door. I was taken from the one place meant to feel safe, leaving it more exposed and vulnerable than anywhere else.

Surprisingly, feline break-ins never crossed my mind.

I puff my cheeks and blow out a breath, frowning at the cat as its tail

swishes from left to right, clearing crumbs off the countertop. “C’mon, let’s get you home. You have a better chance of survival with…anybody else.” Sauntering forward, I approach the mystery cat and glance down at the red collar around its neck: Mr. Binkers.

Mr. Binkers licks his paw, telling me he’s already right at home. I sigh. Evicting my newest roommate might be more challenging than anticipated. Despite my fatigue, I muster up the energy to coax him toward the open door and into the hallway. “Let’s go, kitty-kitty. Shoo. Adios.” I make some meowing noises and clap my hands, hopping up and down to garner excitement.

Yay, the hallway! How fun!

Judging by the deadpan look I receive, Mr. Binkers thinks I’m a moron.

My shoulders sag. “Fine,” I huff in defeat. “Sleep on my counters. Maybe they’ll finally get some use.” That is, outside of my monthly baking spectacles for the West Los Angeles Police Department. Most nights it’s pantry staples and frozen dinners.

I kick off my heels and peel the faux-leather skirt from my hips. It flutters to the cream-and-silver carpeting as I hang my purse on a wall hook, then pad into the kitchen to pull a box of frosted blueberry Pop-Tarts from the cabinet. I give Mr. Binkers a wary side-eye when I take a bite, the stale, sugary crumbs a sad substitute for true sweetness.

Mrrooww.

My nose scrunches. I break off a piece of crust, setting it on the counter beside the cat. “Bon appétit.”

The remainder of the pastry dangles between my teeth as I make my way over to the loveseat, wearing only my panties and a camisole, and plop down. The piece of furniture is the color of actual vomit—a rusty, off-putting shade of orange that never made the color-spectrum cut—but it was a hand-me-down from my childhood that Mom was going to toss in a dumpster.

I took it with me, needing the familiarity. A reminder of home.

My gaze skates over to the far wall, landing on the ten-gallon terrarium that houses my pet tarantula, Festus McGarrity IV. I pop up from the cushion to check on him, peering inside the glass enclosure and the miniature world inside. Plants, rocks, and branches are carefully arranged, mimicking the spider’s native environment. He skitters across the bottom as a heat lamp provides a gentle warmth. Then I trudge back toward the loveseat and drop

back down to my butt, closing my eyes and shoving the remainder of the Pop-Tart into my mouth. It sticks to the back of my throat like a wad of bubblegum.

This is my life now: random cats, stale pastries, a stripper stage, and PTSD.

As I shove my hand between the cushions in search of the television remote, I hear something coming from the adjacent apartment. Voices. Conversation seeps through the wall that separates me from one of the neighbors. I make out a low, gravelly tone paired with a woman's phlegmy cough, but I can't decipher any words.

I try to tune out the distorted dialogue on the other side of the wall because it reminds me of a different wall: a sheet of white chipped by my fingernails and stained with my tears, too thick and sound to burst through with frail fists, books, or gowns made of lace.

Once, I tried to shimmy the porcelain sink from the wall, but my strength was pathetically nonexistent, and it wouldn't budge. Sometimes I daydream about yanking it free, hammering it into the sterile barrier, and gouging a hole big enough for me to climb through.

It wouldn't have been freedom…but it would've led me to him.

And that feels like the same thing.

Something flutters in my chest when the voices grow louder.

I always think I hear him whispering in my ear. He's a shadow, a ghost—a faceless haunting made tangible by my own guilt and grief.

I lose myself in his past words, in the timbre of his voice. I imagine coffee-brown eyes I never got to see with my own. He often haunts me during my quiet moments when I'm stewing in a reality so different from the one I envisioned, if I ever made it out of that place.

I don't think he'd be proud of me.

He'd be crushingly disappointed, I'm sure.

My mind races back to last week, recalling the man watching me dance. Smoking a cigarette as his stare unraveled me. Dark hair, dark eyes. Voiceless and volatile.

I haven't seen him since.

That night, as I laid in bed with a little blue pick clutched inside my hand, I wondered if it could have been him—*Isaac.* My instincts had pinged like cold kisses on the back of my neck.

But I scrubbed the notion from my mind.

It was a stretch.

My Isaac would never disappear for a year, only to track me down and say nothing.

My Isaac would never allow me to believe he was dead after everything we went through together.

My Isaac would never be that cruel.

There are millions of dark-haired, attractive men in the world. I've seen them; I've considered them. I've always been heartbreakingly wrong.

The sooner I come to terms with his loss, the sooner I can stop looking over my shoulder, stop seeing him on crowded streets, stop wondering, yearning, and questioning every stranger's face.

He's gone, Everly.

As I scrub away the goosebumps on my arms, I reach for my cell phone when the metallic ding of a notification echoes through the quaint apartment. My gaze settles on a new text message, and my stomach pitches. My insides shrivel like quick-dying blooms, their colors zapped to gray.

I blink at the name and hold my breath.

ALLISON

I miss you so much. Please come home.

Collapsing backward on the loveseat, I reread the text message half-a-dozen times as I fight back tears.

Allison's icon shines back at me, an image of the two of us with ear-to-ear smiles, our cheeks smashed together, arms tangled. I never had the heart to change it. Memories from a long-ago day at the theme park flash through my mind like a geyser of sun-kissed laughter, music, and unbreakable friendship.

Or so I thought.

I peruse through more missed texts, a few from my mother with her daily words of wisdom. She's my human fortune cookie.

MOM

We must let go of the life we planned and live in the one given to us.

MOM

When life gives you lemons, make a Tequila Sour. Or three.

MOM

There are no bad days. Only lessons learned.

A smile touches my lips as I send back a few heart emojis.

I keep scrolling and land on another text, sent last night around nine p.m.

I freeze.

My throat clogs with grit.

JASPER

Can we talk? Please. It's important.

He's never texted me that before.

Generally, it's always been a long string of apologies and guilt-ridden pleas for forgiveness. Every text I've ignored, every word I've banished from my mind. There's no point in engaging—we're divorced, and he's with Allison. I collected the money owed to me in the divorce, moved nearly four hundred miles away, and picked up the pieces of my shattered life, aching to start anew.

I have no place in their world anymore.

My thumb hovers over the keypad as I debate my next move. Curiosity pokes me. Indecision weaves a barbed knot inside my chest.

Can we talk?

Please.

It's important.

Closing my eyes, I turn off the screen and toss the phone beside me. I reach for a blanket and curl up on the loveseat, allowing exhaustion to take me under, while hoping sweet dreams find me.

The most important thing right now is getting through another day.

When I wake up three hours later, drowsy and hungry, I peer into the kitchen, searching for my new furry companion.

But he's not there.

Mr. Binkers is gone.

39

Queenie clinks her glass with mine as I tamp down my nerves and gear up for my next performance. Another week has rolled by, and I'm still not the fearless topless dancer I was hoping I'd be after two weeks of parading around in front of drooling, dumbstruck men.

My confidence has blossomed, but I wonder if this is something I'll ever fully get used to and accept. I've been wearing wigs during my routines, terrified one of my captors is hiding out in the crowd, making plans to snatch me up the moment I make the darkened trek to my apartment.

But I can't hide forever.

That's the whole point of this.

"Penny for your thoughts," Queenie says, swallowing her Lemon Drop shot and placing her glass on the bar counter.

I rub my lips together. "Hope you have a lot of pennies."

"I have a lot of singles. Better make them some good thoughts."

A smile flickers. "Does this ever get easier? Were you nervous when you first started?"

"Oh, honey, I've been doing this for a long time. I hardly remember those first few weeks."

"Yeah." I nod, glancing down at my fidgeting knees. "I can't picture you ever questioning this. You've always been secure in who you are."

"So are you. That girl you think you lost somewhere, the girl who was audacious and bold…she's still in there." She presses a firm hand to my knee,

ceasing the wobbling. “You never lost her, Angel Baby. She just lost her way.”

I glance up, my eyes misting. “You don’t think people ever change?”

“Change?” Leaning back, she props an elbow up on the chairback and tilts her head. “I think people grow, and people regress. When they grow, they become a better version of who they already are. And when they regress, it means they’re too scared to grow.” She shrugs, pursing her lips. “So, no, I don’t think people truly *change*. Not at their core. Not their essence.”

Queenie reminds me so much of my mother sometimes.

It’s a sweet familiarity that has me smiling through the heartache.

“Thank you,” I murmur, twirling the half-empty glass between my fingers. “You always know the right things to say.”

“I don’t know about that.” She barks a laugh. “I just say what I want to say when I want to say it. It’s up to the listener to take what they need from it.”

I swallow back the rest of my Old Fashioned, wincing as it burns a trail of fire down my throat. Plucking a cherry from the bottom of the glass, I glance around the crowded bar, assessing my audience for the evening. I recognize a few faces. One man sends me a lewd look as he runs his tongue over his lips, causing me to slink back in the seat and readjust my long, brown wig.

But before I fully turn to face Queenie again, someone else catches my eye.

I twist around, craning my neck over the sea of men.

My pulse tap dances.

It’s him.

The smoker from outside the club two weeks ago.

He looks away the moment our eyes meet, and I sit up straighter, jerking my head toward Queenie. “Hey. Do you know that guy?”

“Hmm?” She frowns, following my gaze. “Which one?”

“The good-looking one.”

“That’s subjective, honey. My third husband looked like a garden gnome that weathered one too many storms, and I liked him just fine. For a few years, anyway.”

Blinking repeatedly, I feel my skin heat as I gaze across the bar at the dark stranger who’s staring down at his glass of clear liquid over ice. “The one in the black T-shirt. Broad shoulders. Dark hair.”

She peers around me and squints. “No. Never seen him before.”

“He was here my first night, watching me dance.”

Queenie sends me a perplexed look. “So was I, along with half this place.”

“Yeah, but…it was more than that. I saw him outside the club when I was leaving. There was something about him. I tried to talk to him, but he stormed away. He was kind of intense.”

“The silent type—a rare breed I can appreciate.” She lifts off the stool and slaps a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. Hesitating, she glances down at me. “Did you feel unsafe? This isn’t a cry for help, is it?”

“No.”

“You sure? Say the word and I’ll have Len drag his ass out of here if —”

“I’m fine, Queenie. Promise.” It’s true. Maybe my intuition is all wrong, but, despite the dark intensity rolling off him in waves, I never felt true danger. I still don’t. “It was just an odd encounter, that’s all. But…in an intriguing way, I guess.”

“Well, try talking to him again. Maybe he’s just what the doctor ordered.”

“What’s that?”

“A quickie with a hot stranger. Looks like he’d do the trick.” Squeezing my shoulder, she leans in and adds, “That’ll chase away your nerves real fast.”

My skin hums with warmth, my insides buzzing. I haven’t had sex in years. The closest I came to intimacy was that night with Isaac through the wall.

The dirty talk.

Chloe and Nick.

And I suppose that makes me a hypocrite, considering the situation with Jasper and Allison. I thought my husband was dead, so I crossed a line with the man on the other side of my wall. But I thought I was going to die, too. It was my only form of solace at the time. Human connection.

I can’t feel guilty about it; there’s no room for any more self-blame.

My cheeks burn when the stranger slowly looks up again, his explosive eyes settling on mine. They look angry. Piercing.

Energy crackles in the air. A strange feeling unfurls between my ribs, clawing and poking.

No.

Stop it.

It can't be him.

That wouldn't make any sense.

I'm searching for something that isn't there because I *need* it to be there. I need it to be him so I can relieve myself of this self-inflicted grief.

Queenie disappears into the crowd, leaving me alone with my stare down as I study the unnerving mystery man. He looks away a few times, but his eyes always trail back to mine. There's a pull. A magnetism.

Reining in my courage, I set down my glass and stand from the stool, smoothing out my purple-sequined dress and fiddling with my fake bangs. The man stiffens. I keep watching him, keep making sure he doesn't run away from me again.

I want his name. His voice.

Confirming or disproving.

I circle behind the bar stools as he tosses a wad of cash on the counter. My eyes are locked on his profile while everything around me blurs. I move, dodging people and leering glances along the way.

But the moment I'm about to reach him, a hand grabs me by the arm.

I jump in place, pivoting around and coming face to face with an older gentleman with silver glasses to match his thinning hair.

"Excuse me, Miss. I couldn't help but notice you sitting over there. Are you performing tonight?"

I blink at him, startled. "I… Yes, I'm sorry, I have somewhere to be —"

"What's your name? You're very beautiful." His focus dips to my cleavage. "Striking, really."

Wrenching my arm free, I rub away the insidious tickle left from his touch. Then I turn around, noting that the occupied stool is now empty.

He's gone.

Dammit.

"I-I have to go." Flustered, I stalk away, pushing through a slew of small groups, trying to uncover where he disappeared to. But he's nowhere to be found. Disappointment filters through me after I make three laps around the club, coming up empty.

That disappointment follows me on stage an hour later.

It weakens my steps, drains my enthusiasm, and tightens my smile. I pick

apart the crowd, searching for him in the ocean of eager faces, but he's not there. I feel like I'm going crazy. Losing my mind. The patrons don't seem to notice my missteps and disenchanted eyes, and I leave the stage with over three hundred dollars in tips when the song is over.

But the pocket money does little to fill the holes inside me.

As I veer off to the dressing room to freshen up and discard my cash, Latte catches me by the elbow. "Hey, Bee. You have a private dance in the champagne room. He prepaid for an hour."

"Really?" My gaze drifts over to the staircase leading up to a row of private rooms. The past few nights, I've had to work my ass off to earn a private dance in the champagne room. They're not cheap, so there's often a lot of schmoozing and forced connection-making on my end. "Wow, okay. About time a bit of good luck landed in my lap."

"Now, all you gotta do is land in his." She winks. "Go take five to freshen up. He's in the pink room."

"Ball and Chain?" I wonder. Married men generally know what they want because they know what they're not getting at home.

Her muted cocoa lips twist to the side. "Don't think so. No ring," she says. "He was kind of intense. Really hot, though. Enjoy the change of scenery."

Hot and intense.

A shiver creeps down my spine.

No.

It's probably not him.

That guy clearly wants nothing to do with me.

Before Latte skips away, I ask her, "Description?"

She pauses. "Hmm. Dark hair, kind of shaggy on top and shorter in the back. Didn't catch his eye color because I was too busy counting the veins in his arms." She fans herself. "Vein porn is real."

My heartbeats kick up speed. "Tall? Muscular build?"

"Rugged, built, sexy, and pissed-off." Nodding, she flicks a finger in the air. "That would be the guy. Have fun."

She scampers away.

My nerves tangle into a sticky web as I falter for a beat, then swerve into the dressing room to fix my hair and lipstick, slap on a fresh coat of deodorant, and dab some pheromone-infused oil onto my pulse points. I make

a quick pitstop at my locker and slip the wad of cash I earned into my wristlet.

Five minutes later, still wearing my brown wig and violet slip dress, I make my way up the industrial steps to the row of five VIP suites. They go by color: pink, purple, red, black, and white.

The pink room is made of pure velvet, from the walls to the sofa benches, and even the beaded curtain. Magenta and carnation tones glitter under vibrant chandeliers, and I inch the shimmery skirt of my dress down my thighs as I clear my throat.

Anticipation dances through me as my breaths flounder. Exhaling deeply, I turn toward the pink room and approach the entrance.

The beads flutter in front of me, almost like someone just walked through them.

I frown.

Stepping forward, I inch back the curtain and peer inside the room.

Nothing.

No one is here.

The room smells like roses and vanilla, lightly illuminated by wax warmers as I enter, but the residual aroma of smoke and sandalwood tickles my nose. Heady masculinity.

Confusion snuffs out the adrenaline spike, slackening my shoulders as I step back out of the suite and look around, scurrying over to the opposite staircase. I lean over the balcony, curling my fingers around the iron railing as my eyes take in the loud, overflowing room.

My stomach pitches.

I spot him—moving swiftly along the perimeter of the club, pulling something out of his pocket.

I want to call out to him, but I don’t have a name. I want to scream, shout, beg for him to return, to tell me who he is and what he wants.

Stop running.

Stop hiding.

But he doesn’t look back.

Holding on to the railing, I inhale a shaky breath, my eyes misting over. Two syllables fall out in a choked whisper as I watch him shove through the side door and disappear into the night. “Isaac?”

40

What the hell am I doing?

The door *thunks* closed behind me, muffling the music inside. Within seconds, I've vanished into the darkness, a cigarette between my lips, inhaling the nicotine-infused smoke like it's the first breath I've taken in days. "*Fuck*…" I mutter on the exhale. "I almost did that."

With my eyes fixed on the exit, I wait for that mane of wild curls to emerge. Any minute now, she'll confront me. Ask a thousand questions that demand answers. Wear me down until I tell her all the things I don't want to admit.

Someone else should do this job.

It shouldn't be me.

It's got to be me.

Pressure builds in my chest until it's hard to breathe. The reasons I have for coming don't include talking to her. I could easily stay at arms-length, where she'd never know. But watching her dance like that—embracing that intoxicating sex appeal, owning her body—is getting to me. So much, that in a moment of weakness, I dropped a cool six hundred for a private room and an hour of her time.

Then reality sank in, and I ghosted.

I'd rather not analyze that.

By the time my cigarette is down to a burnt stub, she still hasn't appeared.

My hands shake like I've gone a year without a fix.

Yeah. I'm fucked.

Every time she's been close, I've locked up, so the real question is whether I'm even capable of talking to her the way she'll expect. Am I reliant on walls to carry on an intimate conversation with another human being?

Maybe.

The thought of opening myself up without that barrier between us makes me nauseous. It didn't end well then, so why should it be any different now, when I'm not even sure I'm *capable* of that kind of connection?

Tanner thinks the past year has gotten into my head—made me lose it a little. But that's a side effect of cutting myself off from society to follow a psychopath into the depths of the underworld.

There's a labyrinth traveling under the world, where monsters thrive just beneath society's nose. And when hunting, you go where your quarry lives. You blend into it. Maybe if I were a stronger man, one more acquainted with the light, I could use it as camouflage and strip it off like a costume the next day. But I was born of the shadows, and when they saw me coming home, they opened their arms and welcomed me back.

It's gotten even harder to remember how to coexist among the general public. I was never good at it, but now, I don't even know where to begin. How to make polite conversation.

What am I supposed to do, walk up and introduce myself?

She might think that's what she wants, but I'm not sure she'd like what she found.

I pull another cigarette from the pack, headed down a spiral full of self-loathing and regret when something vibrates against my thigh. A tickle. An annoyance. My goddamn phone.

I don't have to guess the caller—only one person has this number.

Fishing the phone out of my front pocket, I bring it to my ear, never taking my eyes off the chipped black paint of the back door. "What."

"Stop complaining. You'd miss me if I didn't call."

My shoulders loosen. "I said one word. How is that a complaint?"

"It's all in the tone, Porter. You sound like an angry teenager."

I drop the cigarette butt on the ground and smash it under my heel. "Piss off, I'm working," my voice pitches cheerfully.

"Ah, to have a job where stalking an ex-model can be called *work.*"

"I'm not stalking her."

“Tell that to the restraining order she’s going to slap you with if you don’t explain yourself soon.”

“I’m better than that.” I don’t tell him how close I came tonight. How my resolve is disintegrating every time I’m close to her. “She doesn’t know I’m here.”

Yeah, I’m full of shit.

“Let me talk to her. Tell her the truth. The woman’s been crawling up my ass because I can’t give her answers when she knows damn well something’s up. She’s not an idiot.”

“Of course she’s not an idiot,” I snap. My life would be a lot easier if she were. But then she wouldn’t be Everly, and I’d be indifferent to her. “I don’t need you to talk to her.”

“Easy, killer. It’s her right to know she could be in danger. Besides, it would allow us to move her to a safe place. Get some protection on her.”

“*I’m* her protection.”

“Yes, except you’re *also* the reason she’s in danger.” He says it in that gentle tone he uses when he has something to say that I won’t like. But I already know. I’ve been playing with fire. Unleashing hell on my enemy. Thinking I had nothing left to lose.

I was wrong: the girl behind the wall had become something more than I intended, and he knew it. Everly was nothing more than a product to Vincent —until I went fucking around with his empire.

Now, she’s a way to get back at me.

I knew it the second that picture landed in Tanner’s inbox.

Dammit.

As I run through every possible scenario, deciding on the next best move, the side door cracks open. My breath stills when the bouncer walks out and glances around. He nods over his shoulder, and Everly appears, waist-length hair twining around her body with the breeze.

Damn, she’s something. Even dressed in street clothes and makeup-free, she’s easily the most stunning woman in this place. My knuckles go white thinking about how many assholes have jerked off thinking about her. How many she’s rubbed up against.

Fuck. I have a problem.

Tanner’s continued chatter interrupts the trance I’ve slipped into. “Since I don’t have a bat signal, and you don’t bother with email, you’ll have to

humor me. I figured you'd want to know that the bane of your existence is aware of your location. I've got security footage of one of his spies watching you…while you're watching *her*."

I'm off my game. I should have noticed someone following me already. "He knew I'd come here; that was the whole point."

"He *hoped* you would. He threw the bait to find out, and you went for it."

"What a hero I am."

Everly chats with the bouncer for several minutes, huddling in her light jacket as a fine mist drizzles from the cloud cover. It's obvious from the way he's gesturing between the cloud cover and her phone that he's trying to talk her into ordering a ride. She doesn't care that she has no business being alone in the dark, unaware that I've turned her into a target.

She just wants to walk in the rain.

That's why I shoved pepper spray into her purse when the dressing room was empty.

Still, she's treating her freedom carelessly, like her experience has made her immune to tragedy. It makes me want to snatch her off the street and put her over my knee until she learns a lesson.

The mere thought makes my dick half hard, which isn't fucking helpful at all.

How many times have I imagined having her under me, playing out that scene I described to her in filthy detail when we had no hope of making it come true? She's single now, too—and watching her dance topless for a bunch of assholes, just out of reach, has been turning my balls fifty shades of blue.

But there are still too many things in the way. Too many reasons I really need to shut my mouth and keep my distance. Besides not being sure I can even carry a face-to-face relationship like that, I still have moments where I'm just fucking…bitter. As idiotic as it is, I *still* hear her husband's name echo in my dreams.

I gave her my trust, and she chose another man.

A man who'd already turned his back on her.

Sometimes I can't decide whether I want to fuck her or make her suffer.

Both could work.

Tanner rudely interrupts my inner conflict. "There's another thing bothering me. Why hasn't he just taken you out if he's got a lock on you?

There’s got to be something else he wants.”

“That’s comforting.”

“Worth pondering, though.”

“Indeed.” I inch closer to Everly and the bouncer, pressing the phone closer to my mouth. “And I take it there’ve been no more leads since Amsterdam.”

A text *pings* through in the background. “No,” Tanner says. “But I just sent a picture of the guy who’s been following you.”

Amsterdam was what finally shook me. Convinced me to change my strategy. But it won’t be over until I’ve wiped him off the face of the earth, and now, he’s decided to play.

It was in Europe that my prey stopped running and began to bite back, playing his little mind games. More innocents. Casualties left in his wake.

Then it became personal.

I found the bodies in Bucharest, Berlin, and Amsterdam—victims who closely resembled Everly, Sara, and finally, me. After the last one—a humble mechanic and father of four, who’d done nothing wrong but leave his house looking like the wrong person—I came back to the States, afraid of what would happen if I pushed him further.

This time, *I* went underground. I needed to put a stop to all the senseless death.

But I’d made an error in judgment: there’s nothing Vincent loves more than games, and he wasn’t willing to stop playing. A month later, a photograph of Everly showed up in Tanner’s email, the Golden Gate Bridge an unmistakable backdrop behind her. There was no questioning who’d sent it, but just in case I was confused, the subject line was an hourglass emoji.

Subtle.

So now I’m here, far too close to crossing a line I won’t be able to *un*cross. I could watch out for her quietly, of course. Invisibly. But I can’t think straight being this close to her. I can’t —

“Did that picture come through?”

“Hang on.” I glance away from the woman consuming my attention long enough to glance at the photo in Tanner’s text. It’s a nondescript guy in a baseball cap. Not helpful. Movement in my periphery catches my attention, and I look up just as the bouncer disappears from the doorway. Everly sets off in the direction of her apartment, striding confidently with her chin held

high. “Dammit.”

I want to go over there and shake her. Tell her bad shit can happen within a three-block radius, just as easily as it could within three miles.

“Talk to me, Porter. What’s going on? You know the guy?”

“No, that’s not—” Then I freeze.

A figure staggers out from beneath a streetlamp near the front entrance as Everly passes, his slurred words carrying as he approaches her.

“Hey gorgeous, you looking for some extra tips?”

“Who the hell is this?” My hand slowly drops to my side as I watch Everly’s reaction. Chin up and shoulders back, she shakes her head, dodging around him to continue down the block. The knuckles of my free hand crack with the force of my clenched fist.

“Don’t mean no harm. Just a lonely guy, looking for some company.” He follows her, rubbing his palm over his crotch.

This guy is about to fuck around and find out.

Without taking my eyes off the douchebag, I lift the phone enough to growl into the speaker. “Talk to you later. I’ve got to go kill someone.” Then I shove the phone into my pocket and work my way closer, slow and quiet, sticking close to the building.

“Come on, baby,” he calls after her, “I could give you the ride of your life. You don’t know what you’re missin’.”

Unfortunately for him, *he’s* about to be missing half his teeth, and possibly his dick, assuming he has one.

The second Everly turns the corner, I’m in front of him, my fist planted in his face before he has time to see it coming.

Stumbling backward into the side of the club, he takes a minute to wipe his face with the back of his arm and recover. Then, with eyes full of venom and blood trickling from his nose, he fixes his glare on me. “Who the fuck are you?”

Is it me, or did this shithead sober instantly?

“You were looking for company.” I grab him by the throat and lift him off the ground. “*I’m company*.”

After steering him to a particularly dark corner of the used car lot next door, I throw him on the ground. He stays where I put him, coughing and sputtering, while I tower above. “Convince me we don’t have a mutual friend who sent you to tail my ass.”

“You high or something? I don’t want your ass.” He nods in the direction Everly disappeared, grinning like an idiot with a death wish. “I want *hers*.”

And that’s it.

I unleash every last bit of rage I’ve been holding on to until he’s unconscious.

If I go any further, he might not recover.

Shaking with the effort it takes to stop, I pull out my phone, open the picture, and hold it next to his face.

Dammit, I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone.

Aside from the fact that this asshole now looks like he’s been through a meat grinder, I don’t think it’s the same guy. Truthfully, it’s hard to tell, but there’s enough doubt that I probably shouldn’t finish him off, even though I really fucking want to.

Leaving him bleeding in the parking lot, I hurry down the block. Now I’ve got to catch up to Everly. Fuck, I hate this new job of hers. Why couldn’t she sit in a lab somewhere and study bugs? If I start beating the shit out of every douchebag who looks at her wrong, it’s going to get out of hand fast.

Strippers pretty much make their living off men looking at them wrong.

I catch up to her just as she’s unlocking the door to her apartment building, unaware that I nearly killed a drunken asshole on her behalf. Lucky for him, she’s in one piece.

Soon, I’ll retreat to my motel around the corner, but while I catch my breath, I head to the spot where I’ve been spending more time than she’d probably want to know about. Facing her window, there’s a line of trees that’s good enough to keep me hidden, the grass matted from the time I’ve spent keeping watch.

If she came out here, she’d see the spot littered with cigarette butts.

The blinds in her apartment window close, leaving the tiniest leak of golden light around the edges. She wasn’t so diligent at first. I wonder if her instincts are tingling, telling her someone is watching.

Does she suspect who it might be? My eyes linger a few beats longer than necessary.

Mrrooww.

A black cat sits outside the main door, protesting the rain. Looks offended to have been left on this side of the door. I’ve noticed him running in and out of the complex on the heels of other residents, so I guess he belongs to

someone.

The drizzle grows steadier, turning to weighty drops. Looks like the rainy season is coming in early this year.

Mrrooww.

The animal looks at me so pointedly, I can almost hear his thoughts: *Why are you just standing there, dumbass? Can't you see I'm getting wet?*

The lone light over the door lends a sort of iridescence to his rain-slicked fur as I walk over and look down. Slowly stretching one front paw, he unfurls his claws and digs them into my jeans.

"Fine, I can take a hint." I fish down into the bottom of my jacket pocket, pull out a key, unlock the door, and hold it open a foot until he slinks inside.

The thought of following him in, going upstairs, and knocking on her door gives me pause. What would she do? What's the worst thing that could happen if I walked up and introduced myself?

I let out a mirthless laugh.

Maybe she thinks that after a few unraveled confessions in the shadow of death, she knows who I am. But purging a few dark secrets through a wall doesn't change the truth.

Could I ever be good for a woman like her?

No.

I watch the rivulets of water slide down to the metal handle, collecting in droplets that quiver and fall into a puddle on the concrete. At the entryway, lined with mailboxes. At the cat, bounding up the stairs.

Then I take a long, slow breath in through my nose and release my grip on the handle.

Slowly, it closes, locking Everly safely inside.

And I turn away.

41

"You're doing *what*?"

Wincing, I inch the phone away from my ear as I march down the sidewalk in my heels and a tan trench coat. Perhaps this was a conversation better suited for an in-person visit. "I didn't want to tell you when I was down there because I didn't know if it would last. It was one of those spontaneous, split-second decision things, you know? I ran into Queenie a few months ago at a local coffee shop. I told her I was in a rut and feeling antsy, so she suggested it, and I… Well, I thought doing something totally outside my comfort zone would snap me out of this funk I've been in."

"Jesus Christ."

"I figured you, of all people, would understand." I swerve around the corner, inhaling a lungful of engine fumes. "Are you disappointed in me?"

"No. Of course not."

"You sound pissed."

"Taken off guard, not pissed." Her *taken off guard* sigh travels through the speaker, but it sounds like a *pissed* sigh. "Everly, are you sure this is the best route for you to take? You've been through a lot. The idea of strange men leering at your naked body isn't sitting well with me."

My stilettos clink against metal steps as I enter the club through the back door and make my way down the winding hall. Len greets me outside the dressing room with an endearing wink, and I shoot back a distracted smile. "It's topless only. Not to mention, *you* were a stripper for seven years," I

remind her.

"I'm also a mother. *Your* mother. I can't protect you when you're four-hundred miles away, and that industry isn't always…savory."

"Everyone has been amazing. Supportive, nurturing, empowering." Queenie sends me a worried frown from the beauty counter as I veer toward the lockers, but I shake my head, assuring her I'm fine. "And you don't need to protect me. I'm capable."

"I know you are. You're strong and resilient," she replies. "But you're also beautiful, vulnerable, and only five-foot-two when you're not slouching. I'm not worried about the women; I'm worried about the men. The patrons. I've had my fair share of disturbing run-ins." She pauses. "You should carry a weapon with you. Pepper spray, at the very least."

"I have some. Don't worry." Truthfully, I don't know why I have some. It appeared in my purse the other day, likely courtesy of Queenie.

Mom sighs again as I open my locker and discard my satchel. Then she adds, "What about modeling? If it's the attention you're missing, I'm certain Jasper has connections that can re-spark your career. I'd feel better about that avenue."

My fingers tighten around the phone at the mention of his name. "I don't want to do modeling. There's too much…noise." When I glance up, Queenie is leaning against the far wall, watching me with a glimmer of concern in her eyes. "I don't want my name in lights, my face in magazines, or people waving cameras at me everywhere I go. Everly Cross—the model—is associated with abduction, a black-market ring, scandal, and divorce. I'm Everly Mayfield now. I'm just…Bee."

"Bee?"

"My stage name." Fidgeting in place, I glance at the wall clock, feeling restless as my start time draws nearer. "Listen, I need to go. I'll come visit you next week and we can talk more about this. Don't worry, okay?"

"I'll always worry. You'll understand when you settle down again and have children one day. The path you choose for yourself isn't always the path you want for them."

I stare down at the floor, my throat tightening.

I don't know if I want to "settle down" again.

After living in a box for two years, all I want to do is live *outside* of that box. Proverbial, figurative—all of it. I don't want to be trapped anymore.

But it’s not the time for that conversation. “I get it. I’ll call you later. Give the kitties kisses for me.” Macaroni squawks something indecipherable and likely offensive in the background. “Mac, too.”

Mom’s voice quiets as she whispers, “I will. Love you.”

“Love you.” I disconnect the call and spin around to face Queenie. “Sorry. Mom is unraveling.”

“You finally told her, huh?”

I slither out of my coat and hang it in the locker before closing the door. “I did. She didn’t take it as well as I had hoped she would, given her passion for this industry once upon a time.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Jillian is a free spirit, but her spirit is consumed with you. You can’t blame her for questioning this.”

