
VAN DOREN
JALON
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CREA REITAN

JALON

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DRAGON FIRE FANTASY

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Jalon

Van Doren

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

FIRST AND FOREMOST, for those in the back – THERE IS CHEATING IN THIS BOOK! (Not between the MCs.) I'm tired of marketing this TW everywhere and then hearing the cries that 'I cAn'T tRuSt ThE aUtHoR because they put cheating in a book with no warning'. Brenda – READ THE AUTHOR NOTES!! Did you get the memo? There. Is. Cheating. Often and a lot.

Moving on.

Welcome to the last and much anticipated full-length book in the Van Doren series! Of course, I saved Jalon for the end. You can't possibly expect anything less.

The first half of this book runs parallel to the contents of the last two/thirds of ***Voss***. I *suggest* reading ***Voss*** first because I do not include the same chapters from Jalon's or Levis' POV that happened in Voss' book (except one). Personally, I don't like this rehashing and therefore, I don't write it in my own books. It feels repetitive and I, personally, always skim those pages/chapters.

Which means, you'll get the gist of what happened if you haven't read ***Voss*** but you're obviously missing some big details. IF you're someone who needs all the details, I suggest re/reading ***Voss***. Again, not entirely necessary because the important parts that are pertinent to Jalon and Levis' story are

here. Most of the action and events that took place in ***Voss*** are talked about but the days in this book happen between the days in Voss' book. Make sense? I'm not skipping the events but they're not the driving force in this story.

Throughout this entire series, I've dropped hints, left easter eggs, alluded to some details, and left entire ass questions wholly unanswered. The time has come to address everything left open. This book is all about answers, second chances, and learning to accept the desire for a different future than the one you thought you always wanted. It's about learning to be selfish sometimes. More than anything, it's about the unconditional love, unwavering support, and validation of being the human you are that the world is missing when preaching about family values.

Family isn't determined by the blood that runs through your veins and the DNA in your body, regardless of what the cult is so desperate for you to believe. The Van Dorens aren't perfect because no one is. They have skeletons like everyone else. They're victims and vigilantes. They're angry and soft. They're human. They're a safe space, no matter who someone loves or how they identify. No matter what mistakes they've made.

The only definition that family has is 'two or more people who love and support each other'. Quite frankly, if you disagree, put down this book and never pick up another Crea Reitan book again. You're not my audience and I don't want or need your support.

There are some dark themes in this book. I'm sure you've figured out by now, the dark and gruesome level shifts between books, depending on who the main characters are. Loren and the two-thirds triplets were darker for very clear reasons. Noaz and Jalon are not quite so dark for very obvious reasons as well.

If you're expecting the bloodbaths you enjoyed in the two/thirds book, you're going to be disappointed. Jalon's job *isn't* contract killing. It's to run an ever-growing empire. That doesn't mean he won't pick up a knife when he needs to. However, be warned that while the Van Dorens carry on the darkness we've grown to appreciate, most of the darkness in this book is second hand removed until we get to the very end and even then, it's far quieter than other books.

Again, this book is about family, secrets, and putting all the pieces that I've left open throughout the series together. It's about unraveling Jalon Van Doren and seeing the human he is and not the legend the world views him as.

All that to say, are you familiar with Dr. Death? Not a villain in a comic book but the serial killer from the 1980s? It's time to meet him and see just how far Jalon will go for the people he loves.

Within these pages, you'll also find the following content: [large] age gap, sons' friend, workplace fuckery, second chance, banter, jock strap obsession, aromantic MC, family, getting caught, hookup to lovers, and sneaking around

Possible triggers: corrupt politicians, attempted murder, graphic beating.

Kinks: breath play.

And of course, this is a love story.

This story features a broad cast of characters which is partially because books live like soap operas in my mind and you *know* there are characters out the wazoo in a soap opera! Some of them will end up in other books.

If anything you just read bothers you, makes you uneasy, or isn't what you're looking for, please do not read this book. Indie authors don't deserve bad reviews because readers read the warnings and ignore them - or don't read them at all. I'm not for everyone and I'll be the first to tell you to go read something else if this doesn't sound like something you're going to enjoy. Otherwise, let's accept being selfish sometimes.

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1

JALON VAN DOREN



THE BEDROOM that Voss turned into a nursery for his newborn son is the same room that he'd had as a kid. Voss was six when the fourth floor of the house was finished. All my kids chose their rooms, and I spent time with each of them as we designed them.

We didn't live here, of course. I took my boys home during school breaks, over holidays, and vacations. I took them without their mother.

Sometimes I wonder, had I brought Martha along on my time with my boys, would I have seen the signs of her abuse sooner? Without her there, my boys didn't have to deal with her. They were my happy sons. They explored the Estate in its various stages of remodeling. They adventured throughout the house as each new room was completed. They played with their slightly older uncles like four more siblings.

And they chose bedrooms that would be all their own. This one was Voss'. He wanted it space-themed but not '*keechee*', as he said. Not the correct pronunciation or usage of the word, but I understood. He didn't want plastic stars on his ceiling and cartoon Martians on glowing planets painted onto his walls. He wanted true art.

He moved out of his childhood bedroom when he was twelve or thirteen, but he didn't move far. Voss began to occupy the room across the hall. He'd outgrown outer space and was discovering his passion for technology. Witnessing him grow and his intelligence expand infinitely has been one of the most rewarding moments of my life.

Now, watching him lie on his childhood bed in his childhood room turned nursery with his brand-new baby in a bassinet pushed to the edge of the bed, a new swell of pride fills my chest.

I've made a lot of mistakes as a parent. A lot. Not small mistakes like working too late and missing a Little League game. Nothing as simple as a broken promise for ice cream that I didn't deliver on. For far too many years, I left my boys in the care of an abusive mother. A woman I put my trust in. Someone I thought shared my same morals and outlook on parenthood.

I thought I'd struck down any deviation from the path I wanted my sons raised on. I'd been clear, leaving no room for misunderstanding or interpretation.

I chose to be with my brothers full time instead of my kids because I thought my kids had at least one parent there who loved them. My brothers no longer had that.

I was blind to reality. I was stretched too thin but unwilling to ask for help. I was juggling too many bowling pins, and they were getting heavy. Something was going to crack.

I wish I'd fallen and not learned that my kids have been verbally and emotionally abused by their mother since Loren was a small child. My kids didn't deserve that. If someone deserved to hurt, it was me for taking on too much. Not my kids, who had done nothing wrong except be born to shitty parents.

Axl makes a quiet sound, and Voss' eyes immediately snap open. He blinks and then sits upright to look into the bassinet. His shoulders relax, and he yawns widely before lying back down. Axl is only twenty-four hours old, and Voss is learning that newborns can be very frightening.

My son falls back asleep almost instantly, and I take a step back from the nursery. I leave the door open because it was open when I approached. We have nannies with pediatric nurse training on rotation for Axl. Not that I think Voss will utilize them much. Right now, their job is to make sure the nursery is always stocked, Axl's clothes and bedding are washed, and to bring Axl a bottle every three hours no matter where he is or who he's with.

I'm not in the least bit surprised to see Mary Sue, one of the nurses, walking down the hall as I think of the nannies. She smiles as she approaches.

A little further down the hall, Doctor Mark steps out of Lorissa's room, shutting the door quietly behind him. When he faces me, meeting my eyes, he smiles. Mark has been my family's doctor for a decade now. Before him, his father had been our family doctor for thirty years. I hope that our family will continue employing the Markaniches for many more generations. They're good people and wonderful doctors.

"She okay?"

"She's fine. Tired and a little sore, but she'll be sound asleep soon enough."

I glance at the door and nod. Mark grips my arm and then continues down the hall, likely retiring for the night to the room he's occupying while on the Estate. I watch Lorissa's door for several minutes, wondering if I should check on her too. Last time I did, she'd already been checked on by half a dozen different staff who had all brought her beverages.

Instead, I wander down the hall aimlessly, admiring the art on the walls as I pass.

Voss didn't announce that he was having a kid. He made an S.O.S. call to his brother when Lorissa was early in her pregnancy and had been abducted by one of the NYC mafia families they'd been working on eliminating.

While the phone call hadn't been for me—I was away at a university engagement—I know my kids. Yes, pregnant women should be protected, and I'm sure he would have done anything in his power to retrieve her unharmed. But he wouldn't have called his brother in for help under the circumstances had the unborn baby not been his.

Even when he brought Lorissa home and called the baby his, I began to realize that he never actually said that the kid was his biologically. Calling a kid yours doesn't mean you created it. It's a small technicality, but one all the same.

I'm now relatively convinced that Axl is biologically Voss'. There have been enough comments and conversations that have led me to believe as much. Axl looks exactly like Loren as an infant, something that disturbed Loren greatly.

The memory makes me smile as I continue down the hall. I don't know where I'm going. I should turn in. It's been a long day. My eyes are beginning to burn. I'm tired. I also feel restless and know I'm not going to fall asleep anytime soon.

Maybe it's the excitement of my first grandson arriving. He's so perfect and beautiful. I never thought I'd love someone as much as I love my grandkids. Emerson may not be my grandkid, but he also is.

I find myself on the first floor using one of the back staircases that leads to the primary kitchen and pause at the scent of food. The spices are distinctly Asian. I can practically taste the soy sauce in the air. Levis?

Sure enough, I find Levis at the stove over a wok. There's also a pot of water on another burner and a whole slew of ingredients lined up on a wooden cutting board beside the stove. The sizzle of the wok, as it sends mouthwatering scents into the air when Levis adds vegetables into the hot oil, has me inhaling deeply.

But my gaze is locked on Levis himself. He's wearing shorts and sandals, but nothing else. The muscles in his back flex and catch the light as he moves. I've spent many hours watching him in the backyard as he practices his Aikido and his wakizashi. Usually from afar. He's hypnotic. The way he moves through the motions is so fluid and beautiful, I have a difficult time looking away.

I'm rarely this close, where I can see the defined lines of Levis' back.

He glances behind him and meets my eyes. Levis gives me a quiet smile because everything about him is quiet. He's not someone who sits in the

background. He’s not someone you’d overlook. He’ll be right there in front of the crowd, his presence loud because he’s beautiful, but his personality is quiet and observant.

“I’m inclined to ask if I woke you, but since your bedroom is on the fourth floor and these walls are well insulated, I don’t think that’s what brings you to the kitchen,” Levis says.

Smirking, I cross the space separating us and look over his shoulder at what he’s making. “You didn’t wake me. I’ve been wandering the house for a while, and the aroma coming from the kitchen drew me in like a stray dog.”

He chuckles. “I made more than enough for two if you’re hungry.”

I’m not sure if I’m hungry, but I nod anyway. I’m also not sure I’ve eaten anything Levis has cooked before. He has no reason to cook since I hire highly trained chefs.

“Did you not eat earlier?” I ask, trying to remember dinner. I think maybe we all skipped dinner with the excitement of Axl’s birth.

“I had a little. I'm craving ramen.” He glances at me over his shoulder. I’m standing very close, but for some reason, I can’t seem to take a step back. “Real ramen. Not the kind that comes with a bag of salty powder.”

I chuckle. “Understood. I can’t remember if I’ve ever tried the *fake* ramen.”

“You’re too bougie for that, Jalon. It’s fourteen cents a bag.” Levis levels me with a demure expression. “Nothing in this house costs less than eight bucks—that includes the eggs in the fridge and the flour in the pantry.”

I open my mouth to argue, but how can I do that when I don’t do my own grocery shopping? “Are you serious?” I ask as I lean forward to reach above the stove. It brings my chest right up to Levis’ back. The hand with his chopsticks pauses briefly before picking up the constant movement of the contents of the wok.

With one hand on his opposite hip, I reach over our heads to grab the kettle from the upper cabinet. Did my heart rate pick up a little? It feels like it’s fast walking.

Maybe because I’m close enough to smell Levis’ skin. To feel his body heat. His body shakes minutely with the movement of his hand attending to the vegetables.

What feels like a whole ten minutes but is probably closer to seven seconds later, I pull down the kettle and step away from Levis. “Is there such a thing as eight-dollar flour?”

“The wealthy will always spend more on basic items than necessary,” he answers.

“Ouch.”

He chuckles. “What else are you going to spend your money on besides bougie flour?”

“There are probably a million things I could spend money on other than bougie flour. Perhaps I need to look at the grocery bills more closely.”

Levis gives me an amused look. I turn my back on him to fill the kettle with water. “Want some tea?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

For a few minutes, we work together in silence. By that, I mean I gather tea fixings while Levis does actual work.

“This might come across as me picking at you, but do you know how to cook?” Levis asks.

I grab the hand towel hanging on the edge of the sink and flick him with it. Levis laughs, and I find that I’m grinning. Have I ever heard his laughter? Real laughter. Not the way he laughs under his breath or his quiet chuckles.

His laughter is wonderful.

“Yes, I can cook,” I say, giving him a glare. I’m not sure I pull it off since he snorts when he meets my eyes. “Admittedly, I haven’t in…” My voice trails off as I try to remember the last time I cooked. “Okay, there was a small window in which I cooked. When my brothers were very young and before I took control of the Estate and Van Doren Technologies.”

“You took over when you were relatively young, didn’t you?” he asks, all joking gone.

I nod. “I did. The year Myro was born. Arath was six; Noaz was three. I had no idea what I was getting into.”

“They didn’t offer it to you,” Levis guesses.

“No. In a way, I don’t think I gave them a choice. The first time I heard them tell Noaz he needed to stop being a baby and cut his hair so kids wouldn’t pick on him, I lost my shit. By the time he was three and my parents were being… awful, I’d already been dealing with their bullshit for four years because Doc Vinny was talking about an autism diagnosis for Oxley and my parents refused to allow it because their children were perfect. This meant Oxley would never have the support he needed in school, but my parents didn’t give a shit. As long as Oxley wasn’t carrying around a diagnosis that would prove he wasn’t perfect.”

“It’s surreal hearing that kind of story about the Van Dorens,” he says.

I pull the kettle from the stove as Levis drops ramen noodles into boiling water. The contents of the wok are off the stove now.

“There are far more skeletons in our closets than you can even imagine,” I admit, though I have no idea why I’m telling him any of this.

I’ve always wanted the world to see that we aren’t perfect like they believe us to be. We’re human. We have flaws. We make mistakes. We’re no different from anyone else.

Yet, I tend to keep these personal struggles to myself.

We’re quiet as we bring our contribution to the counter. Levis sets a bowl of ramen in front of me, and it looks and smells delicious. I offer him tea, which hardly compares.

“What did the house look like when you took over?” Levis asks. “I’ve always been curious since I heard your kids say that you built it ‘*right*’, which leads me to believe it wasn’t anything like this before.”

I shake my head, remembering the hodgepodge of construction and halfhearted corners cut to make it look rich. “I took a video before I started construction. I’m guessing Haze will come across it at some point.”

“You’ve accomplished a lot in a relatively short period of time,” he says.

“That’s what they say.”

“You don’t believe that,” he says, eyes dropping to my use of the chopsticks he provided me. I wouldn’t say I’m anywhere near as good as Levis with them, but I do okay. I do better when I’m not using them with soup. The little upturn at the corner of his mouth says he’s amused, though he doesn’t comment.

“I don’t disagree, but I refuse to be one of those wealthy people who take all the credit for their company’s success, as if any of the actual advancements are theirs to claim. I employ a lot of intelligent people, and yes, while I oversee every department and business venture personally, I rely heavily on my teams. I’m not an expert, but I hire experts.”

Levis is smiling as he chews, his pretty brown eyes trained on me. He doesn’t counter my statement, though I have a feeling he’d like to debate my claim. Most people do. Instead, he changes the subject, and we talk about Axl.

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2

LEVIS LI



I KNOW how fortunate I am to have found myself in a situation where I'm not pressed to begin my career immediately. It's not that I don't know what I want to do. I've found that now that I'm not on a deadline to continue the upward trajectory, I toy with the idea of changing my mind.

My current job is comfortable. I took an internship at Van Doren Technologies just over a year ago. The summer after I graduated college with my bachelor's degree in architecture. I've always had the idea that I'd continue with my master's degree and work my way through entry-level positions until I could open my own firm.

The internship I took opened a whole lot of doors. It probably helped that I moved onto the Van Doren Estate when my friends did, and I'm treated as if I'm a Van Doren myself because of my proximity and relation to the family.

Because of those open doors, I now work with Van Doren Design and Architect—because, of course, they have their own firm—checking codes and structures and licenses. I'm comfortable at my job. I make good money. My bank account keeps getting fatter because, *shockingly*, Jalon refuses to allow me to pay rent for my room or for food.

I don’t work more than my allotted forty hours a week. I have plenty of time for myself, my friends, and whatever hobbies I might want to pick up. I’m content.

Saying I’m content makes my parents ask me if I’m fulfilled. This question is often followed by asking if I’ve started dating someone new.

I can’t say I blame them. Until moving to the Estate, I think I’ve always had a girlfriend since I was twelve. Suddenly, I’m in a dry spell. I tell my parents that it’s my choice to be single right now, but they’re concerned.

I’d like to assure them I’m fine and taking this time to really determine what I want in life. Both in a career and in a relationship. I’d been set to marry Brianna before we moved to the Estate, but when it came time to ask her to join me… I didn’t want to. I didn’t want her here. I didn’t want her to be a part of this life with my best friends and their growing families.

Since then, I’ve dated a little bit but my interest in dating seems to have waned. In my secret heart, my interest in relationships and the vision I always had for my future have become muddled. I no longer know what I want.

I look at Honey Bee and Myro, happy, sassy, and growing. I look at Oakley and his obsessive husband—the way Oakley smiles and laughs and has everything. I look at Haze as he learns to allow someone into his heart and personal space while he figures himself out. I look at Briar building the exact life he’s always wanted. Brek is a little tumultuous again, but he’s not doing badly, either.

I look at my best friends thriving and wonder why I can’t see myself like that anymore. My sister says I’m lost. My parents think I need to come home and reset.

Maybe what I need is to allow myself to reimagine my future and break away from what I thought I always wanted. The more I think about it, the more frequently I talk to my friends about the world surrounding us, the more I feel discontented with the future I worked so hard for, I can’t help but wonder if that’s the goal I’ve always kept because that’s the goal that the world insists leads to a happy and fulfilled life.

Who doesn’t want a happy and fulfilled life? If this is the path, if this is the outcome that assures it, why wouldn’t I make that my end goal?

Maybe that’s not what works for me, and I’m only realizing that as I watch my friends form slightly different futures from each other and from the prescribed definition of happily ever after.

I’m drifting.

I close my eyes and let the two words flutter through my head briefly as I slowly move through my exercises with my wakizashi. Stretching. Reacquainting myself with the lethal extension of my right limb. Feeling myself expand to encompass this attachment and slide into a routine I know too well.

For a while, I let myself settle into the meditative space that practicing my Aikido brings me. Laughter in the distance has me opening my eyes. I’m in the backyard across from the deck where my friends often gather. It usually affords me decent shade this time of day.

Ellory whistles and exaggeratingly fans himself as they all look in my direction. I roll my eyes. For a few minutes, I ignore their presence, but after a while, not even this is enough to distract me from their laughter.

Bending for my water bottle, which, of course, has somehow been replaced with a Van Doren branded water bottle, I take several deep swallows before joining my friends on the deck. All my besties are lounging around with the addition of the two-thirds triplets and Briar’s one-year-old son, Emerson.

I take a seat beside Brek, laying my wakizashi across the armrests of my chair like I’m buckling myself in.

“What’re you making?” I ask Ellory.

He huffs. “A pillow pussy.” His nose crinkles. “There’s a lot going on down there, and honestly, I’m not sure how to replicate it with yarn. A penis is far more straightforward.”

“Pun intended?” Oakley asks.

Ellory tilts his head as he thinks about what he said and then laughs loudly. “No, but what a happy accident.”

“I feel like, for inclusive purposes, I should point out that they’re not all straight. Some curve a little,” Honey Bee says.

Ellory grins. “I’ve seen pictures. It’s been fun working on different patterns to reflect that in crochet.”

“Why are you making a pillow pussy?” I ask.

Ellory huffs. “I promised I would expose Axl to all the genitalia. You know, so I’m not indoctrinating him into preferring one or the other.”