“I guess.” Part of me knew that, and I think that’s why I waited so long to tell her. “You don’t have any kids, right?”

“Nah. I’m too selfish for that.” She shrugs through a smile. “And I don’t mean that in a negative way, honey, just a realistic way. Some people only know how to take care of themselves, and there’s no shame in embracing who you are and what you want. My life belongs to this stage.” She lifts from the wall and waves a hand at the dancers behind her, who are prepping for their routines. “Besides, my girls are like my children. That’s enough for me.”

Smiling softly, I move into the dressing room and fetch my outfit for the night.

It’s “Career Day.”

The club often sets up different themes to keep things interesting. Holidays are a given, but there has also been a retro ‘50s night, a masquerade, an under-the-sea mermaid vibe, and a nod to the Victorian era. Queenie asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I considered going the entomology route and dressing up as a ladybug or a butterfly, but since I just did the bumble-bee persona, I settled on a scientist instead.

A sexy lab coat, extra high heels, and a pair of bold cat-eye glasses sounded fun.

As I’m finalizing my smoky eyeshadow and securing my short black wig with bobby pins, a knock sounds on the dressing room door. I get up and poke my head out, spotting Len outside with a clipboard.

“You’re almost up,” he says. “Do you have a song in mind for your

routine?”

“Oh, um…” I chew on my cheek, pondering the request. “Not really. Surprise me.”

He gives me a once-over, taking in my costume. “You got it. See you in ten.”

“Thanks, Len.”

Ten minutes later, my name is announced as I’m fidgeting backstage with my heart in shambles. All I can think about is him and if he’ll be here tonight—a shadowy face in the crowd, watching me dance, drinking in my curves, my movements, my skin.

Calling to me.

Waiting for me in that VIP suite after the show, so I can peel apart this morbid fascination, once and for all.

I don’t know if he’s Isaac. I don’t know if I’m setting myself up for crushing disappointment, or if the trajectory of my life is about to change.

A part of me says it’s him.

A part of me says he’d never do this.

Isaac wouldn’t tease me like this; he wouldn’t unstitch all my newly threaded pieces with games and disappearing acts. If he’s alive, then he knows how much I’m hurting and how much I’m missing him. And the Isaac I know—the *real* Isaac—would take me in his arms at last and hold me while I released myself from this final, painful burden of thinking I sent him to his grave.

I just don’t know which part of me is right.

The crowd goes wild when I grace the stage and school my face into a flirtatious smile. As I pluck open the first button on my lab coat, a song starts to play.

The claps and whistles are background noise. Sound drowns out as my eyes search and scan. So many faces, none of them are his. I try not to let my dismay show as I strut forward and undo another button while dollar bills are tossed at my feet.

Music seeps into my ears.

At first, I don’t recognize the song. The singer’s voice is synthesized, the melody garbled, and I’m too zoned out to register the tune. A deep, erotic bass sets in, prompting my body to swing and sway as I reach for the pole.

But then…

I hear it.

Awareness punches me in the chest.

Until it becomes *all* I hear.

Freezing in place, I curl my hand around the pole, my knuckles going white. My heart ricochets between my ribs like a pinball in a rusty machine. My pulse pounds in my temples, my ears, my throat.

It's a cover of "The Scientist."

I can't breathe.

Everything around me blurs. The crowd, the lights, the clapping hands. It's a slow-motion swirl of debilitation. I feel my legs shaking, my breaths coming quicker and shallower.

The song plays, my mind reels back in time, and something inside me snaps.

Withers. Dies.

I can't catch air as I gaze out into the sea of formless faces. Confusion washes over the crowd and the applause falters as people stare and look around.

I blink over and over, trying to scrub the fog from my eyes as my chest caves in and my airways tighten to smothering. The Timekeeper's voice echoes in my ears like a sinister lullaby.

"It's your favorite song. I thought this moment was deserving of a soundtrack."

I'm there again.

I'm in that sterile room, forced to make a decision as Isaac struggles with his binds and begs for me to choose him.

To trust him.

To save him.

And then, as my vision fights for clarity…I think I see someone.

The Timekeeper.

He's moving through the mass of people, stalking toward the stage. He tracked me down. He found me. Two mismatched eyes twinkle with devilish joy as he straightens his bowtie and watches me from the edge of the platform. His arms extend like he's waiting for me to run to him.

Like he wants me to come home.

No…

The world distorts around me. My hand shoots up to clutch my neck as

my oxygen locks up, sticking in the back of my throat. I scratch and claw. Panic infiltrates me, body and mind, and then the image of my captor transforms.

In a blink…he's gone.

It's just a regular man standing there, staring at me as I fall apart.

I'm losing my grip on reality. It was a smokescreen, a destructive mirage. It wasn't real, but the room is already spinning.

Funneling. Pinwheeling.

My legs give out, and I collapse.

A *thud* resounds in my ears as the back of my head meets the stage and the distant hum of worried voices reverberates through me. My eyelids flutter, unconsciousness teasing. I'm vaguely aware of footsteps approaching, hard soles slapping against the platform as a figure bends over me.

Len?

No. Someone else.

I'm being lifted into the air.

Hauled up and carried away.

Two arms encircle me, firm and protective, one draped underneath my knees and the other cradling my back. I stagger against a hard chest as dizzying lights streak across my vision. I blink. I blink again. A face looms above me, dark hair bathed in magenta lights. I'm a sock puppet in his arms as my wig comes undone and flutters to the floor at his feet. We move, weaving through people, through outstretched arms.

"Bring her to the dressing room!"

"Call an ambulance."

"Is she breathing?"

My head lolls, my eyes unable to focus. Soothing heartbeats pound against my temple as I nuzzle against the man's chest, breathing him in.

Sandalwood. Smoke.

I'm placed onto a couch, my limbs soggy noodles. But my hand reaches out, latching onto the collar of a leather jacket. "No…wait…"

People clamor around me.

Dancers. Len. Queenie.

"Get her some damn water!" Queenie shouts, landing on her knees beside me.

The man.

I need the man.

He's still here. My hand is clasped around his lapel, forcing him back to me. Keeping him close.

I try to focus, try to see his face as my breathing steadies.

An image comes into view: two dark, stormy eyes attached to a familiar face, scruff along his jawline, and brown, disheveled hair.

His hand strokes my cheek.

Just a graze. A fleeting, tender touch.

The gesture douses me in warm tingly peace as I slowly twist my head to the side and blink up at him, knowing, believing, with every tortured piece of my soul —

"Isaac," I breathe out.

His expression changes. He glances around, face hardening as his jaw tics and his muscles clench. He straightens, then backs away gradually, like he doesn't want to go. His finger curls around a lock of my hair before he releases me.

I watch him retreat.

"No…" Another wave of panic threatens, clogging my throat as I try to pull myself into a sitting position. "Come back…"

I struggle against the new hands that reach out, holding me down. Then I watch, helplessly—*heartbreakingly*—as he turns on his heel and bolts through the open door, the image of dark-wash jeans and two black boots disappearing from my periphery.

"No." Tears gather in my eyes as I slump back to the couch. A glass of water is pressed to my lips. I sputter and choke while emotion carves new holes in my heart.

"Everly." Queenie presses the back of her hand to my sweat-damp forehead. "Hey. Talk to me, Angel Baby."

I curl into a ball and sob.

"Oh, honey…" She wraps her arms around me and holds me tight as I shatter into pieces.

But they're not the arms I want.

It's not her words I need.

It's just another wall I can't break through.

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"Detective Tanner, please." I pad circles around my apartment in wide-leg jeans and a tight tank top, my hair pulled up in the world's largest messy bun, as my cell phone wobbles against my ear.

"Hi, Everly."

I pause my steps. "Hey, Astrid. I'm that recognizable, huh?"

"It's the prominent irritation inflected whenever you say his name."

Frowning, I mouth the name Tanner multiple times, realizing I do say it with an edge. "Sorry." I clear my throat through a chuckle. "Is he around? It's kind of important."

"He should be. I'll transfer you."

Two minutes pass, and I glance at my Apple watch, noting that I've managed over one-thousand steps just in unproductive pacing.

A voice answers. "Tanner."

The moment he picks up, I plop down in a kitchen chair and ramble off a frazzled monologue all in one breath. "Hey. It's Everly. Everly Mayfield. I'm damn-near confident Isaac is following me. Stalking me while avoiding me at the same time; it's an art form, really. And it's *the* Isaac—not Grandpa Isaac—so don't even bother. Have you been hiding him? Is he a criminal? Are you both criminals? You better start talking, because I —"

The call disconnects.

Son of a bitch.

I stare at my phone screen, my eyes narrowing to slits.

I'm petty enough to call right back.

Astrid sighs through the speaker. "Hey. He told me to tell you he's catching a plane to Aruba, and he won't be returning. Ever. Please don't kill the messenger."

"Aruba's great. A pioneer of purified water technology." Gritting my teeth, I force my tone to stay pleasant as I stand from the chair and start cleaning my countertops for the seventeenth time. "Can you transfer me again?"

"Sure thing."

Straight to voicemail.

I growl out something unintelligible and toss my phone onto the counter, then press forward on my hands. Frustration courses through me in volatile waves. It's been a week since my on-stage meltdown-slash-panic attack, and Queenie encouraged me to take the week off to focus on my mental health. *Valid.* Apparently, putting off my therapy appointments hasn't been wise.

I'm spiraling.

And my stalker situation isn't helping.

For weeks, I've felt a presence. Eyes on me. It would be natural to worry that my captor or someone working for him is after me, but the truth is…I've never felt unsafe. I've felt the opposite.

Protected.

Now, given the mysterious man popping in and out of my orbit lately, I'm led to believe that my instincts have been right all along.

Isaac is here.

He's alive.

And he tracked me down.

A meow echoes from the living room, and I glance over into the sparse space that houses nothing but an ugly loveseat, a coffee table, and a television.

More pressingly, a random cat.

Mr. Binkers swishes his tail from his perch atop the loveseat, eyeing me with judgment. "Judge away, kitty cat. My life is in shambles," I mutter breezily, strolling over to the ball of black fur.

Before I make it to the living room, there's a knock on my door.

My heart gallops.

I don't get many visitors here, save for the mystery cat. Maybe he belongs

to Isaac. Clearly, they're taking notes from the same handbook.

Trudging forward, I unlock the door and am greeted by the elderly lady who lives in the adjacent apartment. "Oh. Hello."

A cigarette dangles between her fingers as she studies me. "You're a pretty thing, you know." Her voice is reminiscent of my most recent bronchial infection. "Binks loves girls with big hair like you."

I blink at her, my gaze landing on two knobby fingers loosely holding the cigarette. "What?" Looking around, I make sure she's actually speaking to me, but the hallway is empty. It's just me, my big hair, and the weird lady, whom I've only met in passing over the last few months.

Then the name registers.

Binks.

Binkers.

"Oh! I think I have your cat."

Smoke billows around her, the ashy cloud blotting out the deep-set wrinkles on her face. "My niece, Freida—she's pretty like you—got that same kinda hair that Mr. Binkers likes to catch his claws in." The woman barks a laugh before choking on a mouthful of smoke, until she's doubled-over coughing. "Anyhoo, it's no surprise he's made his way over here. He likes vanilla sponge cake. You got any of that?"

I fiddle with the belt loops on my jeans. "Um…no. But he's been showing up here a lot lately. Somehow."

"He's a Houdini like that." She shrugs.

"Okay, well, you can have your cat back," I say, inching away. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

She waves a hand at me as smoke stings my eyes. "No need. I'm on my way out of here. My husband left me, so I can't afford the rent anymore. Keep the cat."

"What?"

"Keep him. He likes you."

"I don't…" I glance over my shoulder to where Mr. Binkers is now curled up on my counter, looking homey and content. "I'm not sure I have time for a new pet right now."

"He's low maintenance. Promise." The woman leans against the frame, flicking ashes to the floor.

"What about a shelter?"

“Overcrowded. Poor thing won’t stand a chance.”

Damn.

Looks like I have a cat now.

“Okay…I guess. Do you have any belongings for him?”

“Sure do. Cat bed, food, litter, a few dead mice I’ve been collecting as trophies.”

My nose wrinkles.

“Kidding. Binkers doesn’t like mice. He prefers the finer things in life, like hogging the remote and stealing my pillow.” She readjusts her purse strap, her wispy yellow hair glinting under the hall lights. “I’ll bring everything by tomorrow. You’re a gem.”

“All right. See you —”

She walks away.

Bewilderment has me lingering in the doorway for a few beats as I swallow the remnants of cigarette smoke and cheap floral perfume. With a sigh, I shut the door before swiveling around and crossing my arms.

Mr. Binkers watches me as I stand in the foyer. I don’t know what to do with myself, or the cat. We stare at each other.

He meows.

“So…vanilla sponge cake, huh?”

The back of my neck prickles. The baby hairs on my arms stand straight up as I move and glide across the stage, finally feeling like I’ve regained control of myself after a long week of moping, looking over my shoulder, and scheduling my initial therapy appointment with Dr. Ackland.

I tune out the song—whatever it is—refusing to hear something that’s not there.

I assess the crowd with upturned lips and coy winks, but I don’t *see* anyone. I’m too afraid I’ll see multicolored eyes and shiny shoes. A psychedelic suit paired with a diabolical smile.

A snake hiding in the brush, waiting to strike.

But I feel the telltale pull of familiarity as I unhook my bralette and let the red-sequined fabric flutter to the stage.

A draw.

Him.

I arch my back with confidence, swinging my auburn wig from side to side as my skin sheens with shimmering body oil. He can watch all he wants. I'll give him a show.

How does it feel, Isaac? To know you still can't touch me?

The routine closes out, and I feel good about my performance as I saunter off stage, sending a flirty wave over my shoulder. I collect my tips and run into Ariel backstage.

She nibbles on a banana and slaps me on the ass. "You have a VIP today. Lucky bitch." Swallowing a bite, she tosses the other half into a trash can. "Your knight in shining armor awaits."

My jaw tenses. "Who?" But I already know who it is.

"The hot hero who carried you off the stage like King Kong."

My heart pounds, my pulse quickening to overdrive. "You can take it. I'm clocking out early tonight." But that's not what I want at all; I want to settle this madness and get to the bottom of why he's here, why he's stringing me along like a marionette on tangled strings. But I know my heart might not recover if he ghosts me again. "You deserve a break from the skeevy bald guy with overactive sweat glands who was dry humping the table leg while watching you dance last night."

She considers the proposal. "George is just misunderstood. He's a great listener," she says. "But no, King Kong is all yours, Bee. He was adamant about seeing you."

I fluster, removing my wig and fluffing out my flattened hair. "Okay. Right."

"Len will be nearby if you have any trouble. But something tells me that man is the *good* kind of trouble."

Something tells me it's the fatal kind.

I send her a smile as I leave the backstage area and wind my way to the dressing room to freshen up. On a whim, I change into my bumble-bee costume. If he wants to play games, I'm adaptable. My heartbeats are badgering my eardrums as I fix my hair, scrub the mascara smudges from under my eyes, and reapply a spritz of coconut body mist.

When I pass through the bustling club, a rookie is leaning back on a stool as Ariel tips one of his sneakers toward his mouth, and liquor pours out of the

shoe hole. Whisky dribbles down his chin while a group of bachelor-party friends cheer and holler beside him. She sends me a wink before I gather a breath and pivot toward the staircase leading up to the prismatic champagne rooms.

I tame my hair with sweaty palms as my heart thumps in time with my heels clapping against the metal steps.

The pink room glimmers with a cotton-candy glow. I inhale a breath and pause in front of the flamingo beads as a shadow moves on the other side of them. Then, with a gulp of courage, I pull back the curtain and let my eyes fall on the man sitting on the couch.

Knees spread.

One foot bouncing up and down.

Eyes like weapons.

Face like stone.

I stand in the entryway, my fingers curling around the beads, my legs threatening to buckle. Our gazes meet like swords clashing in the heat of battle.

I'm mad.

I'm terrified.

I'm…hypnotized.

The world falls away as we stare at each other, the gravity of it all bubbling to the surface. My emotions are at war. He's been teasing me, torturing me, and still, I can't prevent my anger from draining, my shoulders from drooping, my eyes from watering.

Everything comes rushing back.

Every moment. Every word. Every carefully threaded connection through that wall.

I wring my hands together in front of me as I step inside the room and the beads flutter closed behind me. Vanilla candles and earthy cologne assault my senses, while his eyes assault me.

A stormy brown gaze travels down my body, taking in my costume, before his focus pans back up and his jaw locks. He blinks slowly, not saying a word.

He looks uncomfortable.

Out of place.

Something tells me he doesn't want to be here, and I don't know why.

“Isaac.” I take another cautious step forward, hating the way my voice shakes. “That is your name, right?”

He taps his foot against the shag rug, draping both arms over the top of the couch. A muscle in his cheek tics, his biceps stretching the material of his shirt while a leather jacket rests beside him.

“Or is it…Nick?” I probe, moving closer. “Andrew. Marcus.” I lift a finger in the air and tilt my head to the side. “Lyle?”

His lips twitch.

“I know who you are. You can drop the act now.” I press closer until I’m situated between his spread legs, and he stiffens. “Tell me why you’re hiding, why you’re following me around yet avoiding me at the same time. What’s the point? Why would you do this?”

A frown bends his brows.

Emotion.

I use the moment of vulnerability to lean in closer and grit through my teeth, “I thought I *killed* you.”

Something unreadable passes over his face. His eyes flicker with a trace of softness, of something other than stone-cold apathy, before he snuffs it out and snaps his legs closed, caging me in.

I gasp.

I lurch forward, my hands planting on his shoulders to catch myself.

Our faces are mere inches apart, his body heat warming me.

He smells like something woodsy, mingling with citrus. Birchwood on his skin, lime on his breath.

I idle between his thighs, my adrenaline heightening. I imagined him to be good-looking—rough, built, and darkly attractive—but he’s *beautiful*. Bone structure cut from stone, a stubbled jawline, lightly tanned skin, muscles rippling and hard-earned. He oozes sex appeal and edgy intrigue. His hair looks soft and silky, a tousling of waves on top and cropped shorter in the back. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I motion to run my fingertips through it.

But my hand stalls mid-reach when he snags me by the wrist.

I go still, slowly turning to take in the contact.

His hand. On me.

His grip is bruising—*punishing*—and my pulse speeds up as my fingers curl into a fist.

I try to pull away, but his hold doesn't loosen. "Let me go."

He doesn't. His opposite hand is balled-up beside his thigh, every muscle flexing with suppression. I know he's affected by this.

"Talk to me," I demand, wiggling free and stumbling away from him. Veins line his arms in ropes, pulsing and dilating as he cups his kneecaps with both hands. "Say something…*anything*."

Nothing.

More silence.

I watch him guardedly through the low-lit room, our eyes a tangle of history and uncertainty. My black-and-yellow-striped bralette and sheer skirt hardly cover anything and have me feeling vulnerable and exposed—and that's usually the point. But I'm pretty sure I could be wearing a woolly parka, and I'd still feel bare under his gaze.

Lifting my chin, I find an ounce of courage and narrow my eyes on him. "Fine. You seem to like games. Let's play, then." My high heels dig into the rug as I stomp forward and shove him back on the couch, both of my palms planting on his chest, until he collapses with a sharp breath.

I mount him, straddling his lap with my knees on either side of his hips.

Then I wiggle.

He hisses.

"I'll give you your fifty-eight-minute lap dance, and then you leave. Stop following me. Stop messing with my head." Tears prick my eyes. My voice cracks, agony inching its way to the surface. "I can't do it."

His two curled hands lie dormant beside my knees. I watch as he splays his fingers, then fists them again before letting out an exhale. The warm air beats against my lips, and I realize my thighs are squeezing his legs so hard I'm trembling. I loosen my hold and lift, my fingertips grazing up his arms until my hands are propped on his shoulders for support.

I want him to see the pain in my eyes and rip off the mask.

I want him to say something.

I want him to be the man he was, back when he was the only man I had.

But he still says nothing.

My fingernails dig into his shoulders, my anger soaring back at his aloofness. "This is what you wanted, right?" I dip my face lower until we're a hair's breadth apart. "It's why you've been watching me dance? You've been fantasizing about this. Your hands on me…" I brush my lips to the side of his

jaw. “Your mouth on me.”

My own words strangle me.

Moisture pools inside my underwear.

And I *hate* this.

I hate that after all we’ve been through, this is where we ended up: a second-rate fantasy in a stripper suite.

Grinding against his groin, I feel his hardness press into my inner thigh. A shuddery breath falls out as my hands cradle the sides of his neck, and I sway and move and writhe to this wayward dance he’s forced us into.

But then his palm slides up my spine.

Grips the back of my neck.

In a flash, I’m flung off his lap like I weigh nothing and shoved down to the couch, his body covering mine as his eyes burn like hot coals.

I can’t move.

I’m trapped beneath him.

“Get up.” I try to wiggle free, shoving at his chest.

A hand curls around my neck as he bends down, his teeth nicking my jaw.

I shiver. Moan.

Bastard.

Regrouping quickly, I push at his chest again. “Get *off* me. I swear to God I’ll —”

He snatches a fistful of my hair and tugs my head back, his lips a centimeter from mine. Then he growls out, the tips of our noses grazing, “What’s the matter, Chloe? I thought you liked it rough.”

My eyes widen.

Blood freezes.

Lips parting on a sharp exhale, I gape at him, my fingers twisting the front of his T-shirt. Confirmation glitters in his eyes. His words.

His *voice.*

Then he fucking smirks.

Fury spirals through me in searing waves as I grab him by the hair, pull his face down to mine, and kiss him hard.

We both groan.

His tongue slides into my mouth, eradicating all the things I want to say and scream. I purge it in a different way, my leg coiling around his hip,

tugging him closer, our mouths angling, breaths hot and wild. I claw my nails down his back, my other hand still tangled in his hair as his tongue dives deeper into my mouth.

Teeth. Moans. Scratches.

His erection digs into my thigh as I writhe against him, causing him to shudder as he grips me by the neck and bites my bottom lip so hard a bead of blood pools to the surface. I whimper through the jolt of pain.

He kisses me again with white-hot fire.

Passion. Magic. Pain.

I feel lost.

I feel complete.

Our tongues lash together, and I cry out against his mouth.

Then I tear myself away.

Reel my hand back.

And slap him hard across the face.

"You *asshole*."

Isaac pulls up, his head sloped to the side as he processes the hit. His eyes close briefly before he slowly turns to look at me, jaw clenched tight, a pink handprint forming on his cheek. "You do like it rough." He glides his tongue along his upper lip as he evaluates me with dangerous approval. "Good."

"Get off me."

"How about I get you off, instead?"

I shove at him with both hands. "I can scream."

"Mmm." His gaze dips to my swollen lips. "But will you?"

My chest heaves, my heart twisted into knots. I don't have time to reply before he snaps both hands out, snatches my wrists, and hauls my arms over my head. I arch my back, my eyes fluttering closed. I feel his mouth descend, hot kisses dancing along the side of my throat as my body deflates, my rational thought dissipating with every stroke of his tongue against my pulse point.

I moan when he pulls my earlobe between his teeth, his tongue grazing my ruby earring.

"Did your husband make you moan like that?"

My eyes ping back open.

His lips curve with satisfaction. "Didn't think so."

A shot of outrage courses through me, and I find the strength to push him

away, rolling out from under him and pulling to unsteady feet. My face is flushed, my costume in disarray. Isaac twists around on the couch, moving into a sitting position as he props an arm up on the backrest.

I shove a finger at the curtain. “Get out.”

“Still have fifty minutes, give or take.”

My knees wobble as I yank down the hem of my skirt and straighten my bralette. “I’ll give you a refund.”

He sighs through his nose. “Thought you wanted to talk.”

“And that’s the first thing you say to me? *Really*?”

I’m livid.

Volatile.

Cripplingly confused.

Hot pressure burns behind my eyes as I drink in his passive disposition, my eyes landing on a jagged nail mark roping down the side of his neck. This was not the fairy-tale reunion I imagined if I ever saw him again. No grand gestures, no teary-eyed hugs, no orchestra or string quartets.

No flowers.

And I think that’s why I’m so…goddamn…

Mad.

My mother told me that expectation was a thief of joy, and I feel robbed.

I shove my hair back, trembling in front of him. “Why are you doing this? Why are you toying with me?” My words quiver despite my yearning for strength. “Why are you acting so cold?”

He tips his head back, his fingers dancing along the top of the sofa. “Sounds like you painted a picture in your mind of a man who doesn’t exist.”

“No.” I swing my head back and forth. “Don’t gaslight me. I *know* the real you. You showed him to me, in vivid color. I know you care.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.” My voice dips with vulnerability as I croak out, “You came back for me.”

His gaze blackens with ink as he sits up straighter and looks me dead in the eyes. “And I paid for that, didn’t I?”

I stone my jaw, trying to hide my heartache. “So, is that it, then? Is this your way of punishing me for the choice I made that day?”

“Don’t really care about that.” He shrugs, indifferent. “That lunatic was going to kill us all, anyway. You were in a losing game.”

Liar.

It eats at him that I said Jasper's name.

Not because he thought The Timekeeper would have let him go, but because *I* let him go.

It eats at me, too. I've died a little every day since. I was certain I'd wake up one morning and there'd be nothing left of me.

Harnessing my composure, I cross my arms and study him, trying to pick apart his tangled pieces. "Why have you been following me?" My eyes slant with scrutiny. "Because you *regret* trying to save me? Because you don't care?"

"You and your endless questions," he mutters with a sigh. "Haven't missed those."

"Answer me."

"Maybe I'm just bored."

"Stop it." I stomp forward, my fingernails digging into my arms. "This isn't you."

"And this is you?" He gives me a pointed once-over, assessing my scraps of clothing and shimmer-dusted skin. A hand flies out, gesturing at the candlelit room, glowing pink, as an erotic dance song thumps through the club. "Shaking your ass for horny men? Shoving your tits in their faces?"

"Does that bother you?"

He tries to remain detached, but I see it—the way the cords in his neck distend, the way his posture tenses.

Isaac drops his hands to his lap and curls them into fists. "No."

"Right." I take another step toward him. "It doesn't bother you at all. That's why you've had a front-row seat, watching my performances from the comfortable shadows, and why you dropped hundreds of dollars on a VIP visit. Twice. Because you're completely unaffected."

His expression wavers slightly, a whisper of emotion crossing over his face.

My thighs graze his kneecaps, and he glances at the contact. "You're worried about me…you missed me." When he scoffs and looks away, I trail my fingers up his leg, the feel of his rough jeans leaving fiery lines on my fingertips. "You're jealous."

He grabs me.

I'm in his lap again, a whoosh of air falling out as he wraps his arms

around my back. Our foreheads knock together. My hands lift to cradle his neck, and I dust my thumbs across his skin. His eyes close, chest heaving with weighty breaths.

Bending, I whisper in his ear, “What do you want from me, Isaac?”

Heat flashes in his eyes as he slowly opens them. A hand lands on my hip, gently at first, before squeezing tight. He leans in. “What does *Chloe* want?”

My lashes flutter.

No.

I’m not letting him twist our connection into something purely sexual.

It’s more than that, it always has been.

I pull away but he follows, his mouth settling in the swell of my cleavage as my back bows. “She wants the real Isaac,” I practically moan, tingles erupting in my lower belly.

He shoves my bralette down past my breasts and takes a nipple in his mouth. “He’s not here.”

I gasp, my thighs clenching. “Yes, he is.”

Isaac drags a hand up my spine and grips me by the hair, his mouth ravenous as he moves to the other breast, hooking my nipple between his teeth.

Desire has me wet and needy.

Indecision battles with arousal as I grind into him, seeking friction.

“Oh, God…” I take his hair in both hands and hold his face to my chest, my body a wretched traitor as I buck in his lap. “Isaac.”

He thrusts up, his hard cock straining against denim. He moves up my chest with an open mouth and bites my neck, sucking the sensitive skin between his teeth.

My hands fly over him, tugging at his shirt, his hair, his face.

I’m lost.

There’s no turning back.

I yank his head back by the roots of his hair and crush my mouth to his. It’s a fusion of tongues and groans and missing as I search for something I can’t find.

Come back, Isaac.

I suck his tongue into my mouth, our teeth clashing in a frenzy of heat and slickness. Clumsy, hurried, desperate. He punishes me, exploring every

nook and crevice, sliding his tongue over the roof of my mouth before he bites my lip again and tugs roughly.

"Have you thought about me?" Isaac dips a hand underneath my skirt and shoves my underwear to the side. "Touched yourself?"

I whimper and squirm against him, begging for his touch. "I…I thought you were dead."

"Mmm." He pushes two fingers inside me, and we both unravel. "I am."

"Ooh, *God*." I collapse against him, my hair a dark-blond curtain around us. He inhales deeply, grabs it, and uses it to hold me steady as he pumps his fingers in and out with violent, angry thrusts.

"*Fuck*, Everly." He finds my mouth again, and our lips part, hover, as his eyes close with rapture. "You're so fucking wet."

I'm soaked. Drenched. Drowning in him.

I ride his hand as my bare breasts bounce in his face. The feeling is already cresting, the salient release. Isaac sucks my breast into his mouth, still finger-fucking me until I'm a boneless, hapless heap of conflict and lust, jerking in his lap.

I want more. I *need* more.

Frantically, I reach down with trembling hands and fumble with his belt buckle.

He freezes, his fingers buried deep inside me. Breathing heavily, he pulls away from my chest, locking our eyes for the barest breath.

There's only a beat of hesitation before he finds what he's looking for.

He loses control.

His fingers slide out, one hand flying to his belt. He flings it open and yanks his zipper down, encircling a long arm around my lower back as he lifts off the couch, just enough for me to tug his jeans and boxers down his hips until his cock springs free.

Holy shit.

We're doing this.

We're really doing this.

My pulse scrambles to keep up. He's huge and thick, engorged to the point it almost looks painful. The crown leaks with precum, veins swollen and dilated.

I wrap my hand around him and squeeze.

Isaac buckles, falling back against the couch and taking me with him.

“Fucking hell,” he hisses, twining my hair around his hand until my scalp burns.

All thought peters out as the room dissolves around me. It’s only us and this…*need*.

This violent physicality.

I reach down and shove my underwear aside, centering myself with the head of his cock.

Our gazes collide.

The air crackles and burns—chemistry steeped in madness, a hopeless ache for more.

More than words. More than walls.

Finally.

I sink down onto him.

Oh. My. God.

Our moans are a simultaneous, sensual fusion as I collapse against him like a broken doll, my forehead landing on his shoulder as he stretches me, filling me so completely it hurts.

He doesn’t give me a moment to adjust, bucking his hips until I cry out. He yanks my head back by the hair, our faces an inch apart. My jaw falls open with disbelief, whimpers spilling out like water from a busted dam. He drags a calloused hand down my body, cupping my breast, using it as an anchor as his hips jolt off the couch, piercing me harder.

Again.

Again.

Quicker, faster, all caution tossed to the wind.

I bounce in his lap, riding him like I’m starved, like I’ve lost my goddamn mind.

“*Fuck*,” he grunts, squeezing my breast until pain mingles with pleasure. “This is what you always needed, wasn’t it?”

“Mmm.” I pin my lip between my teeth, my hair whipping around us as I cling to his T-shirt. “Don’t stop.”

“That’s right. Fucking take it.” He finds my neck, sucking the soft skin between his teeth as he rams into me before subduing the ache with a flick of his tongue.

I clutch him hard, my nails digging into skin. When he pulls up, he crushes his mouth to mine, forcing my jaw open. My teeth slam down, his

growl rumbling through me, shooting fireworks to my core. The slippery wet sounds grow louder than the techno music seeping into the suite. It's intoxicating, muting my mind, chasing away words and rational thought.

This. Only this.

It's all action—a blur of frenzied hands, sweaty limbs, dueling tongues, and savage thrusts.

A reckoning.

My nails tear down the side of his neck.

My pussy strangles his cock.

His thumb presses against my clit, rubbing hard.

I ache. Bleed. Unravel.

Throwing my head back, I scream through the sudden orgasm as his hand slaps across my mouth, stifling my cry as he sinks deeper. Bolts of lightning strike me, shooting up my spine.

"Yeah… That's it. Come on my dick," he hisses. "Mmm…*fuck*."

His fingers crawl inside my mouth, and I bite down, my shriek of pleasure dying out to a hoarse whimper as flickers of stardust blanket me in tendrils of heat. Isaac buries his face in my tits with a tortured growl while I cling hard, hold him, and pretend he's something he's not.

I feel his release.

His cock pulses inside me as he tenses, digging his teeth into the swell of my breast and leaving a wet bruise behind. A low, tapered groan follows, his body vibrating as the orgasm rolls through him, his hands latching on to my hipbones as he grips me with the strength of a storm.

My breathing shallows and my body sags.

Weightless. Drained.

Isaac exhales against my skin as the waves pass, his forehead dropping to my cleavage. Rolling, lingering, savoring.

One, two, three…

And it's over.

When I come down from the high, I'm in ruins.

I feel blindsided.

By him.

By my own mutinous instincts.

My eyes close, and I slump forward against his chest as reality crashes into me. Noise outside the suite filters in. Heady beats from the club, patrons

laughing and cheering.

Isaac slowly slides out, leaving a stinging ache behind as he situates my soaked-through underwear back into place.

I can't move. I can't look at him.

His touch isn't the gentle caress I crave in the aftermath when he tugs my hair back, forcing our eyes to meet. "Feel better now?" A satisfied grin curls up his lips. "I know I do."

My eyes prick with tears.

No, no, no.

What was I thinking?

What the hell possessed me to —

I scramble off his lap.

Finding my bearings, I haul my bralette back up to cover my breasts. My sex pulsates, and my skin twinges from his nicks and bites. I feel color burning in my cheeks with a post-orgasm flush.

My control snapped—*that wasn't me.*

Something inside me broke, and all I can manage is, "That is *never* happening again."

"You know that line about saying never." His eyebrow arches as he settles back against the couch and yanks his jeans up his hips, leaving the belt hanging open. "When you change your mind, I'm at your service."

I stare at him, at his disheveled dark hair, half matted to his forehead and the rest sticking up in all directions. Neon-red nail marks glow on his neck, his lips puffy and kissed raw. "Until you're ready to drop the act and show me who you really are…please, just stay away."

He tugs up his zipper. "It's not an act. This is who I've always been."

"No. You told me things, you opened up —"

"To a *wall*."

I shake my head, biting back a sob. "To me."

Isaac glances away, scrubbing a hand down his face.

No response.

I can't read him. I don't *know* him.

Gritting my teeth, I readjust my skirt, furious with myself for being weak. I feel like a sex-starved hooker. His release drips down my inner thighs, another shocking reminder of what I've done. I was literally *on the clock* when I jumped in his lap and rode him until I saw stars.

This…s*tranger*.

Oh, my God.

Whipping around, I stalk toward the curtains, nearly tripping over my heels.

His voice catches me before I slip through. “Bee.”

I freeze in place, my back to him, closing my eyes as the nickname trickles through me like warm honey. A soothing balm.

But the words that follow are an acid-doused knife.

“See you soon.”

An avalanche of emotion slams into me.

I whirl back around, my eyes widening, ablaze. I gape at him, stunned he could be so careless with my heart.

He falters, takes in my reaction.

My pain.

I see the regret fill his eyes, but it’s too late.

I waited so long to hear him repeat those words. They were a promise that we’d find each other outside of that place. That our stories, talks, and soul-deep connection would follow us home.

That one day…he’d finally see me.

But he just twisted those words into something meaningless, and he can’t take them back.

He doesn’t see me at all.

Isaac swallows and looks away, dipping his chin until he’s staring down at the floor.

I flip him off and storm out of the suite.

43

I screwed a stranger.

I screwed a stranger in the champagne room.

I saw a man's face for the first time, and my inherent reaction was to hop in his lap, remove his pants, and ride him into oblivion.

Jesus Christ.

The words echo in my mind, a scratchy old record spinning relentlessly on repeat. My eyes squeeze shut as I twirl around the pole, my body rotating in time with my intrusive thoughts.

I. Screwed. A —

No.

Not a stranger…not technically.

Even though something tells me he is.

Every sound hooks my nerves. The main door *whooshes* open, and I snap to attention, my gaze darting left, waiting, hoping—or maybe bracing. When a new voice cuts through my fog, I strain my ears, waiting for the one voice that could shatter or steady me.

I expected him to come tonight. He's like a vampire, keeping to the shadows, prowling when the sun dips and the darkness thickens. Isaac has been hunting me.

And I walked right into his trap.

Spotlights catch on the sapphire sequins of my bralette as I sweep it from the stage, my smile plastered on for show. I don't remember much of the

dance, but I've made enough tips to feed myself for a few days. Still dazed, I retreat to the dressing room and slide into my casual armor: ripped skinny jeans, a cream camisole, black ankle boots. The raven wig comes off, my hair scraped into a hasty topknot. Purse and jacket slung over my shoulder, I weave back into the club.

A body jostles me in the crush of people, and I jump, barely suppressing a gasp.

"Sorry," the man mutters, vanishing.

My heart pounds, adrenaline surging as I clutch my purse, hating how jumpy I've become. Faces flash past—The Timekeeper, Roger, the sinister nurse, a doctor with a sharp, rat-like smile.

Isaac.

Ghosts from my past curl around me, choking me, dragging me back to a captivity I thought I'd escaped. I wanted Isaac to return, to be the unsung hero who could piece me back together, but instead, he's fractured me further. Last night's misstep throbs in my chest, shame and longing bleeding together, the heat of humiliation warming my cheeks.

I swipe at my damp hairline, scanning the room as strobe lights fracture across my periphery. Colors swirl, bass thumps, and every note sounds like *that song*. My pulse quickens—a whisper in my ear, a hand grazing my hip, a chill winding down my spine.

"See you soon."

The noise blurs, voices muddle.

Then my vision clears.

Dancers and patrons fly around me as the crowd parts, and in that split-second, under the wash of flickering floodlights, I see him.

He sits perched at the bar, watching me with those hazelnut eyes, his expression locked down, unreadable. But something stirs in my chest—a tangle of anger, desire, shame, and…relief.

Memories of last night unfurl, raw and vivid. The silk of his hair between my fingers, the hardness of his muscles, the heat of his body pressed against mine. Just touching him felt like striking a match to paper; a moment of fragile flame, already ashes but burned into memory.

It was hard enough shutting out the sound of his voice.

Now I've seen his face, and I don't know if I can turn away. I've felt his hands all over me. I know the way he feels inside me, know the sounds he

makes when he —

Stop it, Everly. He's not the man you thought he was.

Isaac slowly stands from the stool.

I'm paralyzed, rooted in place as my heart teeters in two directions. Part of me wants to run to him, to fold myself into the warmth of his arms, while another part wants to hide, to vanish from his orbit. My emotions sway like a seesaw, pulling me to him, pushing me away, unable to settle.

I swallow.

I want to tell him to leave, to beg him to stay, but the words dissolve on my tongue when I hear my name echo through the crowd.

"Everly."

I snap back, the trance broken. The voice registers, but it's not his. It's familiar and disorienting, tugging me out of one daze and into another.

I twist toward the other side of the bar, blinking, as if my brain's struggling to process what I'm seeing. A man leans against the counter—black hair, sun-bronzed skin, a navy quarter-zip, and loafers I could pick out of a lineup.

The man I once trusted with my whole heart.

"Jasper?" His name falls out in a jagged whisper as my two worlds collide.

He straightens and steps toward me, his smile shrinking as he brushes a hand through his hair, taking in the club around him with a hint of distaste. "Are you all right?"

"I…" My gaze ricochets around the room, finding Isaac stalled a few feet away, his eyes drilling into Jasper with a look that could blister. I stifle a wheeze. My ex-husband is here, in San Francisco, standing in a strip club. And Isaac is watching. "What…what are you doing here?"

Jasper's lips tug into another tentative smile. "I texted you."

I nod, fumbling for a response. "I know."

"You never replied. I'm in town for a few days, and we need to talk." His eyes search mine, worry climbing as he takes in my wide-eyed stare, the way I'm clutching my purse as if it might keep me from toppling sideways. "Are you sure you're all right? You look…" He lifts a hand, gesturing to my trembling limbs. "Shaken."

"I'm fine. I-I wasn't expecting to see you." I force the words, darting a glance at Isaac. His eyes are on Jasper now, a storm brewing just beneath the

surface, lethal and precise. The malice there makes my pulse hitch. “I was just…heading out.”

My throat tightens as I shift my attention back to Jasper. The timing feels surreal, like fate is playing some sick joke. Out of all the places in the world, he’s here, in *this* moment, with *him* watching. The air vibrates with tension as my past and present circle each other, one stumble away from a collision.

I nearly hit the ceiling when Ariel sweeps by and slaps my ass.

Embarrassment blooms, pinkening my cheeks.

Jasper’s brows knit—he looks appalled. “I, uh…didn’t mean to surprise you. I realize this isn’t the best time.”

He has no idea.

My heart races as Isaac steps closer, slowly inching through the crowd like a shadow moving at the edge of my vision, each step carrying a silent warning.

“Should we step outside to talk?” Jasper glances at the figure approaching, confusion splashing across his face.

When Isaac lands beside me, his body heat zapping the remaining fragments of my resolve, I almost buckle. “I don’t think…I’m not…”

“She doesn’t look very happy to see you,” Isaac deadpans. His shoulder brushes mine as our knuckles graze, a subtle show of possession. The electricity between the three of us crackles, my nerves stretched tight as a wire.

Jasper’s jaw clenches, his eyes narrowing as he sizes up Isaac. “And you are?”

Isaac doesn’t flinch. “A friend.”

“Right.” Clearing his throat, Jasper steps forward and curls his hand around my forearm. “Everly, let’s go outside and —”

In a blink, Isaac’s hand lashes out and clamps down on Jasper’s wrist, stopping him mid-motion. His grip is firm but deceptively calm.

I see stars.

Shit.

There’s no way this is going to end well.

Jasper tugs his wrist free, his eyes flashing with irritation and alarm. He squints at Isaac, taking one step back. “Do I know you?”

A scowl. “No.”

I position myself between the two men, sparing Isaac a quick glance

before placing my palm on Jasper's chest, gently guiding him toward the entrance. "You're right, we should go outside."

Isaac's gaze sparks with fury, cutting through the strobes like a blade.

I ignore the sting.

Launching forward, I send a weak smile to one of my coworkers and zoom out the front door, Jasper trailing behind me. The night air hits me like a douse of cold water, star-speckled and sharp, and I falter on the sidewalk, slipping into my cropped black jacket. I turn to face my ex, my heart in a gallop. "Why are you here?"

He clears his throat, nervously glancing over his shoulder, half-expecting Isaac to be hot on our trail. "Who was that?"

My gaze settles on my ankle boots. "Doesn't matter."

"He looked…dangerous."

Straightening, I steel my voice. "He's not." The words feel like a mantra, hoping that by saying them aloud, I can convince myself of their validity. "That was Isaac. He was the man I was looking for…during the rescue."

Jasper frowns, then sends me a pointed look. Awareness blooms as his focus flicks between me and the club. "The man with the bag over his head?"

"Yes," I breathe out, wishing I could banish that scene from my memories, scrub the vivid colors from my brain for good. "He was one of the captives. We shared a wall."

The weight of the moment still grips me with a heavy hand.

Jasper and Isaac.

Together in that room.

Both men bound and helpless, begging for their lives, while all I wanted to do was give up mine.

Another look washes over Jasper's face, a different look, something curious and full of weight. He rubs a hand over his jaw, his brows creasing with thought. "Shit."

"I know." I blink away from him. "But he's not dangerous. He's just protective, given the circumstances, so I —"

"No, I mean…I think I've met him before."

I hesitate, my thoughts scrambling. "That's not possible. He went off the grid after we were rescued. He was never in the news."

Jasper squints, studying me, as if he's trying to piece something together. "You sure he's not a detective?"

“What?”

“I swear he interviewed me once.”

My heart teeters and a stuttered breath falls out. “No, I…” I shake my head, rejecting the claim. *There’s no way that’s possible.* “You must be confusing him with someone else.”

He dusts his thumb over his bottom lip, silent and stoic. Marinating in the notion. Then he nods, blowing out a breath as he turns to face me. “Right,” he murmurs. “I could be mistaken. That was years ago, and those months after the abduction are a bit of a blur.”

“Of course.” I stare at him, a briny knot expanding in my throat. “I’m sure the details are hazy.”

There’s still something in his eyes, a flickering of knowing.

But Jasper regroups, peering over at a homeless man camped between two buildings. “Listen, I have some news. I thought we could grab a bite to eat tomorrow and discuss.”

I cross my arms to ward off the night’s chill. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It’s important.”

A jolt of dread twists my stomach as I lock eyes with him. “Is Allison okay?”

“Yes.” He says it quickly, severing our stare. “Of course.”

Nodding, I blow out a breath of relief.

A cool breeze whips by, doing nothing to disrupt Jasper’s perfectly gelled hair. I can’t help but think of Isaac’s hair—untamed and rebellious, wild in the wind, just like his spirit.

Dark eyes. Dark words. Darker heart.

I shake the images away. “Then what is it?” My voice wavers, laced with a sinking feeling he’s about to unravel the delicate ribbons of peace I’ve managed to weave together. “We’re divorced, Jasper; we’re living separate lives. I can’t imagine what there is to talk about, or what you —”

“It’s about your future. A business proposition.” Jasper slips his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants, shifting on his loafers. “But I’d rather not talk…here.”

His attention swings to the flashing marquee above our heads, featuring an emblem of a neon silhouette—a woman mid-dance, legs extended in a high kick, outlined in electric pinks and purples. Beneath her, the words

“Ladies Night – No Cover Until Midnight” twinkle in sync with the beat of the music seeping through the front door.

A shot of insecurity pierces me, knowing how he must perceive the new life I’ve built. I lift my chin, determined not to let him see me rattled. “I’m busy,” I lie. “I have a date.”

“A date?” His huff of laughter is incredulous. “With *that* guy?”

My defenses flare. “Is that a problem?”

“No, but I don’t have a lot of time before I need to get back to Los Angeles. Can you reschedule?”

“Sure,” I clip out. “I’ll tell him my ex-husband popped back into town and wants to take me out. I’m sure that will go over well.”

He exhales sharply, frustration tightening his features. “I just need one night. No pretenses, no expectations.” His hands tent under his chin, a pleading look in his eyes. “Please. Just hear me out.”

I consider what he could possibly want to tell me.

A business proposition.

My mind reels, each scenario spinning in my mind like a whirlwind of motives and hidden agendas. But my curiosity outweighs my reservations. “Fine,” I agree, wheeling my gaze toward the entry door, a prickling awareness at the nape of my neck, reminding me that Isaac is just beyond it. “One night.”

His eyes brighten. “Yeah?”

“I’ll text you my address. Pick me up at seven.”

“Perfect. I appreciate —”

I don’t let him finish. Spinning on my heel, I head in the opposite direction, my pulse thrashing. When I glance back a few yards later, Jasper has disappeared into the night. I pause on the sidewalk, uncertainty clawing at my gut. Isaac is still inside the club, and I wonder if he’s waiting for me to come back. To chase him down and cross some invisible line between us.

This new wall.

Should I?

I dally on the sidewalk as movement distorts in my periphery. Late-night pedestrians blur past me, the clap of heels against pavement blending with muffled words and soft laughter. Lamplight illuminates a slew of unfamiliar faces, colorful jackets, blazers, lipsticks, light hair, dark hair, a pink-and-navy checkered suit —

I slam my eyes shut.

No.

He's not here.

The Timekeeper is not coming for me.

It's over.

When my eyes peel open, I notice my hands are trembling violently. I rake my fingers through my hair, steadying myself as I try to summon one of my mother's hokey pearls of wisdom.

"Every second spent living in the past is a second wasted in the present—and there's nothing worse than waste."

I shake off the jitters.

As I take a step forward, another body bumps into me. My purse slips down my arm, crashing to the cement as a group of twenty-somethings blow past with cell phones in their hands.

Sighing, I bend to retrieve the fallen purse. But before my fingers clamp around it, two black boots enter my line of sight.

A blink. A breath.

A large hand snatches up the purse before I can, and I find myself staring up into a pair of blazing brown eyes. Isaac's expression is stoic, his fingers hooked around the strap as he extends it toward me with unnerving calm.

I stand and square my shoulders. "No."

He raises a brow, gaze sharpening. "No?"

"No," I repeat, meeting his stare with fire. "Unless you're finally ready to talk?"

I'll give him one more chance—a chance to show me the man I thought I knew.

But he just stares at me, his lips curving up with a smirk. "You seem a little…wound up. If last night wasn't enough to take the edge off, I'd be more than happy to help."

My jaw clenches.

I rip the purse from his hand, cheeks burning against the cold air. "Leave me alone, Isaac," I mutter, turning sharply and stepping forward, aiming for a quick escape.

But I don't get far.

His hand closes around my wrist, tugging me back and into the alley beside us. I gasp as he spins me, pressing me against the brick wall, his body

shadowing mine.

"What is it you're running from?" His voice is low, almost taunting, but the question carries earnestness. A challenge.

I swallow, pushing down the flutter of panic creeping up my throat. I'm not afraid of him; I'm afraid of *this*…of what this could become. "This isn't a conversation I want to have in an alleyway."

"Good," he says, unbothered. "Because I'm not interested in conversation." His gaze dips to my mouth, then returns to my eyes. "You keep saying no, but everything about you screams for something else."

I shake my head. "You have no idea what I want."

His thumb traces the line of my jaw, featherlight. "I know what you're trying to avoid."

"Don't flatter yourself."

He leans in closer, his breath brushing against my ear. "I don't need to. I already know you don't walk away from something this easily."

My heart pounds, frustration fusing with an ache in my chest I don't want to name. His hand trails down, skimming my arm, and I force myself to stay composed as he finally releases me, stepping back just enough to give me room to move.

"Go on, then," he murmurs, his eyes still locked on mine. He nods at the entrance to the alley. To freedom. "Run."

My legs refuse to obey. I stare at him, willing myself to turn, to escape, to run like he told me to…but I can't. Isaac sparked a fire between us, a blaze too explosive to tame.

I glance away, gritting my teeth.

"Thought so." He inches closer, blanketing me with warmth and confusion. His hand rises, hovering at my cheek, daring me to pull back.

I don't. I'm caught—caught between the need to shove him away and the urge to let him burn away the parts of me I've tried so hard to keep under control.

"Still pretending you don't feel it?" he asks, voice thick with satisfaction.

I narrow my eyes, mustering every ounce of defiance. "I'm not pretending anything. Last night was clearly a mistake."

"A mistake. Right." The heat of his hand settles on my waist, grounding me, rooting me to the spot. His thumb traces a slow, agonizing circle against my side, sending shivers along my skin. "Have you spent the day convincing

yourself you didn't want it?" His eyes narrow as he evaluates me, the corner of his mouth rising with smug conviction. "We both know that's a lie."

"I wanted someone who doesn't exist," I say, my eyelids fluttering. "I can't do this with you. With this…*version* of you."

"I'm the only one you can do this with." His hand trails up my body, grazing the side of my breast, before his grip turns forceful, possessive, and he brackets my throat, tipping my head back against the brick. "How many men have you been with lately? Tell me."

A whimper falls out as he squeezes my neck. I want to lie to him, but only the truth spills free. "Just you."

A low hum rumbles in his throat as he leans in, skimming his nose up my jaw. "Fuck. Can't stop thinking about the way you rode my cock last night. How much you needed it."

Oh, my God.

I swallow hard, feeling the pull deepen. Tilting my head to find his lips, I inhale a flimsy breath as our mouths gently graze.

But I can't let him win so easily. A tiny grin crests as our eyes meet through the shadows. "Jasper's taking me to dinner tomorrow night."

Isaac stiffens.

I feel his muscles lock, turning to stone.

He pulls back slightly, a hurricane brewing in his eyes. "Is that supposed to shake me?"

"Does it?"

"Stop lying to yourself. We both know your piss-poor excuse for an ex-husband was never enough for you."

"I loved him," I counter. "I *married* him."

"And then he started fucking your best friend while you were locked away in a madman's den, waiting for him to rescue you." He shrugs. "So I've heard."

I frown. "How do you even know that?"

"Does it matter?"

An angry growl escapes, and I shove him away with both hands. "Don't forget, you disappeared from my life just as easily."

He grabs me again, pulling me back.

Squirming in his grip, I grit my teeth. "You vanished without a word, leaving me to pick up the pieces."

“I had my reasons.”

“You’re just as much a part of my past as he is.”

“And yet, here we are.” Isaac sinks a hand into my hair, curling his fist, the tension between us crackling like a live wire. “What are you going to do about it?”

A sound escapes: part wince, part moan. “Let me go.”

“You first.”

I notice my hands are gripping the lapels of his leather coat, holding him to me. The realization sends a jolt of confusion through my senses, but my body betrays me, craving the closeness. The alley fades away, car engines and faraway voices replaced by the pounding of my heart. I’m trapped between the memories of his absence and the intoxication of his presence.

Our eyes meet.

Weakness carves a tunnel through me.

I yank him forward, crushing my lips to his.

Isaac groans hotly, opening his mouth, lashing his tongue against mine as his hands cup my face, fingers digging into my cheeks.

All those days, weeks, months, divided by a wall—*God*, this was inevitable. This physical draw, this connection I can’t seem to shake. The weight of his return, the intensity of his need, blurs the line between desire and reality. I arch against him, wanting more, wanting all of him.

Wanting the way he made me feel before everything went wrong.

He tugs on my hair, slanting my head until our mouths angle, tasting deeper. My leg draws up, coiling around his thigh, seeking friction. Teeth nick and bite, hands grab and claw, and before I can take a breath, I feel the button on my jeans snap open. Collapsing against the wall, I close my eyes as his hand slips inside the waistband, his fingers stroking me through my underwear.

A high-pitched moan tears through me, and Isaac captures it with his mouth. His fingers rub against wet silk, our tongues tangling with fire and desperation. My thighs spread wider. I need his fingers inside me, to tug aside the scrap of underwear and plunge deep.

“Please,” I whimper, dragging my hands up his neck, gripping his hair as we break apart. Our lips hover, parted and needy, breaths intertwining. “Isaac…”

Two fingers work me faster, bringing me to the edge, the euphoric peak.

I’m already close. I’m already so —

Then he stops.

All motion freezes.

I nearly cry out with frustration when he pulls his hand free, curling it around my hip as he presses our foreheads together.

“I’m staying at the Crossroads Inn,” he says, voice low and dark.

It takes a moment for his words to register.

For the implication to settle in my chest.

My lips flatten into a thin line, my face flaming. I straighten against the wall, readjusting my camisole before sweeping loose hair out of my eyes. “I’m not a booty call.”

Isaac takes a slow step backward, his eyes trailing over me from head to toe. “The things I want to do to you aren’t fit for an alley, Bee.”

I blink at him.

Temptation seizes me.

My gaze flicks south, and I catch sight of the giant bulge in his jeans. Swallowing, I slide my focus back up until our eyes meet.

His are sparkling with promise. Mine are rebelliously curious.

I part my lips to speak, but he beats me to it.

“Room 217.”

Then he turns, fading into the shadows of the alley. The echo of his footsteps bounce off the brick walls, leaving me in a charged silence.

I’m left standing there, heart racing, torn between the thrill of chasing him into the unknown and the instinct to retreat into the safety of the night.

But as he disappears, I steel myself and release a long breath.

I refuse to follow him into the dark.

44

With one eye on my laptop and my phone in hand, I pace the motel carpeting. Likely unchanged since the ‘80s, the once-turquoise tone has been stained, cleaned, and faded until it resembles dirty water. My accommodations are nowhere near five-star—hell, they’d be lucky to pull a solid three—but they’re convenient to my target, and that’s all I care about. In my line of work, I’ve seen worse.

So has she.

Movement triggers the security footage I’m monitoring, bringing my computer to life. An older unit, its picture is a grainy black and white, showing little more than the general shape of residents coming in and out. But I’d know this particular resident anywhere. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about *this* resident for one goddamn second since I felt her under my hands in that pink room. Since she rode and writhed and came all over my cock.

I need more.

I watch Everly jiggle her key in the lock of the apartment complex and let herself inside, then I switch to my other feed and wait.

This image is clear and in full color, the camera brand-new and high-tech. While the one at the front door belongs to the complex, I placed my own in the hallway so I could keep an eye out for suspicious activity.

Setting my phone down, I take a drink from the bottle of water on the table and glance at the “No Smoking” sign on the desk, debating whether I

really care.

The answer is no.

Pulling a cigarette from the pack next to the laptop, I hold it between my lips, too transfixed by the woman on the screen to bother lighting it.

Once she enters her apartment, my ability to monitor her is cut off.

Sort of.

I'd be slacking if I didn't have other methods, but contrary to Tanner's jokes, I'm not trying to invade her privacy—I'm just not comfortable leaving her alone. This motel around the corner from her complex is already farther away than I'd like.

She has my room number; the only thing to do is wait.

Will you come to me, Everly?

Needing a distraction, I spend the next hour catching up with the eyes I have in strategic places around the world. Before long, my phone pings, notifying me that my subject is on the move.

Opening the tracking app, I watch her dot leave the parking lot—on foot, because she refuses to drive anywhere her feet can reasonably carry her—and turn left on the corner at the end of the block.

A thrill shivers through my body.

She's walking toward the motel. I knew she'd be too curious to resist.

After pausing at the curb, the dot moves closer, winding around the building until she's on top of me. I smile to myself.

Very soon, it'll be the other way around.

She stands there for far too long, but I won't make the first move. She needs to make this decision for herself.

Finally, I hear it. A brush against the door, too quiet to be a knock. My blood pressure kicks up higher. My body is nearly vibrating, ready to rip the door open and fling her onto the bed, but I don't move from the chair.

Patience.

"Now," I whisper into the empty room, "let's see if you're brave enough."

Once she steps into this room, she's mine.

The tracking dot shows she hasn't moved, but when the silence persists for several minutes, I walk to the door, stopping inches away.

Seconds go by…then a minute. I pivot so my back is to the door, leaning my head against the surface. Letting my eyes close, I imagine her out there,

unsure of what she's getting herself into.

I can't help but think of the days when I rested against a different wall, talking to the woman on the other side for hours. When she told me she'd see me soon, I wonder if she believed it would ever be possible.

I didn't.

When the knock comes, it's light-handed but resolute.

She came to me.

Allowing no time for hesitation, I move to the side, flip the lock, and pull the heavy door open with enough force that it slams into the wall. Before it can fall shut, I lash out like a viper, grip her wrist, and haul her inside. Her gasp lights my nerves like a fuse, and I release her into the room as the door closes, latching automatically.

The lion and his lone gazelle.

She's all mine.

Catching her balance, she darts her gaze to the door, like she's wondering if she made a mistake. Her pupils dilate as adrenaline hits her bloodstream.

I'll give her

one

last

chance.

I give a low rumble of warning. A tilt of the head. "Are you ready for me?"

My eyes drift to her full tits, heaving under her sweater, then rise to her parted lips. She wets them with the tip of her tongue, her gaze flickering from the door to my face, then down to my lower body, where I feel it like fingers sliding along my cock. I'm half-hard already.

Sucking a deep breath in through her nose, she straightens her spine, hesitation replaced by resolve. She dips her chin.

Fuck. Yes.

I'm practically salivating. The pink room was just a taste, hardly a blip in the scope of what I want to do to that delicious body.

Glancing between Everly and the bed, I take a quick mental inventory of the items at my disposal. It's not hard to get creative. A cup of ice sits next to the water bottle on the desk. Sheets can be used for tying, pillowcases for blindfolds. Of course, women wear any number of items that can come in handy for light bondage, so there's no need to look too far.

What I really want is to feel her squirming beneath me—her soft, wet heat, the sounds she'll make when I have all the time in the world to explore. To find those little triggers that will make her scream my name until she never wants another to leave her lips.

She watches me closely, her breath leaving in a sharp exhale that exposes her thoughts.

"Fair warning," I say, taking a step forward. "This won't be an easy ride this time."

She swallows. "I don't expect it to be."

That's all the permission I need.

"Good." I angle my chin toward the floor. "Then get on your knees."

Her eyes flare.

My dick grows hard as a steel pipe—to borrow a phrase I never thought I'd use from those smutty novels Everly used to read. "Care to test me? Because I never back down from a challenge."

It only takes a few heartbeats, a slight, visible pulse along the side of her throat, and she sinks to the floor.

I draw a hissing breath through my teeth and let it out as a sharp pang of lust hits me.

Perfect.

Even fully clothed, she's never been so sexy. That nervous determination in the tight set of her jaw—she may not be a natural submissive, but curiosity has her here, on her knees, wanting to explore the connection we once had. Handing me her trust.

It's a gift that unravels the last threads of bitterness I've been holding on to.

Our past is history. She's here now.

And she's mine.

Stepping in so my feet bracket her calves, I look at her. "Let your hair down for me."

Her hands sink into the mass of hair knotted in a thick pile on the top of her head. Once released, it falls in a heavy cascade over her shoulders and down her back.

"Look at you. On your knees for me." Humming with satisfaction, I trail my knuckles down the side of her face. "You've needed this for a long time, haven't you? Someone to take control. Make your blood sing with the thrill

of it. Push your limits, then reward you when you're good."

She glances down.

"Unless it's not a reward you're after…"

I bite back a smile when she pulls in an audible breath.

Wrapping my hand around her chin, I lift, letting my fingers dig into her jaw. "Look at me, Everly."

With glittering eyes, she obeys.

"I see you, fighting the urge to flip me off and see what happens." I drop my hand to my side. "Remove my belt."

She hesitates…but only for a second, then she reaches for me.

My cock swells, so engorged it's painful. But delaying gratification is worth the wait. For both of us.

When she places the belt in my open palm, I fold it in half, pulling the ends sharply so the snap echoes through the room.

A shiver travels through her body.

"Now, take me out. Then put your hands behind your back."

She unzips my jeans, freeing my erection from my boxers. Her nostrils flare when it jerks in her hand, but she releases me and follows my direction.

Circling behind her, I loop my belt around her wrists and secure them. Coming to a stop in front, I tuck her hair behind her ears, letting my fingers trail down the side of her face with more tenderness than I knew I was capable of.

Damn. If I thought she was sexy before…

The way she looks now—bound and helpless, handing me her trust—nearly makes me come right where I stand.

"You're doing so well," I whisper, running my thumb over her bottom lip. "Open for me."

Gathering her hair in my hands, I slide my cock inside her willing mouth, not getting far before she gags. If we continue with these games, we'll have to keep building her tolerance until she can take all of me. But today, I have plans that include much more. If I play my cards right, it won't be the last time I have her like this.

Then we'll explore every fantasy our depraved minds can come up with.

"Christ, you're spectacular like this." I grip her hair close to the scalp, holding her steady as I piston my hips, driving into her mouth over and over.

She sighs through her nose, taking me deeper, keeping up with my

thrusts.

Letting my head fall back, I keep a tight leash on my control. But before long, the build toward climax begins, tightening my abdomen.

Fuck.

Reluctantly, I pull back.

She licks her lips, tasting the essence left behind, then leans forward, chasing me.

I tighten my hand in her hair, jerking her head up so she'll pay attention. "Not yet. Before we move on, we're going to try something."

Leaning over her, I unwrap her wrists and toss the belt onto the bed. Her arms drop to her sides, and I sweep one of them up in mine, slipping her hand beneath my shirt so her fingers rest lightly against my stomach.

"Now, I want you to take a deep breath for me. Relax your throat. Let's see how much you can take." I know I'm asking a lot; so far, she's barely been able to go down halfway. I lay my hand over hers. "When it's too much, dig your fingernails into my skin. I promise, I'll stop."

She nods, and I wait for her to fill her lungs with air. Then I guide my swollen cock over her tongue. This time, I push forward, my hand pressed to the back of her head, easing her down the length of me.

"That's it. Take it. Breathe through your nose."

When she starts to choke, I stop moving, stroking the side of her face as I wait for her cue.

Her gaze locks with mine, glittering with determination.

Watch this, it says.

My smile is devious.

She pushes forward until her nose touches my skin. Then she swallows around me. Once. Twice. Tears stream down her cheeks and wet her hair, but she never looks away.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I'm a second away from losing it when her nails dig into my skin. Backing off, I run my fingers through the knots in her hair, waiting while she catches her breath.

"How'd I do?" Her smile is wicked. She knows *exactly* how she did.

Lifting her to her feet, I yank her to me and slam my lips against hers. My hand moves to her throat, where I rub my thumb over her thudding pulse. Then, I squeeze…just enough.

She moans. Teeth trap my bottom lip, clamping down hard enough to draw blood. *Fuck, this woman is perfect.*

But we're not done yet.

I push her away and collapse into the oversized desk chair. My breathing is ragged. I'm right on the edge of throwing her down and taking her now—but I want so much more.

"Undress for me." My pants are still open, my legs spread wide.

Urgently, her fingers fly over the buttons of her cardigan.

"Not like that."

Her gaze flies to mine.

"My time was cut short in the champagne room. You still owe me."

A laugh bursts from her. "You got more in the champagne room than any patron could dream of. We're even."

"Ah, but you are no prostitute, Bee. And I'm no patron. You rode my cock because you wanted it. Now, what *I* want is to watch you take off your clothes. Slowly. Just for me."