“Indoctrinating him?” Haze asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You know. Spreading the gay agenda! Trust me, if I want to spread the gay agenda, it would be far louder than a cuddle cock,” he says, leaning forward. “*No one* would get away from my messages.”

Honey Bee shakes her head, turning her attention to Briar. “Are we celebrating Emmy’s birthday?”

Emerson is lying on his back on a blanket, absently playing with one of those arch things that has little shapes hanging down. He’s really a contented child.

“We’re talking about it. We knew Axl would be born around his birthday, so we didn’t want to plan something that would take away from Voss’ bonding time with his new baby. I think probably just something small next week. Dinner. Cake. Nothing extravagant.”

“We’ll save that for the second birthday,” Honey Bee says. “Be forewarned. Celebrating Emmy’s existence will be on a very large scale in future years.”

Briar laughs. “Fine. Not this year.”

“Any news on the new baby front?” Honey Bee asks.

Briar shakes his head. “It’s not a short process. It was five years before Noaz got the first call. And after the horror that happened with Emerson… we’re being cautious.”

“I’m a little surprised that Daddy Jalon hasn’t opened an adoption agency in response,” Oakley muses.

“It’s cute you think he’s not working on it,” Ellory says. “Losing Emmy like that terrified Dad.”

“It’s not just that, though,” Avory says. “There’s *a lot* that goes into adoption. Lots of legal shit. It’s not straightforward, and yeah, Dad has his lawyers working on it, but it’s much slower than he thought it would be.”

“I think by the time we’re ready for babies, it’ll be open,” Ellory says.

“What’s the timeframe there?” Brek asks.

Ellory shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m operating on the idea that I’ll just know when I’m ready. Maybe I’m waiting for my ovaries to jump in excitement.”

Honey Bee snorts. “Your knowledge of the female reproductive system horrifies me.”

“No offense, Jessie, but it horrifies me too,” Ellory says, and I think we all laugh. “It’s weird that I feel that way because I don’t feel particularly excited about men’s parts either.”

“You’re gay, though,” Brek says.

“Am I?” he asks, scrunching his face. “I love one person. I’m attracted to one person. My attention has literally *never* strayed anywhere else. There’s a lot of controversy and people complaining about erasure and whatever when it comes to our community—meaning the queer community, and yes, I identify as queer mostly—but for me, if I’m gay, I’m only gay for one man. If I’m straight, I’ve yet to meet a woman I’m interested in. So what does that make me? What’s the word for someone attracted to no one *except* one person, whose gender is honestly indifferent to me?”

“It’s easier to claim gay than explain, though,” Haze says, nodding.

“Yep, exactly. Even in our bigger family, it’s just easier, and I don’t have to get into the nuances, but in all honesty, in all my twenty-eight years, I’ve never met or seen a single person of any gender who’s sparked even a little interest.” Ellory shrugs.

“Except Levis,” Briar teases.

Ellory gives me a big smile. “Nah. I didn’t say I don’t recognize when someone is attractive, though I mostly find them beautiful. Not attractive. Nuance, I know, but it’s important because I don’t *feel* attracted to them. That doesn’t mean Levis isn’t hot.”

We continue this conversation for a long time, and I’m happy to be distracted by it. One by one, the rest of the resident Van Dorens join us on the porch, beginning with Loren. Then Myro and Imry. Noaz and Jalon. Even Voss comes outside with Axl in a little sleeper.

We eat on the deck and talk about whatever. I don’t eat much. I’m not generally hungry around the usual mealtime, which is why I make something for myself three or four nights a week and leave the leftovers in the fridge for whoever wants them. I know someone eats them because they’re always gone when I cook again on another night.

The sun is down by the time we break apart for the night. I watch my friends who don’t live in the big house wander off toward their houses. Noaz, Briar, and Emerson take a buggy. Imry, Haze, Avory, and Ellory go on foot, as do Loren and Oakley, though they’re headed in the opposite direction. Myro follows Honey Bee inside. Voss had gone in a while ago, not wanting Axl in the hot Arizona air too long.

That leaves me, Brek, and Jalon for quite a while. We don’t talk a whole lot. Jalon heads in twenty minutes later, and I wonder if he thinks he’s an intrusion on Brek and I. In the dark, I watch him disappear into the house. Does he look back and meet my eyes, or is that my imagination?

Brek sighs and gets to his feet, stretching his arms over his head. “You going in soon?” he asks.

I nod. “Yep. I might walk around for a bit first. I’m feeling restless. Like I’ve sat too long.”

“Want some company?”

“And listen to you complain about me forcing you to exercise? I’m going to pass, but thanks for the offer.”

He grins.

Once Brek goes inside, I do what I said I was going to do. Since I never leave my wakizashi unattended in the open, I carry it with me as I wander across the field toward the lake. I walk the perimeter of the lake half a dozen times before heading back to the house.

Now I'm hungry. There are a lot of studies that state eating just before bed is not healthy, but this is when I get hungry. I stop in my room to put my sword away and take a shower. Then I make my way down to the kitchen.

I find it amusing that there are kitchens on all the floors, though none of them are as big and decked out as the one on the main floor where the family cooking takes place. It's a cross between huge, chef-grade appliances and home luxury aesthetics.

Personally, the enormous gas stove is my favorite piece in the entire kitchen. I also love that anything I could possibly ask for can be found in the pantry or one of the fridges. Yes, one of. The one in the kitchen itself is a double-sized fridge. But there are two additional in the pantry.

There are also a dozen woks. An entire drawer of chopsticks. All the Asian ingredients I could ever need. Trust me, I've looked for something I don't think they have, and I always find it. Even if that means I leave a note for the kitchen staff asking if they have something. When I return later, I find the note answered with the item sitting on top of it and instructions on where it can be found.

I'm spoiled. I love that I'm spoiled and also dread the day I leave the Estate.

I'm halfway through cooking some easy stir fry when I *feel* Jalon enter the kitchen. He doesn't speak. This time, when he presses against my back to reach for the kettle, I'm expecting it. It doesn't change my body's reaction. My heart skips at the feel of his chest against my back. His breath is hot against my neck, and I shiver as it brushes my skin.

Jalon takes a step back with the kettle in his hand. Before he can get too far, I turn the burners off and spin to face him. He pauses, vivid blue eyes locked on mine.

Seconds pass. The only sound I hear is my own breathing as I work through the strange thrill of Jalon being so close. I swallow, and Jalon licks his lips.

I’m not sure which of us moves. Maybe both. Maybe the space between us simply evaporates. In the next breath, his mouth is pressed to mine. I inhale in surprise, the breath in my lungs rattling.

Behind me, the clang of the metal kettle on the iron grates of the gas stove reminds me where we are. Who I’m with. But then Jalon’s hands rest on my hips. They rise to my waist, and one glides over my skin until it’s against my back, and he’s pulling me closer.

He’s wearing a button-down shirt. Not walking around like a sexy dad in a romance novel with his shirt open either. Jalon is too debonair for that. That doesn’t mean my fingers don’t try to get a blind glimpse of what’s under his shirt.

His tongue traces my lips, and the realization that he’s rendered me breathless before the kiss has moved beyond PG has my insides flipping and whooshing. Oh god. Jalon is a good kisser.

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3

JALON



EMERSON'S HANDS slap the keyboard in front of him. It's not connected to my computer, of course, but he doesn't know that. He's sitting on my lap and working with me. Every Tuesday morning for the past several months, I've taken Emerson to work for a few hours after breakfast. Noaz drops him off, and it's special Granddad-and-Emmy time.

"What do you think? Since our goal is to open next year when you're two, that means phase one needs to be finished by then. Yeah? We should hire a preschool teacher to help us design the preschool rooms. There's nothing worse than people eighty places removed from your position trying to tell you what you'll need to function."

Emerson points to the computer screen, and I nod. "Yep. That's the layout my designer is proposing, and I think it's great, but again, I'm not teaching, nor am I a kid who will attend there. Does it work?"

He babbles for a minute, and I smile and press a soft kiss to the top of his head.

The plan for the school is simple. It'll open in stages, but the primary stage is the preschool. Noaz says that they don't think they'll want Emerson in school full time already at just two, but playdates and stuff would be great

so he can begin socializing. There aren't any other children around right now.

Okay, there is. But Axl is two days old. For this purpose, he just doesn't count yet.

One of my employees, Azlan Deth, just had his first kid, too. Erez was born in March. The people closest to us are having babies. Some are talking about it, and Noaz and Briar are in the process of looking to adopt a second.

The pressure is on. Deadlines are looming. But I refuse to cut corners. This needs to be done right.

"Maybe we work on social groups for next fall and allow ourselves a two-year deadline for the school. Pre-K through sixth to begin with. One of the dorms needs to be built too."

A knock on the door has Emerson and me looking up. My personal assistant since I took over VDT stands at my door with a smile and his tablet. I'm not sure I've ever seen Crestley without his tablet.

"Hey."

His smile widens. "Hey, munchkin. Granddad entertaining you?" He walks into the room and sits in the chair across from us.

"You're my longest employee and my closest friend, and my grandson gets a greeting before me."

Crestley grins. "Priorities, Jalon. Always acknowledge the next generation first so they understand that they're important."

I narrow my eyes because *I know* those are my words.

"Here." He sets a paper bag on the desk, and Emerson reaches for it.

Not knowing what it is, I allow Emerson to grab it and bring it closer. Inside is a pastry from the café, and on top is the little mesh thing on a handle with a banana in it for Emerson.

"He spoils us," I tell Emmy and reach in to hand my grandson his treat. "Here you go. Daddies' approved morning snack."

My pastry I set out of reach of Emerson, something he doesn't miss and points at it. I tap his handle, reminding him that this one belongs to him.

"Now that you've buttered us up with goodies, what bad news do you have for me?" I ask.

"Nope. That's a cruller. That means there's good news," Crestley says.

"Ah. I didn't know my pastry treats were coded."

"Absolutely. So are the drinks I bring you."

I eye him as I take a bite. "I'm going to put a pin in that for now. What's the news?"

"Your bid on the condo complex ten miles down the road with thirty units has been accepted."

"With the property they were trying to annex?" I ask, taking another bite of my cruller.

"Yes. With the property. In fact, they're offering you an exclusive first refusal of the adjacent property. The owner wasn't intending to let it go, but knowing that you're taking it and what your plans are and the positive impact it'll have on the community, they're willing to entertain an offer."

"How deep are they trying to pick my pockets?" I ask, accepting the napkin from Crestley to wipe Emerson's chin.

"Actually, quite the opposite. They'd like to make 10k, and you cover the fees and property taxes for the year. For an additional eight acres, it's a really good deal. Already licensed for residential use."

"Mm," I hum and nod. "I'll take it. What about the residents of the condo? How many units are filled?"

"Only about half, so what I'm thinking is we buy the leases so we're maintaining cash flow and remodel the other half while simultaneously beginning the first additional building. As the current residents move out, we remodel their unit and rent internally."

"I like that. Good. What's my good news drink of the day?" I ask.

Crestley rolls his eyes. “It’s not beverage time, Jalon.”

“You have me on a schedule like a toddler.”

The half a smirk he gives me says that I finally caught on. While still keeping my eyes locked with his, I take a drink of my water. How boring after my cruller.

“We’ve decided that we’re adjusting the school plan a little,” I tell him.

“We? And again?”

“Emerson and I.” Crestley grins at Emerson.

“Not changing the layout or the buildings, really. I think I’m going to extend our overall timeline a little. Noaz and Briar aren’t ready for him to begin full-time preschool next fall, and I understand. It’s a little early. They said they’d be happy with social groups.”

“Ohh, I like that. So we move forward with our previously scheduled plans on a two-year deadline for the open date, and a social group next year. That’s a much better timeline. It was Emmy’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“Naturally. Let’s get pre-K through sixth on the roll. One dorm. Playground.”

“What about the social group? Where are you planning that?”

Jalon nods. “I hate to say it since we’ve already got the entire campus designed, but I’m not opposed to keeping a social group for toddlers active after the school opens.”

“Which means it’ll need a permanent residence,” Crestley says, sighing.

“Yes! I’m glad you thought of that, though you could have suggested it months ago. *Before* we finalized the plan.”

Crestley glares at me, and I take a pointed sip of my boring water. He gets to his feet. “I’ll get with the design team again.”

“While you’re at it.” He pauses to look at me. “We were thinking that perhaps we need to ask teachers to weigh in on the designs for their rooms. Their needs. Their ideal work environment.”

“That would be more useful if it came from our own employees who will be using the spaces.”

I consider this as I tap my fingers on my desk. Emerson copies me, slapping his banana palm on his keyboard.

“Is it too soon to hire some teachers?” I muse.

“With your interview process? No. I imagine it’ll take six months before you’re satisfied with your options, and by then, we should be in a place where their input really matters.”

“And while the building is happening, we’re going to talk about curriculum. The bullshit the country demands they learn in addition to the truth and far more topics than they’d be offered in public schools. It’s not just the quality of the teacher that matters; it’s the content that they need to teach our young: real history; advanced science; math, so they understand; the way the government actually works and not the bullshit that we’re fed in small batches.”

“Critical thinking,” Crestley adds.

“The actual national deficit. Yes. Good. We have a plan. Get HR on the ads, please.”

“On it. I’ll see you this afternoon for your after-lunch beverage.”

“Great,” I deadpan. Crestley is laughing on his way out of my office.

I sigh and look at my grandson, who is now *covered* in banana. “Good thing there’s a bathroom close.” With my arm firmly around his middle, I stand and follow Crestley out of my office. We gain a lot of attention, of course. Emerson is a favorite face in the office, which is why I don't use my private bathroom when Emmy is visiting. Everyone wants to see Emmy.

In the restroom, I set him on the counter and wash him. He likes to help wash up, so we’re both relatively soaked by the time I determine he’s clean. We pause by Crestley’s desk on the way out and drop the banana pop off. Since he has me on a beverage and treat schedule, he gets the messy banana-pop container. That’s a fair compromise.

This brings us to the end of my Emerson visit, so I take the elevator down to the lobby, where Noaz is just stepping inside. They always make me smile. The comfort they finally feel in their skin is everything.

Noaz beams at Emerson, and Emerson's excited screech when he sees his father fills the entire first floor. I chuckle as I hand Emerson over, and they wrap around each other as if they've been apart for a month.

"Why is he always soaked when I get him back?" Noaz asks, laughing. "Do I need to bring a change of clothes?"

"It'd be wise to do so," I say. "He likes to help when I clean him up, and thus, we both take a bit of a bath." I wave at my shirt and jacket.

Noaz laughs. "Pro tip—which I think you should know—take his shirt off before you give him something messy."

"You're right. I did that once upon a time. Should I take my shirt off when I wash him?"

They smirk at me. "No one would complain, *Daddy* Jalon."

I huff in amusement. Leaning in, I kiss Emerson's cheek. "See you at dinner."

Noaz inclines their head and leaves the building. I stop in the café for a mocha before heading upstairs to set it on Crestley's desk. Maybe a little hint that I like mocha treats in the morning, too. I'm not sure which kind of news that would herald, but I'll take my chances either way.

When the elevator opens on the top floor where my office is, Levis is waiting for the elevator. He meets my eyes, and I wonder if he feels the sudden heat in his chest that I do. He gives me a smile, the small, typical Levis smile as we pass each other, exchanging places so I'm staring at him from outside the elevator while he's now looking at me from inside.

The doors shut, and I stand there for another beat. Where is he going?

I shouldn't, but I do. Once in my office, I bring up the fob system and find the fob connected to Levis. His activity updates as soon as I open it.

11:43 am Gym door

The gym. Closing the program, I stare at my screen for a minute. There are always a hundred things on my to-do list, so it’s not like I have a free afternoon. And yet…

Getting back to my feet, I find myself in the elevator once again. I have no idea what I’m doing. There are many reasons why I shouldn’t go hunt Levis at the gym. Not least of all because he’s my kids’ age. He’s young enough to be my child. He’s my kids’ friend.

As I let myself into the gym and look around, I remind myself that the very first reason on that list should be because Levis is my employee.

It’s not like I can stick my tongue down his throat in the middle of the gym. There are other people around. Speaking of people around, what am I going to do at the gym in a suit? I glance down at my loafers. I didn’t think this through.

Somehow, instead of turning my ass around and heading back to my office, I’m following the path to the locker room right as Levis steps out of it. He stops, meets my eyes, and then glances down at what I’m wearing. His eyes shine with laughter when he meets mine again.

“Do you own anything other than suits, Jalon?” he asks.

“This is a casual suit,” I tell him.

The laughter in his eyes is louder now. “Alright. Then I’ll see you out there.”

“You will,” I agree. This is a bad idea.

I walk into the locker room and hang my suit jacket on a hook. Unbuttoning the cuffs of my sleeves, I roll them up until they’re just under my elbows. Three buttons at the top of my shirt come undone, too. And… that’s as much as I can manage right now.

This is dumb.

However, I still find myself on the floor surrounded by gym equipment I haven't touched since I was in my teens. When I find Levis, his eyes are on me already. I cross the space and *casually* take up residence beside him on a leg machine. I'm going to regret this later.

We work out together in silence. His humor never leaves as I fumble with the machines. I'm sure I'm gaining far more attention than just Levis'.

He stays for forty minutes before telling me he needs to get back to work. Inwardly, *thank fuck* breezes through my mind. I follow Levis into the locker room and muse that I'm going to need to head home for a shower and change of clothes.

The locker room is empty. I lean over the sink and splash cold water on my face. Standing, I watch it drip from my chin. Levis appears in the reflection behind me, so I turn around to face him.

"I can see how this usually fits into your routine," he says, amused.

My eyes hood. Before I can think better of it, I grip the front of his shorts and yank him toward me. Our mouths collide as I cup the back of his head to keep him right where I want him. My brain fuzzes, and then I think, *shit. Workplace harassment*.

Then he moans into my mouth, his fingers digging into the waist of *my* pants, and any reservations float away. I don't know what I'm doing kissing this man. I don't know why I followed him down here except that he tastes of adventure and pleasure and excitement. I want more.

Levis steps closer. Our hands become trapped between us as his dick rubs mine through our clothing. Mine jerks and jumps with anticipation at the contact, and before I can think better of it, my hand drops further south between us so I can touch him through his shorts.

I'm going to fire myself. I'm going to—

His hips rock forward, bringing his inflating dick more fully into my hand. I can't swallow my own groan as his hand falls to mine. I think maybe he's going to push me away, but instead, his hand cups my junk. This time, my hips jerk forward, and I groan into his mouth.

This is not a good place to do this. As if the universe is calling me out, the locker room door opens, and we spring apart.

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4

LEVIS



HONEY BEE IS SITTING in the mezzanine on the fourth floor when I get home. She has books surrounding her. Some stacked, some open, many overlapping others. There are three tablets open to texts, too.

I pause at the top of the stairs to take in the chaos she has going on. “Didn’t school *just* start again?” I ask.

Honey Bee sits back and huffs. Her silky brown hair shimmers in the sunlight coming in through the tall, east-facing windows. “I’m so tired,” she says.

It might have been intended to be a whiny complaint, but she really does sound tired. Instead of heading to my bedroom, I drop onto the couch across from where she’s set up so I’m facing her. Her sleepy brown eyes are hidden behind slow blinks.

“Why not turn in early tonight?”

“I have to study.”

“For fourteen different classes at the same time?” I ask, eyeing the many open books. From the top of the stairs, I missed the couple open on either

side of her knees on the floor.

“This is just one class,” she says, sounding a little defeated.

“Okay, that’s terrifying.”

Honey Bee sighs. “I just need to get through this, and then I’ll take a nap.”

“Or—and hear me out—take a nap now and return to studying refreshed. Are you actually retaining anything right now?”

The misery on her face says that she’s not.

“There’s nothing wrong with following a new path if this isn’t the one you want anymore. You don’t have to see something through if it’s no longer what you want to do,” I tell her.

She lets her head fall to the side so she can look at me without picking her head up. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“Maybe,” I admit. “I’ve been thinking about this recently. My parents think I’ve lost my ambition or fallen off the path to accomplish my goals.”

“That’s kinda cliché, don’t you think?”

I raise an eyebrow. “What?”

“Your parents insisting that you meet some super successful status.”