Her eyes spark with challenge.

I've never seen anything so entrancing as the way she slides her hands over her thighs and up her ribcage, pulling her shirt up with her. She teases me relentlessly while I lean back in the chair, jeans open, a raging hard-on protruding from the fly.

With an agonizingly slow rhythm, she removes every scrap of material, her body flowing through graceful dance moves like rippling water. For a few minutes, I let her tease me, torment me. Have her fun.

Damn, she's good at this.

My fingers clench the arms in a death grip, and I imagine running my tongue over every inch of bare skin. By the time her dance is over, my mouth is watering for the taste of her.

I'm fucking ravenous.

Before she realizes I've left the chair, she's off her feet.

Landing on the mattress with a soft bounce, she beckons me with a crooked finger as I strip off my jeans and boxers in one move.

"Come here." The rasp in her voice sends a rush of blood to my groin, and she drops her head back, exposing her throat.

Propped on her elbows with her thighs spread wide, she gives me a view I wasn't graced with yesterday during our frenzied fucking on the couch.

Sexy as hell.

But…

"Oh, no." My strides are deliberately slow as I move around the side of the bed. Grabbing the belt, I drag it over her—from the apex of her thighs, over her taut stomach, and between her breasts. "I'm afraid that's not how this works."

Did she think that strip tease meant I'd let her stay in control? That was all for me.

"Really, Bee. You'll learn." I pinch a nipple between my fingers, hard.

Her breath catches. Goosebumps break out over her skin. And just like that, the power shifts back.

Her entire body shudders when I whisper, "Hands over your head."

If I were better equipped, I'd have an array of handcuffs, ties, paddles, toys that would keep her edged until she begged for release. But for now, I wrap the belt around her wrists once again, attaching it to the bottom of the headboard.

She gives an obligatory tug at the binds, then turns her attention back to me, spreading her legs even wider.

Fuck, yes. It's time to satisfy this hunger.

I start at her neck, feasting on the tender skin over her pulse point, then run my tongue along the curve of her collarbone and down to those luscious breasts.

And fuck, the way she says my name when I bite and lick and suck her nipples until they're hard pink pebbles.

Finally, I move down, settling lower, where I take the time to inhale, brushing the insides of her thighs with the scruff of my beard. There's nothing better than the scent of a woman's arousal, and this one is an aphrodisiac made just for me.

"*Yes*." She squirms under me, lifting her hips in search of my mouth. "Please."

"Mmm, no. I don't think you're ready yet." I back off.

She is, but I can't resist teasing her when she's tied and helpless like this. If she's willing to give me this kind of control, I'll be damned if I don't make it worth every second.

The cry that leaves her is pure frustration. It sends a jolt through my groin. "Isaac—*dammit*."

“Shh.” A dark chuckle leaves me; I am absolutely going to spank her for that.

While she squirms, I snatch my shirt, twisting it into a spiral. It’ll serve my purpose well enough.

Returning to the bed, I straddle her, running my index finger over her lips until she opens them. Then I lay the twisted shirt between her teeth, instructing her to hold it there. I don’t bother securing it—all we need is something for her to bite down on.

“We don’t want anyone to worry when I make you scream.”

Her gaze turns heated. Smoldering.

Holding her thighs wide, I finally allow myself to dive in. Running my tongue between those soft, wet lips, I lap at the silky skin, savoring the first taste. She moans, long and low, bringing her legs up and over my shoulders. Her heels dig into my back as she arches her hips, searching for more friction.

I back off every time I get her to the brink, chuckling at her muffled protests. Denying her release is its own brand of torture, and I fucking get off on it.

But now, *I* need more. That’s the thing about addictive personalities: we can always find something to fixate on, and she’s my latest fix.

Fuck, she tastes so sweet.

My tongue swirls in circles, up and down, while she bucks and whimpers and moans, her legs shaking uncontrollably. And when she arches off the bed, muscles tight and body convulsing, I clamp my hands around her hips, pin her to the bed, and devour her.

She screams into the T-shirt until she’s hoarse.

Oh yeah, I’m addicted, all right.

She lies there, limp and panting, while I remove the shirt from between her lips. Then I climb up her body and kiss her, long and deep, making her taste herself on my tongue.

I’m going to smell her on me for days, and I’ll enjoy every damn second of it.

Sooner than I’d like, I back away. We have all night, but there’s more I’m dying to do. Everly’s face is flushed, her hairline damp, but the look in her eyes is hungrier than ever.

“I need more,” she whispers.

Read my mind.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you." Reaching up to her wrists, I test the belt to make sure it isn't too tight. "Hands okay?"

She nods. I'll let her loose soon enough, but for now —

"Good." Before she can blink, I have her folded in half, knees up to her shoulders, putting her in a position where I can enjoy her startled expression when my hand cracks against her ass.

Wide eyes and a sharp gasp are my rewards, along with the large pink handprint forming on her skin.

When I follow the smack with five more, fast and hard, she cries out, rolling her body futilely. If there's a next time, I'll have her pick a safe word, but the way she holds her legs high and wiggles her ass after I've let go tells me she's fine.

I give her one last smack for good measure, and she moans.

Fucking hell.

I'm already thinking ten steps ahead, running through all the things I'll do when I have her for the third, the fifth, the twentieth time.

I wonder if I could ever get enough of a woman like her.

Unlikely.

"Are you going to fuck me, or what?" The sultry tease in her voice interrupts my plans.

"Oh, you're asking for it."

"I really am."

Well then, I hope she's ready.

Opening the buckle of my belt, I release her wrists. A little bondage is fun, but now, I need to feel her hands on me.

"Hold on to the back of your knees, Bee. Keep them pulled up as high as you can."

She doesn't need to be told twice.

When she's spread open wide, her glistening cunt in full, glorious view, I settle between her thighs, drag my cock through that wetness, and line up.

Then I slam home. She cries out, back arching so high it looks painful, and I scoop her body into mine, thrusting several times—hard and deep. And after all our foreplay, I'm close to the edge myself.

Time to let go.

My cock throbs inside her tight heat, and she responds, squeezing her

inner muscles. Milking me.

"Time to hold on," I whisper against her cheek.

Her arms wrap around my neck. "Take me, Isaac," she rasps, and bites down on my earlobe.

That's all I need; my control snaps, and I rut into her like a wild animal unleashed, barely aware of the tiny voice in the back of my head warning me not to break her. But, despite how she may look, Everly is no delicate flower.

"Oh… Oh… *Oh, my God*." Her moans strike a tempo with my pounding. Her legs wrap around my waist as she hangs on for dear life. It's not long before her muscles begin to tighten, to clamp down around me, and her cries edge toward desperation.

A high keening vibrates in her throat.

Throwing her head back, she bucks into me, muscles clenching and releasing as she implodes.

I don't bother covering her mouth this time. I don't fucking care. I'm too close to the edge. *So close.*

Pounding into her faster, I chase it.

"Harder," she yells. "Isaac…harder."

I have no fucking problem going harder.

She convulses again with another orgasm that practically turns her inside out. "Isaac. *Isaac.* Oh, my God…"

Her muscles grip me like a vise, sending me straight off the edge.

I don't just fall—I fucking explode. My cock swells and throbs, spilling inside her until my vision blurs. I'm seeing stars, planets, a whole goddamn galaxy.

It's not an orgasm. It's a motherfucking catharsis.

Her groans mix with mine, sweat forming a slippery sheen over our bodies. With our foreheads pressed together, we come down slowly, panting and shaking until my muscles can't hold me.

She protests, reaches for me when I pull out. But there's one more thing I want before I can rest.

Sliding down her body, I bite at her inner thighs until they fall open again, while she laughs and pulls at my hair.

"Let me see." I spread her wide, watching that tight little hole clench with aftershocks, spilling my release down her skin and onto the sheets. She's fucking flooded with me. Dripping.

I’ve never seen anything hotter.

Still sensitive, Everly jolts when I dip inside. Gathering the mess on my fingers, I reach up and push them between her lips.

She knows what I want.

Once she’s sucked me clean, I replace them with my tongue, thrusting slowly against hers in an echo of what we just did.

What I’m already planning to do again.

Laughing with the endorphin high, she flings an arm over her eyes. “I’m exhausted.”

“Fine.” I collapse onto the mattress next to her, wrapping a hand lightly around her throat. I turn her toward me, claiming her swollen lips one last time. “I guess I can allow a quick breather before round two.”

45

The phone buzzes on the bedside table like an angry wasp. I send a glare in its direction, too fascinated by the spiral curl currently wrapped around my finger to care. The languid warmth of Everly's bare skin against mine makes it hard to stay awake, a cocktail of post-sex endorphins still buzzing beneath my skin. When she sighs against my chest, snuggling like she can burrow into me, I allow myself to enjoy it.

Just for a few more minutes…

Tanner can wait. So can murderous sociopaths, and the entire damn world, for that matter. Let it all burn down around us.

Christ, this isn't like me.

She dozes like that for an hour or more, the steady rhythm of her breathing soaking into me until I begin to drift, too. But I can't afford to let my guard down. Any minute, the whole world can shift—this is a lesson I've learned the hard way, and I can't afford to get distracted. The stakes are too high.

She saves me from waking her by rolling over, balling up under the comforter like a contented cat. The buzzing has gone quiet, my lone contact finally getting the hint, so I jump from the bed and retreat to the shower.

Beneath the driving pulse of scalding water, I relive the past several hours. Everly on her knees, her hot mouth enveloping me. Her pale skin illuminated by the slivers of moonlight peeking through the blinds as layers of clothing slid off her body. The way she felt, writhing on my lap. Like I'm

the only man she'll ever dance for again—the only one who matters. The sounds she —

"What the hell is *this?"*

I pull my face from the stream and look down. My cock is in my hand, fully erect despite the multiple orgasms it delivered last night. It pulses at the sound of Everly's voice, oblivious to her tone.

Or maybe the potential of her anger is exciting. It's a sadistic fucker sometimes.

The shower curtain is ripped open violently, leaving steam to fill the room. With the water still streaming in rivulets over my body, I look at her.

My phone is in her hand, the screen lit with a name.

Tanner.

Should have kept him listed as Dickhead.

Dammit, here we go.

"That's nothing," I say casually, knowing she won't buy it. "Wrong number."

"Okay, great. I'll tell him." With a cold smile, she slides her finger over the screen to answer and taps the speaker symbol. "Hello, *Tanner*."

"Shit," he says, and hangs up.

She plants one hand on her hip, her voice as venomous as her glare. "Explain."

"We're friends." I shrug, pulling a towel off the rack and wrapping it around my waist. Since I'm not entirely sure how this conversation is going to go, there are some parts of my anatomy it would be wise to protect.

"You're friends," she repeats, her tone flat.

"Yeah. I've been trying to find Vincent since he escaped the bust. Tanner passed the information he'd gathered to me." It's not technically a lie, just a little out of order. I grab a second towel and use it to dry the rest of my body.

"You've been…" Her brows bend inward for a second, and when her eyes widen, I know all hell is about to break loose. "Oh my God, he was right."

Dammit. I'm not ready to deal with this.

"It's no big deal." Stepping out of the shower and around her, I leave the bathroom.

"Wait a minute." She follows me, piecing the subtext together as she goes. "Tanner's a detective."

“Yeah.” Grabbing my jeans from the back of the chair, I drop the towel and step into them, pulling them over my hips.

“And you—” She stalls at the foot of the bed. “You had a personal connection to one of the victims.”

I freeze in my tracks.

“Sara…” Her voice softens with the epiphany. “You were looking for Sara.”

I swallow. “You knew all this.” All I can do is stare at the faded wallpaper ahead. It’s been a year, and I’d all but buried those conversations beneath the ashes of that godforsaken lab. But she’s been living with bits and pieces of me, limited to the carefully filtered truths I’d felt were safe to reveal. And that character sketch I built is littered with holes.

“You were always so evasive. You said you *investigated things* but never once told me what you actually did for a living.”

Since the day I came to her in that club and she unraveled my identity one encounter at a time, the tension between us has been building toward an inevitable, all-consuming detonation. There’s been no time to look backward, no inclination to sift through the rubble. To dig up those fragments and glue them together.

I’d all but forgotten a piece was still missing.

Slowly, I turn toward her.

“You—” She takes a step back. “You were…undercover?”

“I didn’t get myself tossed in that hellhole on purpose, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“But you’re a detective.” She nods to herself, slowly, deliberately, as it all fits together. “That’s how you know Tanner. You work with him.”

“Not anymore.” I exhale. “Everly —”

She stops me with a raised finger. “Don’t. This isn’t something you can just blow off.” Pinching the space between her brows, she squeezes her eyes shut, letting the revelation wash over her. When she opens them again, they’re rimmed with unshed tears. “You *knew* me.”

I allow the confirmation to show on my face. I’m not going to disrespect her by trying to hide it. Not anymore. My palms slicken with sweat, and I rub them over the denim molded to my thighs. There’s nothing left to do but let the storm blow through.

The tears loosen, spilling down her cheeks. “The moment I gave you my

name, you knew exactly who I was. My career, my personal life, what I looked like. That whole time you were this faceless person, while *you* had a window to everything about me."

Fuck. What can I say to that? It's not like I was an expert on the life of Everly Cross when I got locked up in that room, but I can't deny that I knew her. So, I swallow the excuses and nod.

She lets out a soft huff. "Did you investigate my kidnapping?"

"No. Everly, I —"

Her eyebrow rises like a judgement.

"Not like you're thinking." I slow down and proceed carefully. "A different precinct oversaw the investigation. I wasn't on your case, but I did know who you were. My gut told me the disappearances—yours, Sara's, the others—were connected." Lowering to sit at the foot of the bed, I watch her pace in front of me, tense and unpredictable. "I followed that instinct. Did my research. Dug wherever I could find a common thread. Ultimately, all I had were theories. I got shut down, but I pushed back. Then I kept pushing until I went a step too far and got myself kicked off the force."

Her hands move to her face, pressing against her temples as the details sink in further. "But you—you interviewed my *husband*."

"I—"

"No." Her voice is hard as granite, cold as frost. "Don't even bother denying it. He told me he knew you."

"I wasn't going to deny it…not exactly." Our meeting had been so brief, I didn't expect him to remember.

"What does that mean?"

"I went to the precinct where he was called in for a follow-up interview months after you disappeared. He was leaving the building when I pulled him aside. I had a few questions, needed to clarify some things. That was it."

A shadow passes over her, softening the stone but leaving heartbreak in its place. "But why did you let me think he was dead?"

"Sit with me." I reach out a hand, afraid she'll crumble to pieces right where she stands. "Please."

She flinches back. "Tell me, Isaac."

"I didn't know what you thought." Dropping my arm like it's a weight, I lean over, elbows resting on my knees. The truth is flimsy, but it's all I have. "It was almost like he didn't exist. We were in our own world in there. You

never spoke of him."

It had been two years since her disappearance. People on the outside didn't cross my mind—not until Jasper Cross showed up in that basement.

Surprise lifts her expression. "That's not —"

"It *is* true, Everly. Think about it. We didn't talk about him. Not once."

Visibly sifting through the memories, she shakes her head with disbelief, reliving the grief as she processes my explanation. The only sounds are the intermittent thumps from the room next door: the flow of water through pipes, the evidence of life continuing casually outside our heavy reality.

When the realization settles, she lets herself sink onto the bed. There's a space between us. A gaping chasm I'm not invited to cross. "I thought he was dead." Her voice is barely above a whisper. "Someone told me—" She takes a few shaky breaths, collecting herself. "I gave up. I'd already grieved him." There's guilt in her admission, like she could have changed the events that transpired if only she'd believed hard enough.

I could tell her it wouldn't have changed anything. That even if she'd held on to her love like a burning candle, never letting that flame die, he still would have given up on her.

And that would have hurt even worse.

But anything I say will only serve to twist the knife. Drive her pain deeper. Push her further away.

I pull my lips between my teeth and say nothing.

I just wait.

Finally, she turns her body toward me, a wariness clouding the blue. "I feel like…like I don't know what I feel. Why are you here, Isaac? Am I a job to you? Part of your mission?"

In the beginning, I told myself this was all just part of the job. I was here to head off Vincent and make sure she didn't get caught in the crossfire. But the truth is, I thought about her while I hopped from continent to continent, chasing our revenge. In my head, she was a constant companion. I can't deny the sense of *possibility* I had when Tanner told me she'd divorced Jasper Cross—and the panic when I came across the murdered woman that resembled her.

I'm beginning to suspect all those days spent with the stranger on the other side of the wall altered my brain chemistry. She started feeling like *mine.*

Now, I can't stay away.

So, I tell her the truth. "You're something else entirely."

"What does that even *mean*? If you don't want me to walk out this door, you need to give me something I can understand. All I can think is that I—" She shakes her head, barely keeping herself together enough to get the words out. "I don't even know you."

That fucking hurts. More than I thought it could.

I move closer. "You know me."

All that time I spent telling her she didn't. Why would she believe me now?

"I *don't*." There's a waver in her voice, but she doesn't pull away. "Is your name even Isaac?"

I suppose that's a fair enough question, given all the aliases I've told her about. "Yes."

She huffs a humorless laugh. "Then that's the only thing I know."

My teeth grind, drawing her attention to my jaw before it slides down to my throat. I swallow thickly. "My name is Isaac Porter, and I was the best goddamn detective the Los Angeles Police Department had. I should have never been born, but I was, and it fucked me up. I used to drink too much—so much, it probably would have ended up killing me. My little sister saved me from self-destructing. When she disappeared, I unraveled."

Everly lifts her hand to her mouth like it's the only way to keep the emotions at bay. More tears stream down her cheeks until they gather in the cracks between her fingers.

"You know me, Bee. You know me better than—" My voice catches.

"Than what?"

"Than anyone alive."

The look in her eyes is like a stab to the heart.

"I want to believe you, but I—I don't know what to think anymore." It's hardly above a whisper, something I couldn't have heard with a wall between us.

"There's one more thing." The admission sounds as raw as I feel on the inside. "When I met you, I was at my lowest point. I'd spent my whole life building a wall around myself, but somehow, you got through it." I take a deep breath and let it all out. "And now, I can't fucking stay away from you."

Everly's face crumples; a sob breaks free.

That’s when I pull her body into mine.

All the resistance in her muscles dissolves and she collapses against me, pouring the emotion into my chest.

My breaths are shaky, but I keep calm, so she doesn’t have to.

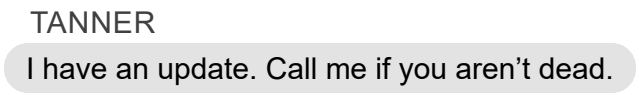
I don’t know how to do this. I’m not good with women’s tears, or emotions in general. Not even my own. But here we are, sitting on a bed in this motel room where I just unleashed my filthy fantasies on this girl, and she accepted every one of them.

Now, I’ve shown her the final pieces of me I’d been holding back.

There’s nothing left to do but tuck my face against her hair and let her fall apart.

When she’s wrung out, she backs up enough to look me in the eye. “I don’t like feeling lied to this whole time…but I’m going to try to understand.” Leaning in, she rests her forehead against mine. With her cheeks streaked with tears and her eyes rimmed red, I’ve never seen anything so damn beautiful.

My phone chimes through with a text. I glance at the bedspread; it lies forgotten where Everly tossed it, a message waiting on the lock screen.



“You should talk to him. I’ll go get cleaned up.” Everly leans back, rubbing her index fingers beneath her eyes. “Tell Tanner I said hello.” The last part is delivered with a smile that promises my friend will eventually be getting more of an earful than *hello*.

I hit the call button, and he answers on the first ring. “On a scale of one to ‘I’m in danger of losing a sensitive area of my anatomy,’ how fucked are you right now? I mean that in a bad way.”

“I’m in one piece. Everly says hi. What’s going on?”

“Sure she did. Remind me to wear a cup when I see her next.” He switches me to speaker, suddenly sounding farther away, and I do the same. I’m not going to hide this from her anymore. “I’m about to send some information over and wanted to give you a heads-up. Nothing earth-shattering, but I *think* I’ve tracked Vincent to Belgium. No further signs in your area. It’s possible he sent that picture to keep you distracted with the girl so he could move.”

“He sent a picture? Of me?” Everly emerges from the bathroom, wiping her face with a washcloth. The fresh cloud of fear I see there burns through my veins.

This was what I’d been trying to avoid.

“Oh, hey, Everly.” Tanner’s voice is tinged with wariness. “Don’t hate me, okay? Your man’s a handful; I’m just trying to keep him safe.”

“Isaac, The Time—” She’s ignoring Tanner. Needing confirmation from me. “Vincent… Is he —”

“I’m not letting anything happen to you.”

“Are we in danger now?”

“I’ve got a handle on it. That’s why I —”

“Holy shit. Oh, my God.” Her panic is snowballing by the second.

“Everly.” Her name comes out sharply. “I am not going to let anything happen to you.”

“You can’t watch me every minute.” When I merely raise an eyebrow, her eyes widen. “Oh… You already *are.”*

Tanner breaks in, reminding me he’s still on the line. “I’m going to go. Best of luck there, buddy. I’ll check in when I know more.”

My eye contact with Everly doesn’t waver; she needs to know she’s safe. “Listen to me. I won’t be responsible for someone I care about getting hurt ever again.” When she moves closer, I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her toward me so she’s standing between my thighs. “I don’t care what it takes.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to wipe him off the face of the earth. He’s as good as dead right now.”

Her eyes widen. “You’ll kill him?”

“Yes. I’ll fucking kill him.” Warmth soaks into my chest before I realize I’ve picked up her hands and taken them in mine, pressing them against my heart. “I’ll kill him for you.”

Fingertips dig into my chest. Her eyes close, and when they open, the blue has gone hard as granite. “Good.”

My lips twitch. *That’s my girl.*

Lifting her hands to my cheeks, she looks into my eyes. “Be careful, okay? I worry about you.”

“Don’t worry. This is what I was meant for.”

I should have done it a long time ago.

46

The following evening crests, and I'm taming a stubborn curl in the mirror when there's a knock at the door.

My heart leaps. Twists.

I swish a dirty-blond ribbon out of my eyes, then swipe my hands down the front of my heather-gray hoodie. My nerves are in knots as I wind through the living room and pull open the door.

Jasper greets me with his hands on his hips, fidgeting from loafer to loafer. "Oh… You're not dressed up." His gaze trails down my casual blue jeans topped with Converse sneakers before sweeping back up.

I frown. "Why would I be?"

Jasper is wearing a dress suit and a metallic cerulean tie, the scent of his cologne teasing a promise of something more formal.

He clears his throat and smiles. "No matter. You still look incredible."

The compliment boomerangs through me like a chaotic pinball.

I used to live for his compliments, be it a favorable word or a flirtatious look. I'd dab Jasper's favorite perfume at the space just below my ear—a delicate blend of honeycrisp apple and soft peony. He'd nuzzle his nose against my neck, breathe me in, and I'd laugh because it tickled.

I'm not wearing perfume tonight.

"Thank you," I murmur, unsure how to process our new dynamic. Wavering for a beat, I reach for my purse on the wall hook and shuffle past him. "Where are we headed? There's a cute café a few miles from here that

has great coffee —”

“I made a reservation at Kaiyo.”

I blink up at him, moving toward the exit of the complex. “Oh. That’s fancier than I expected.”

“I heard the sushi is good.”

I shouldn’t be surprised Jasper scored us reservations at a high-end location. He was always extra like that. Appearances mattered. Still, I don’t want him to get the wrong idea about tonight—this is merely a business transaction between ex-spouses, tangled in a web of complicated history, emotional damage, and heart-rending betrayal.

Totally casual.

“I hope you know this isn’t a date.” I avoid eye contact as I close the door behind me. “Regardless of how I left things with Allison, I wouldn’t do that to her.”

I wouldn’t do that to Isaac, either.

Erotic hotel memories spring to mind, dragging me farther away from Jasper. A prickle of guilt teases my heart.

What the hell are we?

Last night was a fusion of so many things: hot, dirty sex, tender moments and hard-fought intimacy, big reveals and confusing goodbyes. For all the things we discussed, putting a label on our complex relationship was not one of the topics.

Oddly enough…I kind of like that.

Yet, I can’t help but low-key feel like shit as I pull ahead of Jasper, as if I’m speeding away from a fire I helped start, only to realize the smoke’s still clinging to me.

He comes up beside me as a fifty-degree wind smacks us in the face. “Things with Allison are a bit…strained at the moment.”

My shoes *thunk* against the pavement as my grip tightens on my handbag. “Strained?”

“Mmhmm.” He rubs two fingers across his chin. “I’d prefer to stay focused tonight. I have some news that might cheer you up.”

“I’m cheery.” My tone drips with the opposite of cheer. “Never been better.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“That’s kind of unavoidable, Jasper. Everything about this is

uncomfortable.” My tone bleeds honesty as we trudge through the parking lot and beeline toward Jasper’s silver Porsche coupe.

Partial honesty, anyway.

I refrain from telling him that some of the discomfort lies in the fact that I spent the greater part of last night featured in a multitude of different positions—sweating, moaning, sore, and on the receiving end of multiple orgasms.

As we approach the vehicle, a hint of bleach dances underneath my nose. My instincts heighten as an unsettling feeling edges its way through me. I glance around the lot.

I’m not sure what I’m expecting to find. The smell is associated with Roger, who met a grisly, horrific death right in front of my eyes. But logic is often eclipsed by memories I wish I could erase. The bleach brings it all rushing back—the stark, metallic tang in the air, the cold dread, the terror twisting in my gut as I watched Roger fall, his insides splashing across my face like insidious rain.

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus. The parking lot is empty, and there are no signs of anyone lurking.

Isaac promised me I was safe.

I trust him.

“Are you okay?” Jasper holds the passenger door open for me, his eyes narrowing through nightfall.

“Yep. I’m good.” I slide into the vehicle and buckle my seatbelt as Jasper closes the door and enters the driver’s side.

It’s a quiet twenty-minute drive to the restaurant.

“Would you like some music?” Jasper asks as we idle in traffic.

I cross my arms and look out the window. I always needed music in the car; he hasn’t forgotten that. Podcasts and audiobooks were my go-to for cleaning and exercising, but music was reserved for sliding in behind the wheel. There was something about the rhythmic bass that made stop lights and angry drivers fade into background noise. “No, thanks,” I say, realizing I haven’t voluntarily listened to music since I’ve been back.

It feels like yet another missing piece of the old Everly.

Jasper’s car is pristine, as always. Not a single speck of dust on the dashboard. It smells like tea-tree oil and fresh pine, prompting long-lost memories to coast across my mind: joyrides to galas and photography shoots,

road trips to Nevada, dinner dates, and popcorn fights at the drive-in theater.

Another life.

A past life.

The valet parks the car, and we stroll into the dimly lit restaurant before being led to a two-person booth. Candlelight and soft music have me feeling itchy and underdressed, completely out of place.

When I settle into my seat, I readjust the collar of my hoodie and tuck my hair behind my ears. “So.” I have no idea what to say, or why he wants to see me. Cursory conversation feels too shallow, given our circumstances, and anything with sentiment or depth feels like too much. “How’s your mother doing?” I latch on to a common thread that won’t strangle me.

“She’s fine. Has an office job in Santa Monica. She’s allowed to bring her maltese.” Jasper folds a napkin in his lap, then dances his fingertips on the tabletop as he makes a humming sound. “Everly, I wanted to discuss something with you. It’s about your career.”

My throat dries.

The gentleman’s club?

It’s not that I’m ashamed or embarrassed, I’m just in no mood for an interrogation. “My job is going well at the moment.”

His eyes flash. “Not the stripping.” When he catches the way I flinch, he exhales through his nose. “Allison told me. Your mother brought it up. Everyone is worried about you.”

Thanks, Mom. “Wonderful. I was wondering how you found me.”

“But this isn’t about the dancing. It’s about modeling—about stepping back into the industry.”

I reach for my chopsticks, a flimsy excuse to avoid looking directly at him. “I appreciate that, but I’m done with modeling. It’s not for me.”

“And stripping for men is?” he counters, his voice edged with a note I can’t quite place.

Heat creeps up my neck. “The club gives me a sense of control… something I didn’t have for a long time.”

He huffs lightly, leaning back. “Modeling can offer the same. With your clothes on, no less.”

“There’s no control in modeling. People telling me what to wear, how to pose, how to smile…” My defenses spike. “If you dragged me here to judge me, I’ll save you the dinner bill.”

Jasper sighs, his shoulders relaxing, like he's softening, but his eyes don't quite match. "No. I'm not judging you. I'm just offering a different perspective. A door's been left open for you, and it leads somewhere…let's say, respectable."

"Respectable," I echo, my tone sharp.

"Trevor Scott—the influencer from Miami," he says. "He's been working with Abner on a new clothing line, and they both think you'd be a perfect fit for an upcoming runway show."

I can still remember Trevor's business card tucked inside my lace stocking that night. The night they took me. "I told you I'm retired."

"You're hardly past your prime."

"I'm retired for personal reasons."

"Please." He shifts forward, eyes locked on mine. "Think about it. I can help you start over. We could —"

"I *am* starting over," I say, my voice hardening. "But there is no 'we.' We're divorced. And you have a girlfriend."

His face falls, as if the reminder stings. He loosens his tie, his gaze dropping to the table. "As I mentioned, things with Allison are strained."

"Strained because of me?" I ask, tilting my head. "Let's not rewrite history here. I left so we could move on, and we're all the better for it."

He fiddles with his cufflink. "Not a single one of us is better for it. We're all destroyed, crawling through the aftermath on our hands and knees." Off my startled look, he shakes his head, his throat rolling. "Ali is a mess. Reclusive, sad, and unreachable."

Tears threaten, stinging the backs of my eyes. My breath snags with empathy. "If you think I'm glad to hear that, I'm not," I choke out. "It hurts to hear that."

"I'm not trying to hurt you, baby—" His eyes widen a fraction, the nickname falling out unbidden. He bites at his lip, looks away. "Sorry. Fuck… I didn't mean —"

"It's fine." I squeeze the chopstick like it's my tether to reality. Something to ground me.

Baby.

I used to love it when he called me that. There was nothing unique about the term of endearment, but it was mine.

Ours.

Now, the nickname crawls through me like splinters under my skin.

I crave a different voice and a different name—*Bee*.

"Old habit," Jasper adds, looking mortified. He skims both hands through his slicked-back hair. "I'm sorry. I'm only trying to —"

Just then, a waiter approaches, and Jasper takes the lead, ordering for both of us: sushi rolls, edamame, and two glasses of wine. I feel strangely like I'm observing the scene from outside, watching the little pleasantries and gestures that once felt so familiar.

When the waiter leaves, Jasper clears his throat, taking a sip of his Pinot noir. "Are you sleeping with that guy?"

"What?" My pulse races at the shift in topic. "That's none of your business."

"So that's a yes." His expression darkens, his grip tight around the wineglass. "He seems…unhinged. A loose cannon."

"I repeat—my relationships are not your concern."

"I worry about you. Living here alone, stripping for strangers, getting involved with these types. You deserve more—stability, financial security. And this…" He gestures vaguely, as if the life I've built is barely worth acknowledging.

"Stop." I drop the chopsticks with a loud *clink*. "You don't know me anymore, and you certainly don't know what I deserve."

He blinks, rubbing a hand down his chin. "Right." His coiffed hair glimmers under the atmospheric light fixture, a contradiction to the muddled look in his eyes. "Just…consider it. Please."

"Consider what, exactly? Your so-called modeling proposition? Or you?"

His jaw tightens. "I'm not here to meddle in your love life or confuse you. I just think…well, maybe we both gave up on something unfinished."

"We were finished the moment you started with her."

"You think this has been easy for me? Watching you walk away, after spending two years praying to God-knows-what that you would walk through that front door one day? Signing those goddamn divorce papers?" He squints at me, perspiration dotting his upper lip. "You just left. Without a backward glance. Like our marriage wasn't worth salvaging."

I gape at him, wondering how his version of this story could be so vastly different from mine. "Need I remind you that you let *me* go? Before I ever had a chance to walk through that door."

He leans forward and jabs a finger at his chest. “I *grieved* you.”

My throat strangles at his words. Frowning, I stare at him across the table, a deeply buried pain carving out my insides. I shake my head through the barbed wire in my lungs. “Not long enough.”

He goes quiet, the strain dissolving from his posture. Slouching forward, he drops his face in his hands and scrubs a palm over the top of his head.

Silence festers.

I want to shapeshift out of my skin.

Our order arrives moments later, and I dive into the elaborate spread of sushi, hoping the flavors will distract me from the tension simmering between us. When the silence stretches uncomfortably, I finally glance over at him. “Do you love her?” I ask through a bite. “Allison?”

Jasper looks up, his face momentarily clouded with something that resembles guilt. He drops a sushi roll onto his plate, as if it weighs too much. “Yes.”