Grinning, I push the corner of her book sticking over the side of the coffee table with my foot. “I don’t think this is a stereotypical race thing, actually. I think they’re concerned because *I* gave myself these goals when I was a kid and have since steadily pursued them. I’ve always stated that’s what I wanted and now… I’ve strayed from the path that will take me to my goals. It’s not their expectations but their support of me reaching my own.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I didn’t quit. I just didn’t continue.”

“Semantics. Why?”

I shrug one shoulder. “I was just thinking about this a few days ago. I don’t really have a solid answer. I like my job. I learn something new every day. There’s a ton of room for growth and advancement. The pay is good. I’m respected and treated well. I work forty hours, and when I clock out for the day, I don’t have to even think about work at home. I never bring work home. I have time to spend with my friends, exercise, hobbies, or whatever. If I open my own firm?” I shake my head. “I’m going to end up like you.”

Honey Bee tosses her pencil at me. I let it hit me in the arm.

“To be completely honest, I don’t have any ambition to keep going with that future. I’m not sure anything I’ve worked for is actually what I want.”

“Someone wanted it for you,” she guesses.

“Yeah. Society. There’s a very clear checklist to work through to be considered successful. I created my future image with that in mind. What if I don’t actually want that?”

She stares at me without comment.

“Almost all our friends have experienced this same revelation. Briar never knew what he wanted to do with his degree and fell into freelance editing until he chose. Now he’s happy and thriving as a stay-at-home father. Oakley *never* knew what he wanted to do. He struggled with deciding since we started college.”

Honey Bee nods her agreement.

“He’s happy now. Without having to settle for something and being a house husband with a man who dotes on him.”

She snorts. She’s come a long way in accepting Loren’s obsessive presence over Oakley, but I think it still annoys her on some level.

“Haze switched his degree to something his father would hate. He wasn’t going to school for something he wanted to do because it wasn’t what his father would allow. Now he’s working in the history department, and I think we all know he’s just going with the flow because he was never allowed to find his own passion in life. He’s doing what his degree will allow.”

“Brek isn’t using his degree at all,” Honey Bee says. “Though he’s kicking ass as a real estate agent.”

I nod. “You’re the only one sticking to your guns.”

She sighs. “I *want* to get my law degree. I want to be a loud voice and advocate for people who look like me and are given shitty deals because of it. I *am* passionate about it. I’m just tired.”

“Take a year off. Or just a semester,” I suggest.

“The statistics of people actually going back to school after taking time off are very, very low.”

“But you’re not a statistic, Honey Bee. Giving yourself time to relax and recharge before diving in again is probably going to go a long way in making you the best lawyer in this country.”

She smiles and closes her eyes. “Maybe.”

“Think about it. Go take a nap. All this mess will be here when you get back.”

Honey Bee sighs, long and drawn out. “Yeah. Just a catnap.” She climbs onto the couch and curls up.

I push myself to my feet and drape a blanket over her on my way down the hall to my bedroom. As I change out of my clothes, my thoughts linger on our conversation. I haven’t fallen off the path to reach the future goals I gave myself. I stepped off consciously.

I’d already been beating around the bush that maybe all that wasn’t what I wanted after all. The topic has come up periodically over the last few months with my friends as they tease me that I’m single.

Interestingly, I don’t hate being single. At some point in my life, I determined that everything I do needs to be working toward a single objective. All romantic relationships are entered into with the idea that they’re the kind of person with common lifestyle goals and that we’re compatible on a romantic and physical level.

Moving to the Estate and not wanting my then-girlfriend to join me when we had both talked about marriage and a future together seriously up to that point was probably the most potent moment that opened my eyes and forced me to re-examine what it is I actually want.

I won't go so far as to say I'm lost like Oakley was. But the drive that I've always felt inside is gone. Empty. Like it ran out of fuel and there's no refill station in sight. I have no direction. I'm content to stay right where I am and just… be.

It makes me feel unsettled in my skin. Maybe because my parents and sister continue to ask me if I'm okay. If I've enrolled in a graduate program yet. Do I have a new girlfriend? Have I decided where I want to settle down and start a family?

They don't mean to pressure me. The questions they ask are based on things that I've always said I wanted. Nothing that they demand I have.

That doesn't mean that their questions don't create a tight ball of anxiety in my chest. I feel like I'm letting them down.

What I need to remind myself is that letting them down isn't my problem. I need to know whether I'm letting myself down.

I spend the evening in the mezzanine with Honey Bee. She sleeps for an hour and then slides off the couch to continue working again. Myro brings her dinner later but doesn't stay.

When he's gone, I say, "I think he's smitten with you."

Honey Bee flips me off, not taking her eyes off what she's reading while she chews her bite. I chuckle but don't interrupt her again.

Our friends come and go. Checking in on Honey Bee, but careful not to become a distraction. I remain on the opposite couch and scroll through my phone. Sometimes on social media, sometimes on the internet, looking for career options in case I eventually want to get a graduate degree. Sometimes I play on the mood-board app, Pinster, just to see what comes up. Maybe something will inspire me.

It’s pushing ten by the time I get up for bed. I kiss Honey Bee’s head on my way out. “Don’t stay up too late.”

She nods. That’s the only response I receive.

In my room, I strip down to my underwear and climb into bed without turning the light on. I’m tired, but my eyes remain wide open as I stare at the ceiling I can’t quite make out in the dark.

I haven’t seen Jalon today. Not at work, and he didn’t follow me to the gym this morning. Not since I’ve been home. Strangely, I’m a little disappointed. I haven’t seen him since the gym yesterday. When we kissed in the locker room.

And groped over our clothes. Remembering his hand on me has my cock thinking about chubbing up. He wasn’t aggressive, and it wasn’t excessive. We didn’t have a lot of time before someone entered the locker room.

Maybe I haven’t seen him because he freaked out after? I can’t say I know Jalon well, but he doesn’t come across as the type of person to freak out about anything. I doubt that’s why. He’s busy. Jalon is always busy. I’ve never met a busier person than Jalon Van Doren.

My mind wanders back to the way he kissed me and his hand rubbing my cock. I touched him in return, but I was too distracted by his hand on me to truly *feel* where my hand was and what he had to offer under his clothes.

As I remember, my eyes close. In my mind, the moment isn’t interrupted. Reality and fantasy tangle together as I begin to doze. I don’t quite fall asleep when there’s a knock on my door. My eyes flutter open, and I look around my dark room. My pre-dream state lingers enough that I can’t decide whether the knock on my door is a remnant of yesterday’s event in the locker room or if someone is actually at my door.

A glance at my watch says it’s nearly eleven. It’s a little late for a visitor. A gentle knock comes from my door again. At least I know it was real and not in my head.

With a deep breath to calm my heated blood, I get to my feet and open the door. I’m both surprised and not surprised to find Jalon standing there. One of his hands is in the pocket of his slacks. He’s wearing what he calls

‘*house shoes*’, but they’re no different from what most people would wear to an office. He still has his button-down shirt on from earlier today.

I suppose he thinks this is casual since he’s taken off his belt and his shirtsleeves are rolled up his forearms, the top three buttons undone.

“You look so relaxed,” I note, trying to keep the amusement from my voice. “Is that what you wear to bed?”

The quiet amusement on his face makes me grin as I take a step back to let him in. He shuts the door behind him and we face each other with only a foot or so separating us.

“Let me guess. You have a set of silk pajamas.”

His hands grip my hips, and he pulls me to his body. I try to control the way my breath jumps. His lips are against mine when he answers. “I do, actually. But I didn’t buy them. They were a gift.”

“A gag gift or a serious gift?” I ask.

Jalon doesn’t answer. His mouth presses hard against mine. Possessively. Demanding. Very clearly telling me we’re finished talking.

My hands tangle in the front of his shirt while his hands slip around my bare waist to slide over my back. His hands are slightly calloused, and I can’t help but wonder why. Not that I think Jalon is a boring man who spends his days solely behind a desk, but what has caused these kinds of calluses to remain permanent on his hands?

He pushes me into the bedroom until the back of my legs hit my bed. Jalon follows me down. His mouth releases mine, spreading kisses all along my jaw. One of his arms supports his weight from being completely on me, and the other slides over my chest and stomach.

“This is unfairly balanced,” I complain breathlessly.

“Oh?”

“You have at least three more articles of clothing on than I do.”

He huffs in amusement. Jalon presses his mouth firmly to mine for a quick peck before pushing himself from the bed. I lean up on my arms and watch as he unbuttons his shirt the rest of the way.

I'm strangely breathless as he lets the material fall from his shoulders and pool around his feet on the floor. He's bare-chested underneath with a smattering of dark hair over his chest and running down his stomach.

My eyes drop to follow his fingers deftly undoing the button and zipper of his trousers. I swallow, my breath catching in my throat as he drops his pants and steps out of them. He's in dark briefs. I can't see the outline of his cock because the room is too dark, and I feel robbed of the experience.

Though I suppose that's fair. I'm in dark boxer briefs so he doesn't get to see what I have going on either. Not by sight, anyway.

"Better?" Jalon asks as he lowers himself on top of me again.

I nod. "Yep. Needed to level the field."

I taste his chuckle as his mouth comes down on mine. He slides his body so he's not completely on top of me but off to the side, giving his hand on my stomach better access. I try like hell to keep myself under control and not let him know it's been several months since someone else has touched me. I haven't had an orgasm from anything other than my own hand in… far too long. I don't even want to think about it.

His hand drops to cup my cock over my underwear, and I groan into his mouth.

"Such a sexy, slutty sound, Levis," he murmurs against my lips, his palm pressing more firmly to my cock. "What other sounds can you make for me?"

Fuck.

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5

JALON



“No, Jalon. Please. I didn’t hurt them. I never laid a hand on them. I swear.”

“I trusted you,” I say coldly. “I trusted you with my boys.”

“I never touched them!”

“No one accused you of physical abuse. That doesn’t excuse your emotional and verbal abuse.”

“I didn’t hurt them, Jalon.”

Her feet slip on the muddy embankment and she screams in fear. “Please, Jalon! I’ll be a better mother.”

“It’s too late for that. Sixteen years too late.”

Her pleading screams echo around me. I wait for a sliver of hesitation to come, but it doesn’t. Not now that I know the truth of how she treated my sons.

MY EYES SNAP OPEN. The room is dark. The only sounds are my slightly labored breathing. Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I look around my room, eyes landing on the bedside clock. 3:07.

She died at 3:11 am. Are we nearing the anniversary of her death? Is that why my subconscious is forcing me to remember via my dreams?

I inhale deeply to calm my breathing and rid my body of the tension taking root in my muscles. She deserved worse. She deserved worse, far earlier than she was disposed of.

The room is cool. I push the blankets from my body and sit up. Might as well take a piss and wash the dream from my face so maybe I can get some more sleep tonight. When I get to my feet, I stop moving. The rug feels… strange.

That's when I realize I'm not in my own room. Turning, I find Levis asleep on the opposite side of the bed. The blankets are barely over him, covering his junk and one leg. Otherwise, his sexy, smooth, bare body is shining in the moonlight.

My dick decides this is a fantastic distraction from the dream. Still, I head to the bathroom to empty my bladder and wash my face with cold water. It does a lot to shake the remnants of the dream. By the time I enter the bedroom again, my cock is ready for some fun.

Is it presumptuous to take my underwear off? Levis' are off because I *needed* to explore him and I wasn't interested in letting him touch me. I want to concentrate on the feel of his hands on me and take the maximum amount of enjoyment from it. But not last night. Last night was about touching his body.

He's not the first man I've touched. There was that guy in high school. We jerked off together often, which led to jerking each other off. No kissing. No groping. Just mutual orgasms.

Then there was the guy in college. He sucked my dick three times. Then I met Martha, and that needed to end. I'm nothing if not loyal. Even when my loyalty is misplaced.

Levis is different from both of those men, though. His body is a work of art, formed by many years of honing his physique. He's smooth, pretty much everywhere, and it's hypnotic. If I'm honest, maybe there's a little thrill in knowing that he's twenty-three. That's less than half my age, and yeah, there's a surprising amount of appeal in that.

He doesn't stir when I crawl back on the bed. Not until I pull the covers away from him and his eyes flutter open. Levis doesn't move otherwise. He blinks a couple times, eyes shifting to his windows and then the ceiling. It takes him a minute to turn his attention to me.

I'm not sure if he's surprised. With his face in my direction, he's no longer illuminated by the moon. I feel his lips part more than see them by the puffs of warm, moist breath on my chest.

Levis rolls toward me, and I slide down further so I can meet his mouth. No touching this time. No exploration. Now I want to get off and I want to do it with my cock against his.

He lets his legs fall open for me when I roll us so I'm on top of him. As soon as my hard dick is pressed to his equally hard cock, he moans, hips rolling toward me. Maybe I also find Levis enthralling because I can make this twenty-three-year-old man horny for me relatively easily. It's not unreasonable that a younger person can turn on an older person. We hear about dirty old men all the time.

But when that feeling is reciprocated? It adds a new level of heat. A different kind of heat. It burns hotter, quicker.

"Lube?" I ask into his mouth.

He nods, hand coming away from me, and reaches blindly for the nightstand that's out of reach. As much as I don't want to move away from him, I release his mouth and partially climb off him so I can locate it. Thankfully, the tube is right on top. It's a pump, so I coat my hand in a few squirts and then readjust my position between his legs.

His eyes travel down, but I capture his mouth again before he can truly take a look. Not because I'm embarrassed. I'm definitely not. While I don't consider myself a slut, I've had enough people enjoy my dick to know that

I’m at least average. I’m a firm believer that knowing how to use what you have, regardless of size, is always going to be better than a lazy fuck with a big dick.

Still, I think I’m a decent size. I also have some accessories that tend to lend a little more stimulation to my partner, so even if I lack a little talent, I have a helping hand.

Not that it matters right now. I’ve wanted to rub my cock against Levis’ since I touched him two days ago in the locker room. The craving was so fucking loud that I avoided going anywhere that I’d even catch a glimpse of him yesterday.

As soon as my hand closes around our cocks, Levis’ hips jerk up and he grunts into my mouth. He’s so damn responsive. It’s fucking hot. So fucking hot. I got him off earlier, but not myself, so I’m already right there. Ready. Hungry for it. Needy.

But I won’t be the cliché older man who comes early. Fuck that. While I keep my hand firmly around both our cocks and rock my hips in time with his for maximum friction between our dicks, I try—somewhat unsuccessfully—not to stimulate myself too much. I’ve never done this before, so I’m not sure how to make this more one-sided.

It’s a lot of trial and error. What feels best for him? What angle? How tight should my hand be? My kisses slow as I concentrate on the responses I elicit from his body. I appreciate that Levis doesn’t appear to have any reservations about the noises he makes. He doesn’t hide his arousal or his enjoyment. He’s slowly laying out a floor plan for me. Giving me a map to his pleasure.

Thankfully, he comes before I lose my mind. As soon as he starts, I stop trying to hold myself back and press my thumb against the top of my cock more firmly. Letting the crook of my hand between my thumb and finger stimulate the bars there as I rub the sensitive underside of my cock against Levis’ until I finally allow myself to succumb to the pleasure.

When I spill over his chest, I hover and blink through the lust haze that’s blurring my vision. Good fucking hell. I enjoyed that immensely.

“Your dick feels nice,” Levis says, and I snort.

His grin feathers over my mouth, so I know he’s teasing me. Lightening the mood, maybe. So many people say it’s awkward after an orgasm, so maybe Levis is making sure that’s not what’s happening here. Honestly, I’m fifty-two. I just need to catch my breath and let my heart settle a bit.

I press my mouth to his and roll away. For just a moment, I stay on my back and feel my heart race. It’s slowly calming. After a deep inhale, I push myself up and open the nightstand on this side of the bed, where I find more lube and also wet wipes.

“You’re so prepared on both sides of the bed,” I comment as I come back to wipe him up.

“Someone insisted on putting beds the size of Rhode Island in all the bedrooms. It makes more sense to just duplicate the contents of each nightstand than drag a wet trail across the bed.”

Laughter vibrates through my chest. Levis is such a quiet person that I’ve never noticed his sense of humor and teasing in the two years I’ve known him. I like it. I like that he makes me smile so easily.

With the soiled wet wipe, I back away to toss it. Using another, I wipe myself clean and then pull my underwear back on. Levis leans up on his forearms to watch me as I grab my clothes.

“This isn’t a fuck and run,” I assure him.

“Evidence suggests otherwise.”

He doesn’t sound offended, though. “I’d like to point out that I’ve already slept most of the night here. Consider this a wake-up orgasm.”

“No better way to wake up,” he says, eyes still trained on me as I pull my shirt on. He doesn’t bother to cover himself, so I still have a very clear view of his perfect body. Beautiful.

Once I’m put back together, I round the bed to his side and sit on the edge while I slip back into my house shoes. Then I lean in to press a lingering

kiss to his lips. “I get up at four-thirty most mornings. It *is* my morning, Levis.”

“That’s a god-awful hour. Why do you hate yourself?”

I chuckle. “It’s quiet. No one else is awake. I can watch the sunrise and the birds wake up. It’s relaxing.”

Levis touches my chest. The soft pressure of his fingertips as he looks into my face. “You’re a complicated man, aren’t you?” he asks, voice soft.

I’m not sure what that means, so I don’t confirm nor deny. Instead, I press another lingering kiss to his mouth. Nothing heated. Nothing intimate. Just something to end the discussion and maybe taste him once more before I get up for the day.

“I’ll see you later.”

He nods. Levis remains sitting as I leave his bedroom. The hall is empty and silent. The sun hasn’t even touched the horizon yet. I stop at the door to Axl’s nursery and poke my head inside. Voss is a good father. I’ve never had any doubts that he’d be a good father. I’m sure all my kids will be.

Even Loren, though the idea of him having children makes me nervous. He hasn’t talked to me specifically, but I’ve been around when he, Oakley, and the others are talking about kids. Which means it frequently turns to Loren and Oakley.

This is how I’ve learned a whole lot about my children. They seem to enjoy my company when they’re hanging out, and I love to see them relax and just be. If they hold anything back on account of my presence, I haven’t noticed an abrupt shift in topic.

As I muse about my children becoming parents, I enter Axl’s nursery silently. Voss is asleep on the bed there again. I have a feeling he won’t be in this room long, though. He looks uncomfortable.

Axl is asleep. I watch long enough to see him breathing regularly before adjusting the blanket on my son and leaving them. In my room, I go through my usual morning routine of a shower and dressing for the day.

Our chef, Mario, has a cup of coffee waiting for me when I enter the kitchen. “A little late this morning,” he comments.

I nod in agreement as I take a sip. Delicious mocha with a hint of caramel coats my mouth, and I quietly hum in appreciation. Mario frequently changes up my morning drink. I’m not sure if it’s based on his mood, what we have in the pantry, or something else. Maybe he’s stumbled across a new fad online and wants to try it on me. Who knows?

“I’m going for a walk around the lake this morning,” I tell him. “I have my phone if someone needs me.”

Mario inclines his head. “Noted. You want breakfast delivered at the dock?”

Generally speaking, Mario will bring me breakfast at six thirty. No matter where I am, including in my office. He doesn’t care where I am; if I’m on the Estate, he’s going to feed me breakfast and dinner. This is a non-negotiable subject. Trust me, I’ve tried. You pick your battles.

“Sounds good. Thank you.”

He inclines his head again and continues his prep for the day. Before I leave, I watch him work as I sip my mocha. After a minute, Mario meets my eye.

“Out of curiosity, how much does our flour cost?”

His hands stop kneading dough, and he looks at me a little perplexed. “I’m not sure. I don’t actually do the shopping. I make a list of what I need.”

“Brand-specific?”

Mario shakes his head. “Sometimes. Our shoppers have detailed notes of what I do and don’t like for brands based on feedback.”

“Is there a chance that our flour costs $8?”

He gives me an amused look. “I don’t know. I’m sure there are scans of receipts. We buy local when we can. Everything that we don’t or can’t get from our garden and barn market, we purchase locally first. *Then* we shop at the store. Is there something wrong with the flour?”

I shake my head and then shrug. “No idea. I admit I’m not the most frugal man, but I hope we’re not spending needlessly on expensive products just because we can.”

Mario studies me for a minute and then nods. “I’ll take a look and have a conversation with the shoppers.”

“Thanks, Mario. You’re getting a raise.”

He chuckles. “I will never say no to a raise, but it’s not truly necessary. This isn’t exactly outside my responsibilities. It’s just not something I spend a lot of time on since we have a system that I think works well. I haven’t taken into account the price of groceries, but I’ll take a better look.”

“Thank you.”

Mario is still chuckling when he turns back to his dough. Sipping my mocha, I make my way through the house and out one of the back doors to cut across the field behind the house that’s closest to the lake. When I reach the shore, I pause and stare at the water, sipping my mocha.

I know my boys have halfheartedly looked for their mother over the years. If they’d put any real effort into it, I’d tell them where she is. I know their curiosity is just that. They’re curious. She hasn’t come around or called since I took them out of that house.

I wonder how startled they would be if I told them that she’s been right under their noses this entire time.

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6

LEVIS



SINCE TALKING to Brek about my *secret* relationship, I've thought more about the questions he asked about this thing between Jalon and me, taking into account that I've *never* done something casual. I'm always working toward a future.

I told Brek that I didn't want him constantly feeling in flux, and those words stuck in my chest. Maybe that's how I feel right now. I'm in flux because my future feels murky as I battle with what I've proclaimed to want and now, having stepped away from accomplishing, well… any of it.

What we're doing *is* stupidly hot. Because it's a guy? Does the newness of this make it extra hot? Because it's Jalon fucking Van Doren? King Jalon? Daddy Jalon? Is it who he is that makes it so damn hot?

Maybe it's the secret aspect of it. I've *never* kept such a secret from my friends before. Ever. I'm shit at secrets. They feel like they weigh heavily on me and make me jittery. As if everything I say and do is going to reveal the secret that may or may not be mine.

That's why I kinda told Brek. It's not like he would guess it's Jalon. No one in their right mind would ever guess it's Jalon I'm talking about.

So why don’t I share exactly the amount of information with the rest of my friends that I did with Brek? Maybe because I only needed to tell *someone*, not *everyone*. And Brek needed something that might even the playing field of sharing. So he didn’t feel like he was under a spotlight.

In so many ways, Brek has suffered more than any of us, which is saying a lot given the environment Haze grew up in. But Haze was a witness. Brek was the victim. We’re protective and accommodating toward Brek far more than we are toward anyone else. We give him room and allow his assholery longer than we would each other.

I stare out my window as I strip my shirt off over my head and toss it on the chair. Jalon is wandering around the lake right now. He has been for a few days. There’s a gravel path that circles the perimeter, except at the beach on the north side, where the dock and sheds are.

The lake is beautiful. Especially so early in the morning, when the world is calm. Have I just now noticed that he walks the lake in the morning? Maybe he’s always done this, and it wasn’t until I started… fooling around with him that I noticed.

My stomach swoops at the thought of his hands on me. He hasn’t let me touch his dick yet. I’m borderline thinking he’s self-conscious, but I can’t imagine Jalon with insecurities. He’s larger-than-life.

Except over the last week and a half. He's been far more human than he’s ever felt before. Do I mean that literally because I’ve touched him? Is that why he’s not just the ruler of the Van Doren empire but someone who laughs? He has a sense of humor. He carries a lot of weight on his shoulders that I feel like maybe I could help him set down for a short period of time.

It’s… thrilling. I wake up looking forward to the next encounter.

Licking my lips, I turn away from the window and retrieve my wakizashi from the wall mount and head to the backyard, mind still musing about how different these last ten days fooling around with Jalon have felt compared to literally every other encounter in my entire life.

I won’t go so far as to say my sex life with my previous girlfriends was lacking. Or that I was dissatisfied. Yet, I feel like there’s a plateau that is my

past. As if I've elevated every aspect of my life with my past girlfriends to a specific point and that was peak.

There's been no penetration of any kind—no mouths touching further south than necks with Jalon, and the spike in the graph has shattered the plateau of my previous experiences. Did I set that plateau and keep us there? Is this a me thing?

Is it because of my partner that I feel differently regarding the physicality of what's happening between us? Part of me says yes, but another part pokes at something different. There's far more anticipation regarding Jalon. My body is in a constant hum of readiness for the chance that I'll see him. He'll meet my eye, and we'll both be thinking of the recent orgasm we shared. We'll be thinking about when the next one will happen.

It's new. Everything about it is new, unexpected, and arousing.

I watch the figure of Jalon cresting the northeast of the lake as I descend the steps of the deck onto the lush grass of the backyard. As much as I'd really enjoy watching Jalon, I turn my back on him to face the house as I always do and begin my stretching routine with my sword resting on the ground in front of me.

Always keep your eyes on your weapon, especially when it's out of your hands. There can't be any mistakes or accidents if you're always in a position to react.

One of the reasons I've continued mastering Aikido and my wakizashi is that, as I go through the motions, it's largely meditative. It brings me peace, no matter what clutters my mind. Today is no different. Even as thoughts of Jalon are loud and electrifying, with every fluid transition between poses, my mind releases my thoughts one by one.

As always, the world begins to fade away around me until it's little more than a watercolor landscape. It's only me, my breathing, and my sword existing for a long time. Nothing else. I appreciate the peace wrapped around me when I finally come out of the moment.

Getting to my feet, my heart immediately jumps in time with my dick to find Jalon sitting on the big deck right beside the door I use. He's in a suit

because Jalon wears nothing else. I'm still convinced this is the only style he owns.

Hoping that I haven't given away my reaction to seeing him, I approach, eyes locked with Jalon's. There's the barest hint of a smile on his lips. The most common smile we see from him. He exudes confidence and regality. I've always prided myself on my calm, collected, and confident demeanor, but Jalon is on a level that mere mortals can't reach.

As I approach, Jalon leans forward and picks up a Van Doren water bottle and offers it to me. Without a word, I accept it and take several long swallows, trying to keep him in my sights as I do.

"It's important to stay hydrated," he comments as I bring the bottle away from my lips. Do I imagine the way his eyes drop to my mouth? "Especially when participating in or preparing for extracurricular activities that increase your heart rate."

No. No. That's not a suggestive comment. This is Jalon!

I lick my lips and take another sip to give myself time to collect my thoughts. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, I'm saved from having to come up with a response when Oakley comes out of the house with Emerson in his arms and Loren trailing him. I'm a little amused to find Loren carrying the diaper bag, a play mat, and a kiddie chair.

"Did you bring his entire nursery?" I ask as I take a seat in a chair where I have a direct view of Jalon. His eyes linger on me briefly before his attention turns to his grandson.

Oakley grins. "We're practicing parenting." He glances at Loren from the corner of his eye.

"Yeah?" I look at Loren too. He sets the bag and mat down to set up the folding chair that's adorably child sized.

Oakley grins. "When Axl is a little older, we'd like to sponsor a playdate with both kids and get a feel for two kids at once."

My attention flickers to Jalon briefly. He's now watching his son as opposed to his grandkid.

“You’re thinking of two kids, then?” I ask.

“Actually,” he says, and I’m blinded by the enormous smile my best friend shines my way. “We’re thinking about three kids.”

“Simultaneously,” I clarify. I’m not sure if Jalon knows all the details.

“Yes,” Loren answers as Oakley nods.

“Why simultaneously?” Jalon asks.

Loren and Oakley look at him, but Oakley’s focus turns to his husband. Loren, for his part, shrugs in answer.

“That’s not a good answer, Loren,” Jalon says. “Three infants at the same time is a lot of work and responsibility. Especially when there are only two hands to take care of them.”

Loren studies his father for a moment. His gaze floats away, and I think he’s looking in the direction of his triplet brothers’ houses. “I have a less likely chance to screw them up if they’re alive all at once.”

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It’s clear none of us was expecting that answer. Oakley looks startled. Loren is the only one moving as he adjusts the chair until it’s steady. A minute passes, and Oakley gets to his feet to hand Emerson to Jalon. Then he grips Loren’s face in both his hands, making Loren look at him.

“What do you mean? Are you really worried about screwing up our kids?”

Loren abandons the chair entirely when Oakley’s hands touch him. He hesitates to return the touch, though, and Oakley removes his hands in response.

“I’m not equipped to care about children.” He glances at Emerson. “I care about him. I’d kill anyone who tried to harm him. But that’s different from his life being my responsibility.” His dark eyes look into Oakley’s again. “I’m going to mimic what you do when we have kids. It’ll probably be easier if they’re all the same age at the same time so I don’t have to remember to adjust my behavior for children of different ages mixed together.”

“Loren,” Oakley says quietly and leans forward to rest his forehead against Loren’s.

It’s clear that Loren isn’t quite sure what to do with this reaction. He wraps an arm around Oakley and says, “My sense of right and wrong is different from what the rest of the world says. How do I teach a child to be a proper human being when I’m… not?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Loren,” Jalon says.

Loren looks at his father and frowns.

“Your dad is right. There’s nothing wrong with you. This is who you are, and that’s fine. You live just how you’re supposed to live.” Loren appears amused at his words. “But I’ll be there. We’ll talk all the time about how we raise our kids together. And your family is here too. Our babies will have older cousins to learn from too.”

“I still want them all born at the same time,” Loren says. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to let my chances of messing up multiple kids increase when I have to start over and over.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you felt this way earlier?” Oakley asks, picking his head up to look at Loren.

“I’ve been thinking about it because you keep asking and you don’t really like my answer. As it is, I’m only seventy-one percent sure this is the entire answer as to why I want to have all our kids at the same time.”

Oakley smiles and then laughs. “I love you. You know that?”

Loren smiles. “Good.”

I look at Jalon. Emerson is picking at the buttons on his shirt, but his attention is on his son. Maybe he feels me watching him because his blue eyes meet mine and the corner of his mouth turns up slightly. A smidge. A hint of a smile. It's enough to make my dick jump in excitement.

JALON KNOCKS AGAIN, but this time, he doesn't wait for me to answer the door. He lets himself in. My lamp is on tonight as I lounge in bed to read a book. Or… maybe I'm waiting for Jalon. He's visited every night since the first night.

I smirk because he's still wearing his clothes from the day, though his jacket is missing. I shake my head as I set my book on the nightstand.

"Take your clothes off," Jalon says as he approaches, already unbuttoning his shirt.

"In a hurry tonight?"

"Yes. I want to see you naked with the light on."

My heart races at his words. There's a chance that I stall in sliding from the bed now. Not that I'm self-conscious about my body. I have never been before.

Jalon's gaze is locked on me as he continues to undress. I push my weird unease away and get to my feet to shove my underwear down. Then I sit on the edge of the bed to wait for him, my cock a flagpole.

When he's down to his underwear, my gaze drops to see him in the light, too. My eyes widen, and then my mouth pops open when he shoves his briefs down to expose himself.

There's a tattoo around his dick. I would never have guessed that Jalon has a tattoo, especially there. He comes closer, and I can see the details now that he's in the circle of light from my bedside lamp. It's a dragon. The one that circles the Earth, eating its own tail.

My attention shifts to his cock before I can take in the details further because something glints in the light.

“Okay,” I say as I instinctively lean closer to get a better look. “Is that a piercing?”

Jalon chuckles. His thumb presses to the base of his dick to bring it down and slides along the length of bars climbing to the top of his dick until he’s holding his cock parallel to the floor and I can see the seven barbells.

“Who even are you?” I mutter as I examine them. “How did you get this done and not have it all over the dirty tabloids?”

This time he laughs slightly louder. “You can touch me if you’d like.”

I raise my hand and then stop. “You haven’t let me touch you before. Do they hurt?”

His head tilts to the side. “No. I wasn’t trying to keep your hands off me for any other reason other than I wanted to explore your body without the distraction of your hands on me. Not because I don’t want you to touch me, Levis.”

“Oh. Afraid that you’d come too soon if I touched you too?” I tease as I press a finger to one of the barbells.

My breath catches when his hand grips my chin and forces my eyes to his. “Yes. But don’t for a second think that would be the end of our activities, young man. With age, you learn stamina. You’re not nearly old enough to understand.”

Heat flares in my belly. I’m not sure if it’s the slight force he used or his words, but holy fuck. Yes. Yes, please.

Jalon releases me, and I look back at his dick.

“To answer your questions, I had the tattoo done when I was sixteen and the piercings a year later in a weird, misguided attempt to punish my parents who were hell-bent on having perfect sons. They may not see or know about these little *flaws*, but I do.”

He’s just admitted something to me. He let me in on something personal, and I’m not sure I know what to do with that right now. We don’t usually talk when he comes into my room. Not unless it’s teasing banter.

“Lie down. We’re going to see who has more stamina, youngin’.”

I laugh, but crab walk back onto my bed.

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7

JALON



THE FIRST WEDNESDAY IN OCTOBER, I find myself questioning whether I should keep the dark underbelly of Van Doren open. Myro looks exhausted as he walks into my office, closing the door behind him. He sets the tablet at the corner of my desk as if it's a file for the inbox.

"Do you need to stop executing contracts?" I ask.

I've been keeping a close eye on Myro for a while now. Since Loren '*retired*'. Myro joined the contracts department to keep an eye on Loren. Now that Loren no longer utilizes it, is there a benefit to keeping it running?

There's a chance that my son knows what I'm thinking because he doesn't answer my question but tells me exactly why I began this endeavor.

"Loren needs a controlled environment," Myro says. "The only reason he's able to keep himself in lane without feeling the urge for violence is that he knows there's an outlet *should* he need it. It allows him peace of mind to focus on Oakley."

I nod thoughtfully. Turning my chair ninety degrees so I can look out the large windows behind me, I lean back and look over the lake.

“Ellory needs it too,” Myro says.

My gaze turns back to my oldest son.

“I think we all know that he’s… more like Loren than not.”

“He was easily overlooked because Loren was obvious,” I muse. Then I sigh. Another way I failed one of my kids.

“He didn’t need a diagnosis,” Myro says. “I’m not sure he actually fits the definition of an antisocial disorder. He clearly feels a whole lot. His personality is loud and genuine, and he loves with his whole body. But he also has a dark addiction to murder.”

“Blood.”

Myro makes a face as he nods. “Yes. I’m disturbed.”

I chuckle under my breath and look back out at the lake.

“I know the reason you built the contracts department is for Loren, but we do good things, despite those good deeds being illegal. We’re not walking down the road and choosing someone at random. We conduct our due diligence. We deliver karma where it’s due. In a system that can be bought and your trial rigged, our hands aren’t tied by the same red tape. A rapist is a rapist, end of discussion. A serial abuser is still a serial abuser, no second chances. A pedophile is a fucking pedophile, and I don’t give a shit what that eleven-year-old *said*. This might have been for Loren, but we bring a lot of peace, closure, and justice to victims of unspeakable crimes.”

I nod minutely as he talks. As he justifies the murders we commit.

“I think Loren does still feel a violent urge sometimes, and it sways his decision on whether he’s willing to leave Oakley for a short period of time. Which he has—the megachurch cult, the pig farm where Emerson was carved from the stomach of the woman carrying him. You misjudge how much he loves his family. When he thinks he *personally* needs to protect his brothers or his uncles or his brand-new nephew, you bet your ass he’s going to trust Oakley’s safety to Imry while he handles it himself.”

“That’s why he went to the megachurch cult island,” I agree. “He wasn’t willing to allow his brothers to go without him.”

“Who would protect them?” Myro grins. “Loren does need this place, Dad. Knowing it’s here gives him the comfort to ‘*retire*’ because he can always come out of retirement for a day if the need arises.”

I exhale. “Thank you.” For a moment, I study my son’s face. “How are you faring?”

He smiles, and I can see the fatigue in it. “This isn’t a forever occupation for me. It takes its toll. Knowing that I’ve taken out the trash is beginning not to be a driving force, *but* I’m not ready to quit yet.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Myro.”

Myro shakes his head, a smile on his face. “I won’t.” Leaning forward, he says, “I have a feeling my next job is going to be far more taxing.” He gets to his feet and heads for the door. I watch him go.

Once he’s out of sight, I frown. I’m well aware that none of my sons want to inherit Van Doren Technologies. It’s too big. Too important. Too vast.

More than that, they’re intimidated. I wish I could explain to them that I understand the weight and I’ll never simply sign over the company and then walk away, leaving them to figure out their shit on their own as my parents did.

Yes, I forced them away once they handed over VDT, the Estate, and my brothers. I didn’t want their help. I was fortunate to have found some amazing support at the company and at the house. Crestley had worked for my father, and we talked in depth about… everything. We rooted out the negativity, the building corruption, the illegal activity, and the questionable bribes. We scrubbed the company clean and practically started over from the ground up, including building a brand-new foundation.

The reason I brought the company to the Estate was proximity. I had an estate to fix, *and* a company to fix, *and* my brothers to raise. Everything needed to be within arm’s reach.

At the house, I had Cheddar. He'd been an employee of the Estate for a few years and had a lot to say. I listened. I fixed the issues. Together, we found policies and practices that created a good, healthy work environment.

My kids won't be stepping into the mess I did. For all intents and purposes, the company and the house run themselves. All they need to do is oversee it. Let it grow and prosper. Don't fuck up and cut corners.

It's never far from my mind that they don't want to wear the crown, though. I'm not sure what to do about that. I won't force them. If they don't enthusiastically want to inherit VDT, then they're not going to be able to grow it.

Which means I've been looking for another solution. I've watched so many *good* companies become completely monetized once the founder has moved on. Disney comes to mind. Wally World is another. When someone who is wealth-driven takes over, the company turns to shit. It might still be successful, but you've taken the heart out of it. The people without whom the company would crumble hate it there. Loyalty has been stripped away.

I won't let that happen to VDT. Which means I need to look for another solution. Seriously look. I've waited long enough, hoping one of my kids would decide this is the role they want. It's not, and that's okay. I respect that.

A shadow falls across my floor, and I spin my chair around again so I'm facing my desk and the door beyond. Azlan Deth steps inside once I meet his eyes. He swings the door shut behind him and, like Myro, sets his tablet on top of the first one before taking the same seat my son occupied before him.

"Everything go smoothly?" I ask.

He inclines his head. "I burned him alive from the inside out," he states as if we're talking about the wildflowers outside.

"Did you?"

Azlan nods. "I flayed him open while he was conscious and then started the fire in his gut. His stomach, intestines, kidneys. His screams were loud and painful. Before he lost consciousness, I set fire to his lungs, and I think he

might have suffocated." He frowns. "I'm not sure if it's considered suffocation when I didn't cut off his oxygen, but I'm pretty sure his not being able to breathe is the reason he died, which means he suffocated. Right?"

I chuckle. "I suppose, by definition, it does. We talked about setting people on fire."

"Yes, but he burned from the *inside out*, Jalon. I really wish I could see those police reports. Are they going to call it spontaneous combustion?"

Azlan came to me out of the blue one day, looking for security work. He told me he'd just come off a killing spree. Laid it right out there. He assured me that every death was justified and went into detail as to who, why, and how he killed them.

It didn't take me more than the first three minutes of speaking with Azlan to know that he has an antisocial disorder. After he told me about his murder spree, I asked him if he did. He shrugged and told me that one of the therapists he was forced to talk to as a kid called him a psychopath, but he was never officially diagnosed.

He went on to tell me about the abuse he suffered as a young child and how adults didn't like it when he turned that abuse back on the foster parents they stuck him with. He went through twelve families until he met one that confused him.

They showed him immediate acceptance and support, unconditional love. It was the first family he didn't hurt, and he stayed there until he was an adult. To my knowledge, he's still relatively close with that last foster family. Which makes sense because one of his three partners was the son of the foster family who gave him an actual home.

Over a week of meetings with Azlan, I learned a lot about him, but a lot about my son, Loren, as well. Azlan gave me a lot of insight in a way Loren has never been able to.

One of the most fascinating things about Azlan is that he seems to have been dropped into this world from a parallel, alternate universe. You've heard about anomalies from the past: people being able to bend forks with

their minds, their touch being magnetic, or being able to levitate. We all write it off as fantasies from an earlier time when people were far more likely to point at something unexplained and claim witchcraft.

Azlan can set fires with his mind. I've seen him do it. I've witnessed it many times. Not because I didn't believe him, but, well, I didn't believe him. Then I was fascinated and needed to keep seeing it.