I brace myself, expecting the pain to strike like a rusty razor blade, to carve through the numbness and into my heart. But the feeling never comes. I thought his admission would shake me, disrupt my equilibrium, but instead, I feel an odd sense of calm.

“Then what is this?” My voice lowers, curiosity mingling with the remnants of our argument. “Why are you here?”

“Because I care about you, too,” he forces out, his tone almost pleading. “And I can’t help but feel like I gave up on you too soon. You’re falling apart, and I feel responsible.”

I scoff, insulted. “I’m not falling apart. I’m rebuilding.”

He reaches across the table, his fingers brushing mine, desperation lacing his touch. “The life we shared, it was —”

“Over,” I finish for him.

His brows furrow as he squeezes my hand. “Good,” he says softly. “It was good.”

I pull my hand away and plop a napkin on my lap. “Look, I have a new life now, and so do you. You just said you love her. Why would I want to come between that?”

“Allison misses you, too. You’re not a wedge, Everly—you’re a missing piece.”

I swirl my sushi roll in a bowl of soy sauce until it’s inedible. “I thought

this was about modeling."

"It is," he says, but there's a tremor in his voice, something raw. "But it's also more than that. It's about forgiveness. Moving forward."

My mind races, cluttered with memories of what once was.

I consider what moving forward really means, knowing now that Jasper isn't the one who fills my thoughts anymore. Instead, I picture brown eyes and worn jeans—a warmth so different from silk ties and polished façades.

I see Isaac.

And I can't tell if that's a spark of hope or a death sentence.

I set my jaw, steeling myself. "What you're feeling is regret over something left undone. But you don't owe it to yourself to fix what no longer exists; you owe it to yourself to fix what you have right now."

He searches my face, conflict shimmering in his eyes. A subtle desperation. "You don't miss modeling?"

"Missing and wanting are two separate things. I can miss and mourn my past while still craving a different future. When you try to weave those two things together, all you're left with are knots." I soften, reaching for his hand again, but I keep my fingers hovering just above his. "I just want to be free, Jasper," I tell him, my voice wavering. "Don't you?"

For a heartbeat, I see a flicker of something in his expression—guilt, sorrow, regret, doubt.

Nobody predicted this. Our situation unfolded like a slow-motion car crash, inevitable and impossible to stop, leaving nothing but shattered glass and broken hearts.

The only thing left to do is pick up the pieces.

Jasper studies those pieces in a new light, until a different look steals his eyes. Acceptance, maybe. He blows out a breath, fiddling with his tie again. "Take me out of the equation, then. This isn't about me or Allison. Just consider the modeling proposition—I can get your foot in the door, but I'll assign you a new agent. Plenty would be vying for the opportunity to represent you," he explains, the words falling out quickly. "There's a runway show next week. It's big. A last-minute slot opened, and Abner requested you. I really hope you'll consider it."

His eyes glimmer with a mix of hope and urgency, and I know this is his way of trying to make amends. He thinks that if he helps me find my way back to modeling, it'll somehow make up for what happened between us.

My compliance will be the first step to chipping away his guilt.

And without the ghost of our doomed relationship hovering over me, I simmer in the invitation. I see it for what it is, for what it might become.

Stirring a sushi roll around the dish, I glance up. “When is it?”

His eyes flare slightly, tinged with relief. “Friday. I can help you prepare.”

I nod.

I should consider the positives: the stability, the familiarity, the steady paychecks. I can rebrand myself. I may no longer be Everly Cross, but I’m not gone. I’m still here, still capable of building something new from rubble and old bones.

Exhaling a breath, I sip my wine and meet his eyes. “I’ll think about it.”

47

I have both socked feet propped up on the ugly orange ottoman as I stare at my cell phone, a cherry lollipop tucked in my cheek. The television flickers in the background, volume on low, featuring some trending Netflix movie that lost my interest five minutes in.

Outside, through half-cracked blinds, a car horn blares, and I bite down on the candy.

Mrrooww.

Mr. Binkers coils into a loose ball on my lap, his fur a soothing balm as I graze my fingers between his ears. November rain lashes against the windowpane, streaking down in relentless, slanting sheets. It's the start of the rainy season in San Francisco.

Sighing, I peer down at my phone screen again, my eyes fixed on a single name.

Isaac added his number to my phone at the hotel two nights ago, urging me to call or text him if I ever felt unsafe. He didn't say anything about texting him out of guilt, but the weight of my conscience grew too heavy, and I messaged him shortly after Jasper dropped me off at my apartment, telling him about the business dinner. He left me on Read.

Now his name shines back at me again, a temptation I can't quite shake. He probably never considered I'd be staring at his name just because I'm tangled up in thoughts of him—brash, unpredictable, and still somehow the one who makes me feel safer than I've felt in ages.

I roll the lollipop to the other side of my mouth, my thumb hovering over his contact before pressing the phone to my chest, hoping to dull the ache that follows his name, even when I'm not looking. "What do you think, Mr. Binkers? Am I catching feelings?"

That's an understatement.

I've been feeling something for him ever since he called me "Bee" and bared his soul through a wall of white, his voice breaking through my hollow chasm like a lifeline.

The cat mews contentedly on my lap, his soft fur warming my hand. I stifle a smile. "Yeah," I murmur, brushing his ears. "This probably won't end well."

Leaning back, I open a new message and flick my thumbs over the keypad.

ME
Hey.

He reads it almost instantly. My pulse kicks up as I wait for a response.

ISAAC
?

I frown.

ME
…I didn't realize a hello needed more context?

A few seconds roll by as my molars clamp down around the candy.

ISAAC
You okay?

ME
Yes.

Then I add:

ME
Thinking of you.

My heartbeats skitter with anticipation.

He's not really a talker. Or a sharer. Or a texter, probably.

We'd never be the type to go on dinner dates or trade cheesy "good morning" messages. And yet, something about that feels…right. Like whatever we'd have would be raw and real, carved out of moments no one else could understand.

Perfectly imperfect.

His response comes through a minute later.

ISAAC

Am I naked?

I pull the candy from my mouth with a popping sound and grin.

ME

You tell me.

ISAAC

Easily doable.

I watch his bubbles dip and move, but I send a reply before his message comes through.

ME

Are you busy tonight? I want to cook you dinner.

The bubbles stall out, disappearing. Rainfall sluices against the building, loudening when a gust of wind blows through. I sink deeper into the couch, waiting for a reply, feeling more vulnerable than I thought I would. This could just be sex for him—a familiar body to warm his bed, built on a fragile connection and a complicated history—but something tells me it's more.

It's in the way he held me, how my cheek melted against his chest as I dozed in his arms, how he opened up and shared more with me than I ever could have imagined. It's in his promise to protect me—to take our captor's life with his own hands.

He swore he'd kill him…*for me*.

His bubbles dance to life again.

Ten seconds. Fifty seconds. Two minutes.

He must be penning a dissertation.

And then my phone pings.

ISAAC

K

I blink at the screen.

According to every relationship article ever written, that's the universal code for "he's just not that into you." But with Isaac, I have no idea. He could show up at my door in twenty minutes for dinner, materialize in my bedroom at two a.m. for a quickie, or never speak to me again.

Huffing out a breath, I toss the phone beside me as Mr. Binkers hops off my lap and scurries into the kitchen. Regardless of Isaac's intentions, I'm hungry, and I'm cooking.

I think back to a long-ago conversation in our side-by-side rooms when he mentioned he missed how his sister used to make him chicken pot pie, claiming it was "the only kind worth eating." The memory softened the edges of his usually guarded tone, and I imagined the warmth he felt just thinking about it.

A smile tips my lips as I recall that day. It was a tiny light; a firefly in the dark. Truthfully, I think it was a defining moment for him—for both of us.

After discarding the candy and searching through the fridge, I place ingredients on the counter, my feet cool against the worn tile. Just as I grab a box of refrigerated pie crust, a knock sounds at the door. My fingers curl around the box, and I wonder if it could be Isaac—or someone else.

The Timekeeper is still out there, my mind screams.

It would be like him to knock.

But then a voice seeps through the door, settling my nerves. "It's me."

Blowing out a relieved breath, I pad across the apartment and pull open the door. Isaac hovers in the entryway, his hair wet and matted to his forehead, shoulder wedged against the frame as he drinks me in. I'm not exactly dressed to impress, wearing a form-fitting pink tank top and baggy white sweatpants, my hair braided over one shoulder. His eyes settle on the braid, a flicker of something dark and possessive lighting in his gaze, like he's already imagining his fingers wrapped around it, tugging hard and using it as some kind of kinky noose.

Then he flits his attention to the box of pie crust pressed to the space between my breasts. "Lucky crust."

My mouth ticks up with a smile as I step aside, allowing him entry. "I didn't know if you were coming."

"Said I was," he says, sauntering through the threshold and rifling raindrops out of his hair.

“Your reply was noncommittal.”

“Was it?” He sniffs, his hands disappearing into the pockets of his damp blue jeans. “Guess I’ll spam you with a billion emojis next time.”

I close the door behind me and turn to face him.

We hold each other’s gaze for a suspended beat, and a wave of vulnerability washes over me. Isaac stands in my apartment, waiting for me to cook him dinner, and it feels…intimate. More so than the bevy of compromising positions we shared two nights ago, which seems illogical. Yet with every look, every touch, and every shared moment, the emotional connection between us deepens into something I’m struggling to fully understand.

Nervous energy sinks into me, shaking my words. “Um…you said you missed chicken pot pie.”

He frowns a little, glancing down at the box of crust dangling at my side. “You remembered that?”

A nod. “Sara used to make it.”

The sound of her name has him visibly tensing, his throat rolling.

He doesn’t respond.

“Anyway, I figured we could talk. You know…hang out.” Chewing on my lip, I shuffle past him to the closet-sized kitchen. “Maybe with our clothes on?”

“Don’t understand the question.”

I shoot him a grin as I pull ingredients out of their packaging. “You got here fast,” I say. “Did I interrupt your stalking?”

“I was in the area.” Isaac glances at a kitchen barstool, almost like taking a seat would somehow solidify the moment. Give our dynamic a new weight, a different meaning. A breath passes, and he sits down, pressing his elbows to the island. “How was your date?”

Averting my eyes, I shake my head as I reach for a paring knife. “I told you my meeting with Jasper wasn’t a date.”

“Did you wear a dress?”

“Nope. Hoodie and jeans.”

“Was your hair down?”

I blink over at him and position a stalk of celery on a cutting board. “Yes.”

“He’s already dead.”

A laugh slips out. “Trust me, I have no interest in rekindling that relationship. It was all business. Platonic.”

He eyes the vegetables as the knife slices down. “So, what was the point?”

“Closure, I think. And he wants me to get back into modeling.” I move to unwrap a stick of butter. “I’m considering it.”

Isaac steeples his hands under his chin, watching me flit around the kitchen. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Some parts of the industry felt suffocating and empty—people barking orders, the rehearsed poses and smiles—but there were times when it felt like I was part of something bigger. Like I wasn’t invisible. People saw me, you know?”

His brows knit together. “And that’s enough to make you want to go back?”

“Not exactly,” I admit, pressing forward on the island. “It’s more like… I don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened if I’d just pursued it longer. What if I could’ve made it on my own terms?” I shrug, glancing away. “There’s a big runway show on Friday. Jasper pulled some strings to get me on that stage. I think I want to give it a shot, then I can decide if it’s the right avenue for me.”

A darker look steals his expression. “You want to take a road trip down memory lane with your ex?”

Frowning, I shake my head. “No, it’s not like that. He’s not representing me professionally. And personally, it’s over between us. He’s with Allison, and I’m with—” My words cut short. I blink at him, clear my throat. “The show is local. It’ll only be for the day. And maybe I just want to prove to myself that I’m not running anymore.”

“What about bugs?”

“Bugs?” My nose wrinkles.

“Yeah. The Everly I know is a scientist. She dreams of discovering new species of beetles and butterflies, not rising fashion trends.”

I pause, simmering in the statement.

That *is* what I want.

But it feels like a distant memory, overshadowed by the helplessness I experienced in captivity. In that cruel, dark place, smothered by despair, I yearned for the freedom to explore, to make discoveries that mattered. I

wanted to help people, to bring light to the world in any way I could.

Now, as I stand here, the weight of my fallen dreams feels heavier than ever. Just another sad reminder of who I used to be.

"I do want that," I say, steadying my breath as I go back to chopping vegetables. "I want to help people, change lives. But it goes beyond entomology. I want to be a voice for those who can't speak for themselves. I'm just not sure if it's too late for that."

I realize I'm looking for guidance from a person who is just as lost as I am.

But Isaac seems to soften. He studies me across the island as he slowly slips out of his drenched leather coat, layering it over an adjacent stool. "You're young. It's never too late."

My lips twitch, and I continue my task. "I've considered psychology."

"You do love to talk."

Another bitten-back grin. "That's the thing, though. I spent two years acting as some kind of makeshift therapist, trying to help those people who never stood a chance. Talking them through their fears, listening to their regrets. Trying to give them something to hold on to in a place where there was no hope." I falter, slicing through a carrot, feeling the tight grip of those memories and the icy chill of the ghosts left behind. "I couldn't save any of them. Not one."

Isaac's gaze is uncharacteristically steady, almost gentle. "Maybe it's not about talking or listening, but finding answers."

I pause mid-chop, absorbing his words. "Finding answers?"

"Forensics." He leans against the counter, watching me closely. "Think about it. You're curious, observant—always digging deeper. You'd still be helping people with no voice, just in a different way. You'd be helping the ones they leave behind."

The idea settles in my chest, surprisingly natural, as though it's been waiting for this moment to emerge. Not just studying, but uncovering the truth.

Finding justice.

I think of all the victims who came and went, their stories left unfinished. I imagine the mothers, daughters, husbands, all waiting for their loved one to come home. My eyes glaze over, prickling with tears, a quiet resolve blossoming inside me.

Forensics.

Yeah…maybe I could do that.

Someday.

I nod, exhaling a breath as I set the knife down on the counter. But before I can reply, Isaac stands from the stool, winding around the small island until he reaches me, his hands curling around my waist and tugging me to him.

Deflating, I peer up at him, my body responding to the heat in his eyes, the intensity of his grasp. “Dinner first,” I murmur, my fingers crawling up his chest and bracketing his shoulders.

“Mmm. I have a different menu in mind.” He bends, brushing his lips along my ear. “Thinking of you in a forensic lab, wearing a little lab coat, all this hair pulled back…fucking sexy.”

“There would be corpses.”

He hauls me up by the thighs, coiling my legs around his hips. “At least they won’t interrupt.”

“Romantic.” I kiss him, biting down on his bottom lip until he groans. “I’ll bring the scalpel, you bring the flowers.”

“Thought it was cigarettes and bubble tea.” He smirks through another kiss.

Isaac carries me to the bedroom, tossing me onto the unmade bed. The mattress bounces beneath my weight as his body covers mine, and I arch up, drawing our faces together. It’s the usual frenzy of clothes tearing, hair being pulled, stretched limbs—nails, teeth, moans. My knees are shoved back, folding me in half, as he cages me in with both hands and slams inside.

I bow, bend, break into pieces.

It begins with urgency, hard thrusts and eager cries. I half-expect him to rip off a pillowcase and tie my wrists to the bedposts, spinning me inside out, upside down, until I’m seeing double and begging for mercy. But instead, he wraps my legs around his middle and lowers himself on top of me, our chests flush together. He cups my cheek, his touch tender.

I find his eyes.

We hold.

A new feeling churns between us, his movements slowing. There’s a crease between his brows, a sentiment I can’t pinpoint. My breath hitches on a whimper. I lift my hands, sifting my fingers through his mess of slow-drying hair, but I don’t squeeze, don’t pull.

I savor.

Soft hair, soft eyes.

Intimacy coils around us, and I feel everything—more than his body pressed to mine, slick and hard. More than the dark intensity we're used to chasing. It's something that reaches under my skin and wraps itself around my ribs, clawing through the damaged chambers of my heart and stretching tight. His eyes glimmer with an affection I rarely see, like he's holding something fragile in his hands and doesn't know if he's allowed to keep it.

Doesn't know if he knows how.

Isaac moves—slower, deeper—and it feels like an unspoken promise neither of us knows how to voice. My pulse thrums with the rhythm he's setting, a measured pace that leaves room to breathe. To *feel*. I pull his forehead to mine, closing my eyes, letting myself sink into this unexpected shift.

It's like we're peeling away all the layers of armor and debris we've wrapped around ourselves, each kiss a muted confession. The brush of his hand down my jaw tells me something that words never could. And when the orgasm crests, brimming to a peak, I grip the nape of his neck and bury his face into the curve of my throat as I cry out. Isaac ruts into me harder, pace quickening until he finds his release, spilling into me with a low groan.

Our bodies settle, drained and spent. A smile tugs at my lips, a warm honey feeling journeying through me as I curl a piece of his hair around my finger. I wait for him to drag me into his arms, to extend the moment and draw out the quiet intimacy that still hovers.

But he moves away, putting distance between us. The warmth fades, replaced by a familiar chill. His gaze is somewhere far away, his jaw tight, face unreadable.

I wait, my fingers still tracing the edge of his hair, hoping he'll turn back, say something, anything to break the thickening silence. But he doesn't. His expression hardens, his guard sliding back into place, and I feel him retreat even though he's right beside me.

"Hey," I murmur, inching closer. "Talk to me."

He blinks up at the ceiling before lifting off the bed and searching for his clothes. "You still cooking?"

I swallow. "Isaac…"

"Or we could go for round two. I've got handcuffs in my car."

Sitting up, I drag the bed sheets up my body and watch as he steps into his jeans and yanks them over his hips. I rub my lips together, thinking back to one of our past conversations. When he confided in me about his family. His awful upbringing.

Chicken pot pie.

Isaac never had anyone; he had no safety net, no support system. He was always in survival mode, fighting alone. Even now, I see it in his eyes—the walls he's built to keep the world out. To keep everything good and pure at arm's length.

All he had was Sara. And she was taken from him, ripped away like a limb torn from his body, leaving nothing but phantom pain behind. No matter how much time has passed, the loss feels raw, as if a part of him had been violently severed and never healed.

Every day is a reminder of what he couldn't save, of what he couldn't protect.

"I have something for you," I say, my voice low, barely cutting through the tension.

He pauses, his hands stilling on the button of his jeans. His gaze shifts to me, wary, as though he's already bracing for what I might say.

I inhale sharply, nerves sparking to life, then reach over to the nightstand drawer, pulling out a swirly blue teardrop that's been with me since my darkest days. The guitar pick is featherlight inside my hand, its surface scuffed from years of use. I've held on to it all this time, a relic from captivity—a tiny, stubborn remnant of hope.

For both of us.

The room is dim, as rain continues to beat against the window. I slowly unclench my hand, revealing the small treasure nestled in my palm. His gaze locks onto it, his eyes widening slightly as he registers what I'm holding.

A mix of emotion washes over him—recognition, disbelief, a flicker of something deeper that seems to carve new lines across his face. For a moment, he's stripped bare, the full weight of memories settling between us like a heavy fog.

He takes a step forward.

My breath suspends in the back of my throat as I wait. Watch. The pick shakes in my palm. I can't read him, can't find the words.

Isaac hesitates at the side of the bed, staring at my outstretched hand, his

fingers splaying, then curling. He sinks down next to me, like his legs won't hold him. Our shoulders graze, and I feel his muscles drawn tight as he leans forward, elbows to thighs.

Vision blurring through the sting of tears, I reach over, gently placing the pick in his hand and loosening my grip until it's transported safely to his. His gaze locks on it, every breath heavy and labored, before he seals it in a closed palm and holds his fist to his mouth.

He doesn't ask why I still have it, or how I managed to bring it with me.

I don't think it matters.

I study him, unsure how to carry him through the moment. It's big; bigger than I imagined. My eyes scan his profile, and I swear I see a glint of tears. The image is a lasso around my heart. An ambush, a tight snare. I can almost picture Sara as he described her—dark hair braided into pigtails, crystalline eyes, and a smile that changed people. I feel the warm, golden halo wrapped around her, glowing with music. Her favorite song plays in the back of my mind, a ghostly melody laced with heartbreak and love.

Wild Horses.

A tear slips down my cheek, my heart splintering.

There's nothing to say.

But…maybe words aren't needed. We clung to them for those bleak months, hollow echoes through walls we couldn't cross. But now, there's more. I can *offer* more, so much more than a whisper in the dark or a hand pressed to a cold, unyielding barrier.

Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around his bicep and rest my temple against his shoulder. That's how we sit for a long time. Me, curled around his broken pieces, holding them together.

Seconds stretch into minutes—I don't count them.

Then Isaac straightens beside me, inhaling deeply as he whispers, "She'd appreciate you taking care of it for her."

My eyes close, more tears falling loose. I nod softly, squeezing him tighter.

His hand lifts, a warm palm cradling the back of my head as he threads his fingers through my hair, gently, like a silent thank you.

He presses a kiss to the side of my head.

And this moment, this frozen-in-time second, is all I need to carry me forward. Every second I counted alone on the other side of that wall—

desperate to see him, begging for something to hold on to, aching for just *one more*—all perish under the weight of this one.

A quiet space to grieve.

To remember.

To rebuild what was lost.

We eat chicken pot pie side by side on my lumpy couch, listening to the steady drum of rain splashing against the window. Hours later, he leads me to the bedroom, where we lose ourselves again—clothes slipping away, skin warming skin, kisses lingering. I fall asleep nestled into the curve of his arm, my hand splayed over his chest, feeling the rhythm of his heartbeat.

When I wake the next morning, Isaac is gone.

But he left something behind.

Sitting beside me on the nightstand is a full glass of cranberry juice.

48

The voice on the GPS announces my upcoming destination at the same time a text pings through on my phone. Now that I have more than one contact, it's harder to know what to prioritize.

The minute I'm stationary, I'm going to change Everly's tone to something sexy.

Just as I'm navigating around a tight curve, a pair of high beams hits me full in the face. I lay on the horn, barely avoiding sliding into the ravine, while the oncoming car swerves into its own lane just in the nick of time. Adrenaline hits my bloodstream, kicking my heart rate into high gear.

"I really hope this asshole shows his face," I mumble to myself. White knuckled, I turn into the parking lot of a seedy motel, where a man we connected to Vincent was last seen. If I wasn't already in a bad fucking mood, now I'm *really* feeling the need to beat someone into the ground.

We scored a tip that led me to this dive a little over an hour south of San Francisco, with good reason to believe my target is directly correlated to the lab where we were kept a year ago. Since I've made it my personal mission to take every last one of them out myself, I had to check it out.

Hopefully, he'll have some information on the man I'm *really* looking for, because I'm prepared to extract it by any means necessary.

Leaving the city has me on edge, but things have been quiet since I arrived. I upped my personal surveillance around Everly, convinced a retired officer I know from the precinct to watch her, and ignored the little voice

telling me everything was going to go to shit the second I left.

I park in an area of the lot that gives me a good view of anyone coming or going and turn off the engine. Judging by the people milling around outside, this place is clearly a hub for an *interesting* crowd. Several working women loiter near open doors while transients stagger through the parking lot.

And there's definitely a drug deal going down a few yards away. They're not even attempting to be subtle; the local precinct has obviously given up on this place.

A few people gave me the side-eye as I pulled in, but it's nothing concerning. I've always had the ability to blend in anywhere I go.

Once I've gotten settled, I retrieve my phone, pleased to see Everly's name on the lock screen. I wonder what it would take to convince her to send me a dirty picture…

Though her text is innocuous, I'm distracted enough that I barely process the person approaching my vehicle before there's a knock on the window.

Get it the fuck together, Porter.

"Hey, sweetie, you looking for some company?" A scrawny woman wearing a cocktail dress better suited for a teenager headed to homecoming in 1991 stands on the other side. Shaking my head, I wave her away and turn back to the missed message.

BEE

Checking in. Did you get there safely?

ME

I'm here.

BEE

Good. I took a sleeping pill, so I'm fading fast.

ME

Look for me in your dreams. I'll be the one with the massive cock.

She sends an eggplant emoji followed by a pink heart, and a ridiculous grin spreads across my face. Fuck, when did I get so damn sappy?

You know when.

ME

Night.

I back out of her text thread and switch to Garrison, the guy I've reluctantly tasked to keep an eye on her while I'm here. Though I don't really trust many people other than Tanner, I've worked with him before. He's a decent person and has been instructed to act as backup while keeping his distance.

Also, I'm paying him well, and he's too familiar with my temper to risk fucking around.

Of course, I still have the camera trained on her doorway, my tracking app connected to her phone, and she knows to check in with me often. But even with all those safety measures, my gut has turned into a pit of paranoia.

Garrison messages that all is well, and I send Tanner a text to keep him updated. Just as I'm ready to toss my phone to the side and settle in for a potentially long night waiting outside this shithole, I catch a notification I missed.

It's another message from Everly sent ten minutes ago.

I'd lost track of time.

BEE

If I'm quiet tomorrow, don't worry. I've decided to do the modeling show I told you about—I think it will be good for me. Maybe I'll never do one again, but at least I won't wonder what would happen if I had. I'll check in whenever I can. Hopefully you'll be back tomorrow night, and I'll see you soon?

Wait…

What in the fuck?

I read the text over, biting down on my tongue until a coppery tang registers. I wasn't thrilled about being out of town as it is, but I'm only an hour away, and Garrison is watching…

There's a growing pressure just over my eyebrows. My thumbs itch to type a hundred thoughts at once, but I finally settle on one.

ME

I didn't think you were doing that show.

She wasn't—was she?

When she mentioned that gig, I wasn't thrilled over the thought of her getting back into a world where her ex-husband still exists. But it hadn't sounded all that serious, so when the subject was dropped, I forgot about it. I

just assumed…

I wouldn't have left town if I'd known.

After a minute of staring at my phone, there's still no response. I keep staring for five more minutes. Then ten.

Has she already gone to sleep?

Am I making a big deal about nothing?

No… This is a big, public thing. She's more vulnerable there. I would have doubled up on security. I would have —

The pressure builds. My teeth grind. I jab my fingers on the digital keys.

ME

We needed to discuss this first.

I wait two more seconds, listening to the pulse pound in my ears. Then —

ME

I don't want you going.

My chest is tight.

She needs to respond, goddammit.

After five more minutes, I start calling. There's no answer, but that's not surprising; the sleeping pills her therapist has her taking do a good job of knocking her out. She told me it's the only way she's been able to sleep alone since she's been free.

I should be there with her, making sure she knows she's safe. She doesn't need to dope herself up when I'm lying there next to her. She knows I'll kill any motherfucker that thinks of touching her.

Fuck. Why did I think it was okay to leave? I should never have left.

If I squeeze the phone much harder, I'm going to crack the screen. I've lost track of the world outside of this car.

I check the tracker to make sure it still shows her at home, even though I'm positive she is. I'm so pissed, I can barely see straight. She can't go—not while I'm out of town. She knows I'm trying to protect her.

She fucking knows.

I jam my finger on the call button again, knowing it won't do any good. Then I send a text I know is pointless.

ME

Answer your goddamn phone, Everly.

Maybe I should go back.

There was no mention of what time she was leaving, or the venue—only that it was local—which means I should be able to hang out here and keep an eye out for my target a while longer. See if this douchebag shows up.

An hour goes by before I stop obsessively checking my messages. I spend the rest of the time trying to talk myself off a ledge, while keeping one eye on the hotel room.

The parking lot stays quiet for the rest of the night, which is probably for the best, since there's a war going on inside my head. A hundred voices scream for attention:

What are you waiting for? March your ass over there and tell her she's absolutely not going.

But it's local, and public. Garrison can follow. She'll be fine.

Look, dumbass, she didn't include you in the decision for a reason; she doesn't give a shit what you think. Take a hint.

Calm the fuck down. It's not that big of a deal.

She's definitely going to die the second she leaves the apartment.

Maybe you're being too controlling. She'll probably appreciate being given a little trust.

Yeah, that last voice is a fucking pussy. Ignore.

By the time the sun has risen, I've sent Garrison a message to drive down here and take my place. There's still no sign of the guy I'm waiting for, and I can't sit here all day and wonder what's happening with Everly.

Just before I get on the highway to head north, I send her a message:

ME

See you soon.

17

It's still early when I set foot on the cracked pavement outside Everly's complex. Thanks to my tracking app, I'm confident she hasn't gone anywhere, but there's nothing but fucking crickets in our text thread.

I inhale slowly, filling my lungs with early morning fog, laced with a

tinge of exhaust. I'm sleep deprived, irritated, and judging by the looks I got when I ran into a mini mart for coffee, I look every bit as shitty as I feel.

God help the next person who —

Mrrooww.

Several parking spots away, the cat that's adopted my girl is rubbing against the back tire of a silver Porsche.

"Hey, cat."

He blinks at me like I'm an idiot.

"You happen to see Bee this morning? She's not answering me."

Ignoring me, he aims his furry balls at the wheel, his tail high, and wets it with a spray of urine.

Oof, wouldn't want to be the owner of that car—

Wait.

When I get a better look at the driver, I have an overwhelming urge to give the cat a high five. Jasper Cross sits with a phone in one hand and a cup of overpriced coffee in the other, oblivious to the feline christening his six-figure penis extension.

Fantastic.

I stride over to the vehicle and look down. "I owe you one, kitty cat."

This animal is getting a free supply of tuna for the rest of his nine lives.

After giving the tire a sniff of approval, he takes off, pausing to look over his shoulder at me before disappearing into the bushes.

Standing next to the driver's side window, I wait a full minute while Jasper's attention darts between his phone, the door of the complex, and a few nearby cars—completely ignorant of my presence, inches away.

I could easily break this douchebag in half.

It's tempting.

What Everly saw in this slicked-back pussy, I'll never understand. She's way out of his league. Then again, she's way out of mine, too.

Furthermore, how in the hell did he move on after she went missing? Even if he truly believed she was dead, it's no excuse. I would have turned the world inside out to find her.

Jasper rubs his jaw and looks at the time, his agitation evident. I suppose a polite person would tap on the window to get his attention, but…

Thunk.

I slam the heel of my hand to the glass, and he jumps so high, his head

hits the ceiling.

His attention whips my way, a dozen expressions passing over his face in the space of a second. He's probably pissing himself. And if he isn't, he should be.

After another glance around, likely searching for someone to step in and protect him, the window finally slides down. "Something you need, *Detective?"*

"Yeah, I need you to turn this car around and drive the fuck back to Los Angeles."

"Sorry to disappoint, but we've got a runway show to attend."

I catch the way his fingers twitch around his phone.

False bravado.

Definitely pissing himself.

I lean an elbow on the roof of his car and look straight down at him. A layer of product glistens in his hair. "She's not going with you."

"Try telling her that." He scoffs. "See how far it gets you."

"Don't worry, I—" When his eyes shift to the left of the parking lot, I follow, my gaze snagging on movement at the front door. Everly steps out, her hair piled on her head in a messy bun. A tightness compresses my ribcage. Every time I see her, it's like being struck with a revelation. I can always find something new to obsess over. Currently, it's the way she wets her lips with the tip of her tongue as she rifles through an oversized purse, barely looking up enough to make sure she doesn't trip over anything.

Damn, she's adorable.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I take a couple steps in her direction, barely processing the sound of the car door opening behind me. When she's nearly on top of me, she looks up. Stops short.

"Hey." Crossing the distance between us, I wrap my hands around her biceps and lean down to press my lips to the top of her hair. I'm still pissed off, and I hate her ex-husband with a burning fucking passion, but something about seeing her now, wide-eyed and speechless at my appearance, deflates me a little. I can't keep myself from touching her. I need it too much.

I'm not sure when this happened, or what *this* even is, but here I am.

"Isaac, what are you…" Her gaze flits between me and Jasper, who has magically become brave enough to leave his car now that Everly is here as a buffer.

“You can text from the car, Ev, but we need to go.”

She’s visibly flustered—from Jasper and me being in such close proximity, or from my string of unanswered texts last night, I don’t know.

“I’m so sorry.” Her warmth soaks into my chest as she lays her hand there, addressing the man behind me. “I took a sleeping pill later than I should have and didn’t wake up until a few minutes ago.” She looks into my eyes, wary and apologetic. “I didn’t know you were coming back already—I haven’t even had time to check my phone. I’ll message you from the car, okay?”

Jasper taps on the car.

Lifting on her toes, she gives me a quick peck on the lips. “I’m so glad you’re back safe. I’ll head home right after the event, and we can —”

She’s backing away as she speaks, but as she turns, I grab hold of her wrist. “You aren’t leaving.”

She recoils, caught off guard. “What?”

“Everly.” Jasper’s voice rises with a tinge of distress.

If he thinks he’s taking her away from me…

I shake my head. “Please. You can’t go.” This is when I should tell her that I’m only trying to ensure her safety and can’t do that at an impromptu modeling show I have no details about. That thinking about anything happening to her makes me want to burn down the world. But my defenses overpower my emotions, and I say, “You should have checked with me first.”

Her eyes narrow. “And you would have said…”

“No.”

Her eyebrows arch. She shakes out of my grip.

Jasper huffs a laugh. “Well, now you’ve done it.”

I’m losing control here. It’s crumbling right in front of me, but I keep making it worse. And I’m about to take it to the next level by pummeling this jackass into the ground. “It’s in your best interest to shut the fuck up,” I growl through my teeth, pitching my voice low.

“Fine.” He throws his hands in the air in resignation. “If you think throwing this barbarian attitude around is going to win her over, then by all means —”

“Listen, asshole, I’m not exactly sure what your motivations are here, but your life with her is history. It’s time to let her go.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Everly back away

But Jasper stands his ground. “Everly has a mind of her own. She’s not into the bossy type.”

“Oh, I beg to differ.” I smirk. Then I turn toward the woman I’m apparently losing my damn mind over. “Should we tell him how much you love it when I order you to get on your knees? The things you’ll gladly do when my —”

“*Isaac*.” Her eyes flare as a pink tinge creeps into her cheeks. “Please.”

“Don’t leave with him, Bee.”

She gapes at me for a minute, her head shaking with disbelief. “No. You don’t get to make decisions for me—especially not like this.” Then, with her eyes glossy and her expression hard as stone, she yanks on the handle and opens the door. “I can’t do this with you right now; we’ll talk when I get back.” Sliding into the car, she pulls the door closed, yanks at the seatbelt with all the frustration she wants to take out on me, and stares straight ahead.

“Everly.”

“Come on, buddy.” Halfway into the driver’s seat, Jasper pauses to look at me over the roof of the car. “Don’t be a sore loser. She made her choice.”

I meet his eyes with a glare that could shoot daggers.

This. Mother. Fucker.

She’s not choosing this dickhead over me. I refuse to believe that’s what’s happening. *Again*. I just presented my case wrong. Triggered her rebellious side. This slimy douchebag isn’t my competition. It’s not fucking possible.

“She. Isn’t. Choosing. *You*,” I seethe, my attention fixed on the woman in the passenger seat, willing her to look at me. To change her mind and get out of the damn car.

To see me.

My lungs are full of shrapnel. My chest constricts with the forceful memory of something I didn’t know I was still holding on to.

I swallow the desperate words before they can leave me.

Come on, Everly. Don’t choose him.

Not again.

“Looks like she just did.” He dares to look me in the face, his expression full of challenge, and lowers his chin. “And you know what the kids say…” With a fading smile and a peculiar look in his eyes, he delivers the words that clinch his fate: “No backsies.”

He’s a dead man.

The car zips away, and I’m left standing in the parking lot, wondering how badly I just fucked up.

Thirty minutes later, I pace the floor of my room. With every second that goes by, I’m becoming more enraged. As it is, I’m going to owe the hotel for punching a hole in the wall, my knuckles are raw, and the gaping hole in my chest cavity feels no better.

Everly was my light at the end of a long, dark tunnel, and I don’t know how it all went so wrong, so fast, but I sure as fuck know who to blame.

Your own bad temper, you idiot.

Still, that does nothing to absolve Jasper Cross.

Every second of that encounter is on replay in my head. Everly’s face when I chose the wrong thing to say, repeatedly. How her anger was mixed with something that looked almost like heartbreak.

“*Fuck*.”

My fist hits the wall again. I’m surprised no one has knocked on my door to see what’s going on. I need to get out of here before I make things worse. Go somewhere far away from people before I take my wrath out on someone who doesn’t deserve it.

Without bothering to change my clothes, I shove my phone into the pocket of my jeans, lock the door to my already trashed room, and jog around the building to the trail out back.

The morning chill sears my lungs as I hit a punishing pace. The steady rhythm of my feet pounding the ground fills my ears. My breath saws in harsh bursts of exertion, leaving visible puffs hanging in the cool morning air.

Since she’s already pissed, I may as well have thrown caution to the wind and flattened her ex-husband before he took her away.

Everly made him sound like some mild-mannered lump of coal, but today he showed me a different side. The verbal jabs, rubbing salt in the wound. Taunting me from the safety of the other side of his overpriced car. He wanted to remind me that he’d won—just like he won the moment Everly said his name in that basement.

He wanted me to remember.

Needed me to —

My pace begins to slow.

It’s all catching up to me. Pieces of the puzzle I was too angry to analyze. I let my emotions cover the hidden subtext like a fog. But it’s there if you look for it. Something off. Out of character. Like that phrase he used just before they drove away.

My heartbeats and breathing sync.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump…

I’m at the end of the trail. Standing at the edge of a grassy landing overlooking the Bay.

The fog begins to clear.

And I see it.

No backsies.

Shit.

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Movement flies by outside the window as I sit silently in the passenger's seat of Jasper's car, questioning my choices.

Did I screw up?

Isaac has been trying to keep me safe, but I never questioned my safety by doing this event. It's high-profile, public, surrounded by cameras and security. Not to mention I was taken from my own home. A crowded social function feels like the last place anything could go wrong.

But I know things between us have been shifting—becoming more serious, more real. Our dynamic is taking on new life, so I can't help but wonder if I just messed it all up by driving with my ex-husband to a runway show I'm not even sure I want to be in.

Shit, shit, shit.

He was pissed.

Far more than I anticipated.

And as my head clears with every passing mile, I can't say I blame him entirely. If only I had more time to explain, to calm him down…

My stomach twists with regret as I fiddle with the zipper on my jacket, stealing a quick glance at Jasper. He white knuckles the steering wheel with both hands, looking tenser than a coiled spring. The sky is clear for now, the sun shining, but it feels like there's a thundercloud waiting to burst in the driver's seat. "Um…sorry about all that." I clear my throat, crossing my arms. "That was awkward."

“Mmhmm,” Jasper mutters.

“Isaac is a good guy, but his people skills aren’t the best. I kind of blindsided him with this and didn’t give him any time to process.”

God—I really did handle it all wrong. When the dust settles and I head back, I’ll be spending the better part of the week groveling. On my knees. Naked and tied up.

Probably gagged.

“Can’t blame him for being protective,” Jasper adds, his jaw ticking as he peers down at the Bluetooth screen. “Music?”

My instinct is to say no, but I need the distraction. Anything to fill the guilt-ridden void. “Sure.”

He flips a dial and the volume cranks. A song filters through: “6 Underground” by Sneaker Pimps. I wasn’t even born when the song came out, but it’s Allison’s favorite. She was obsessed with the movie *Can’t Hardly Wait*, and we watched it together countless times during giggle-infused sleepovers in high school.

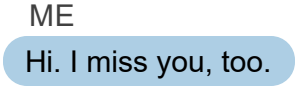
“Wow,” I breathe out, my attention ping-ponging between the speaker and Jasper as the last ten minutes fall secondary to a different life. “Last time I heard this song, you and I were on a double date with Allison and Erik. Allison was trying to sing the lyrics all sultry, but she sounded like a dude, and Erik pretended he didn’t know her.”

I can’t help but laugh. Out of all the songs to play…

The recollection tastes exactly like the Sour Patch Kids we’d often inhale until our bellies ached—sweet and sour. I wonder if Jasper is being intentional, making me think of her right now. But he doesn’t say anything. He just stares at me for a breath before returning his attention to the road, his hairline dotted with a glistening of sweat.

Nostalgia creeps across my heart as the song continues to spin melodies into memories. I’m compelled to act on the feeling, and I think that was the point.

Retrieving my phone from my handbag, I pull up her number and don’t give myself time to think. I’ve done enough thinking for one lifetime.



My pulse quickens with anticipation as I wait for the message to show as

Read. Minutes drag by, one song blending into the next, but nearly ten minutes pass and she still hasn't opened it. With a sigh, I turn the phone face down in my lap and bob my knees.

Jasper hasn't said a word. Isaac really got under his skin. "So, what happened to the model who dropped out? It's unusual for a spot to open up last minute."

He swallows. "Heard she was in the hospital. Surgery of some kind."

"That's unfortunate," I reply. "Do you really think I'm cut out for this? I haven't walked a runway in years. I can't imagine I'll be the graceful vision they're expecting, or if I'll even hit all my marks."

His throat works again as he flicks a look in my direction. "You were born for this, Everly. Guarantee you'll blow Abner away."

I allow the sentiment to settle, sending him a nod. "I, uh…do appreciate you going out on a limb for me. I'm not sure yet if this is something I'll want to pursue long-term, but it'll be nice to feel relevant again." Gathering my hair over one shoulder, I play with the spiraled ends. "I know this is a big deal. You didn't have to bring me in."

"I wanted to. It was the least I could do after…" He pauses, panning his gaze to the rear-view mirror. "It was the least I could do."

I pin my lip between my teeth, forcing back the *after*.

A new song begins—another one of Allison's favorites.

We sit in silence, blowing past cars on the expressway, before Jasper turns to me. He loosens his collar, fidgeting. "Is it serious?"

I blink over at him. "Serious?"

"With Isaac."

"Oh." Isaac's face skates across my mind, a warm balm to my senses. I imagine his smirks, his dry sarcasm, his firm hands holding me like a prize. The rare, tender moments that feel a million times more priceless because they're with him. A smile blooms. "Yes. I think it's serious."

I brace myself for Jasper's huff of disgust—a scowl, or a word of warning.

But it never comes.

"Good," he says, swiping a hand down his thigh. "He seems intelligent, sharp. He's a detective, after all." A glance. "Hopefully he's someone who will keep you safe."

My chest grows heavy. I wasn't expecting his support, not after what

transpired back there. “Thank you.”

“You deserve to be happy.”

I look at him, a little stunned, but he’s already turned his gaze to the road, jaw set. “So do you,” I murmur, wringing my hands together. “And I hope you realize you don’t owe me anything, Jasper. It’s been over a year, and I think we’re both in a better place now.”

He nods, tapping his fingers on the wheel.

“Mom’s been urging me to forgive and forget,” I continue. “It’s hard. It’s hard letting go of something you thought you were coming back to, only to have it ripped away so suddenly. It was like a different kind of abduction.” My throat stings, needles and thorns. “I could have handled it better, and I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to say that. When we get back, I want to talk to Allison. Try to make things right again.”

Jasper rubs a hand over his chin. “Yeah,” he says. “Hopefully, we all make it out unscathed.”

Moisture puddles in my eyes, and I let out a shaky exhale.

I think of Isaac, of his loss. *Sara.* He’d do anything to get her back, and here I am, pushing away someone I love. Life is too short for that. Time is fleeting, and regret has a way of carving out a place in your soul, filling it with missteps you can never take back. Seconds tick by as memories resurface—all the moments I’ve spent wishing things could be different, that I’d made better choices, that I’d been stronger.

A waste.

A slap in the face to everything I’ve gained and grown from.

I stare out the window and whisper back, “It’s never too late to start over.”

Backstage, the air hums with chaotic energy—voices shouting over each other, makeup brushes sweeping over razor-cut cheekbones, and the constant snap of fabric as stylists tug dresses into place.

The show is taking place at a yacht club off the Bay, with a glorious view of the Golden Gate Bridge. I can almost taste the salt air from outside as I weave my way through the crowded room, dodging a rolling rack of sequined

gowns and nearly tripping over a box of heels. Everywhere I look, models in varying stages of prep are being worked on, hair teased and pinned, their skin glimmering under harsh fluorescents and ring lights.

I find a quiet corner near a vanity stacked with cosmetic palettes and gloss tubes and take a steadying breath. There's a cloying sweetness in the air fused with hairspray and perfume, and it sticks in my throat, making it hard to swallow through the knot of nerves.

The theme for the night is "Seasons."

Models move like clockwork, all set to wear outfits that align with spring, summer, autumn, and winter. We're showcasing winter first, my gown an avant-garde take on the theme. Bold and futuristic, the fabric is a metallic silver that shifts in hue as it moves, like the sky caught between twilight and dawn.

"Remember, it's going to be raining on the runway for spring," an assistant announces, reminding us of the program. "Double up on that setting spray."

Before I turn away, a makeup artist materializes with a brush poised like a weapon. "Sit," she commands, and then I'm pressed into the makeup chair. She tilts my chin up, smearing a foundation sponge across my jawline. "You're good." Satisfied, the woman releases me.

A pang of anxiety flares in my chest as I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Bulb lights rim the glass, illuminating the snowflake gems glittering in the outer corners of my eyes. I look like someone else, someone I used to know—the model who walked these runways without a second thought, who knew the exact angle of her body and how to glide without hesitation. But the person staring back at me now is wildly different.

I'm not sure if I miss her or not.

"You're on in two minutes!" someone shouts, and I feel a hand on my shoulder, guiding me toward the hairline curtain that separates us from the buzzing crowd.

My ankles wobble in my silver heels that stretch for days. I close my eyes and imagine what Queenie would say to me right now. Probably something sarcastic.

"Try not to fall on your face, Angel Baby. Or at least do it gracefully."

My cue arrives.

I take a deep breath and step forward, the bright lights swallowing me as I

glide onto the runway. The overheads gleam like stars, and the crowd fades into shadows beyond the spotlights. Cameras flash, a sea of snapping lenses capturing each stride. Ahead, a model shifts and sways in her winter ensemble, keeping me focused on my task as she whizzes by.

Trying not to squint, I assess the crowd from my vantage on the runway, a blur of silhouettes staring back. I scan the crowd for Jasper, but can't make out any faces. Only hints of designer suits and cocktail dresses, crushed between a wall of photographers. There's a pulse in the air, and the camera flashes assault me in bursts, like mini lightning storms. At the end of the runway, I pivot sharply, managing a half-smile as I turn back toward the stage.

The second I step into the dressing room, a team of hands is on me, tugging and adjusting. My frosted gown is stripped away, replaced by a sheer floral dress that floats around me like a soft whisper. Another pair of hands fastens a clear raincoat over it, snapping it into place with a wide, transparent belt.

Someone thrusts a prop umbrella into my hand. "You're back on in five!" a voice yells from behind me.

I tighten my grip on the umbrella, stepping up to the edge of the curtain as the music shifts to something whimsical, reminiscent of the '80s or early '90s.

A little strange…

The stage manager glances at her clipboard as the model in front of me takes the runway. "This isn't the right song."

"Are we going with it?" a production assistant asks.

"Too late now." She sighs, flicking her wrist to signal me forward. "Go. Make it work."

I inhale a sharp breath and step out, imagining how I'm going to release the belt at the end of the runway without looking like a rookie fumbling with her seatbelt in coach.

Here we go.

I burst through the curtain, my head held high. It's another confident strut across the stage as I approach the narrow runway.

Water sprinkles down from the ceiling to mimic raindrops, catching the light in delicate arcs as I twirl the umbrella above my head, the fabric snapping open with a *whoosh*. I feel the unfamiliar beat reverberating through

the soles of my stilettos, unsettling the flow of my steps as I near the edge of the platform.

The lights flicker.

The crowd's energy shifts, the applause faltering. A few whispers ripple through the front rows, but I'm too focused on staying on my feet to figure out what's going on. I twirl the umbrella again. Droplets continue to rain down, sluicing my skin.

A shiver dances down my back.

And then, just as I reach the far edge, unhooking my belt, I notice movement from the sidelines. The production crew converses with nervous energy. The buzz of the audience dips into an uncomfortable silence.

My instincts ping with apprehension.

Something is off.

But before I can process a coherent thought —

A shrieking alarm fires through the building.

Deafening sirens.

I'm frozen to the platform, the umbrella tumbling from my hand as my pulse cranks into overdrive and my lungs lock up. I clamp my hands over my ears, my vision blurring.

Chaos unleashes.

Bodies scatter.

I'm paralyzed, rooted to the end of a runway in a floral dress and raincoat, soaked and terrified.

Move, Everly.

MOVE!

I croak out a sound, my gaze darting through the scrambling masses, searching for Jasper. He's not there. Maybe he's already made it out. Spinning to face the stage, I force my spaghetti legs into action, darting forward, searching for the nearest exit. There's one behind me, teeming with frantic bodies.

Pivoting, I crouch down, inching my way off the platform and sliding to the floor. Adrenaline fuels my steps as I weave through the panicked crowd, my heart hammering in my chest. My breath is ragged as I make it past the nearest cluster of people.

The exit is ahead…just a few more steps.

But a rough hand grips my arm, yanking me to a halt.

“Get back on the platform!” the voice commands.

Flinching, I twist to face him—an unfamiliar man in black clothing, his dark eyes flashing with urgency. His grip is tight, painful.

“What—” I try to pull away. “What do you mean?”

“You need to get back on the platform—*now*.” His tone leaves no room for argument.

I hesitate, heart pounding in my throat.

“Backstage exit,” he orders, attention darting toward the chaos behind me. “Go!”

The sound of panicked footsteps reverberates around us, mixing with shrill shrieks of terror. The lights go in and out, and everything feels like it’s on the brink of imploding. I’m being herded, cornered, and I can’t do anything but comply as I shakily climb my way back onto the platform and head for the backstage exit.

Water gushes from the hydraulic system, compromising my footing as the runway slickens and my heels wobble and slide. I hardly make it two feet before I slip, face-planting mid-escape. Fear hollows out my chest as panic skews my vision.

Holding back a sob, I pull myself up and try again —

—just as the lights go out completely.

A scream flies past my lips as a wash of pitch-black nothingness smothers me. My head shoots left, right, behind, but I can’t see anything. It’s just me, the strange song, and whatever lurks in the shadows. Haunting memories invade my mind: the sound of a gunshot, a darkened foyer, blood-soaked tiles.

A monster waiting to drag me away, his arms coiling around me like a snake.

I slam my eyes shut, collapse to my knees.

The main door *thunks* closed, and I wonder if everyone made it out. Fumbling for balance, I crawl forward, splashing in puddles, my wet hair tangling in front of my eyes as I try to blink away the darkness. My hands search the platform to keep me from toppling over the side. I cling to the edge, my palms sliding across the slick surface, breath coming in shallow gasps. The song plays on a loop, dizzying me. I can’t see a thing—just shadows twisting and turning in the dark. Panic claws up my throat as my fingers grope blindly, desperate for any sense of direction.

Then, somewhere in the distance, footsteps echo—a slow, deliberate beat that ices me to the bone. Shrinking back, I clamp a hand over my mouth. Whoever it is, they're coming closer, each step amplifying, slicing through the darkness like a butcher's knife.

Just as the ground beneath me starts to spin, the lights snap on, flooding the room in blinding, unforgiving brightness. I squint against the glare, blinking away spots until my vision clears.

That's when I see him.

My heart stutters, then slams into a frantic, suffocating rhythm.

The Timekeeper—*Leonard Vincent*—stands at the entrance of the runway, his face a mask of cool fury. His mismatched eyes glint with malice as he forces a tight smile, a sliver of agitation slipping through his customary composure.

No.

This is a trick.

I'm hallucinating, manifesting my greatest fear.

Pinned by his gaze, I'm trapped like prey caught in a predator's snare. Every nightmare I thought I'd left behind surges to the surface, memories bubbling up, raw and fresh—the smell of stale air and bleach, the scrape of metal cuffs as I spent those first few months chained to a wall, and the stifling stillness of his underground hideaway.

It all comes rushing back, crushing my chest like a deluge.

I freeze, instinctively recoiling as he takes a step forward. My skin prickles with the phantom sensation of his hands on me. The urge to run stampedes across my ribs, but I can't move. Every muscle in my body locks, every nerve flaring, screaming at me to escape.

But I'm back there, in that room.

Trapped. Helpless.

The corners of his mouth lift into a thin smile as he watches me struggle, and I know he's savoring this. Drinking in my fear like it's a topflight champagne.

He scans the empty rows, disappointment flickering over his features before his eyes settle on me. Lifting one gloved hand, he gestures outward, each step echoing ominously off the polished floor. "It seems someone decided to interfere with my carefully arranged schedule." His gaze sparks, irritation flickering behind his usual implacable calm. "A fire alarm, of all

things. How…pedestrian.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, tasting blood, anything to jolt myself out of this nightmare. But even the sting does nothing to shake the image of the man standing in front of me. The man who stripped me of every scrap of hope and dignity.

He’s back. He’s here.

“I have to say, I do love a good runway show. Did I tell you I got my start in fashion design?” He links his hands behind his back. The familiar hourglass trinket is still clipped to his belt loop, reflecting off the overhead lights. “Perhaps that’s why you were always my favorite.”

I find an ounce of strength and pull myself to quivering legs. “Please…”

“Please?” he parrots, lifting a hand to his ear. “I see you’ve found your manners again.”

Swallowing hard, I glance over my shoulder, searching for a way out. I wonder how far I’d get if I made a break for it. But my gaze snags on the stranger who coerced me back onto the runway platform moments ago—he stands near the exit door, a hand on his holstered gun.

The Timekeeper clicks his tongue, glancing skyward. “Do you like the song? It’s Erasure.”

My attention pans back to him as I instinctively inch backward, putting distance between us.

“I thought ‘Always’ would be a nice soundtrack to listen to while watching hundreds of people die by hydrogen sulfide,” he says casually. “Of course, it doesn’t hold a candle to the music video. That’s a masterpiece. But since *someone* stole my grand finale…” His tone hardens again, bouncing between snake venom and playful mockery.

He skips forward, doing a showy pirouette as the song plays.

He’s…dancing.

I watch in horror, his suit shimmering with opulence and madness—a riot of deep purples and bright blues, a silver cravat tied loosely around his neck. His tailored jacket, sleek and metallic, glimmers with every exaggerated movement like a broken shard of glass.

Water splashes as he prances through the puddles.

I move back.

My eyes scour the platform, desperate for something, anything. I spot the discarded violet umbrella at the end of the runway. Heart pounding, I swivel,

racing to snatch it up, gripping the pointed end toward him as I turn to face him head-on.

He's lessened the gap between us, standing in the center of the runway, a few feet away. His eyes flick to the prop. "Oh, Everly. Are you planning to beat me to death with your *umbrella*?" A bark of laughter. "I suppose anything can be a weapon if you're creative."

"Stay away from me." The umbrella shakes in my grip.

Another step.

Then another.

If I move any farther backward, I'll fall.

"This rain…" he drawls, holding out a flat palm and watching as water fills his hand. "It's a nice touch, isn't it? Must be murder on your hair."

"Don't you dare —"

Just like that, he's on me.

I scream.

His gloved fist hooks a handful of my hair, tangling and tugging, my knees buckling. Pain lacerates down my body, scalp to toes, until my fingers unclench the umbrella handle, and he gently plucks it from my grip.

Humming with appreciation, he twirls it around while droplets go flying. "Another nice touch," he says. "The little details really do make the show."

"Help me!" I screech, squirming in his grip. "*Somebody help*!"

"Oh, shush. You can scream all you want when we're out on the water."

I go still, terror coursing through me. "What do you —"

"Hey, boss! Is this your guy?" Commotion rustles from backstage before two figures appear, barreling through the curtain. "Found him poking around back here."

It takes a moment for recognition to seize me.

Navy dress suit. Polka-dotted tie. Black hair.

Loafers.

My heart sinks to the floor.

"Jasper…" Panic curls around me as I watch Jasper struggle in the henchman's grasp.

The Timekeeper growls with disapproval. "No, you idiot, that is not *my guy*." His grip on my hair tightens as he gives me a shake. "It's so difficult to find decent help these days, isn't it?"

Oh, my God.

“Jasper!”

Jasper kicks and flails against the beast of a man, a bruise dappling his cheek, blood dribbling from a split lip. “Everly!”

“Don’t hurt him,” I beg. “He has nothing to do with this.”

My captor’s lips purse, his eyes thinning. “You’re right…he really doesn’t.” He flicks his hand. “Let him go.”

Jasper is shoved forward, collapsing to his knees. He remains like that for a moment, catching his breath, before lifting his chin and finding my eyes. “I’m so sorry,” he says, his voice hardly carrying over to us. “Forgive me.”

I wrestle in vain to break free, tears sliding down my cheeks. “Jasper —*run*. Please, you need to —”

“I had no choice,” he continues. “Allison.”

My wide eyes lock with his. Swallowing, I stop wriggling. “What?”

Jasper pulls to one leg, then the other, slowly rising to full height as he shakes his head with remorse. “They took Ali. He said they’d kill her if I didn’t find a way to bring you here.” He pauses, his voice breaking. “I’m so sorry, Everly. I had no way out. They put a wire on me, followed us here. I was being watched. One wrong move and she was dead.”

The room blurs, the weight of his words landing like a punch to my ribs. “No…”

He steeples his hands, stumbling forward. “There was no other way. Please, believe me. I tried to signal your detective friend, but I had to be subtle. I don’t know if… God, I’m so sorry. I never wanted to —”

“Touching,” The Timekeeper interrupts, sending a hand gesture to his lackey. “Sadly, I have a schedule to keep.”

It happens so fast.

The man behind Jasper stalks forward, pulls out a pocketknife, and flicks the blade.

In one swift motion, a meaty arm arcs across Jasper’s throat.

Slice.

My scream strangles with disbelief as Jasper’s eyes round in shock. He stumbles, a hand flying to his neck as blood seeps through his fingers, spilling through the cracks in violent spurts. Knees buckling, he crumples to the floor.

Gasping. Gurgling.

“*NO!*” I lunge, but The Timekeeper’s iron-clad grip pulls me back,

holding me in place.

He leans down, whispering in my ear, “Now, let’s not make a scene.” His voice drips with a chilling calm. “That’s *my* job.”

Reality bends. Folds in half.

Sound dulls to a distant roar, muffled by the thundering pulse in my ears. I’m numb, my brain scrambling to process what I’ve just seen.

Jasper’s body slumps forward, splattering across the stage until he’s lying motionless in a pool of his own blood.

My stomach clenches, cold and hollow.

My limbs are frozen, trapped in quicksand.

Then something inside me snaps, raw and instinctive, cutting through the haze.

Without thinking, I twist sharply, slamming my stiletto down on the bastard’s foot. He lets out a grunt, and we grapple for dominance.

I claw at him.

Teeth bared, lungs shrieking with desperation, I struggle for anything to throw him off balance. I scream like a banshee, my nails tearing across his skin, the toes of my heels gouging his shins.

A sharp prick at my neck.

I gasp.

Instantly, my mind dizzies.

Eyelids flutter… Vision blackens…

I fall…

11

I wake to a soft, unsteady sway.

The faint hum of what sounds like an engine is a distant murmur in my ears. The air smells of saltwater and something else. Stale, a confined space. My head pounds, a dull throb gnawing at the perimeter of my consciousness.

Groaning, I press my fingertips to my temples.

My limbs feel heavy, uncoordinated. I blink rapidly, trying to focus, but the world tilts, spinning in and out of clarity.

Slowly, my vision clears, revealing the plush interior of what I think is a…boat.

A large one.

A yacht?

Polished wood gleams around me as soft light filters through a porthole, hinting at the turquoise swirl of the ocean outside.

I sit up too fast and everything slopes, tipping sideways. My stomach churns with the remnants of whatever drugs were injected into me, and I scratch at the pinprick left behind.

The walls are closing in, the air thickening.

My pulse quickens as nausea threatens.

I try to stand, but my legs wobble like a newborn deer, and I crash back onto the white leather couch. Trembling, I push a section of hair off my face, trying to orient myself. The drug is still clinging to my bloodstream, slowing everything. I can't think straight.

I have to move. Run. Escape.

A door opens behind me.

I don't need to look to know who it is, as his presence fills the space before I even hear his footsteps.

"Ah, you're awake." His voice is a sinister echo. Paralyzing.

I whip around, ignoring the dizzying wave of vertigo. I lock eyes with him—cold, cruel, multicolored eyes. The world outside the porthole is a blur of blue, and I realize, with a sickening lurch in my stomach, that the boat is moving.

Not just moving; it's cutting through the water, picking up speed.

He steps closer, a suffocating weight in the small cabin. My eyes catch sight of the purple umbrella twirling in his hand.

"I thought I'd take this as a souvenir," he says, admiring the prop like a coveted prize. "It is my favorite color."

I brace myself against the edge of the couch, trying to stand. The boat sways gently at first, then surges forward, the hum of the engine vibrating through the floorboards as water churns against the hull.

I feel it.

We're moving farther and farther from shore.

"You should rest, my dear." Stepping toward me, The Timekeeper pulls a set of handcuffs from his waistband. "Those drugs will still be dancing in your system for a while yet. You're in no condition to be running around."

I eye the glinting metal. "Maybe it's time to find another hobby," I rasp,

my voice shaking. “This tired brand of kidnapping is getting old.”

“I do enjoy crocheting,” he deadpans. “Keeps the muse sharp.”

“Stay away from me.”

“Oh, honey, not everything is about *you*. But I do need you to stay put.”

My eyes veer toward the exit, and that’s when he lunges for me.

Scrambling to my feet, I dodge him, making a break for it. I shove at the door and am met with a wall of fog and heavy sheets of rain. Cold wind slaps me in the face as a salty tang fills my lungs. A hand clamps around my mouth. The handcuffs clatter to the floor.

I’m yanked back.

I struggle, my scream muffled.

Caught in a gust of wind, the boat joggles beneath us as my captor hangs on, my feet unable to maintain traction. A bottle of rum sits on the edge of a counter, close enough to graze my fingers along the glass, but it tumbles from my grip, crashing to the floor, its contents spilling out in a thick amber pool.

My stilettos slide across the puddle as The Timekeeper snatches me by the bicep and pulls me back. I shriek, scratch, sob, but it’s no use.

He knows how to handle his prey.

The sharp scent of salt and diesel mingle in the air. I’m half-dragged, half-stumbling, barely able to keep upright as he tows me across the slippery surface. My eyes dart to the dense fog through the swinging door, knowing there’s nothing but dark waves to greet me. A watery grave.

No.

This can’t be over. It can’t end like this.

But there’s nowhere to run.

Even if I broke free, I couldn’t swim to shore if I tried.

“Stop it! Get your fucking hands off —”

A gunshot goes off.

My eyes flare as footsteps pound the deck.

The hand tightens on my arm. Then, wedging the umbrella beneath one foot, The Timekeeper jerks upward sharply, snapping it in half. The jagged edge is jabbed against my throat as he steadies his grip, his voice turning to a low hiss. “Where are you going to go, little girl?” His hot breath beats against my cheek.

I close my eyes as splinters scrape my flesh.

“If we’re lucky, Mr. Porter will still be in one piece when we join him.”

His words seep through my fog like sludge as the chilling rain falls harder. A downpour. Makeup fuses with tears, burning my eyes.

I swallow.

Oh, God…

A second gunshot rocks me off my axis.

The Timekeeper sneers, ramming the slivered umbrella harder against my throat. “I would love to have a final conversation with him before he meets his end.”

I rip the hand from my mouth.

And I scream.

“*Isaac*!”

50

I’m on a fucking suicide mission.

Driving blind across the Bay in a borrowed boat is just the tip. A mantra races through my head as I zip through a hazardous deluge of wind, rain, and fog.

Find Everly.

Kill Leonard Vincent

Don’t die.

By the time I snapped out of my jealous spiral and realized Jasper Cross was goading me into following them, I was almost too late. The bane of my existence—The fucking Timekeeper, himself—is here.

“*Come on*…” I grit my teeth, pushing the boat faster.

When I arrived, the show was underway. Unsure of Vincent’s plan, I had to clear the building of bystanders before more innocents suffered. As I realized Everly was not in the crowd, I caught a glimpse of one of Vincent’s men pulling away from the marina. That’s when I was intercepted by another man.

By the time I dispatched him, the boat was gone.

Now I’m searching for a mid-sized yacht with a head start.

There was no time to call for backup; I had to grab a boat and go. If I let them get much farther ahead, I’ll never find them.

She’s with him. He’s taken her.

I can feel it.

After a few minutes of searching the marina, I found a small center-console whose owner thought stashing a key in a hidden compartment was safe. Fortunately, I know enough to fake my way around a boat, and *September Dawn* is easy to handle. Fast, too.

Now, to make up for lost time.

It helps that there's only one direction they'd be going. It would be ideal if Everly had her phone, but with no way to track her, I'll have to settle for the next best thing. Luckily, *Dawn* has radar. I hit a button and turn it on, watching dots of different shapes and sizes light the screen, and head for the monster looming dead ahead: The Golden Gate Bridge.

Beyond it, an even bigger monster.

The Pacific Ocean.

When the building was evacuated, Vincent knew I was on his tail. Taking Everly is his insurance policy. My options are limited if he keeps her close.

She's become my weakness.

Vincent isn't stupid, so he'll use whatever tools he can get. First, he used her as a distraction—and now, she's bait.

Time to turn the tables in my favor.

This is one mission I can't fail.

I made a promise.

This bastard is mine.