I've made it very clear that he can't simply set everyone on fire, though. That would cause a lot of mass chaos. People would snoop everywhere. Point fingers everywhere. It would turn into a modern-day witch hunt. This country is already backward. No need to help it digress faster than the corrupt politicians are currently pushing it.

"No more fire for at least the next three contracts," I say.

Azlan nods. He gets to his feet, but I stop him before he can go.

"How's Erez?"

Seven months ago, he and his three partners welcomed their first child. A little boy. I've made it a habit of checking in with Azlan because he doesn't deal with people the same way others do.

"He's healthy and a joy," he says, and I know that those are repeated words.

"How do you feel about being a father?"

"Xan doesn't stop smiling. Wade is smitten. Issy is excited."

"And you?"

Azlan's gaze lifts, and he stares out the window for a minute. "I would set the world on fire for him. He's mine." That's truly a statement of his loyalty. "But he's loud and needy and messy. He smells often. I like it best when he sleeps. I don't mind holding him when he sleeps."

"Are you feeling overwhelmed?"

"I'm not sure I like him," Azlan admits.

"He *is* needy right now, but he'll get older and be less needy. He'll learn lots of things from you."

Azlan momentarily looks horrified, and I laugh quietly.

“You’ll control what he learns from you. They don’t stay that little forever.”

He inclines his head and then nods. “I know.”

“Have you talked to your partners about how you’re feeling?”

“No. I don’t want to upset them.”

“They’re very aware of your ability to relate to other people. They’re not going to be upset. I bet they’ll have ideas on how to make it less stressful for you.”

I’m not sure I convinced him, but Azlan agrees with another nod. This time, I don’t stop him when he heads for the door. I make it a point of not interfering in other people’s relationships, but Azlan didn’t grow up with the tools that Loren did. He’s never been reassured that there’s nothing wrong with him. He never learned to express how he feels.

Maybe I’ll talk to Issy the next time he stops in with Azlan. Briefly. Just a subtle push to encourage them to talk to Azlan a little more about Erez.

I spin my chair back to the window and turn my attention to the lake. There’s a figure on the dock. It takes me several minutes to determine that I’m looking at William. The now fifteen-year-old that my three sons brought home from the megachurch cult island. The little boy who was probably the longest, most severe victim of the cult.

We don’t see William often. He doesn’t like crowds. He doesn’t like to be around anyone other than Ellory and Avory most of the time. I’m actually very pleased to see him out of the house and trusting his environment enough to wander so far from home.

Without thinking about it too much, I leave the office and head for the dock. William knows I’m coming almost as soon as I turn down the path toward the lake. He turns to look at me, watches for a minute, and then turns away. He’s silent as I approach, sitting on the end of the dock with a life jacket on.

I stop at his side and join him, careful not to let my feet reach the water. “I’m glad to see you’re wearing a life jacket.”

William glances at me and nods. “I don’t know how to swim,” he answers quietly.

“We can teach you if you’d like. Someday.”

He looks around and then nods. “Yes.”

A minute passes in silence. “Would you like to go on the water?”

His eyebrows knit together, and he looks down at his clothes.

I smile. “Can I show you something, William?” His shoulders tense, and I quickly add, “There’s a float house over here. There are a lot of float options for you to sit on the water.”

His gaze turns up to mine. “Float house?”

“My kids thought it was a fun play on boathouse.”

I think the subtle climb at the corner of his mouth is in response to my smile more than him finding it amusing.

“Would you like to choose a float?”

William nods. He follows me to the float house, and I open the doors to show him the two rows of shelves lined with floats that are still in their packages. I tap the little picture on the edge. “You’ll see the different ones we have here. You can choose any of them.”

He glances to his right and then wanders down the aisle. I remain at the door until he chooses one. After a quick look at the picture, I take him to the back, where there are already a whole lot of floats inflated, to see if that particular one’s out. “Do you see it?” I ask as we pick through the floats. I’m getting covered in sand, but I keep seeing little smiles flash across William’s face, so I can’t find it in me to care.

“No,” William says. “I can choose one of these, though.”

“Nope. Come on. Let’s grab the one you want.” At the shelf, I give him the option of pink, green, or orange. He chooses pink at first and then flinches and changes his mind to orange.

I don’t want to put him on the spot or make him feel uncomfortable, so I don’t ask. Instead, I open the box and show him the little patches and where to put them. I hand him the rope from the inside. Then stick the paper warning and whatever else into a bin before showing him where to discard the box.

Outside, I warn him that it’s going to get loud as I flip the switch to the air compressor. Immediately, the stupidly loud machine roars to life, making William jump. He slaps his hands over his ears as I hold up the little nozzle and show him how to blow up the floats.

Once I turn the air compressor off, he looks at the switch wearily.

“Trust me, they don’t come quieter. I’ve looked. Endlessly.”

He nods and watches me as I loop the rope through the rings and tie it off. “Okay. Just a sec.” Before we leave the float house, I grab a small oar before I have William grab one end of the float while I take the other.

Together, we bring the float down to the dock and put it in the water. William smiles. It’s probably the biggest smile I’ve ever seen him with. He reluctantly lets me help him onto the float, and I hand him the oar before letting him float.

I take a seat on the dock once again and watch as William relaxes and rocks gently on the lake. The lake always brings peace.

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8

LEVIS



IT TOOK me a solid month to locate the laundry room in this beast of a house. The Van Dorens told me that I didn't need to do my laundry. My bedding, my towels, my clothing—it would all be done by the staff. I made it clear that would never be an option. I can do my own damn laundry.

Seriously, it's the very least I can do when absolutely everything else around here is done for me.

However, the laundry rooms are *not* close to my room. Not the one I needed today. It takes me several trips and thousands of steps to get my laundry down to the washers and then back up to my room.

It's my fault, really. I put off laundry day too long, so there are two big baskets of clothes, two baskets of towels, a basket of bedding, and then another big basket that has my comforter. Everything is sitting on my stripped bed as I chug some water and let the burning in my thighs dissipate.

Just as I'm getting ready to fold my laundry, my phone rings. I fish it out of my pocket and sigh as I answer.

"Hi, Mom."

“Levis,” she greets. “How are you? You haven’t called in weeks.”

I love my mother. I love my parents, and I’ve kind of thought we were relatively close once upon a time. But yeah, I’ve put a little distance between us over the last year because they don’t understand that maybe I don’t want the same things I once did.

“Been busy, Mom. Sorry.”

“Have you enrolled in school?”

My shoulders sag, and I drop into the chair by the window. “No. It’s October. Enrollment was over the summer.”

“For winter or spring,” she pushes.

“No. I don’t think I’m going to.”

“Why? Have you decided on a different career?”

A light tapping on my door has me turning my head as my door opens. I’m not surprised to find Jalon opening my door. He meets my eye, sees I’m on the phone, and begins to back out again. I shake my head, gesturing that he can come in. Maybe his presence will allow me to get off the phone quickly.

I watch Jalon approach as my mother asks me about careers, suggesting what I could do instead of architecture, even though I already have an undergraduate degree in architecture. It’s clear that she’s been doing some research. None of her suggestions are new to me. I’ve also been halfheartedly looking.

Jalon doesn’t come toward me. He stops at the end of the bed and looks at the many baskets of clothes. I try not to laugh as he peers into a basket as if it might hold tadpoles or something.

“Mom,” I interrupt her rambling list. “I like my job. I don’t have any desire to go somewhere else right now.”

“We’re worried that you’re settling because things didn’t work out with your girlfriend.”

I let my head fall back briefly and then push to my feet to stare out the window. “Ending that was my choice. Not because she did anything wrong, but because I wasn’t into it.”

“You were going to marry her.”

“Yes, well…”

I turn around and find Jalon leaning against the end of my bed with one of my jockstraps dangling from his finger. Despite the conversation with my mother, I smile. “Mom, I need to go.”

“Levis—”

“I promise you, I’m not lost or unhappy, nor have I given up on life. I’m just working through choosing a different direction right now. I’m *not* settling. I truly like my job, and there’s a ton of room for advancement. I’m still going to have a successful career, even if it looks different from what I initially thought I wanted.”

“And your wife?”

I wince. “I’m not in a hurry for a… wife.”

Jalon gives me an amused smile.

“I have to go. I’ll call you next week.”

“Okay, Levis.” I can hear the way she sighs.

“Love you.” I don’t wait for her response before I hang up my phone and drop it onto the chair I’d been sitting in. I cross the room and grab my jock from Jalon and drop it into the basket closest to me.

“When do you wear jocks?” Jalon asks, eyes dropping to my crotch.

Does my dick jump? Yes. Yes, it does. “When does anyone wear them? When I work out, primarily. Keeps everything where it’s supposed to be and nothing sticks to my thighs.”

“And airs out your ass.”

I laugh and shrug. “I guess.”

“What’re you wearing now?”

“Are you really asking to see my underwear?”

Jalon considers my question and then makes an ‘*eh, why not?*’ expression before answering, “Yes.”

I kind of wish he hadn’t asked because I *am* wearing a jock right now. One of the reasons I forced myself to do laundry today is that I was out of normal underwear and down to my stash of jockstraps.

Huffing, I shove my shorts down, lift my shirt, and then make a slow three-sixty rotation so Jalon can take his look. When I face him again, my breath catches. He *likes* what he sees. A whole lot. The fire in his eyes is hot.

So he doesn’t see my blush, I bend to pull my shorts back up. “Did you really come in here to check on my underwear?”

“No,” Jalon answers. I pull a basket toward me to distract from his heated stare. “I was told that you were running a marathon with laundry baskets.”

“You have such nosy staff,” I complain.

“I do, and I like it that way. You know—”

“I’m never going to allow someone else to do my laundry. You can forget that reminder altogether.”

Jalon’s sexy half-smirk in response has my stomach flipping.

“First, I was going to say that there’s a laundry room on every floor. Why were you going to the basement laundry?”

“Because the basement laundry has the washing machine big enough for the comforter. If some bougie bish hadn’t insisted on filling every single bedroom with beds the size of Rhode Island, I could use a normal-sized washing machine.”

Jalon laughs. He legitimately laughs. This might be only the second time I’ve heard his laughter, and… I love it.

“They’re big rooms. A smaller bed would look ridiculous.”

“Don’t get me started on the ostentatiousness of this house, Jalon.”

He’s still laughing as he pulls out another jockstrap from the basket beside him and looks at it hungrily.

“Second,” he says, without looking away from my underwear. “What do you have against someone else doing your laundry?”

“Don’t take this as an insult, but I’m twenty-three. I’m old enough to do my own laundry.”

“Ouch.”

“You’re a busy man.” I shrug.

His sharp blue eyes rise to mine. “I don’t think I’ve done my own laundry since…” He trails off, gaze traveling away. “Actually, I’m not sure I’ve ever done my laundry.”

“Sad, pathetic man-baby.”

He snorts.

“Can’t turn the washing machine on, can you?” I tease.

“It’s not rocket science. I think I can figure it out.”

I shake my head and snatch the new pair of underwear from his hand. “I enjoy doing my laundry,” I tell him, which is the truth most days. “It’s relaxing. I don’t need to concentrate on it. It’s practically white noise with my hands. I can tune in without actually needing to tune in.”

“Huh.”

“Do *you* know how to relax?”

The half smile he gives me is sexy. “No,” he says, and I’m a little startled by his honesty. “I’m not sure I’ve relaxed since… before Arath was born.”

I make a face, and his smile turns bemused as he nods.

“That sucks. You need to take a vacation or… something.”

Jalon looks at the window, and his gaze becomes far off. The bemused smile slips away. “Someday.”

“When you retire?”

“Retire,” he repeats. “I’m not sure I’d do well in retirement.”

“Because you don’t know how to relax!” His attention turns back to me, and his attention drops to watch me fold my clothes. He slides his hands into his pockets as he watches. I wonder if he’s ever folded his clothes. Or a towel. Or anything at all. “You should take the afternoon off. Grab a book. Turn your phone off. Sit in the sun with Axl.”

“No.”

I laugh.

“That sounds awful… not time with Axl but the rest of it. No.”

“You don’t read?”

“I never learned. It seemed like a waste of time.”

I toss a sock at him, and he catches it easily enough.

“Since you’re in here, make yourself useful and fold some towels.”

“I pay staff very well to do that,” he says.

“Fold the towels,” I insist.

Honestly, I’m fucking shocked when he pulls the basket of towels toward him and plucks out a washcloth. “We used this to clean our jizz off this morning, didn’t we?”

I burst out laughing, cheeks heating. His answering smirk has my stomach flipping again.

While I don’t make a point of watching him, I keep an eye on Jalon as he folds towels, proving that he has definitely done so in the past. They’re neat and not rolled up into a ball, which was how Brek had once ‘*folded*’ his towels.

“Can I ask you something?” Jalon asks.

“It’s always unsettling when someone needs permission to ask a question. How personal are you trying to get?”

His smile is small. “I’m not going to ask your dick size. I’m pretty confident I have that figured out.”

I flush again and toss another sock at him. Fucker.

He lets it hit his shoulder.

“What?”

“You no longer want to open an architecture firm?”

“The preempt to that question is a letdown.” He flashes me a grin, and I shrug my shoulders. “I like what I’m doing. What I told my mother is the truth—I enjoy my job, and it’s not a dead end, so I’m not in a hurry to leave. It’s challenging, I learn a lot, and my coworkers are respectful.” I shrug again.

“If I hadn’t offered you a job, would you have decided to continue with your original plan?”

I think about it as I toss the now empty basket to the floor and pull the second toward me. “I don’t know. But I’d already been procrastinating on applying to a graduate program. I’d had the program chosen since high school. I had everything that I needed to apply filled out and ready. I just didn’t want to press the submit button.”

“You’d already gotten off the train.”

I nod, staring into my basket of clothes. “Yeah. I think I checked off the train as we were moving here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, voice low. “I’ve been toying with a lot of different reasons over the last few months, but I don’t know exactly why. It was no longer what I wanted. I’m just not sure what I want, but I’m happy with my life right now and don’t see any reason to change it since I’m happy.”

“You are happy with your position. That wasn’t something you told your mother to pacify her or because I was in your space.”

“I love my job,” I assure him. “It’s everything I said it is. My parents are concerned because, to them, I suddenly jumped off the train moving at full speed toward my end goal. Without notice or reason. They don’t really get that I can’t put into words why that end is no longer what I want. I don’t have a reason. I just don’t want it anymore.”

Jalon nods. He brings the second basket of towels toward him and begins folding them too. “I get that more than you might think.”

“Your plans changed abruptly when you took your brothers,” I guess.

“Among other things, yes. Our ability as humans to adapt instead of trying to force ourselves to remain on a broken road is how we evolve as a species. Imagine if our ancient ancestors had not continued to follow food sources, or learn to farm, or had just lain down when a predator attacked them instead of fighting back. We were always meant to roll with change, not die on the hill trying to prevent it.”

“That’s very prophetic.”

“No. It’s common sense and critical thinking,” he says, giving me a demure look that has me snorting. “It’s *shocking* the number of people in this world who lack both.”

“You say shocking; I say frightening.”

Jalon nods. “Everything that suddenly fell into my lap with a single signature necessitated my adapting however I needed to. It was a lot of trial and error. I never truly got it right. I excelled in some areas while others were neglected. When I picked up the slack in the areas suffering, the pendulum swung, and a new catastrophe faced me where there hadn’t been one before. Getting a seesaw to balance is impossible.”

“Impossible without help,” I say.

“Yes, except that sometimes the people you trust have only made you believe that they’re holding their side level when in reality, that side has plunged into hell.”

I stare at Jalon for a minute and assume he's talking about the situation with his ex-wife and kids. I don't comment.

"I suppose my point is, it took me a long time to find the recipe for a balanced seesaw."

"Are you going to share that secret?"

The amusement in his eyes is overcome with heat, and my cock feels the sparks jump between us. "Maybe in the dark, I'll share my secrets with you."

Unbidden, my eyes fall to the outline of his cock. He's a little hard, too; otherwise, the style of his pants does well to conceal what he's hiding. The seven barbells along the topside of his length burn in my eyes. I'm not sure if I'm more fascinated with them or the tattoo around the base of his dick. Does it make a complete circle?

Jalon is a little stingy with my attention on his dick. He lasts for maybe a few minutes with me touching him before he's on me, devouring my face. Rutting his cock against mine until we both lose our loads.

I'll hand it to him. He does not lack stamina. I'm not sure I've lasted longer than him a single time. He feels too good. He knows exactly how much pressure to circle our dicks with. He knows where to put his fingers. He knows how to suck my soul from my body through his kiss.

"You have more secrets?" I ask and nearly flinch at the sound of my breathlessness.

Jalon's chuckle is low and sultry. I feel it trickle down the length of my spine and cup my balls. "Levis, I have more secrets than you can even imagine."

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9

JALON



TODAY HAS BEEN one of the longest days of my entire life. I've had a whole lot of days that felt like they wouldn't end, but this one… this one is endless as I wait for nightfall.

My kids are hanging out on the mezzanine of the fourth floor after dinner with a clear shot down the hall. Which is fine because Levis is with them. It's not like I'm going to sneak into his bedroom while everyone watches me.

I love to see my kids together. Including my adopted kids—my brother-in-law and son-in-law's best friends. I've thought of them as mine since it was clear that my boys were fully integrating themselves with the six of them while we were in Southern Arizona. I'm not sure they realized they were doing it to the extent that they did. Maybe in an effort to show Loren support and make Oakley comfortable—I'm not sure.

Thinking of them all as my kids has recently been a little problematic, given the new dynamic between Levis and me. So now they're all my kids *except* Levis. Which feels a little exclusive, but yeah, those two relationships just can't coincide.

The relationship my children share is something I've always loved. I know that so much of it is born from their need to protect each other from their mother. I hate that perhaps the necessity to do so was their driving force in bonding, but they've chosen to stay close since then, and it's been… almost a decade? No. Longer. Twelve years now. Something like that.

Their laughter. The way they pick at each other. The clear fondness in their expressions. It allows me the reward of a slight leeway in accepting that maybe I stepped in before irreparable damage was done by their mother.

They know love from a parent now. Even if I was late in showing them just how much I love them, and that no one will ever come before them. Including, and especially not, the person who gave birth to them.

Voss, Brek, and Axl turn in first. Shortly after are Noaz, Briar, and Emerson, though Emmy has been asleep in my arms for more than an hour now. There's nothing better than cuddling with my grandsons.

One by one, the rest of my children wander off to their homes or their rooms until, finally, when I'm ready to lose my mind, only Levis and I remain. Honey Bee's door shuts, and Levis meets my eyes.

Fire flares to life all around us, and I push myself to my feet. Wordlessly, Levis follows. Together, we walk down the hall. He pauses at his door, but I grip his elbow and escort him further down the hall to my room. He doesn't argue or hesitate.

The house is silent. If there are eyes watching, they're not visible to us.

I open my door and playfully shove Levis inside. He laughs quietly as I shut us in, but when I turn the lights on, his laughter dies down, and his eyes turn wide.

"Holy fuck, Jalon. You have a palace in your room!"

I glance up at the metal tile ceilings and the water fountain in the foyer and think maybe he's exaggerating a little bit.

"You bougie bitch," he says and peers down the hall to the left. "Is that a fucking kitchen?"

Amused, I lean against the door and watch as he pokes his head through doors and looks at everything all at the same time. He disappears onto the balcony and comes in with an incredulous expression. “There’s an entire outdoor house out there.”

“I know.”

He’s only seen a fraction of my living quarters, but he crosses his arms over his chest and levels me with a frown. “This entire place is wasted on someone who refuses to relax.”

I laugh and push myself from the door. Gripping his narrow hips, I haul him against me and seal his mouth with mine. He’s only slightly reluctant. I think he wants to scold me some more, but I swallow his reprimands instead and slowly push him backward toward my bedroom.

However, he’s not entirely preoccupied by my mouth on his when we walk into the sitting room, and there are open doors on either side. To the right is an office, and to the left a library.

“What the shit,” he mutters, pulling from my grasp. “Bougie doesn’t cover this.”

Knowing that I’m not going to have his attention until he’s finished scolding me on all the unused rooms that make up my apartment, I push my hands into my slacks’ pockets and watch as he looks around with a mix of horror, shock, and awe.

His expression is honestly everything. Unfiltered. Authentic. I love it.