The currents beneath the bridge can be deadly to a smaller boat, but the tide is slack right now, so I have a chance. Carefully, I navigate beneath the steel giant and through the Golden Gate Strait. Above, its glut of passengers travel at a snail's pace, oblivious.

The Pacific stretches out endlessly on the other side. Vincent's cruiser can't be far ahead, and I'm still faster. *Be good to me, Dawn.*

A horn sounds.

I glance at the radar; there's a boat ahead. A shot of adrenaline to my system.

My fingers clench around the steering wheel, relaxing when a yacht four times bigger than the one I'm searching for comes into view.

The gravity of my task looms like the bridge behind me.

I'm searching for a needle in a fucking ocean.

The rain comes down harder, pooling on deck. The waves become choppier. Despite the weather shift, there are a few vessels around me.

Nothing of the right size showing on radar yet, so I push farther. Faster.

I don't get a promising lead until —

There.

Another dot, the right size and shape, a short distance ahead.

It's them. I *know* it.

I kick the boat into gear, gaining on them.

Murder curdles in my veins as I get closer. My intuition blares alarm bells. I can feel him there.

I feel *her.*

A boat comes into view.

With the weather conditions, it's nearly impossible to see the driver at the helm, but I'm sure he can hear me approaching. I pull closer, right up to the side.

The cruiser is eerily quiet, as though there's no one on board at all.

I don't believe that for a second, but I take advantage, tying my boat to a hook and securing us together. Then I —

Crack.

A gunshot flies blindly in my direction, lodging in a non-vital part of *Dawn's* hull.

The first guy disarmed me on shore. *I need that gun.*

Catching hold of the ladder, I climb up the side. My feet have barely landed on deck when a vaguely familiar face appears inches from mine.

A punch hits me square in the mouth.

Oof.

Teeth clatter and lips tingle. A coppery tang fills my mouth, my vision blurring from the impact.

"I've been dying to do that." The man I beat the shit out of outside the club sneers, then hurls himself at me.

Motherfucker. "Knew I should have killed you." I dodge just in time, letting his momentum carry him into the rail.

The boat rocks.

We grapple for control, both dodging as many punches as we land.

The wind whistles around us, subsiding just long enough that I hear a different noise:

A scream.

Everly.

But there's no time for distractions. "You were following her." I land a blow to the side of his head.

"It was never about her." A hand grips my neck, holding me back. "She was just a bonus. Got me hard every time I looked at her."

My laugh is dripping with venom. "You're a fucking dead man."

"Not if I kill you first." The man points his gun. "Then I'm going to fuck your little bitch right here on the deck."

Sheer determination tips the odds in my favor, and before he can aim, I grab his arm and push up. He might want me dead, but I have more to lose.

I have everything *to lose.*

The gun goes off, whizzing harmlessly into the air.

I make a move that whips us around, so his back is to the rail. Locking an iron grip around his wrist, I shove the gun into his chest. With his other hand still locked around my throat, cutting off my air, I squeeze his fingers and fire.

Shock registers on his face, quickly draining into something else.

His hand loosens, the weight of his body tipping him overboard. But the gun —

Shit.

I grab at his clothes. Try to pull him back.

Not fast enough. The gun goes with him.

Goddammit.

Panting, I stare at the spot where the body sank beneath the waves, taking with it the weapon I need. Then —

A sound behind me. Movement.

Another scream.

"*Isaac*!"

A door swings open.

Then another voice registers. Chillingly calm.

"Hello, Mr. Porter."

It's the voice that's haunted every moment of my life for over a year. The man who ripped my sister from this earth.

The rain comes down harder.

It's time to end this motherfucking bastard.

Slowly, I turn.

There he is, a multicolored nightmare in a soaking wet suit. Despite my

soaring blood pressure, I take a slow breath, assessing the situation.

One of his hands is latched tight to Everly's upper arm, the other holding the folded end of a broken umbrella. Its splintered handle jabs into her throat.

The real danger is the low railing he's got her shoved up against. One wrong move, and she'll end up as dead as the man who just went overboard.

"We thought you'd *never* arrive." Vincent's voice drips with the same malice as his fake smile. "Right, gorgeous? Your boyfriend is impressive."

Kill him, kill him, kill him. The mantra sings through my blood.

"Sorry I'm late." I address the man who's signed his death warrant a hundred times over. "Your guys did their best, but they kinda suck at their jobs. You should fire them."

His lips flatten into a line, eyes narrowing.

I bare my teeth in a vicious smile as I gesture at the ocean behind me. "Oh, wait… I already took care of that."

"Indeed, you have." Barely controlled rage simmers beneath his casual façade. "Unfortunately for you, I still have the upper hand."

Everly winces when he yanks her to him, the umbrella jabbing into her skin.

I allow myself a split second to evaluate her. Makeup runs down her face, matted hair plastered against her skin like the sheer dress she's wearing. Water drips off the hem onto her high heels.

She's in one piece, but her movements are sluggish, like she's only half awake.

Drugged.

Without taking the time to blink, my mind runs through scenarios. Weighing my options. Vincent is calculating, but I've goaded him enough to see his control snap in the past.

This time, I need to do it while making sure Everly stays alive.

He shoves her even tighter to the railing, proving his point.

Keep him talking.

My eyes dart between the two of them, unable to leave her for long. "You okay, Bee?"

"Aw, you two are *adorable*." His tone is ripe with condescension. "Meant for each other, even. You have me to thank for that."

"Yeah," I deadpan. "Thanks."

"Now you get to die together." He chuckles. "You'll have me to thank for

that, too. You're welcome." His mocking singsong makes me want to turn him inside out.

I make a show of looking him up and down.

"Ah. What are you killing me with, exactly?" I raise my eyebrows at the umbrella. Surely, he doesn't think that toy is enough to do me in.

"Oh…well, my sharp wit, of course." He twirls the umbrella in the air, swinging it back to threaten Everly without missing a beat. "Just kidding, I predict you'll be jumping right over that railing and taking care of it all by yourself. The sharks will help. You're nice and meaty; they'll love you." He licks his lips and makes a disgusting slurping sound.

I glance at Everly, making eye contact, checking in. She appears docile, but I know that's how she survived two years in his facility of horrors, all while never giving up. And now, I see the way her eyes flare, caught between determination and panic.

Are you planning something, Bee?

My attention swings back to him before he becomes suspicious. "And why would I do that?"

This guy is out of his fucking mind.

"Because you're a *hero*. And I bet you're arrogant enough to think you'll be able to swim to shore. Also, if you don't, she goes overboard."

"And I'm supposed to believe you won't throw her over anyway, because…"

"I've reconsidered; perhaps she's too pretty to die. Not unless she has to. And that depends on you, my friend."

I dart a glance to either side, looking for a weapon.

Keep talking, asshole.

Everly straightens. I watch some of the clarity come back into her face. If I can keep Vincent's attention on me, she may have a chance to make a move. Get away.

I need to get her over here on my side, where she's safer.

Come on, push him away. Come to me.

With nothing to hold over my head, he'd be finished.

Remembering how angry the bastard gets when I'm unimpressed, I shrug, forcing a show of nonchalance. "I guess we're at a dead end, then."

"Mmm, the proverbial impasse, indeed. But see, my wager is that you're a better man than I am. You won't let her die."

My stomach curdles. Doubt creeps in.

"I'm not a better man." The words stick in my throat. "I'm just a man. And *you* are completely devoid of humanity."

His chuckle is flat. Humorless. "No matter, I still have something you want." He changes his hold on Everly, entwining his hand roughly in her hair while driving her to her knees. "And *you* don't have a weapon." Depravity sparks in his malicious glare. He grins wide, showing perfect white teeth. "Do you, Mr. Porter?"

From her knees on the deck, Everly begins to laugh. It's a maniacal, "I'm about to die and don't give a fuck anymore" kind of laugh.

Vincent looks down at her, almost like he's seeing her for the first time.

"Like you said…" Everly leans into the umbrella, ignoring the blood sliding down her neck. Fast as lightning, she reaches around his waist and yanks. "Anything can be a weapon if you're creative."

Her arm swings like a pitcher on the most important throw of the game, and I don't know what's flying at me until I've caught it.

And when I see what's glinting in my hand…

His prized possession. A show of power.

You brilliant woman.

She took a chance, and I won't let her down.

I won't let Sara down, either.

Not this time.

"Oh, look." I raise the hourglass in the air. The sand pools at the bottom, completely drained. The smile I give him is vicious. "Your time is up."

A gust of wind hits the boat. Waves splash.

We rock.

A feral sound comes from Vincent's chest. His head lowers, eyes narrowing into a death glare.

Like the day he shattered the hourglass in my cell, I watch his temper rise to the surface until it snaps.

He shoves Everly roughly. She falls over onto the deck.

Come at me, motherfucker.

I have a promise to keep.

A roar leaves him as fury wins over logic, and he charges me like a bull, holding the umbrella like a rapier in front of him.

"*DIE*," he screams, completely unhinged.

Adrenaline hits; everything slows. My view zooms out, catching every detail.

Everly on her hands and knees, determined tears mixing with rain.

Leonard Vincent's twisted expression, his face crimson with rage.

Rainwater splashes under his shoes as he runs at me.

So close.

Madness swirls with the evil in his mismatched eyes.

NOW.

A heartbeat before he connects, I bring my arm straight down, smashing the hourglass against the railing, then swing upward in a single move.

Vincent's body slams into mine.

His scream stops abruptly.

Searing pain registers.

The splintered umbrella handle protrudes from my shoulder. I grit my teeth against the agonized sound it pulls from me.

Inches away, Vincent's eyes widen. His mouth opens soundlessly.

Wrapping my arm around his back, I yank him into me.

Push harder. Twist.

Jagged glass opens his jugular vein.

Blood coats my hand, pumping faster with every waning heartbeat. His gaze locks with mine, both coal and colorless, and he sees.

He knows.

My eyes burn with saltwater and blood spatter, but I keep them open.

I'm going to watch the life drain out of you, motherfucker.

Vincent's lungs empty in a *whoosh*, eyes fluttering, rolling backward.

With a new surge of strength, I pull upward, dragging the glass through the artery. Slicing it wide open.

He's just a man, after all.

"That's for all of us," I whisper against his cheek.

His godforsaken blood is my reward, and *I will fucking bathe in it.*

His body slumps.

Dead weight.

Dead.

All the strength leaves me. I exhale. Numbness creeps over my body. We collapse on the deck.

Then there's pain…

Relief.

My eyes close. And there's nothing.

Fucking

sweet

nothing.

It's finished.

The energy drains out of me. I could die here. Just like this.

Maybe I will.

I did it. I'm done.

It's quiet. So quiet.

Over.

"Isaac."

There are hands on my face. My body.

Soft, warm hands. They won't let me drift. Won't let me go.

I'm done. Let me go.

"Isaac," she says. "I'm here, Isaac. Stay with me. Come back."

My lungs fill with air. There's life in it. The voice is a siren's song. I feel —

Her.

She shakes me.

My eyes open.

Everly's face hovers above me. Frantic. Crying. "I'm here," she sobs. "Isaac. I'm here. It's over. Stay with me. *Please* —"

"Fuck." I rise on my elbows, wincing, groaning. Pushing the corpse off me.

Everly's palms run over my body, gently moving around my still-impaled shoulder.

She's here. We're here.

We're okay.

Her hands move back to my face, pulling me toward her. She rests her forehead against mine, then kisses my bleeding mouth.

I feel everything.

"You're okay," she rasps. "You're okay."

"We're okay." My voice sounds far away.

We hold on to each other in the rain, in the carnage—a pool of watery blood spreading around us.

It’s over.

But there’s something else here. Someone. No more than a whisper. A presence.

Everly lifts her face to the mist.

She feels it, too.

We’re not alone.

In the fog, in the rain, in the blood of our enemy running in watery rivulets down my skin…

Somehow, I know —

Sara is watching.

51

"You've got the SFPD in quite the tizzy."

Tanner looks down at me from the side of the bed.

Between my skills in wilderness first aid and a stash of antibiotics, I was able to convince Everly to let me recover in her apartment. The umbrella didn't hit anything vital, and I'll do just about anything to stay out of the hospital.

Warming my hands around the mug of herbal tea she left on the bedside table, I inhale the vaguely spicy scent. It's in my best interest to try to be a better patient for her than I was for Nurse Rebecca. "If I could let them off the hook without producing a body, I would."

The San Francisco Police Department was all over the venue after I had it evacuated, finding several fog machines full of a very concentrated hydrogen sulfide solution. The "grand finale" Vincent mentioned to Everly, no doubt. He'd planned to lock everyone inside and let them suffocate, while he cruised out into the Pacific and disappeared.

His motives were a mystery, until Garrison checked out that hotel I'd almost walked into the night before. Though the man I was following had vacated, he'd left supplies behind: industrial bondage attached to a chair, tranquilizers, and a video feed set to stream the fashion show. Live.

It was a trap.

A trap set for *me*.

The bastard was going to make me watch it go down—witness all those

people dying, with Everly as the main attraction, just to prove he'd won. A big fucking checkmate.

If she hadn't texted before I walked into that motel room—if I hadn't been so paranoid I'd high-tailed it out of there the next morning—every one of those lives would have been on my hands.

I was still too late to help Jasper Cross, who will always be on my conscience. Maybe I didn't like the guy, but he took a risk to get me on the scene.

No one should have died on my watch.

Of course, I immediately called my former partner, who managed to locate Allison James, uninjured, in a hotel room outside of Los Angeles. One of Vincent's hired men had duct-taped her to a chair and abandoned her when he failed to hear from his boss.

The look Tanner gives me now would be unreadable to most people. "I guess they'll have to be satisfied with a blood-soaked boat and DNA results. Convenient you had the ocean there to dispose of him easily."

"Yeah. Convenient." I take a sip of the tea. This way it ends, and I can disappear off the radar without explanations or unwanted attention.

He raises an eyebrow that says he suspects there's more to it. "Not much has changed from our days in the department together, I see." He points at his mug. "You don't think she did something to my coffee, do you?"

I look at him sideways.

"This is the first time I've seen Everly since she found out I haven't been exactly truthful for the past year. She looks sweet, but that's the type you need to watch out for."

"Oh, Tanner." Everly enters the room with a plate of blueberry muffins. "I never thought you were being truthful. Besides, if I were going to do anything, it would be to that muffin you just took off the top."

When he sets it on the plate like it might bite him, she hands it directly to me. I shove half of it into my mouth while she presses her lips to my forehead.

He shakes his head disdainfully. "This case consumed the last three years of your life. Have you thought about what you're going to do next?"

Everly glances my way. "That's true. Now that The Timekeeper is gone, you —"

"Leonard Vincent," I say, teeth clenching. Silence falls like a hammer as

they both stare at me. “That was his name. Leonard Vincent. Not The Timekeeper, not some title that feeds his ego. He was just a murderer—a coward hiding behind a clock. And now, he’s nothing.” My gaze cuts to Everly, and I watch as realization dawns.

She swallows, nodding slowly. “Yeah. You’re right.”

I reach for her hand. “And I have no idea what I’m doing. Private sector bullshit, I guess.” *Which sounds terrible.*

“Have you considered fugitive recovery?” Tanner clears his throat. “Batman would approve.”

Everly suddenly appears very interested. “Is that the same as bounty hunting?”

Tanner and I cringe.

“What? They still have those; I’ve seen them on TV.”

“Those guys are bail bondsman runners who want to sound cool.” Ignoring the flowery-tasting tea, I snag my friend’s untouched coffee mug from the side table and take a drink. “Tanner is talking about a type of independent contracting the government doesn’t admit to.”

“Sounds perfect for you.”

She’s not wrong. It would allow me to do what I’m good at, fulfilling that part of myself that will probably always feel like I’ve got something to prove—that I’m the opposite of the evil bastard who created me. Because even though being around Everly has done wonders for my mental health, childhood wounds have a way of working their way into your molecular structure.

“Yeah.” I let my hand trail down from her arm to her ass, giving it a squeeze. “But it’s also dangerous. And there’s a lot of traveling.” That would never have stopped me before. But what I’m *not* saying is that it’s a lone-wolf type of job—the kind that works best when you’re single. “I don’t know.”

Am I still a lone wolf?

Since that day at the club when Everly discovered who I was, we’ve been—well, I’m not sure, exactly. Enjoying each other? Exploring this magnetic pull we have? But there’s always been a threat looming over our heads. Somehow it made everything feel temporary.

But over the last twenty-four hours, everything has changed.

We’re bound to change, too; that’s inevitable.

Where do we go from here? What does she expect?

Fuck, I'm starting to sweat. I scratch at my neck.

Tanner's eyes narrow for a second, before he glances at Everly and back again. Understanding washes over his face.

I can't look at her. Is she watching me? I blink at Tanner like an S.O.S. signal.

The itch spreads to my chest. Will I be expected to "settle down?" Do I *want* to settle down? Do I know what the hell settling down even means?

Shit. I can't breathe.

"Isaac." Everly gives me a coy smile. "I don't expect you to change personalities now that he's dead, you know."

I just look at her, helpless, because I *don't* know.

"That would be boring. And you…" she leans over and kisses me, her hair falling in a curtain around my head, "are incapable of being boring. That's one of the things I love about you." The smile widens until it practically takes over her face. Turning on her heel, she leaves the room, taking the empty mugs with her.

Oh, God, the room is spinning.

Also, I really want to grab her and throw her down on the bed, dammit.

Plates clink in the kitchen, along with the sound of water running in the sink. At least I have a small reprieve. I look out the bedroom window at the tree line where I stood not so long ago, wondering what her apartment would be like.

"So." Tanner chuckles. "When's the wedding?"

"Fuck off." I glare at him. "How's Shay?"

His face twists. "Bite your tongue. I'd take Everly any day—even if she *was* a gigantic pain in my ass for the past year."

I stare at him. He's one of those people who rambles under pressure.

He'll crack.

"Stop looking at me like that," he grumbles. "Shay is a completely different thing."

"Okay."

He sighs. "She's staying with some deadbeat with a record. I'm keeping an eye on her only because I still feel responsible. Plus, my mother is attached. The end."

"Ah. It's a favor to Mom. Right."

“Stop trying to change the subject by antagonizing me.”

I grab a bottle of water and take a casual sip. “I just asked a simple question.”

“Uh-huh. Do I get to be your best man?”

“Do I look like a wedding kind of guy to you?”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to string that poor, smoking-hot angel along. There are millions of men who’d snatch that right out from under you in a heartbeat. Wouldn’t even care if your dick was still wet.”

My blood pressure rises. “You, my friend, are about five seconds away from needing to run.”

“Just saying.” His eyes sparkle at me like a motherfucker. “You need to do right by that girl. She’s a gem.”

“All right, Grandpa. In this millennium, people don’t have to be married to be in a long-term relationship.”

His laugh is fucking triumphant. “All I heard is you admitting it’s a relationship. And the words *long-term.*”

I throw the water bottle at him, forgetting he used to play baseball.

“Must be love.” Tanner’s voice fades into the distance.

“Yeah,” I mumble absently, staring out the window, watching the trees begin to blur.

Maybe I’m the one fading. Maybe some part of me has disconnected. I’m floating away, somewhere past that tree line and out into the horizon, where there’s nothing but blue.

“Wait…” His voice comes from somewhere distant. “I was joking, kind of. Are you —”

“Hey, can we talk?”

Everly’s voice aims at me from the doorway, and I slam back into my body so abruptly, my wounded shoulder throbs.

Shit.

“Tanner, did you say you were staying at the motel around the corner?” she asks. “How about you check back in with us later?”

“Yep. I’m out.” He excuses himself with a fast wave, disappearing out the bedroom door. “I’m taking the last of these muffins,” he calls, then the front door closes.

And now I’m alone with a woman who wants to *talk.*

“Looks nice outside.” I push myself up on my elbows, gritting back the

strain in my voice. “I think some fresh air would do me good.”

“Absolutely not.” Climbing over me on the bed, she straddles my waist. “I’m not sure who you think you’re fooling, but I’m aware of how hurt you really are.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I can see the pain in your eyes; that’s why I brought these.” She opens her palm, showing me the painkillers, then grabs the water Tanner returned to the side table after I threw it, gesturing for me to swallow them. “And, by the way, if you get out of this bed right now, I’m marching you straight to the hospital. Don’t test me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I can’t focus on anything but the warmth of her body pressing into mine, and with no will left to fight, I collapse back onto the pillows.

Her voice shifts to a gentler tone. “Listen, I’m aware it’s not your favorite thing to talk about, but I think it might be time for us to discuss the dreaded subject of feelings.”

“Mmm, I’m definitely having some feelings.” I push my hips up enough to make sure she feels the same thing.

“Stop distracting me.” She smacks my bicep lightly. “I heard what Tanner said. Now I want to know what *you’re* thinking.”

Well, let’s see: five seconds ago, I was thinking I was turned-on, and now I’m back to thinking I want to vomit. “Do we have to figure this out today? We could take it one step at a time. See how we’re feeling tomorrow, or next week.” I swallow. “Maybe we’ll never have to give it a label. We could wake up one day, and it’ll have figured itself out.”

Fuck, why am I still talking?

“Hmm…” She regards me thoughtfully, holding herself far enough away from my groin that I can’t easily shift the subject to other things. “No, we don’t have to figure this out today, and yes, we can take it one step at a time.”

Oh, thank God.

“But the fact that you said the word *we* five times during that panic-ramble tells me a lot.”

I’m not sure what to say to that. “Does it?”

“Yes. Especially considering it was connected to future dates. It sounds like you think *we* have something you don’t want to end right now.”

“Did you expect me to?”

She rubs her fingers over her forehead, bringing them down to her cheeks. Her body drops against mine.

She looks…thoughtful? Hopeful? Sad?

I don't know, but this time, I don't try to distract her.

"I don't really know what you're thinking, Isaac." Her eyes rove my face, studying me like she's trying to piece together a puzzle. Her hands drop, one trailing lightly over my heart. "I'm not sure what you want, or what you need; if you'll stick around, or disappear into the wind in the next hour. But I know that the thought of it makes me want to cry."

A glossy sheen glimmers in her blue irises.

There's a pang in my chest where her hand rests, and it has nothing to do with the injury.

"Oddly enough, I'm hoping the fact that you seem on the verge of a meltdown is a good sign." Her lips turn up in a half smile. "If you didn't care, you'd just leave without a backward glance. Wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. I guess I would."

"Then I'll take this as a positive." Her fingers thread through my hair, stroking lightly, soothing, moving down to the back of my neck to gently knead the sore muscles there.

"I don't know how to do this, Bee."

"Be together?" She frowns a little. "It's not that difficult. We're doing it right now."

Exhaling, I lift my good arm, gesturing for her to tuck into my side. "For the record, you're the only person I've ever considered doing this with."

She pulls her face to mine, rubbing against the scruff of my beard. "That's a good start."

The ceiling fan circles slowly over our heads, and I stare at it, unblinking, letting it take me into a hypnotic space. "I'm just not sure what you'll need from me. Or what comes next."

Snuggling into my side, she molds her body to mine. "All relationships evolve. The only thing we need to know right now is whether we want to go forward with our lives without the other person in it."

My eyes snap to hers. "I don't."

"Neither do I."

I nod once.

We'll just let it evolve.

Her lips brush against mine, and I press in, sealing our mouths together. My hand tangles in her hair, tugging her head backward. Then I lick a line along her jaw, to her neck, where I nip at the tender skin.

It hits me like an epiphany that should have been obvious all along.

"I was never going to leave tonight," I whisper into her throat.

She hums dreamily, her eyes drifting closed.

"Or tomorrow." My fingers move between her legs, pulling a moan from her. "Or next week."

Or probably…

Ever.

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Five months later

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel as I stare ahead, watching moms with strollers glide over freshly poured concrete as they soak up the Santa Clarita sun. The rain from last night has vanished, but its trace remains in the glistening droplets clinging to baby tree branches under a clear blue sky.

I steal a glance at Allison's bungalow—a fresh stucco build with brown shutters, tucked in a textbook soccer-mom subdivision. It was meant to be her dream come true: a fresh start. A good man by her side and the promise of a family just within reach.

But there's already a "For Rent" sign perched in the front lawn, and the image is a pair of metal pliers clamped around my heart.

Swallowing hard, I cut the engine and slide out of the car. I'm not sure what I'm expecting today. Since everything imploded on that San Francisco runway five months ago, I've only seen Allison once, and it was far from a heartfelt reunion. Jasper's funeral was a somber blur. She was so wrecked with grief that I stayed on the sidelines, managing only a fleeting moment with my former best friend—a bone-crushing hug that still lingers in my chest whenever I close my eyes and hold my breath.

I slipped out early, planning to reach out when the dust had settled, but I

was met with radio silence.

Her mother eventually got in touch, telling me Allison had taken a much-needed getaway to South Africa to stay with her aunt while she recovered and processed the aftermath of our mutual hell.

Understandable. I know what it's like to want to hide.

I also know running is only a bandage for a wound that keeps bleeding underneath. Sooner or later, it seeps through, forcing you to face it head-on.

I walk up the path to her olive-green door, each step heavier than the last. The freshly planted flowers along the walkway are vibrant, almost defiant against the weight of everything unsaid between us. I haven't practiced this conversation, and I'm regretting that now. Words used to flow so effortlessly between us, but now they feel stuck, tangled somewhere between my ribs and throat. Lifting my hand to knock, I hesitate for half a second before letting my knuckles connect with the wood.

The door creaks open, and there she is.

Allison stands in the doorway, her auburn hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. Shadows lurk under her eyes, and she forces a smile that doesn't quite reach. She looks smaller somehow, as if the world has been pressing on her from every angle.

Her gaze meets mine. "You came," she says, the words soft, almost disbelieving.

I nod, trying to steady my voice. "Of course I did."

The tension between us hums like an invisible wire, pulled taut and waiting to snap. But for the first time since the funeral, we're standing face to face.

It's a start.

Before the silence thickens to smothering, I take a step forward because I'm not here to let it grow. "Can I come in?"

She blinks once, twice. Then she pulls the door wider and moves out of the threshold. "Yes…yes, come in. Please."

Cardboard boxes litter the living room, stacked on countertops and dining chairs. My footsteps echo through the near-empty space while my eyes land on a pearly white couch and an adjacent end table. A framed photograph stares back at me: Jasper and Allison, smiling on a sun-drenched pier, their faces pressed close together. Her hair catches the light in a way that makes it glow, while his hand rests protectively on her shoulder.

They look happy. Untouched. Like the world hadn't yet shown its teeth.

The sight freezes me in place.

I glance between the scattered boxes, each labeled in neat black marker —*Kitchen, Books, Bedroom*—all part of a life she's trying to pack away, piece by piece.

"Sorry for the mess," Allison says, stepping to the side. She wipes her hands on her jeans, her smile strained, eyes darting to the photograph on the accent table. "The renters are moving in on May first, and there's still a lot to do. I guess we could have met at a café or something, but —"

"I'm so sorry." My eyes water, emotion creeping up my windpipe. "It's a beautiful house."

"Yeah," she breathes out, faltering briefly. These words are hard, so hard to say. "Someone will be happy here."

I swipe away a loose tear. "Where are your dogs?"

"They're staying with my mom while I pack. It's been easier getting things sorted."

"Are you moving in with her?"

A slight nod. "For a little while, anyway. I need to get back on my feet, and the mortgage here was too much to cover on my bank salary. I'm thinking about relocating somewhere cheaper. I can't fathom downgrading to another apartment. The dogs need a yard to run around in, and I just…" Her eyes glaze over, pain skating across her face. "I'll be okay. Recovery takes time, you know?"

"You know I do." I step closer, twisting my long hair over my shoulder. "If you need help moving, I can fly in at any time. I'm in the process of moving myself. We bought a fixer-upper, about an hour east of San Francisco."

"We?"

"Um, yeah." Clearing my throat, I chew on my cheek. "Isaac. He's…"

Everything.

But I can't get the word out—it doesn't feel right talking about my everything when Allison stands before me, sifting through the shattered remains of *her* everything.

"He's the man I'm seeing," I finish, glancing away. "We met…in captivity."

Her eyes pop. "Oh."

“Not exactly the start of a fairy tale, but things are…good. Really good.” I wait for her to flinch, to back away, to shut down and ice me out. Part of me feels the need to apologize, or at least to soften the edges of my misplaced confession. “I mean, we sort of —”

“I’m so happy for you, Ev.”

My eyes fill with fresh tears. Authenticity laces her words as a smile blooms, shining back at me, real and raw. I steal another glance at the photograph as guilt and relief battle beneath my ribcage. “You’re not alone in this,” I whisper, the words wobbly but pure. My gaze slides back to hers. Heart thumping, I reach for her hand, linking our fingers together. “I’m here for you.”

Her bottom lip trembles as she squeezes my hand. “I never wanted you to be alone, either. *God*—I tried, I tried so hard to reach you, to be there when —”

“I know,” I croak, a geyser of tears spilling free. “I wasn’t ready.”

That’s what makes this so painful.

No one was ready; no one *prepared* for this. This goes beyond apologies and surface-level strain. We’re not the same people.

And yet…we are.

I think about what Queenie said to me once:

“People grow, and people regress. When they grow, they’re becoming a better version of who they already are. And when they regress, it means they’re too scared to grow.”

But people don’t truly change—not at their core, not at their essence. Allison is still Allison, and I’m still Everly. What connected us once is still there. Our experiences and scars have marked us, defined us in ways we can’t undo…but maybe that’s not what matters anymore.

My face crumples as the truth settles in, clearer than ever.

I close the gap.

Her arms extend the moment my feet start to move, and I collapse against her chest, scooping her up into a hard-earned hug.

“I’m so sorry I left.” I hold her tight, tears dampening our collars. “I’m sorry I couldn’t forgive you fast enough. If I had done something different, maybe he’d still be —”

“No.” Allison pulls back, taking my face between her palms. “It’s not your fault. None of this was your fault.”

My grief pours out in gulping, agonizing sobs. “H-he tried so hard to find you…to save you.”

And I watched him die; I watched him bleed out before my eyes. Another fragment of my past, gone with the wind.

I feel guilty. I feel pulverized.

Allison grips me by the biceps, her hands shaking as mascara streaks down her face. “Everly,” she murmurs. “He did the same for you.”

Grief is such a complicated thing.

It can crash over us like a heavy tide, pulling us under, only to release us with a sharp, cruel breath. Sometimes it’s quiet—an unspoken weight that lingers, subtle but constant. It can scream, or it can whisper, reminding us of what we’ve lost and what we can never reclaim. It doesn’t heal.

It teaches.

And in its wake, there’s an unexpected kind of peace—the kind that comes with the painful understanding that some parts of us are meant to stay broken.

I look at Allison, her tear-streaked face still a mirror of the girl I once called my best friend, and I realize I’m not so alone in my brokenness.

“Do you think it’s too late for us?” The question is for her, for the universe, for *me*. I need to know if there’s still a chance to rebuild, to take the jagged pieces of what we had and make something whole—or at least something that doesn’t cut so deeply.

Her grip on my arms tightens, as if she’s trying to anchor both of us in the now. “It’s never too late,” she says. “Not while we’re still here, willing to try.”

Her words are a lifeline, a flicker of hope. I nod, the ache in my chest unbearable but somehow less lonely. “I want to try.”

Her lips curl into a sad, bittersweet smile. “Then we start here.”

It’s not a solution; it’s a beginning.

And for the first time in a long while, that feels like enough.

We drink tea at her kitchen island, seated side by side on two barstools. Our tears dry and our voices strengthen, the stories we share holding a little less weight. She asks me about Isaac, and the truth pours out less guilty this time as I fill her in on what I call our…evolution.

It’s not a picture-perfect romance. What bonded us in the beginning will always remain. Our ghosts won’t scatter, and our pasts won’t dissolve just

because we want them to.

But maybe learning to live with them is the point. Isaac isn't my salvation, and I'm not his. We're something quieter, something steadier—two broken souls learning how to be whole alongside one another, even if the cracks still show.

"It sounds complicated," Allison says, her fingers tracing the rim of her mug. "But also kind of perfect."

"Yeah." I smile. "We just fit, in some strange way. And something tells me we're both in it for the long haul, whatever that may look like."

"Marriage? Babies?" Her brows waggle, her eyes brighter. It's as if my small happiness is infecting her somehow.

My cheeks warm at the notion. "We're not rushing into anything, but…" I fiddle with the hem of my blouse, my fingers brushing my lower belly. "I wouldn't say no to starting a family someday."

I may or may not have settled on a house with a third bedroom, perfect for a nursery—*eventually*.

Allison grins, her dimples glimmering back at me. "The world needs more spider enthusiasts. Get 'em a magnifying glass and one of those bug-catching kits as soon as they can crawl."

I laugh, our words trailing off as we sip our tea and simmer in the silence that feels more like a familiar embrace than a chasm. And when morning gives way to afternoon, Allison discards our mugs in the sink and glances at me from the other side of the island.