Eventually, he makes it into the bedroom and stares at the massive bed. I can only imagine the look he’s going to give me, and I’m not disappointed when he turns to me with an exasperated expression.

“I have a bed the size of the smallest state. Yours is the size of Canada. You’re one man, Jalon. Do you host orgies in here?”

I look beyond him at the bed and tilt my head to the side as if I’m considering it. “We can talk about that.”

Levis rolls his eyes and begins opening doors. He scoffs at the kitchenette, which is an elevated coffee bar, really. Just beyond that is another balcony where I sometimes enjoy a drink in the morning or in the evening.

He gets lost in the closet. Or so he says. He claims he legitimately got lost. And then he points a finger at me in triumph that I don't own anything casual. My '*entire eighty-acre closet is filled with suits!*'

I don't tell him that there's a hidden panel in there that hides the rest of my wardrobe. When you're planning for episodes of *Lifestyles of the Mega Wealthy*, you think of these things. Cheddar assured me it was necessary when we were discussing what the big house should look like inside once it's done right.

Levis gets to the bathroom, which, admittedly, is overdone. I have a spa just outside my bedroom. It even has a hidden staircase where a masseuse can come up if I'd like to schedule a massage, and no one would see them come into my room, assuring me of the illusion that I *am* at a spa.

There are a ton of hidden rooms within my… little… apartment. I don't bring these to Levis' attention, though, because I'd really like to get him naked, and he's already stupidly distracted.

When he *finally* stands in front of me with his hands on his hips and an expectant look, I ask, "Are you finished? Can we fuck now?"

His cheeks turn a delicious shade of pink, but it doesn't completely wipe away his amused horror at my bedroom. "This entire space is wasted on you, Jalon."

Truthfully, I didn't plan it for myself. I planned it for… someone else. A partner? No, but definitely for someone else to enjoy while I worked and kept everything running.

I don't tell him this, though. We've already talked enough, and I need this man naked. "Is that a no?"

The rosy color on his cheeks remains. "No, but only because I'm horny. You stared at me all damn night!"

"You're sexy. Weird that I only recently noticed."

He rolls his eyes.

“Take your clothes off, Levis. Get on my bed. Hands and knees. You best be wearing a jock.”

He rolls his eyes and, with a sarcastic tone, asks, “Do you want me in Vancouver or Quebec?”

Unfortunately for him, he just dropped his pants, so I slap his ass. It’s hard enough that he jumps and spins to face me with wide, startled eyes and a hand over his smarting ass cheek. I grip his chin so he’s looking into my eyes. “I think I really love the red tinge your skin can take, Levis,” I say, keeping my voice low. He shivers in my hold. “Quebec is fine.”

He stares for a solid three seconds and then laughs loudly. I love that sound.

Releasing him, I watch as he strips down to his jockstrap and climbs onto the bed as I instructed. I’m going to be honest with myself and admit that I did a lot of research in preparation for… things beyond the basic blowie and frotting. How to do it right without injury. Where the biggest pleasure points are located and how *exactly* to reach them. What kind of prep we need ahead of time so there’s no mess while doing it.

Fortunately, I have had the house making very fibrous foods and maybe I’ve also seen to it that Levis has a fibrous breakfast and lunch over the last week. I’m not even sorry about it. It’s good for all of us to have a well-balanced, high-fiber diet.

I grab the lube from my nightstand and climb onto the bed. Honestly, if I had to wash my own bedding or make my own bed, I’d sleep on a floor mat that I can roll up and shove *under* the bed. I hate making beds, but I love getting into a freshly made bed. It’s a good thing I’m rich and can pay someone to do the things I don’t want to do.

Levis doesn’t watch me over his shoulder. The place I slapped his ass is still red. I can see the faint outline of my handprint, and it sends an unexpected thrill through me. Huh. Who knew I’d like that?

With one hand, I gently rub that spot. With the other, I squirt copious amounts of lube down his crack, which has Levis grunting. I toy with the slick jelly along his crease and gently push two fingers inside him. Little by

little. No, I don’t begin with one. Levis knows I’ll stop if he tells me to. I’m too impatient to begin with a single finger. Besides, not to get gross, but let’s be real. This hole rarely stays as small as a single finger when engaging in its usual activities.

So, two fingers and I listen closely to the way Levis breathes. The way he grunts. The sounds he makes. The way his body tenses. My other fingers trail along the elastic material of the jock’s straps framing his perfectly plump ass as I work my fingers inside him.

He’s a work of art. I think he’s toned every single muscle in his body, and it’s glorious to look at.

“Fuck, Jalon,” he grunts.

I curl my fingers briefly, right where I think—

Levis jerks forward, a strangled, sexy sound ripping from his throat. Yep, I found his prostate.

“Ever had this played with before?” I ask and press against it again.

His arms shake as he gasps again and shakes his head. How beautiful. Now that I’ve found his pleasure point, I add a third finger, far less slowly than I did two, but concentrate on his prostate. His body trembles. There’s a long string of precum connecting the tip of his dick to the bed, and I’m a little hypnotized by it.

His noises are a drug, and I push harder, deeper, creating more friction as I drive him closer and closer to coming. When he collapses on the bed, I roll him over and shove my fingers back inside him, rub his cock through the front of his jock, and cover his mouth with mine so I can taste his orgasm.

Levis spasms, hips jerks upward and down, fucking himself on my fingers. How addicting. He comes with a loud but strangled sound, hand gripping my wrist tightly as if to keep me where I am, refusing to let me stop. As if I would. This is my favorite orgasm I’ve earned to date.

He’s barely coming down when I adjust his body so his head hangs off the edge of the bed. “You ever had a dick in your throat?” I ask, and he shakes his head. “Are you opposed?”

“No.”

I frame his head between my thighs and watch as he obediently opens his mouth for me. Fuck, that’s hot. So fucking hot as I slide my dick inside his wet, hot mouth. His arms wrap around my thighs, and I adjust us both so that he can have my dick without me needing to squat in any way.

As I was with his sweet little ass, I’m not entirely interested in working up to what I want. Not right now. Just to make sure Levis has a way out, I tell him, “If it’s too much or you need me to stop, tap my leg. Okay?”

He nods, mouth still wrapped around my dick.

“I’m going to come down your throat,” I warn.

A shiver travels along his entire body.

Despite my impatience, I work my dick to the back of his throat and listen to the way he gags around me. It sends a vibration along my dick, and I grunt as I pull myself out. Levis gasps a breath before I replace my dick where it was.

He feels good. All of him. Hand flat on his chest, I run it down his stomach to his soaked through jock where I cup his semi-soft cock. His hips jerk up. The sound of his choking makes me pull away slightly, and I listen to him take another breath.

“Okay?”

In answer, he takes my dick back in his mouth, and I grin as I lay down along his body, forcing my cock down his throat by an inch for the first time. His throat contracts on instinct as he tries not to choke. This new position brings my face right to his crotch, and I want nothing more than to bury my face there.

So I do. Tasting his release through the cotton. Feeling the thickness of his dick. The way it twitches. I back my own cock out and allow him another breath before driving in deep. This time, he struggles around me. His entire body struggles under me as he fights his reflexes.

“If you need me to stop, tap my leg,” I grit out as heat plunges between my legs.

His fingers curl, digging his nails into my thighs. Hanging on tight.

I imagine my stamina is going to take a hit tonight because he feels too fucking good. I don’t keep my dick down his throat for longer than three or five seconds at a time before I allow him a breath or two. He coughs. Gags. But always takes me back.

My orgasm is sharp as I shoot down his throat. It makes him choke, which doesn’t surprise me since I didn’t warn him at all. I pull back long enough for him to sputter, but I’m not finished, so I shove back inside and make him take the rest of my load as I bury my face harshly between his legs and groan my way through the best fucking feeling in the world.

I have presence of mind enough to pull my dick from his throat so he can breathe before letting my body weight settle on him. I don’t want to kill him.

I’m surprised when he keeps my dick in his mouth and sucks on me all on his own. He drags his tongue along my piercings, flicks them. Toys with my head. And then sucks me gently before he goes completely slack beneath me.

“How long do you need before you can take my dick down your throat again?” I ask.

Levis grunts. “I didn’t hate that,” he croaks.

“Did I hurt you?”

He shakes his head. “Not aggressively.”

“Everything I’ve read and experienced says you’ll get used to it, and it won’t be a struggle every time.”

“I might regret saying this, but I kind of liked struggling.”

I groan, wrapping my mouth around his cock through his jock. Why the fuck does he turn me on so much?!

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10

LEVIS



FOR THE PAST month and a half, I've struggled to wake up. It's not like I don't know why. I've stayed up far too late with Jalon almost every night since the first time he showed up at my door in early September. Last night, I didn't come back to my room until three in the morning.

I *had* dozed a little before Jalon woke me up to fuck my throat for a second time and I came for a second time in my jock. Not because he did anything at all to me except bury his face in my groin as he fucked my throat and moaned.

If someone had asked me what the sexiest sound was, I probably would have said something cliché like a confident woman's laughter. I'd have been wrong. Sure, that's sexy. But hands down, the sexiest sound I've ever heard is Jalon's arousal. The unfiltered sounds of a man who is the epitome of elegance, debonair, and larger-than-life. Even though I've been in his presence for the past two years, Jalon has always felt like a person out of time. With heavy burdens comes a heavy crown and the need to be restrained in all settings.

But this side of Jalon? I absently wonder if anyone has ever seen it before.

He’s the first thing I think about when I become conscious this morning. Maybe because my throat is a bit scratchy when I swallow, reminding me that Jalon held back less the second time than he did the first time. Probably because I said I enjoyed the struggle.

Which wasn’t a lie at all. I can’t explain the way every nerve in my body lit on fire when I couldn’t breathe because his metal-lined dick was shoved almost painfully in my airway while he groaned into my dick. With all the confidence in my soul, I can honestly say that I have never felt that kind of arousal.

I’ve always kind of silently hinted that I had secrets when my friends would ask or allude to me being kinky. In reality, I’m not all that kinky. For no other reason than that it hasn’t come up in my past relationships. As if I chose vanilla women to match my cookie-cutter vanilla lifestyle.

My alarm tells me I’ve lain in bed long enough. I roll to reach my phone and reset the alarm. A notification flashes at me from Jalon. My heart stutters. I’m not sure he’s ever texted me before.

Clicking on the notification, my screen opens, and I find I’m right. This is the first text between us. I’ve had his number since we moved to the Estate, but I’ve never had a reason to use it. It was always a ‘*just in case*’ contact.

JALON VAN DOREN

Drink your tea. It’ll soothe that sore throat.

I sit up and rub my face. Maybe I’m not awake enough to understand his tea comment. I haven’t gotten out of bed…

There’s a pot of tea on a tray sitting on a small table just to the side of my nightstand. When the hell did he bring this in here? How did he not wake me? Was I so damn tired that I slept through his presence?

That’s not in the least bit disturbing.

Still. Tea *would* soothe the ache in my throat. “Arrogant fucker,” I mutter as I reach for the small teacup, only to find a small bag of throat lozenges. “Wow.” I can just see him laughing if he were watching me see his *thoughtful* gesture.

Okay then. Before I even pour myself a cup of tea, I open my Zon app and begin searching. Ah. There we go. I pay for same-day delivery and add a little gift note. With the instructions to have it delivered to Jalon at the office this morning.

> Thanks for the tea. I can't determine whether the gesture was thoughtful or arrogant. As a thank you, here's some educational reading material for you to enjoy.

I'm feeling pleased enough imagining Jalon's laughter when he opens his new copy of the *How to Do Laundry for Dummies* book and reads his gift note that I pour myself a cup of tea and enjoy a few sips. I might be tired, but I think this is going to be a good morning.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Jalon proves that men in their fifties do *not*, in fact, lack stamina when faced with the right motivation. I'm pretty sure he's had his dick down my throat well over a dozen times since the first time, and it's not always at night. He's had me in a damn coat closet at the big house pinned to a wall as he fucked my face until I nearly passed out.

At night, he practically sticks his hand up my ass as he fucks my throat, and I'm so out of it that I ride his fingers into oblivion as he practically forgets to let me breathe.

Sometimes, I wonder if we're good for each other. He's not exactly reckless, and pulling me out of crowds where someone would see him shove me into a den to come down my throat. I feel absolutely wrecked after, but that son of a bitch just straightens his tie with a smirk, and he's ready for a magazine cover.

Every morning, he has hot tea delivered while I sleep. There aren't always throat lozenges, but there are often some other little things that might soothe a sore throat. Or a sore ass if he thinks he really stretched my ass good the night before.

Which, okay, usually he does.

In turn, I send him instruction manuals for menial household tasks. This morning, I was excited to find an adult coloring book that was all about relaxing. I might have been smiling far too widely when I got to my office, and the mail employee had a Zon box in his hand for Jalon. I'm loving that there's a Zon shipment center so close.

The first email in my inbox this morning is from one of my co-workers asking if I'd like to partner on a design that he's been working on. At first, I'm excited, but then this strange niggling feeling flutters to life in my gut. Jalon wouldn't do the whole quid pro quo thing, right?

The idea that maybe he had has me hesitating to accept. My finger hovers over the reply button, but I can't shake the sour feeling in my gut.

A light tap on my door has me turning, and as if my thoughts summoned him, Jalon stands in my doorway with a book in his hand and an eyebrow raised. Maybe it's not the coloring book that has him there, but the jumbo crayons that I sent along with it.

For just a second, I forget about the email and try my damnedest not to laugh at his expression.

"What's up, Mr. Van Doren?" I ask.

His eyes hood slightly as he stares at me. "Jumbo crayons?" he deadpans.

Okay, I can't keep my laughter in. It bubbles out before I can hold it back. "I thought you and Emmy could relax together. And, you know, you're not a spring chicken, so your old-man joints might appreciate something bigger to hold on to."

His nostrils flare, and I *know* he's going to fuck my face hard later. To show me how achy his old man joints are.

Jalon doesn't answer. He turns away, but then I remember the email.

"Jalon?"

He pauses to look at me, and I hesitate to ask. I don't want to offend him. Or insult him. Now that it's on the tip of my tongue, I feel stupid for even

thinking that Jalon would do something like that is even a possibility.

“Jimy Trainer asked me to partner with him on his project,” I state.

Jalon smiles, all signs of our previous banter gone. “What’s he working on?”

I study him for a minute. “A condo complex outside the Hollywood Hills.”

His smile remains, but I think maybe it spreads a little wider. “That’s great. Congratulations.”

The inside of my lip pinches between my teeth as I hold Jalon’s eyes. I’m not surprised when he guesses what has me not excited. He steps into my office and closes my door before crossing the space between us.

I feel horrible when he pinches my chin and forces my eyes to meet his. “I do not get involved in my family’s jobs, Levis. I feel strongly about earning your position, accolades, and pay. The playing field at Van Doren Technologies is level for everyone. I *did not* do anything to make this happen for you.”

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He presses his mouth to mine, which has my heart skipping around alarmingly. “It’s okay. I understand why you entertained the thought. We live in a corrupt world. Even the mighty have flaws. But I want you to trust me that I will never involve myself in your career. In fact, I don’t oversee this branch of VDT *because* you work here. Once I offered you the job, I removed myself from active involvement.”

“Because I work here,” I repeat.

Jalon inclines his head. “Yes. You, out of all Oakley and Briar’s friends, would *not* appreciate my presence in your career. I knew that soon after you approached me for an internship and told me you didn’t want any special treatment because your best friend is married to my son. After finding you an internship that fulfilled your interests, I took a step back and let you do your thing. Everything that’s happened to you since is all on you.”

“You offered me this job,” I point out.

“At Sandra’s request,” he says. Sandra is my boss.

“Thanks, Jalon. I feel shitty for even entertaining the idea, but I appreciate the assurance.”

He kisses me again, and this time it lingers. “What we’re doing has nothing to do with work. I promise you. It will never interfere. Okay?”

I nod.

Jalon releases my chin and takes a step back. “You choking on my dick is just a bonus.” He turns, and I snort. I don’t miss his smile as he leaves my office.

Before I can get back to my email, I hear Oakley’s voice. “Hi, Jalon. Want a cookie?”

I grin.

“Thank you,” Jalon says. “Good to see you’re branching out in your cookie shapes.”

Oakley laughs. “I’m not. They just didn’t seem appropriate for work.”

“My sons do not share your same reservations.”

Oakley’s laughter gets closer, and he appears in my door a second later with a big smile. His messy blond hair is in an elastic but falling out all around his face. He’s always been borderline too thin, though not for lack of eating. He just has that body structure and metabolism. With the number of cookies he consumes every week, it’s certainly not for lack of calorie intake.

“Hey,” he greets. “Are you busy?”

“I’ve barely started work for the day.”

“Daddy Jalon was just in here, wasn’t he? Did you get in trouble for something?” He raises a brow as he sets the food container filled with cookies on the table opposite my standing desk.

“No. I was just invited to partner on a project, and I was sharing the news with him.”

Oakley beams at me. “That’s awesome. Have a cookie to celebrate.”

Chuckling, I join him at the table and take a cookie. He watches me closely as I take a bite, which has me initially concerned about what I’m putting in my mouth.

“We’re perfecting that recipe,” Oakley supplies. “It’s already a combination of three, but we’re trying to balance out the flavor profiles. What do you think?”

The texture is soft in the middle and melts like butter as soon as it hits my tongue. Then it’s an explosion of flavors. I’m not big into sugary treats or beverages, but I find my eyes closing as I let it tap every single taste bud.

“This is amazing, Oak.”

He grins. “Yeah?”

“Yes. Come up with a catchy name, and you’re going to become internet famous.”

Oakley laughs as he falls back into the chair. “Not interested in that. Imry and I are just messing around for something to do.”

I glance at the door. “Where’s your husband?”

He gives me a sly smile. “I left him at home, though he’s probably lurking in the hall.” He gets to his feet, and pops his head out, looks left and then right before shrugging and coming back into my office, and closes the door.

“Need some space from him?” I ask.

Oakley shakes his head. “Nope. Never.”

“Just want some privacy?”

He sighs. “I’m thinking of not having kids.”

Ah. I take the seat across from him. “Why?”

“I didn’t know Loren felt that way. I don’t want him to feel that way about our kids, like he’s just having kids for me.”

“Have you talked to him about it further?” He shakes his head. “You probably should.”

“Yeah. Probably. He doesn’t give me answers.”

“I think it takes a while for him to find the answers because he doesn’t know why he feels the way he does. I’ve listened to his brothers talk about Loren a lot, and everything they say is that Loren’s behavior is incredibly unlike his previous twenty-four years before you. Not in a bad way. But he’s navigating situations and relationships he’s unfamiliar with. He’s grown up believing he was incapable of feeling strongly about someone. He might be your first real boyfriend, but you also grew up in a world where you knew you’d fall in love. It’s very different for Loren.”

Oakley’s eyebrows are pinched together as he thinks about my words. “You don’t think we should have kids because he’s a sociopath either, do you?”

I study him for a long time and then nod. “Actually, I think you should have kids.” His eyes widen a little, but I hear the subtle intake of breath. “I think you need to have lots of conversations with Loren. It seems that the more something comes up, the more Loren is forced to work himself through what he’s feeling. So, as cliché as it is, talking is going to be the most important thing between you. You’re also going to need to remember that you’re not just dealing with two or three kids at once. You also need to manage Loren. Keep in mind he’s been the youngest his entire life. Kids might be incredibly overwhelming for him.”

The lines in Oakley’s face smooth out. “Thanks, Levis.”

“That what you wanted to hear?”

He shakes his head. “I knew that if I asked Brek or Honey Bee, they’d tell me I shouldn’t have kids with a sociopath. Briar is on the fence because Loren makes him uneasy, though I don’t think he distrusts him like Brek and Honey Bee. Haze is kind of… dissociated from Loren, I think. Maybe not the right word, but he doesn’t seem to have an opinion one way or another. If someone was going to give me a logical, unbiased opinion, it was always going to be you.”

“You think my opinion isn’t biased?”

“You can be wary of Loren too, but you’re far more open to seeing the good in him than everyone else is.”

I get to my feet and kiss the top of his head. “He very clearly loves you more than anything else, Oak. That’s honestly the only thing I need to know about him.”

He smiles and then pushes the food container toward me again. “Eat another cookie.”

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11

JALON



SEEING Axl and Emerson grow every day is a constant reminder that I didn't have the same experience with my children. I didn't see them every day, so I missed a ton of big milestones. Watching Axl open his eyes and search for me as I hold him, my chest tightens because I don't know that I experienced this with all my kids.

I wasn't a deadbeat father. At least, I don't think I was. I provided financially and materially for my family. Martha's only job was to stay home with our kids and raise them in a loving, supportive household.

Apparently, she failed at both of those requirements, but she did stay home with them. For better or worse, they never came home to an empty house. At this point, I'm not sure if that's a good thing.

When they were very young, I was home every weekend. Friday night to Sunday afternoon. As they got a little older, sometimes I'd have to skip a week. When they were very young, I was just getting VDT traction in the world. The Estate was a disaster zone as I had multiple projects underway at once, needing *everything* built simultaneously so we could live. I had my brothers with Oxley struggling to focus, and his tutors being a pain in the ass, Kairo becoming an absolute dickwad, primarily toward Noaz and

Oxley, but that hateful hostility was beginning to bleed outward as well. As much as Arath tried to help, I insisted that he just be a kid. That was his job. Be a kid. Not a caretaker.

My priorities were fucked up.

“You’re spiraling,” Voss says, and I glance up at him. He’s perched on a spinning stool. The seat is offset at an angle, and his lower body swings from left to right constantly.

This is how you accommodate someone with ADHD. Trying to make them conform to what’s comfortable for others *does not* make a perfect child. It means they struggle. Once Voss had the tools he needed, he began to thrive like nothing I’d ever experienced before. He went from being a smart but closed-off kid to someone who can do anything with technology that I propose as soon as I simply hint about it.

“I’m not,” I argue.

He snorts without looking at me. “Liar.”

“I’m admiring my grandson, who was staring at me for a few seconds, though he already gave up and went back to sleep.”

“His attention span is shorter than mine,” Voss muses.

“He’s pretty perfect.”

Voss looks at me with a smile. “He is. I agree.”

“How’s Lorissa?” I ask.

He looks back at his screen and begins tapping away. “Lor is Lor. Champing at the bit to head back to the city.”

“She’s six weeks postpartum now. Is there a reason she’s staying?” I want to ask if maybe she’s having second thoughts about staying in Axl’s life. I don’t because I don’t want anyone to think that I prefer one outcome to the other.

Honestly, forcing someone to be a parent who doesn’t want to be is only going to harm the child. I don’t give a shit what the idiots who argue that

kids are better off with their bio parents than anyone else say about it. Good for them that they grew up in a household where that was a positive experience. That is *not* the case for many, many kids.

Of course, the loudest people screaming that the only environment where a kid can thrive is with both their bio parents are also the people who put stipulations on their love, weaponize emotions, and condemn empathy. Are we really surprised that they want to keep the kids where they have the most control over creating little gremlins just like them?

But I digress. I understand the weight of my opinion, so I generally try to keep it to myself when it comes to these kinds of conversations. I'm not sure even my kids simply see me as Dad. I'm Jalon Van Doren.

Voss shrugs one shoulder. "I think she's enjoying the time off, actually. Lorissa comes from a life where she's never had a break to truly relax. Safe, fed, comfortable."

A constant reminder that the world is shit.

I turn my attention back to Axl and gently brush my thumb across his cheek. I can't believe how big he is already. He's getting heavy. What great things will he do? Will he be a tech guru like his father? Will he grow up with a knife in his hand like Loren?

His resemblance to my youngest son continues. Loren seems a little disturbed by it sometimes. I *love* that he recognizes that his nephew looks just like him.

"No," Voss says when I don't respond. "She really doesn't want to be involved in his life."

Voss' tone is indifferent, though I've known my kids long enough to know that they also grew up in an environment the exact opposite of what I wanted for them. Martha tried to form my kids into those gross little gremlins I just thought of. All my kids hide their true thoughts very well when they want to.

I examine his profile and try to gauge how he feels about it. After a minute, when he's finished typing whatever it is he's working on, his eyes meet mine. "I'm sure she'll show up as a distant aunt once in a while, but she

doesn’t want a kid, and that’s fine. She kept the pregnancy because I asked her to, Dad. Not because it was her first choice.”

I hadn’t known that. It’s also the closest admission to Axl being biologically his that he’s offered. I’m confident Axl is, but after knowing how long it took Noaz to be chosen for adoption… I wouldn’t put it past any of my kids to jump on an opportunity to have a kid when the opportunity presents itself. Considering half my kids are in relationships where they can’t procreate with each other and Voss has never brought a partner home… I thought maybe he saw a chance and seized it.

“He’s mine, Dad,” Voss says, and I blink my way out of my thoughts.

“Did I say something out loud?”

Voss laughs. “No. I’ve been waiting for you to ask *for months*, and it’s clear that you never intend to, so it’s been amusing to see how vaguely specific I can be and watch you weigh my answer.”

I sigh dramatically, and he chuckles.

“He’s mine,” Voss says quietly. “My DNA. My baby. Your grandson.”

“For the record, I don’t care whose DNA he carries. You tell me he’s your kid, I’m going to love him as my grandson.”

He smiles. “I know. He *does* look like Loren.”

“Yes, but Emerson looks weirdly like Noaz. Maybe we see what we want to see.”

Voss gives me a thoughtful look and nods. “Okay, that’s fair, though I keep thinking he looks more like Briar as he gets older. He doesn’t have Briar’s Hispanic skin tone, but he’s beginning to have his facial features.”

I shake my head. “We’re definitely seeing what we want to see.”

While I’d love to spend all my time holding my grandkids or spending time with my sons, I set Axl back into his office bed and slip back into my jacket. Voss’ office is one of the most hodge-podge rooms I’ve ever been in. There’s a large table in the middle of the room that he uses for meetings with his team as well as to set up new equipment we receive.

In the middle of the table is a large basket filled with various fidget toys. Along the back wall are more than a dozen different alternative seating options with moving bases, springs, round bottoms, and more.

Now, there's the addition of baby things all over. Axl's changing table is in the bathroom, and the fridge in the other room is filled with milk, but there are half a dozen different pieces of furniture for Axl around the room now, too. A pacifier, toys, blankets, burp clothes—baby *things* are everywhere.

I kiss the back of my kid's head and wrap my arm around the front of his shoulders in a brief hug and leave him to his work. It's early in the afternoon, but I decide I'm finished for the day. After a brief check-in with Crestley to make sure there's nothing that needs my attention, I head home.

The best way to end my workdays is with an Axl snuggle anyway. Might as well end on a high note.

Usually, I drive to and from work. Yes, the office isn't far. Most certainly within walking distance of my house. But it gets hot in the afternoon.

This morning, I opted for another wander around the lake, so I walked to work. Which means I'm walking home. I could call for a ride or take one of the work vehicles, but there's no reason I can't walk.

I choose to cut across the lawn instead of following the roads. It's more direct, and yes, it's hot out. Even in mid-October. The nights are getting colder, which I appreciate. It means I can open the balcony door at night and enjoy the cool air. But the afternoons can still get sweltering.

It's nice out. With the gardens to the west and the field of wildflowers to the southwest of the property, there are birds and bees everywhere. I'm pretty sure the bees are from our own hives. As I'm walking across the grass, which we spend a whole lot to maintain in this climate, I determine that I think we need more flowers. This is just an open space, and we're not feeding the bees.

Flowerbeds, perhaps.

Then again, we're in Arizona. My ancestors cut down all the cacti that grew on this property long before they were protected. Maybe we should bring back some native flora. I'll have to talk to Walter, my head of landscaping. I

love that we're a world removed, but perhaps we're not being true to our Arizona roots.

By the time I reach the house, I'm almost soaked through to my jacket. As soon as I reach my bedroom, I strip down and take a long shower in my excessive bathroom. One of these days, I'm going to show Levis all the fun that can be had in my bathroom. The thought carries me through cleaning.

I consider hauling out a pair of jeans and a tee, just to see Levis' face when I prove to him that I *do* own clothing other than suits, but I don't. That fun can be had another time.

As I'm buttoning my shirt sleeves, movement in the backyard catches my attention, and I open the balcony doors. Levis is on the lawn, moving like a part of the wind around him with his wakizashi. He's elegant and hypnotic. Slow and then slicing. Everything is fluid and practiced. If he makes any missteps at all, they're too subtle for my layman's eyes to catch.

I must have caught him at the beginning of his session because he continues for quite some time, and I'm too enthralled with the way he moves to take my eyes off him. By the time he finishes and heads for the door, my cock is throbbing.

It's luck alone that finds the upstairs hall and the mezzanine, where the kids tend to gather, empty. I let myself into Levis' room, briefly wondering if he's going to be annoyed that I didn't get his permission to enter his personal space without him.

He steps inside three minutes later, still sipping his water bottle. His eyes meet mine immediately, and he pauses before quickly shutting the door. I think I hear the faint *click* of the lock engaging.

Levis is slow as he approaches, setting his water on the side table. Do I love that he's using a VDT water bottle? Kind of. But my gaze is on his bare chest. It glistens with a light sheen of sweat as he gets nearer.

"I'm going to need you to get undressed now," I state.

He grins. "I need a shower first. I'm sweaty."

“Yes,” I agree, eyes dropping. Nostrils flaring. “I see that. I *do not* want you to take a shower first.”

Levis licks his lips. For a minute, he doesn’t move. Debating whether he’s willing to let me touch him when he’s sweaty, maybe. It’s on the tip of my tongue to remind him we get sweaty every night.

He kicks off his shoes, and I take that as a go. Though I just dressed again, I make quick work of stripping my clothes off.

“Jock on or off?” Levis asks.

I groan because fuck. I’m not sure if the high I feel is because he asked or because I love his ass hanging out of a jock while his dick is framed all pretty for me but trapped inside.

“Off,” I decide. “This time.”

He drops it, and I stare at his naked body as he climbs onto the bed. Levis tosses the pillows aside and leans his back against the headboard to wait for me with his legs splayed wide, dick standing tall, and watching me finish undressing.

As soon as I’m naked and grab the lube, I hook my arms under his thighs and haul him down the bed so he’s lying flat. He laughs, though I cut that sound off when I swallow his dick into my mouth. His hand grips my hair tightly, hips jerking roughly up as he hisses.

“Shit, Jalon,” he grunts.

I waste no time plunging lubed fingers into his body and feeling the way everything inside him responds to me. I’m rougher than I need to be as I swallow down his musky, sweaty taste. He pants, hands tugging roughly in my hair as I force his body closer and closer to orgasm. I need to taste him. I need to taste his spunk mixed with sweat.

Except… I also want to be a part of his body right now.

Without warning, I pop off his dick, and he grunts in frustration. Before he can complain, I capture his mouth with mine in a rough kiss. “I need to fuck you,” I demand. “Can I?”

Levis groans and nods.

I don’t waste time covering my dick in lube and pushing my head to his hole. There I pause because I didn’t put a condom on. My gaze flickers to the nightstand, and I scowl. “Okay, I’m going to make you think less of me right now with my nineties melodramatic, irresponsible request.”

He snorts. “What?”

“If I promise to pull out, are you opposed to me not wearing a condom?”

Levis laughs sharply. “Wow. The only thing you forgot to add is that it doesn’t feel as good.”

I bite his lip, and he smiles. When I release him, he picks his head up to look at my dick where I’m holding it poised to slam inside his sexy body. Need makes me shake.

“Do they rip? Is that why you don’t want to wear one?”

“They rip far more easily than someone without piercings would, though I’m adept at knowing how to move so that they won’t cause it to rip.”

“But you don’t want to fuck me within those parameters,” he guesses.

“I’m drunk on your sweaty pheromones, so no. I don’t. I won’t come inside you.”

“Well, that’s a promise no man has ever broken.”

His sarcasm has me laughing.

“Yeah, Jalon. Hurry up and fuck me before I change my mind.”

His go is barely out of his mouth when I push my weight toward him. He finishes his sentence on a gasp as my cockhead breaks through his tight ring. I stare at his face for the first few inches as his mouth falls open and eyebrows knit together.

Then I plant my hand on the other side of his head and push into him. Levis’ body arches and spasms under me. I swallow the sounds he makes and feed him my own. I pause for just a few breaths as soon as I’m balls deep.

“Jalon,” he grunts, but my name leaving his mouth in that tone ignites my blood.

I capture his mouth and don’t release it as I begin fucking him for real. Not hard or deep thrusts. I’m already fully sheathed in his body, and while I truly need to fuck the shit out of this man to release the animalistic desire to own him and cover his erotic scent with my own so everyone stays away, I’m conscious that he’s probably never had a dick in his ass. We haven’t had the conversation outright, but I’m under the impression that he’s new to gay shit. That means new to anal play.

Probably. Maybe he’s a kinky fuck, and I haven’t gotten that far into this yet. I’m sure as fuck going to find out, though.

My thrusts remain shallow as I wait for his body to relax. I’m so attuned to everything about him that I respond instinctively to how he moves and the sounds he makes. By the time I’m really fucking him, I’m about ready to lose my mind. I promised not to come inside him and I won’t, but I’ve yet to fail at making him come before me. This can’t be the first time it happens.

Thankfully, I manage to get him there just as I sink my teeth into his collarbone. I fuck him through it and then pull out to catch my breath. Before I can grab my dick to finish, Levis’ hand is there, and he does the job, focusing on the top of my dick with the joint of his thumb maddeningly rubbing my frenulum until I spill all over his chest, mixing my release with his.

The world around me blinks in and out as I pant. “Just so you know,” I say between breaths. “I would have broken the condom with that.”

He laughs breathlessly.

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12

LEVIS



I'M USED to Jalon's texts first thing in the morning these days, so when I wake up to one that demands I wear a jock today, I have no idea what he has in mind. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited to find out though.

My body is in a constant state of aching. Between my sore throat and my sore ass, every move and breath is a reminder that Jalon knows how to fuck. I'm an absolute slut for the way he does both. I don't even care where he puts his dick at this point. I know I'll succumb to a molten hot orgasm before the sun comes up.

Or before our encounter ends. He doesn't limit our activities to the hours when the sun is down. When the opportunity arises and we're left alone for even a second, Jalon whisks me off and fucks me somewhere in some way. I'm not mad about it. In fact, I'm a fucking eager participant.

I've decided that my sex life has been mediocre up to this point. It's not the fault of any of my exes. It's truly not. I never pushed for something beyond the basics, and they never suggested it. Maybe my sex life is reflective of me breaking free from the mundane, straight and narrow path my life had been heading down.

If this is what sex can be like, what about the other boring parts of my life? Is it wrong to want to be excited in all aspects of my life?

I slip into a jock, and as I look at it, I determine that I'm not sure where this one in particular came from. I've never seen it before. I won't admit to my clothing being *boring* too—I wear what's comfortable—but I also won't say it's… interesting. That includes my underwear. Everything was grayscale and cotton from my boxer briefs to my jocks.

These… I feel like someone just wrapped my dick in a cloud. Narrowing my eyes, I grab my phone.

ME

You bought me underwear, didn't you?

My message is read right away. He sends me a laughing emoji and then one with big, wide eyes.

JALON VAN DOREN

Why would I do that? There's nothing wrong with your basic bitch clothes.

Oh, what a shit.

I sit on the edge of my bed and open the Zon app. I type in '*basic bitch clothes*' and find a *basic* tee that reads '*I'm into basic bitches*'. Snorting, I order that, and in the gift note, I type, '*quite literally, Jalon*.'

Making sure that it'll arrive in the morning, I turn back to getting dressed. There's tea waiting for me when I come out of the shower. No text. No note. But this morning, there's also a flower that looks like it's from the wildflower field. It's not in water. Just lying across the tray.

I don't know why, but looking at the flower has me staring. For several long seconds, I look at the delicate petals and gently bring one between my finger and thumb.

Over the years, I've given a lot of flowers to my girlfriends. I've given flowers to Honey Bee. I think I even gave flowers to Brek once. I don't think I've ever been given flowers, though. It hits in a way I didn't expect it to. I'm weirdly emotionally touched by the gesture.

It takes me a minute to shake off the feeling and enjoy a cup of tea as I finish getting ready for the day. Unsure what I'm supposed to do with this flower, I pick it up and look around. Leaving it on the tray feels rude. Like I'm throwing away the nice thought. As if it means nothing. But seriously, what do I do with this?

What have my girlfriends done with their flowers in the past? Chewing the inside of my lip, I stop in my bathroom and search around for anything at all that I can put some water in. Since I don't have a kitchen in my bedroom, I find nothing. So I fill the basin of one of the sinks and let the flower prop up against the edge. Before I leave, I open the shade in the window to let the light in.

Not weird at all.

Water bottle in hand, I head for the office. Generally speaking, I walk to work. I'm outside early enough that the full heat of the sun hasn't reached over the trees to the east, and I can walk in relatively decent morning weather. Especially as we head into fall. Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't consider this cold by any means.

My office is empty when I arrive. Not that I expect anything less. I don't think Jalon would leave anything in my office. That's carrying this over to work and, aside from kissing me that one time—and at the gym, but I was on my lunch break, so that doesn't really count, does it?—he's made it clear that we don't cross over into work.

Which is good. This is definitely *not* appropriate for work.

The morning goes by without seeing Jalon. I get lost in my work, something I really like because it means I enjoy my job. Not everyone can say that. I'm so focused that the quiet tap on my open door has me jerking away from my desk.

Jalon looks like a regal celebrity. He's always dressed as if the paparazzi are right around the corner and he's going to end up on a trashy tabloid. He needs to look his best at all times.

And he does. His vivid blue eyes. The composed, confident way he holds himself. The gray at the sides of his head that make him look distinguished

as opposed to aging. There's this hint of a smile right at the corner of his lips, like he knows a secret.

Like he bought me bougie underwear.

"Are you busy?" Jalon asks in a tone that anyone who might overhear would completely believe that this is a business visit.

Had he not recently assured me that he has no part in my particular branch of VDT, I might believe it myself.

"Always, but you're the king," I answer.

He's too sophisticated to roll his eyes, but the way his eyelids lower slightly is Jalon's version of an eye roll. He steps into my office and closes the door. I'm confident I imagine the lock flipping into place.

My heart doesn't race with excitement at all.

"I'm into basic bitches, am I?" he asks, leaning back against the door. His tone is quiet. It won't carry through the door even if someone is standing on the other side of it.

"You were twelve hours ago," I answer, leaning my hip against my standing desk.

"You're basic, are you?"

"I'm not bougie. Even if you buy me bougie underwear in the same colors that I wear so I don't realize it until I put them on."

Amusement shines in his eyes. "Let me see."

I glance at the window as if someone is going to see me through it. Never mind that we're on the top floor and that the windows reflect the outside. "Really?"

"Drop your pants."

"I'm not on break yet."

"You're on break when I say you're on break. Drop. Your. Pants."

A thrill of excitement tingles its way down my spine. Licking my lips, I do what he requests. Though can it be considered a request? That was a demand.

I drop my pants and let him look his fill. I even hold my shirt up so he has an uninterrupted view. I'm courteous like that.

"Turn around."

Huffing, I do as I'm told. That man is fucking stealthy because I don't hear him move and suddenly, his hand is over my mouth, and his fingers are between my ass cheeks and pressed to my hole. I inhale sharply, cock immediately jerking to attention.

Jalon's hot breath skims over my ear as he presses his chest to my back. "Are you actually opposed to being fucked in your office, Levis?"

I groan into his hand and shake my head. Everything inside me screams that I should absolutely be against this, but no. I don't have the ability to leave an offer to get fucked by this man on the table. I want it. Desperately.

"Think you can be quiet?"

I shake my head. Not a damn chance. Not with his accessorized dick that hits all the good spots and the way he uses it inside me.

He chuckles, and the sound travels right through me.

"I suppose we'll need to find a position where I can keep my hand over your mouth, then." He drags me across the room, hauls the table away from the wall, and bends me over it. "That's better. Hang on a second."

I grip the edge of the table and try to kick my way out of my pants. I don't manage before Jalon's back with wet fingers and sliding them inside me. My teeth dig into my tongue to keep the moans in. Instead, a whimper escapes. I draw blood from biting my tongue so hard.