A smile hints.

She leans over to the Alexa and says, "Alexa—play 'The Scientist' by Coldplay."

For one brutal heartbeat, my throat narrows, chest tightening. I close my eyes, sinking into ancient, dark memories. But as the first notes crest and my friend meets me at the edge of the kitchen, a warm familiarity takes over. Something inherently sweeter.

Allison's eyes glitter with fresh tears. "Dance with me?"

I rise, the space between us shrinking in a silent, knowing pull. As she steps into my arms, I'm taken back to a moment when we were sixteen years old.

The living room morphs into a theme-park backdrop.

A lifetime ago.

Innocence and living.

People sing along beside us, dancing, laughing under the smoldering sun, while we cling and sway and make music that reaches deeper than any note or melody.

The living room hums with the soft rhythm of our tear-filled laughter, echoing with the same lightness that filled those carefree days. Our favorite song weaves through the air like a thread connecting us to the moment—then and now—reminding me that even the hardest struggles can lead to something beautiful.

Not all walls are unbreakable.

Not all walls are forever.

Some just need a little time to crumble and a little hope to tear them down.

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“…and then Ariel, halfway through her set, grabbed a rookie’s phone, took a selfie with it, and sent it to his mom with the caption, ‘Having a great time, thanks for the birthday money, Janet!’”

I snort coffee through my nose. “Oh, my God. I feel so out of the loop.”

Mom laughs beside me, shaking her head at Queenie’s ongoing strip-club tales.

“That’s why you’ve got me, Angel Baby. I’ll always bring the tea, whether you’re on my payroll or not.” Queenie leans back in the patio chair and slings back a midday mimosa. “But I can’t say we don’t miss you fiercely. Len has been sulking for weeks.”

“I miss Len,” I muse. “I miss everyone.”

“No need to be a stranger. We’re only an hour away from your new place.”

My mother pulls the tomatoes off her BLT like some kind of monster. “Everly, maybe you can throw a housewarming party once you’re settled. Say the word and I’ll make the drive up here again. You know I have a few plants that need rehoming.”

I do know; she sent me a panorama photograph of her living room that doubles as a greenhouse. Then my nose wrinkles at the thought of hosting a housewarming party.

The guest list flashes through my mind: me, Isaac, a Los Angeles police detective, my traumatized best friend, a handful of strippers, and my mother

with her small army of ferns.

"I'll bring over the snake plant, the jade, and definitely that monstera," Mom continues. "It'll really brighten up your space."

"I appreciate that, but we're still in the renovation stage." Just what I need, plants that could probably survive an apocalypse while I'm still trying to remember if I watered myself today. I stir my iced coffee with a plastic straw and watch the ice cubes clink. "We haven't even picked out paint colors yet."

"Do you need furniture? Décor, wall art, kitchenware?"

"I think we're all set."

"What does Isaac like?"

I refrain from saying, *my vagina*. "We're both kind of minimalistic. Less is more."

Queenie hums with appreciation. "You scored yourself a good one. My second husband was a hoarder."

"Andre, right?" Mom inquires, her eyes flashing with old memories. "He had that commemorative ketchup packet shrine."

"Man couldn't throw away a single packet from 1987 to 2003." Barking a laugh, Queenie swallows the rest of her mimosa. "Still leagues above Darrell and his emotional support mannequin."

They both cackle, shouting in unison, "Margaret!"

As the two women play catch-up, I check the time on my phone. Isaac dropped me off at the café an hour ago while he left to go run errands in the city.

Errands.

The word sounds way too domesticated. Realistically, he's probably lurking around a 7-Eleven, giving the store clerk the kind of stare that makes people confess to crimes they didn't commit.

I nibble on my croissant, watching pedestrians drift past the San Francisco café as the sun pours down like a golden spotlight. A smile tugs at my lips, and I close my eyes, soaking in the warmth. There was a time I missed the sun more than anything. Then came the time I resented it—the glow made everything feel too bright, too perfect, like a happiness that couldn't hold.

Now, I let it wash over me without expectation, taking what it offers. The world keeps moving, and I've learned to move with it, even when the light

fades.

"What are you doing for work now, honey?" Queenie asks me, dabbing her lips with a napkin and leaving a ruby kiss behind.

Tugging on my ponytail, I straighten in the chair and stretch my smile. "I got a part-time job at a native wildlife sanctuary."

"Spiders?" Mom wonders, her eyes wary.

"One. A giant, hairy tarantula, much bigger than Festus." I grin when she winces, then glance down at the table. "Also…I just enrolled in a forensic science program at the community college."

Mom drops her sandwich and gapes at me. "What? You didn't tell me."

"I signed the paperwork yesterday." I chew on my lip, unable to tamp down the excitement whizzing through me. "I figured it's never too late to pivot."

She blinks half a dozen times, processing. "Forensics? After everything you've been through?"

"Yeah. If any good has come from my experience, it's that I have a newfound appreciation for how the smallest details can make the biggest difference. So much can be hidden in plain sight—a single piece of evidence can unravel a whole story." My eyes glaze over, adrenaline buzzing in my chest. "I spent years analyzing every little thing that could've gotten me out of that situation. Now I want to use that focus for something more… productive. I want to help others find answers."

Queenie and Mom share a glance, their faces tenderizing before they both look over at me. My mother's eyes water. She nods, reaching for my hand and squeezing gently.

Her dragonfly ring still rests on her finger, shimmering under the California sun—*resilience and change*, she told me.

Queenie sighs, clicking her tongue. "Always knew you were meant for big things. You live your life the same way you tell your stories: unapologetically."

I fold my hands in my lap, my attention panning between the two strongest women in my life. Both mothers in their own way, both guiding lights. "It's how I was raised."

A familiar engine roars up beside us, and I glance left, catching sight of a rust-colored Jeep. My chest sizzles like a firecracker. It's hardly been six months, and my physical reaction to seeing Isaac Porter in the flesh has never

waned, not for a second.

Cheeks warm and pulse fluttering, I watch as he hops out and shuts the door, strolling behind the vehicle and finding my eyes across the sidewalk. The smallest smirk ticks up his mouth as he wedges a hip against the Jeep's rear and folds his arms, watching me from a few yards away.

I know that look.

There are suspension ropes in the trunk.

Mom clears her throat, pulling me from the invisible current crackling between Isaac and me on a downtown city street. Queenie whistles under her breath.

Flustered, I reach for my iced coffee and chug half of it. "What?" I say through the swallow.

"King Kong is looking at you like he just found his new favorite skyscraper," Queenie mutters with a wink.

Mom's lips press into a thin line, but her eyes gleam with amusement. "I hope you warned him you're not exactly a damsel."

I chuckle. "Pretty sure he figured that out when I made him carry my groceries up three flights of stairs."

"Good man."

I wave at Isaac, summoning him over to the café patio. Begrudgingly, he looks both ways, almost like he's searching for the nearest escape route.

Not much has changed.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Isaac enters through the gate, rifling his fingers through his hair and pausing a few steps from the table. He sends a nod to my mother and Queenie, then stuffs his hands into his pockets, shuffling from foot to foot.

Smiling widely, I reach for my purse and pull out a wad of bills, tossing them onto the table. "That's my cue," I say, standing from the chair. "I'm so glad we could do this today. I really needed it."

Mom jumps to her feet, drawing me into a firm, motherly embrace. Her necklaces and bracelets jangle as she clutches me, smoothing a hand through my hair. "Love you, sweetheart. I'm so proud of you."

I close my eyes and savor the moment. "Love you, too."

"I'll be staying with Queenie for the weekend. Allison is watching the animals."

"Give her the biggest hug for me when you get back."

“You know I will,” she says, inching away. “Let us know if you need help with the move.”

I nod. “Don’t have too much fun without me.”

The two women exchange a mischievous glance. “With the amount of tequila on the menu, we won’t remember much of it.”

Laughing, I move away, blowing a kiss to Queenie as she raises her empty glass in my direction. Isaac grabs me by the hand the moment I’m close enough, linking our fingers together. His rough, calloused palm cradles mine and I sink into the warmth, the undeniable connection.

I peer up at him, a light breeze making my ponytail catch flight. “Hey. I missed you.”

We saunter onto the sidewalk and stroll past his Jeep, heading toward the downtown district that’s teeming with families and shoppers. Isaac glances skyward, squinting at the sun. “I know.” Then he looks down at me, his features softening as he scans my face, my dreamy-eyed expression, as my tongue pokes past my lips. “You’re trouble, you know that?”

I grin, tilting my head. “Oh, yeah? What kind of trouble?”

He leans closer, his voice dropping low. “The kind I can’t seem to stay away from.”

“Good. Sounds like my plan is working.”

His lips twitch in that almost-smile of his, the one that melts me every time.

These little moments are everything these days: the wind in my hair, children laughing, birds singing from treetops, the salt breeze on my skin.

His hand in mine.

I take nothing for granted anymore. I know, more than most, that these precious seconds are what stitch the canvas of life together. Tiny, fragile pieces that might seem small on their own, but together—they make us whole.

Pausing on the sidewalk, I pull my hand from his and point at the building signage on my right. It must be fate. “Oh! Pitstop.”

He frowns, his gaze following my finger. “Really?”

“I promised, right?”

His eyes dim for a beat, glazing over with memory, before sparking back to life. He waves me off, nodding.

I return ten minutes later, finding him right where I left him, leaning back

against the brick siding. Tossing him a pack of cigarettes from the adjacent convenience store, I hold up my other treasure and waggle my eyebrows. “Ready to try it?”

“Do I have to?”

“It’s our thing. You bring the bubble tea, and I bring the cigarettes.” I shrug. “I saved you a trip and grabbed both.”

Grumbling, Isaac snatches the pink drink from my hand and takes a sip. His face immediately sours as he ingests the strawberry milk tea. “Disgusting, as predicted.” He hands me back the giant plastic cup. “Enjoy your sludge.”

With a chuckle, I watch him flip the cigarette box open a few times, drawing one out, then pushing it back inside. “What were you up to while I was at lunch?” I ask, slurping from my straw.

Isaac hums under his breath. “If I tell you, I’d spoil my very specific plans for later.” He glances back toward his Jeep and tucks the pack of cigarettes into his pocket. “Maybe I got you something, too. Your birthday is coming up.”

My eyes round through a gasp. “I knew there were suspension ropes in your trunk.”

“Along with gags and zip ties.”

I bite my lip and smile, stepping toward him. Swallowing, I clasp his face with both hands, finding his gaze and watching as the gold flecks flicker, swirling with brown. “Weird way to say you love me.”

His eyes shimmer with affection and heat as he reaches for me, tugging me close. Then he rests his chin on the top of my head and inhales deeply, pressing a kiss to my hair. “I tolerate you.”

“Yeah,” I whisper back, sliding into the warmth of his arms, knowing I finally found my place. My home. It’s more than four walls—more than a box on the ground, or a roof over my head. It’s the steady beat of his heart against mine. It’s safety and chaos, comfort and fire.

It’s him. It’s us.

“I tolerate you, too, Isaac.”

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"Sorry I'm late." Everly rushes through the door, a large plastic cup in one hand, and a bag of groceries in the other. "I had to rescue a taran—" The word cuts off in a gasp as I close in from behind, slipping a scarf across her eyes.

"Shh…" Wrapping my arms around her, I nip at her earlobe, letting her know she's safe. "I have a surprise for you."

While I'd love to play with the adrenaline rush, I *don't* want to play with PTSD.

Her body relaxes against mine, warm and pliant. I don't think I'll ever get enough of the way she hands herself over to me so readily. She's strong enough to get by on her own—hell, she could probably survive fucking Armageddon at this point—but when I ask her to trust me, she doesn't hesitate.

No matter what I throw at her.

I plan to explore that with some of the supplies I picked up in town the other day while she was visiting her mother and the woman who owns the strip club. But that's further down the agenda.

Bending her knees just enough to lower the groceries to the floor, she keeps the cup held out in front of her. "Can you set this somewhere safe?"

"There's a spider in here, isn't there?" I take it from her, barely able to make out a large brown lump through the plastic. "Shouldn't they be hibernating?"

Disoriented from the blindfold, she stays still, giving a slight nod. “An employee at the store I stopped at found her hiding in the stockroom. I thought I’d get her to the sanctuary where she can be released in time for mating season later in the year.”

Shortly after we decided to get out of the city, a great deal came up on some acreage in a rural area in the foothills of Mt. Diablo, also known as a hotspot for tarantulas during the fall. Needless to say, Everly can’t wait for September.

I set the spider on the kitchen counter—because we’re a really strange couple—and return to the girl waiting blindfolded, at my mercy. Taking her hands in mine, I lead her to the wall separating the living and dining areas of the century-old house we closed on two weeks ago. Thick plaster and about fifty coats of paint divide the rooms, and after verifying that it wasn’t load bearing, I decided we didn’t need it. There’s a sledgehammer leaning there, since I’ve been working on renovations while she was gone.

I wanted to wait to do this with her.

“Should I be naked?” she asks, when I have her positioned.

It almost makes me laugh out loud; she knows me too well. And now, the thought of her naked tempts me to abandon my plans. *But*… “I hate myself a little for saying this, but not just yet. Probably isn’t the safest.”

“Okay…” She draws out the word, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth. “Should I be worried?”

Situating myself behind her, I wrap one arm around her, pick the sledgehammer up with the opposite hand, and bite down on her shoulder. “What do you think?” When she grins, I kiss the bite marks. “I have something for you to hold. It’s heavy, so be ready.”

She snickers with innuendo.

“You’re worse than I am.” I loosen my grip around her waist long enough to smack her on the ass. Then I reach around her, place the handle in both her hands, and lift the blindfold.

She glances at the hammer, then turns her head to look at me, the question reflected in the downward pull of her eyebrows.

“I think we need a more open floor plan. Want to do some demolition?”

Her face lights up, snapping back to the tool. “Oh, hell yes.”

“That’s my girl.” I back off to the side by several feet, giving her room to wield the hammer. “Have at it.”

Lifting it as high as she can, she pauses, blinks—then takes a Herculean whack at the wall.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

And *again*.

The wall absorbs her fury with varying cracks, chips, and dents, each swing punctuated by an endearing little growl. It doesn't take long to realize my mistake: Everly's determined as hell, but at five foot two and barely over a hundred pounds, she's not exactly built for busting through reinforced plaster. The house fights back and sweat begins to dot her hairline.

She doesn't stop. Her expression is a storm of power, anger, and frustration—a relentless fusion that drives her to keep swinging, even as her arms tire and tears threaten. She's too stubborn to quit, which is exactly why I step in, moving behind her, chest brushing her back. I cover her hands with mine, steadying her grip.

"Mind if I join you?" I whisper against her ear.

Breathing hard, she gives a small nod, fingers tightening around the handle.

I've got my own issues with walls.

Together, we hammer, strike, and wail against it, turning dents into holes, then gaps large enough to catch glimpses of the dining room beyond. The air cools, but sweat drips down my back. Everly's panting, charged with something beyond sheer effort.

It's a *release*.

This is what I hoped for. Because while I might be useless at expressing myself in words, I know how to read people—*her*, most of all. I've watched her fingers skim the worn white walls of this place, seen the way her palm lingers there, like she half expects an answer from the other side. Like the surface is both an enemy and a friend.

With a good chunk of the wall gone, I back up and let her decide whether she wants to continue without me. She's built her own momentum now, and I watch her for a minute as she grunts and growls, gaining a second wind that drives the hammer in harder.

Fuck, that's sexy.

There's a case of water bottles sitting on a box in the dining room, so I go

to retrieve one for each of us.

While I'm in there, she has a breakthrough.

Literally.

The sledgehammer busts through, followed by a huge chunk of plaster that falls to the floor near my feet, breaking into pieces. Now, there's a gap about the size of a child.

Almost there.

She keeps at it. The hole becomes larger until it's big enough to fit through. Cracks, wood splinters, and her growls of effort echo through the space. Any minute now, I expect to see a mane of hair covered in powdery white plaster emerge triumphantly from the hole and join me on the other side.

But those growls have turned into something more. Something heavier.

Her swings slow, her breaths hitch. The sledgehammer slips from her fingers, hitting the floor with a heavy thud. Dust hangs in the air like a cloud, and I look through the opening in the wall in time to see her crumble.

Shit.

I frown, peering through the jagged gap. "Bee?"

Her eyes swim with tears, spilling over to soak the edges of her hair. She stands there, shoulders trembling, her hands pressed to her knees, and she looks up at me like she's never seen me before.

"Hey," I whisper from the other side.

She shakes her head. Covers her mouth with her hand.

A sob breaks from her.

I step through the opening without hesitation, closing the distance between us.

Her knees buckle, and I catch her as she sinks into me, her sobs muffled against my chest. I hold her tightly, one arm around her shoulders, the other cradling her head as she finally lets it all out. I feel her chest rise and fall in sharp bursts as the emotions erupt—years of weight she's carried breaking free like the wall itself.

It kills me to watch, but I know she's not falling apart.

She's freeing herself.

Everly looks up as I hold her, a choked sound slipping through her tears. "I didn't think it would feel like this."

"Like what?" I ask, brushing a strand of plaster-coated hair from her face.

“Like I can breathe again.” Her voice trembles, but there’s something in it—hope seeping through the cracks. More words pour out like a flood, years of silence and captivity spilling from her lips. “I used to sit there,” she chokes out, motioning toward the wall. “Staring at it, dreaming about what was on the other side. Wishing I could just walk through it. But I couldn’t. I *couldn’t.*”

I gather her closer, tucking her against my chest. She doesn’t collapse so much as let go, melting into me like she’s finally safe.

Her voice trembles. “And when you were there, when I knew you were in the next room…” She lets out a breathless laugh, shaky and raw. “I wanted to *scream*. I wanted to tear that whole damn place apart. But I didn’t. I just…sat there. I let him win, day after day, year after year.”

“No,” I say sharply, gripping her face, forcing her to meet my eyes. “You survived. You fought in ways he couldn’t see. You outlasted him, Everly. You’re standing here now because you’re stronger than he ever was.”

Nodding frantically, she clutches the back of my shirt, more laughter bursting from her lips. A smile breaks free like a hard-won victory. “I’ve held on to it all for so long.”

“And now you’re letting it out,” I mumble into her hair. “It’s over.”

Her tears soak my shirt, but I can feel her breathing steady, feel the tension ebbing from her frame. Both arms tighten around me, and she whispers it back, like a promise. “It’s over.”

When she finally pulls away, her face is streaked with tears and dust, but her eyes… They’re alive, shimmering with something fierce and untamed. She swipes at her cheeks and looks back at the gaping hole in the wall.

“I thought breaking it down would be the accomplishment,” she says, her voice soft, steady. “But it’s this. It’s just…this.”

I rest my forehead against hers and smile. “Fuck yes, it is.”

She tilts up and kisses me; deep, hard, and unrelenting. And when she pulls away, her gaze lingers on the wreckage behind us. She stares at it like the wall isn’t just broken—it’s gone.

And in its place, there’s a door.

“What are you thinking for career day?” Sara appears next to me wearing a flannel shirt and rainbow-striped Converse. Ribbons loop in bows at the ends of her braids, the same color as that stupid toy guitar she carries everywhere.

“Nothing.” Snatching the crumpled brochure out of her hands, I plop down on the curb with the comic I just picked up: Batman and Captain America.

My mother laughed at me when she saw the flier I brought home from school.

“She’s wrong, you know. No one can predict what you’ll be in the future. You can do whatever you want.”

I scuff my feet across the pavement. “You wouldn’t say that if you knew where I came from.”

“I do know.” Her fingers strum an off-key chord across the instrument’s plastic strings. “She told me.”

“She told you?” No…she wouldn’t. “You’re nine.”

“She said you’re not really my brother.”

I let the air out of my lungs. “That’s ‘cause I’m not.”

“Then you’re both wrong.”

I go back to reading while Sara pretends to play the guitar, but I can’t focus, and after several minutes, I pick the paper up and glance at it. “There’s nothing on this list I’d want to do, anyway. Might as well forget it.”

“You know what I think.” She nods at the comic book draped across my lap.

“Superhero isn’t a real career.” I roll my eyes.

“What about a police officer? You could still catch the bad guys.”

A humorless laugh bursts out of me. “Cops would hate me.”

“Why?”

“Because my father’s in prison. There’s probably some kind of background check.”

“Oh.” She plucks one string on the guitar, over and over, until it finally snaps, smacking her in the face. “Shit.”

Her eyes go wide, and she looks at me in horror. We burst out laughing.

The energy shifts when a line of bicycles passes in front of us—a group of kids she knows from school, calling to her to come to the playground. She waves, getting up to follow.

But at the last second, she freezes. Whirls.

“A private investigator! That’s what you should be. You could solve mysteries. That wouldn’t require a background check.” Then she grins. “But if you ever need a sidekick, you know where to find me.”

There’s a flurry of activity in the branches of the aspen tree in front of the house. I’ve been sent out here to make sure Mr. Binkers isn’t harassing the birds Everly saw building a nest earlier.

It might have also been because I couldn’t keep my hands off her while she was cooking.

Nearby, some wildflowers sway with the breeze. I walk over and pull one —a single, long stem topped with a cluster of purple flowers heavy enough to make it droop. Everly would probably like these.

Wait… What the hell is happening to me?

I drop the flower.

Then I think of her smile, and I pick it back up, along with five more.

Another barrage of chatter erupts from above. The black cat we brought with us has definitely caused a stir among the local wildlife, but his attention is on something much bigger: several horses from the neighboring ranch, grazing casually in our yard, like they don’t give a shit about the concept of boundaries.

Honestly, they were part of what attracted us to the place.

Binkers stares at the enormous animals for a minute, then turns to me and blinks: *The fuck is this?*

I shrug. “You’ll get used to them, Binks.”

As he saunters past the unhappy tree dwellers, a bright, jewel-blue head pops out of a hollow in the trunk.

She didn’t tell me there were bluebirds.

“Oh, blue dicks.”

I look up at the sound of Everly’s voice. She’s radiant; flushed from the heat of the stove, wiping her hands on her spring dress, her purse draped over one shoulder.

“Uh…what?” *Did she say dicks?*

She nods at the flowers in my hands, laughing lightly. “That’s actually what they’re called.”

“Ah.” Clearing my throat, I hold the handful out, passing them to her.

“Thought they might look nice on the counter, next to your spider.”

She gives me a mock gasp, but the way her smile glows makes my heart beat a little differently. “Isaac Porter, are you giving me *flowers*?”

“Don’t make a big deal about it.” I chuckle. “It does figure I’d pick something called blue dicks.”

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, looking up at me through a fringe of eyelashes as she holds them under her nose. “Thank you,” she whispers.

It makes me wonder why I thought giving a woman flowers would be so terrible. I can’t remember now.

She tucks the flowers into the top of her purse, so the heads stick out, and loops a finger through her ring of keys. “I’ve got the chicken and vegetables together, but I got so distracted by the tarantula, I forgot the pie crust. I’m going to run out really quick. Do you mind stirring the pot on the stove occasionally?”

“Sure, I’ll head inside in a few minutes. Just enjoying the air.”

She hums a satisfied sound, her gaze panning across the field, from the invading horses to the swathe of wildflowers, and over at the birds. The empathy in her eyes tells me she knows what I’m thinking. Her mouth curves up on one side. “She’d love it here, I bet.”

“Yeah.” The word gets stuck in my throat.

It’s something I think about sometimes—what it would be like if my sister were here to see my life now. Because the truth is, if she’d never been taken, I wouldn’t have ended up in that room on the other side of the wall from the woman I share my life with now. I wouldn’t have been able to destroy the vilest evil I’ve personally encountered, with my bare hands and a piece of broken glass.

One action started a domino effect that couldn’t be taken back, and it changed everything. But no matter the good that came out of it, she’s still gone.

I’m not sure I’ll ever say all that out loud. I don’t think I need to.

The male bluebird serenades us, cocking his head at the female as she works on their nest.

Warm arms wrap around me from behind, a soft body pressed to my back. “She’d be proud of you.”

I nod slightly.

Without my sister's loss, how many other lives would have been taken? How many families would be missing someone?

You were never my sidekick, Sara. You were the catalyst.

"I won't be long," she says softly, standing on her toes to kiss me on the cheek. Her hands drag down my arms, threading through my fingers for a minute, before they drop. "See you soon."

As she walks to the Jeep, the female bluebird takes off from the hollow, zipping ahead of her in a sky-hued blur.

Everly starts the vehicle, rolling the windows down to give me a wave. The stereo kicks on, playing a cover of the song she's had on loop—fitting, given our four-legged neighbors who seem to prefer grazing in our field over their own.

The lyrics reach me, a reminder that the people who truly love you won't leave. Not for being broken, and not for being bitter. Nothing will drag them away.

Not even when it seems like they're gone.

As the male bluebird follows his mate, I watch the woman I love pull down our long gravel driveway, raced by a gold palomino with a cream-colored mane.

My whisper is lost in the wind.

"See you soon."

EPILOGUE

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, 2125

"Hey, Grant."

I look up from the table, where I've been sketching a skull, using a real model that sits in the center.

This place is so cool.

John Richards, a senior lab tech, stands in the doorway of Dad's office. "I've got that last run of DNA results you asked for."

My father spins away from the computer, looking over the top of his glasses. "An email would have sufficed. You didn't need to come all the way up here from the basement."

"I was on my way out. Besides, I see you brought our favorite future scientist." John waves at me. "Heard you had an ordeal. Glad you're okay."

I smile back. This sling is a pain, but I'd go through it again just to be able to skip school and hang out here.

While Dad looks over the printout, John slips a latex glove over his hand, turning the now-empty hourglass over on the desk, giving it a cursory examination. "The ashes came out of this?"

Ashes?

Dad hums a confirmation, rubbing his chin. Then he turns back to the computer and compares the results to a page on his screen. I've been trying to let him work, but I'm dying to know.

"Looks old. Where did you get it?" John holds it up to the light, looking through the glass. "Crime scene?"

Dad gestures to me. “Aiden fell on top of it. It was out in the back of our property, buried in an old cellar where the original house once stood. No one’s gone digging through there in years. I thought everything had been cleared out.”

“Interesting heirloom. Ashes in place of sand, huh?”

He didn’t tell me that.

“Indeed,” my father replies. “Dates back a hundred years or so.”

“And your property…it’s been passed down through your family for several generations, right?”

“Long time, yeah.”

John sets the hourglass down carefully. “So, it could be cremated ancestors, or a family dog?”

“Neither. They’re human, but I ran them against my DNA and it’s not a family member.”

Human ashes?

Practically vibrating, I jump out of my chair and rush to look over his shoulder. “You can tell that for sure?”

“Back when these ashes were bottled up, it would have been hard to get concrete results. But technology has come a long way. I’m ninety-nine percent sure the deceased isn’t anyone related to us.”

“Who do they belong to, then?”

Dad slides his chair over so I can see his screen. “Well, I had a suspicion based on some stories passed down through our family, so I’ve been digging through police archives and found a DNA match to some blood from a case a century ago. A guy who committed some terrible crimes. Black-market stuff. He was presumed dead, but the body was never recovered.”

My eyes feel enormous, like I’m trying to take every bit of information in through them all at once. “So, does this mean *we’ve* recovered it? On our property?”

My heart races.

I found it. Me. I did that.

“Looks like a possibility. A small part of it, at least.”

“Are we going to be famous?”

He chuckles. “I don’t know about that. But it’s kind of cool, huh?”

“Really cool.”

John leans back on the desk, looking at all the evidence like he still can’t

quite figure it out. “So, just so I’m following this: there’s an old cellar that used to be part of a house at the back of your family property, that contained the remains of a very bad man lost to history a century ago?”

“Yeah.” Dad pulls up some pictures from another website. Old case files. “My great-grandfather made a name for himself by bringing down some notorious criminals. From what I’ve been told, he was a little, uh…*different.* Finding something like this on our property isn’t the most shocking thing I’ve heard.”

A laugh bursts from my dad’s co-worker. “You spend your days talking to bones. Most people would call *you* different.”

Dad smiles. “Right, so it means something coming from me.”

I like that he’s different. Most kids’ parents are boring.

“You think there are more bodies back there?” I hop from foot to foot. “Can we dig around?”

“Wow, the apple really didn’t fall far from the tree, did it?” John looks between the two of us, clearly amused, and heads for the door. “See you next time, Aiden.” Then he peers over my head and nods at Dad. “Good luck with this kid. He’s going to keep you on your toes.”

My attention is back on the hourglass. I *knew* it held a mystery. “Can we keep this, too? Since it was on our property?”

“We’ll see. With the remains found in it, and the DNA they were connected to, it’s going to stay here for now.” He angles his chin toward the box we found it in. “I’ll let you bring that home, though. You did a great job cleaning it up.”

Sliding it off the desk, he places it in the crook of my arm.

Dad hangs his lab coat by the door and unrolls his sleeves. “Ready to head out? Your mom will have dinner waiting. I’ll let you tell her everything we discovered.”

Nodding, I cradle the box carefully. It’s in much better shape now, but it’s still old.

He even located the manufacturer: a long-closed store out of San Francisco that once specialized in custom jewelry and gifts. They made the hourglass necklace, too; I really hope we can bring that home someday. It would make the perfect centerpiece in the collection of artifacts found on our property.

Oh well. At least I have this.

Dad locks the door behind us. Since he's in charge of this department, he's lucky enough to have his own office. Maybe, when he retires, I'll get to take it over.

As he walks ahead down the hall, stopping in a doorway to say goodnight to some techs working late, I glance at the silver nameplate on his door, imagining my first name in place of his: *Aiden Porter, PhD.*

Turning to give me one of his half smiles, his eyes glimmer. He knows exactly what's in my head. This work has been in our family for generations, in one way or another, and I know he had the same dreams when he was my age. That's why he doesn't bother hiding the gruesome stuff from me.

With my good arm, I hold the box to my chest, just like I did the night I found it in that deep, dark hole. Thanks to Dad's tools, decades of crusted mud have been cleaned, the intricate engravings now as clear as I imagine they were the day they were carved.

Turns out, it doesn't say *FOREVER.*

It says:

FOR EVERLY.

THE END.

We aren’t done yet.
Two more stories are planned in this world.
You got to know one of the heroes well...but can you guess the other hero?

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With all our gratitude,

Jennifer + Chelley

MORE BOOKS BY JENNIFER HARTMANN & CHELLEY ST CLAIR

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June First
The Wrong Heart
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Catch the Sun
An Optimist's Guide to Heartbreak & A Pessimist's Guide to Love
Claws and Feathers
Entropy (co-written with E.R. Whyte)

PLAYLIST

Listen to the *Irreversible* playlist **HERE**

“Time For People” – Atomship
“Stranger Ways” – Anberlin
“The Pit” – Silversun Pickups
“Familiar” – Agnes Obel
“Wasteland” – 10 Years
“Run Baby Run” – The Rigs
“Every Day Is Exactly The Same” – Nine Inch Nails
“Wild Horses” – The Sundays
“Innocent” – Fuel
“Circadian Rhythm (Last Dance)” – Silversun Pickups
“6 Underground” – Sneaker Pimps
“Every You Every Me” – Placebo
“(Don’t Fear) the Reaper” – Keep Shelly In Athens
“The Scientist” – Coldplay
“Possession” – Sarah McLachlan
“In the Air Tonight” – Jon Howard
“Dots and Dashes (Enough Already)” – Silversun Pickups
“Bells in Santa Fe” – Halsey
“Kiss Me” – Rob Vischer
“Withered” – Atomship

“Rain” – Sleep Token
“Human” – The Cinematics
“Blindfold” – Sleeping Wolf
“Something Better” – The Broken View
“Closer” – Kings of Leon
“The Kill (Bury Me)” – Thirty Seconds To Mars
“Always” – Erasure
“Separate Ways (Words Apart)” – Daughtry, Lizzy Hale
“Remedy” – Thirty Seconds To Mars
“The Scientist” – Beth

ABOUT CHELLEY ST CLAIR

Chelley St Clair writes love stories with emotional grit, often featuring broken, morally questionable characters who find their way to redemption.

Obsessed with learning and trying everything, she's had careers ranging from gang intervention to zookeeping. After decades of collecting unusual experiences, she found her calling as a writer, weaving bits of everything into imaginary worlds. Living in Tennessee, nature and the Southern U.S are frequently at the heart of her work.

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ABOUT JENNIFER HARTMANN

Jennifer Hartmann resides in northern Illinois with her own personal romance hero and three children. When she is not writing angsty love stories, she is likely pondering all the ways she can break your heart and piece it back together again. She enjoys sunsets (because mornings are hard), bike riding, traveling, bingeing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reruns, and that time of day when coffee gets replaced by wine. She loves tacos. She also really, really wants to pet your dog. XOXO.

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