He's not slow or patient, which is in direct contrast to how he presents to the world. To everyone around him, Jalon is the epitome of patience. He's not with me. He never has been. Everything we've done has been at an accelerated pace and has skipped the beginner levels.

This is no different from any other, except he’s even more eager. His hand rests on my back, holding me down as he finger fucks me hard. I squeeze my eyes shut as if that’s going to help keep the sounds inside. They’re bubbling right there at the surface, though. Ready to break out. Fill the room.

He doesn’t give me more than a second to breathe before he’s shoving his master-level dick inside me. Jalon cuts my cry off with his hand clamping down over my mouth. Two thrusts and he’s stabbing my gut with his cockhead.

There’s a chance this is hotter than usual because we’re in my office. There are offices on the other side of my walls. The only thing preventing me from filling the room with my needy cries is the firm hold Jalon has over my mouth.

I’m sure someone is hearing the slapping of our bodies together. I find it hard to believe that they can’t. Jalon is far quieter right now than usual, but I still hear his heavy breathing and the occasional grunt every three or four harsh thrusts.

I struggle to keep my orgasm in. I have zero desire to have wet underwear all day. But the fire in my core is burning hotly, screaming with demand. Releasing the table with one hand, I grip Jalon’s hand over my mouth, trying to communicate.

If he gets the message, he ignores it entirely, and I release in my jock as he pounds my prostate. My eyes roll. My lips and fingertips tingle.

True to Jalon fashion, he doesn’t stop fucking me until right before he needs to get off. And then he suddenly vacates my body. I gasp. Nearly roll off the table, and he barely catches me as I crash into the chair.

I catch sight of him just as he finishes in his hand, eyes locked on me. Goddamn. I’m not sure I’m ever lucid enough to see this man come, but that vision is going to be burned into my memory for the rest of my life. So sexy. He leaves me breathless, and it’s not just because he fucked me until I saw the promise of paradise just beyond the veil of this world.

Jalon takes a deep breath, eyes closed for just a second. When he opens them again, he's almost entirely put together. That must come with age. I can't reset that quickly.

Hanging off the chair and still panting, I watch as he wipes his hand with a tissue. He uses a second to clean off the multitude of lube from his cock and surrounding area. That dragon glistened for a hot minute, as if it truly had scales that sparkled in the sunlight.

From his pocket, he pulls out a single-wrapped wet wipe, and I snort in amusement. Jalon bends to pull his underwear up again. Then his pants. From his pocket, he pulls out another jockstrap and tosses it at me. It lands on my face, and I huff.

Jalon waits for me to find the strength to move again and watches as I finally manage to climb out of my pants and get rid of the jock. He doesn't let me toss it, though. He carefully rolls it, keeping all my juices contained, and sticks it in his pocket.

I don't blush easily. Not really. But fuck if my skin doesn't burn at that. Coupled with the way he looks at me… Jesus, I'm not prepared for the effect this man has on me.

We don't speak as I step into another bougie fabric jockstrap and pull my pants back up. I'm going to need a trip to the bathroom for a cleanup relatively soon. First, I need to make sure I don't *look* like I was just fucked. That might take a few minutes.

"You know," Jalon says, and I meet his eyes as I tie my shoes. "I rather enjoy being inside basic bitches. You have the best hole I've ever put my bougie dick in."

"Wow," I deadpan, though my heart skips around in a happy dance like that was the best compliment I've ever been dealt. "You're smooth."

He chuckles. Even though I have goo leaking from my ass and it twinges a little louder than usual when I sit back, I finally feel like I'm breathing normally again. My pulse is still a little high. I can feel it. But no one can see that, at least.

Jalon pinches my chin and then drops his hand to my neck. Maybe he needs to feel my pulse bounce around. What a bitch.

As if I'm his marionette, Jalon pulls me to my feet with his grip on my neck. If it didn't set my heart racing again, I'd shove him away. I'm not his toy.

Well, maybe I'm his toy. I kind of like being his toy.

"You struggling while I fuck you in any way is the sexiest fucking thing I've *ever* experienced, Levis Li." His mouth brushes mine as I fight to take a breath. "You really have no idea how much you turn me on."

In contrast to his low, sexy voice and the words that make my knees weak, his kiss is soft. Languid. Makes me shake for an entirely different reason.

"I'm going to enjoy your used underwear for the rest of the day. I'll see you at home tonight."

My skin prickles with warmth as he lets me go. Frozen where I stand, I watch Jalon leave my office.

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13

JALON



My parents leave through the side door. I watch from the fourth-floor landing, through the large windows facing the East. Their cart is parked in the small lot.

The house is silent around me. It's incredibly early for a morning visit, with the majority of the household still asleep. Voss is awake with his infant for Axl's morning bottle. Only the staff move around now.

Quiet footsteps on the stairs alert me that someone is approaching. I know who it is before they arrive. I've put my staff on alert that they're to keep an eye on my parents when they're anywhere except their house or out in the open and alert me if there's anything concerning. Otherwise, they can report on their activities once they've left the house.

Cheddar is one of the few staff members who stayed on when I took over the Estate. He quickly became my Everything Man, a title we joked about, but has become his official title.

"They were looking at the art," Cheddar says as he joins me on the landing and follows my attention out the window. My parents' cart is almost out of sight. "As if they were shopping."

Inwardly, I frown. “Have they been to Imry’s gallery in town?”

Cheddar shakes his head, shrugging. “I’m unsure, but I don’t believe they have. Are they aware of it?”

I consider this. Honestly, I have no idea. I’m still not sure why they’re here. After the disastrous dinner in which I explicitly told them, with no room for interpretation, that they will apologize to my family and get their shit together, or I *will* remove them. On my way out, I advised them that they should take a better look at the contract they’d signed.

They’ve since apologized to my sons and Noaz but haven’t to my acquired kids. Not Loren’s or Briar’s husbands, not my other sons’ partners. Not Levis.

Equally, I’ve yet to learn why they actually came home.

“Thank you,” I say. “Make sure the staff knows that they’re not allowed to take anything—not even a spoon—from this house without my express permission. The staff will not take their word, even if relayed as my permission. They will need to hear it directly from my mouth.”

Cheddar inclines his head. “Of course. We wouldn’t have let that happen anyway, but I will reiterate the instruction.”

A minute passes before I murmur, “Why would they come back *now*?”

“Maybe they want to be a part of the school?” Cheddar suggests.

The east windows aren’t at such an angle that I can see in the direction of the new refuge I purchased last year, but I turn my head in that direction anyway. I consider Cheddar’s suggestion, and while I don’t think that’s it, I also can’t imagine what would bring them home after more than thirty years.

Cheddar rests his hand on my forearm for a moment before he excuses himself. I remain where I am, staring out the window, toward where my parents’ cart disappears into the tree line. Their presence upsets the peace that the Estate has become.

A new set of footsteps approaches. I assume it's Voss, since I knew he was awake already, but just before they stand beside me, I see Levis' reflection in the window. He pauses at my side and stares outside. I can practically see him studying our surroundings as if we're playing *Where's Waldo*.

"The rich have weird habits," he says.

I chuckle. "My parents were just here."

His reflection gives away the brief scowl that crosses his face, replaced quickly with a frown. "It's not even seven."

"Exactly. Why are you up so early?"

"Someone woke me up insisting on morning orgasms, and I couldn't get back to sleep," he deadpans.

"Your throat sounds a little rough. Would you like some tea?"

Levis turns his attention to me, and I manage to keep a straight face as he glares. "Yes. I want tea. I also want to hear *you* with a scratchy voice, *Daddy* Jalon."

Before I can stop it, a wide smile spreads across my face. I've heard him and his friends calling me Daddy Jalon for a couple of years, always when they think I'm not around. My sons have repeated it on a few occasions since they find it amusing. I wondered how long it would be before Levis intentionally called me Daddy Jalon.

I've come up with a dozen different responses based on the situation in which he might say it. Almost always, it would be while we banter. Honestly, who knew this kind of teasing would be so… comforting. I look forward to it.

I grip his throat and turn Levis toward me. He inhales sharply and stares at me with wide, startled eyes as I pull him close. So close that our noses brush.

"Careful," I say, voice low and calm. "Or I'm going to show you how you behave with your Daddy."

A delicious little shiver works its way through Levis. His breath comes out in a punch, and I swear to fuck, I can *smell* his sudden arousal. Huh. Who knew the simple subject of *Daddy* would turn us both on.

I release his neck and straighten his shirt, though there's nothing wrong with it. "Let's get you some tea. Daddies take care of their little boys after a morning of rough use."

Levis snorts but doesn't comment. While I should just walk him down to the kitchen, I lead him back to my room instead. Might as well show him that I use my kitchen from time to time.

He's immediately amused when we step into my solarium. His eyes dart up. He's yet to comment on the glass dome roof over the fountain. He didn't see it the first time I brought him in here because it was dark. It's far more apparent when the sun is shining. As are the stained-glass windows that I've seen him giving side-eye to.

Those shouldn't surprise him. The house is filled with stained- and leaded-glass windows. I've always said that if you're going to do something, do it right. The very first house built on this spot was in the mid-1800s. Over the next one hundred and fifty years, it was built onto and extended, updated for modern conveniences, over and over again.

It became a hodgepodge of styles. Some were done really well. Some were done lazily. I'd found a blueprint of what my great-grandfather had envisioned this house to be. It was grand, a work of superior craftsmanship.

That was my starting point. What Levis doesn't know is that this apartment right here is actually part of the original design of great-grandfather Alann's vision. He wanted something wonderful and elegant to spoil great-grandmother Bernice, who'd borne him eleven children.

Of course, I added some things. All the hidden nooks and such. Obviously, I upgraded the entire plan into the twenty-first century, but I hired people to make it look like it's been here for a hundred and fifty years with hand-carved woodwork and handcrafted plaster-crown moldings and hand-painted frescoes on the ceilings in certain rooms.

Such as my kitchen, which Levis hasn't truly been inside during the daylight. He immediately looks at the stained-glass transom windows, letting in a rainbow of colors across the terracotta tile floors. Then he sees the fresco painting on the ceiling and sighs heavily.

I don't comment while I prepare him some tea. While the kettle is heating, I open the French doors and lead him outside to sit on the balcony and enjoy the view of the lake in the distance. Levis gives me the side eye, but sits where I lead him.

While he's occupied, I call for some breakfast pastries and fruit. I have a feeling the pastries will be for me. I've watched what Levis eats over the last couple of months, and he tends to prefer a healthier diet. Meanwhile, I have a sweet tooth and much prefer sweet treats.

Once my breakfast platter has arrived—with egg bites, scones, and bagels in addition to my requested pastries and fruit—I bring everything outside to set on the table. Levis watches the contents of the tray with amusement as I bring it outside. Then his eyes are on mine, and he gives me a bemused smile.

"Look at that. I had time to prepare breakfast for my good boy."

Levis flips me off, and I laugh. "I am *not* a good boy."

"You're more of a brat," I agree and choose a cream-cheese-filled danish. Unlike the pastries you purchase at shops in town, this one is actually filled with cream cheese throughout, so every single bite has cream cheese. They're wonderful.

"No," he says, eyes narrowing. I pour him a cup of tea and set it in front of him. Then I hand him a skewer of fruit bites, all uniformly chopped. He accepts it, but that bemused expression remains. "You don't actually expect me to believe that you prepared this and just happened to have it lying around, do you?"

"Of course not…" My thoughts trail off as I chew a bite of my danish. "I did tell you I haven't cooked since my brothers were much younger, didn't I?"

Levis sighs heavily, shaking his head as he takes a sip of tea.

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes as we pick through breakfast and sip on tea. In the silence, my mind wanders back to my parents. I don't like that they're wandering around. There's a chance that I'd feel differently if they didn't come in and immediately put on their asshole britches, insulting *everyone* whom I love.

"You're still thinking of them," Levis says quietly. "Maybe they do want to be here for the next generation."

"They missed an entire generation already," I state. "I don't believe that."

He frowns but doesn't say anything further.

"I'm relieved that Lorissa left before they got here," I admit, though I'm not sure why I offer Levis this thought. "I can only imagine the ugly opinions that would come out of their mouths if they knew that Voss and Lor weren't together even though they made a child together. I can *hear* their contempt at the thought that Lor doesn't want to be a parent."

"No offense, but all the little bits I've been told over the last couple years lead me to believe that they didn't want to be parents, either."

I huff. He's not wrong. "They didn't, but they wouldn't see it that way."

"Have they always been homophobic?"

A frown settles on my face as I eat through another danish and think back on my parents. On the few times I've talked to them in the last three decades. "I don't know," I admit. "I knew my triplets were gay since they were young teens—something their mother found annoying, though it doesn't sound like it was ever a source of her disgust. Apparently, Avory and Ellory wanting to stay close, and Loren's sociopathy is more offensive than any homophobic feelings she might have held."

"I'm not sure if that's a positive or a negative," Levis muses.

"Trust me, I know. I've spent a lot of time thinking about that too. I can't decide if that's a good thing. Is it better that she tried to make Loren feel inhuman? Or that she did everything she could to try to shame Avory and Ellory into separate rooms? Would it have been better if she'd focused solely on their fucking sexuality? Which is more harmful at this point?"

Levis watches me as he slowly chews on an egg bite but doesn't answer.

"I don't know," I say at last. "I began supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ charities vocally and visibly as soon as I learned that my sons were gay. I *have* spoken to my parents since then, and I don't recall a time when it's ever come up, so I want to say no. Then again, they hated that Noaz liked long hair and dresses, so…" I shrug.

"There's a difference between homophobic and transphobic," he says.

"Noaz isn't trans."

Levis smiles, and I recognize that expression from my kids. Cute old man not hip on all the information. I sigh. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Trans means that you don't conform to gender assignments. More or less. So, nonbinary, genderfluid—both also fall under the trans umbrella."

"Ah." I take a sip of tea as I think about this. "I guess I've never heard Noaz say he's trans, so I didn't connect the dots, though that is definitely familiar information now that you say it."

"There's a lot of hateful rhetoric about trans people in the world, so I think that many who identify as nonbinary and genderfluid, and many labels that fall under the trans umbrella, choose their labels with consideration. Most people want to live in peace, and sometimes, it's easier to do that if you don't make yourself visible to a world that wants to use you for target practice because they think you don't have a right to exist."

"That's why this Estate is so important to me," I say, and look out at the property and, in the distance, the land beyond the tree line that will hold our school. "Here, you're removed from those gross views. If I can create a space where my family can just *live* without judgment, without bigotry and hate, without conditions placed on who they are, I feel like I've succeeded at something."

"I hope you don't take this wrong, but I know you're building that school for Emmy and Axl. I know you want to protect them from all that. But I hope you know how harmful and dangerous it is not to educate them on the truth of the world, too. They aren't always going to stay within your

protective bubble, Jalon. They will eventually leave, even if they come back in horror."

I nod. "I know. But there's a way to teach them truths—all truths, not cherry-picked and highly modified truths—while also providing them with a safe space to be whomever the fuck they are."

"You have an entire vision for your grandchildren, don't you?"

"I've learned a lot from raising my brothers and boys. If I can provide better for the next generation than I was able to for their parents, I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

Levis doesn't respond. When I look at him, he's watching me with a small smile. Something about it makes my stomach flutter.

Because he's sexy. Obviously.

"How's your throat?" I ask.

He nods. "Better. Thanks for the tea."

"Good. Get over here and on your knees. I need to make sure you think about my dick all day."

Levis rolls his eyes, but he fucking *listens* to me. He's on his feet, approaching, even as he glares. I grab a pillow from an adjacent chair and toss it on the ground in front of me. Levis drops to his knees, and Jesus, the sight of him! I'm hard before he even undoes my belt.

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14

LEVIS



JALON'S PARENTS have been here for the past week, and I think they're doing everything they can to make him lose his shit. Tonight was the second dinner that failed spectacularly. It seems that everything their grandsons do is wrong or not good enough.

Honey Bee was practically vibrating by the time she got to her feet and tossed an entire pitcher of water into both of their faces. She told them they were the most abhorrent people she'd ever had the misfortune of meeting before turning on her heel, hair fanning out dramatically behind her, and leaving the room.

I think even Loren was stunned into silence. He was also the first to recover because a huge smile split his face as he looked around. I'm pretty sure that was the first time I've seen glee on his face.

Dinner turned into chaos. The Van Dorens absolutely laid into their grandparents. Emmy threw a roll at them before Briar picked him up and left the room. I think he saw Honey Bee throwing water as permission to throw food also.

I'm not sure what most were saying. I sat and watched as Jalon's six sons and Noaz, all on their feet, laid into Weston and Vanessa. It was ugly. There

were a lot of feelings, and they weren't holding back.

The rest of my friends and I remained seated. Like me, they stared in awe and probably a little shock. Jalon only tried halfheartedly to calm his sons, but eventually, he sat back and watched it unfold.

Eventually, he got up—unnoticed by most—and hovered over the back of my chair. "Will you take your friends out of here, please?"

I nodded and coaxed Oakley, Brek, and Haze from the room. It was horrified curiosity that had them rooted to their chairs more than anything. As soon as we were in the hall with the door shut, their shouts became muffled. There were staff slowing by the doors, staring with concern. I bet they never hear anyone yell. Ever. That's not the kind of family the Van Dorens are.

Eventually, one by one, Jalon's sons and Noaz are ushered from the room. Honestly, I'm impressed that they leave. They had an endless well of aggression festering inside them that had busted the lid, and it all came spilling out. I doubt they said even half of what they had to say.

Jalon remained in the dining room for more than an hour. Longer. After an hour, I excused myself and headed upstairs. I have a feeling he's not going to want to be surrounded by everyone when he finally takes his leave of his parents.

Now, away from the madness, I stop in front of my door and then look down the hall toward Jalon's bedroom. Since he first brought me into his room, he hasn't enjoyed slumming it in my modest McMansion bedroom. He much prefers to have me in his.

Glancing around the hall to make sure I'm alone, I head for his bedroom instead. I pause for just a moment. I've never been in his room without him. Do I even have permission? I won't go far.

After another look down the hall behind me, I push Jalon's bedroom door open and let myself in. The fountain greets me with a gentle trickle of water. Its creation was so meticulous that the water cascading over the sides is so smooth, it looks like the water is frozen in time. It falls into the basins without a splash. Just a fluid, silent path that makes very little sound at all.

It’s a work of art.

With the door shut behind me, I walk around the fountain, shaking my head at its opulence. In a bedroom! Who does that? Jalon Van Doren, that’s who.

There’s a small seating area opposite the door, off to the side of the French doors. I swear, every single room has a set of doors that lead to the balcony. Does he ever open them and enjoy the outside? This man always seems to be busy. He’s already admitted to me that he never relaxes, so I would wager a guess that he rarely opens these doors at all.

Forty minutes later, Jalon enters his bedroom. He steps inside, closes the door, and leans his back against it. He pinches the bridge of his nose and doesn’t move. In his opposite hand, he clutches a butcher knife. It’s not bloody, so I’m not entirely concerned, though it’s a weird item to be carrying around.

When he drops his hand and opens his eyes, they meet mine, as if he knew where I’d be. He expected me to be here. It’s on the tip of my tongue to apologize for intruding into his space without permission, except I’m not sure he wants anything but silence right now.

Jalon steps away from the door and sets the knife on the edge of the fountain as he comes around. I get to my feet and approach. As soon as I’m within reach, his hands grip my hips, and he hauls me against him.

He rests his forehead against my temple and takes a breath. I’m not sure what he needs, so I remain still, lightly gripping his forearms. I don’t like this heavy silence, though. I’d like to lighten the mood, if I can. Release some of his tension.

“I didn’t notice the ostentatious glass dome overhead. Like you’re living in a museum.”

I receive a quiet little huff in response.

“I’m kind of impressed that we don’t see it from the ground at all.”

“Intentional design,” he answers quietly.

“So you have battlements? Like a castle? That makes sense for the king.”

He smiles. “The roof has… adornments, yes. They’re classic 1890s decorations. There’s a specific name for every feature of this house. I knew them all at one point as it was being built, but I’ve since forgotten.”

“Flat roofs flood. Do you have a pool up there?”

“Have you seen my ceiling leaking?”

I haven’t, actually.

“When you pay for something, you pay for it to be done correctly. My roofs do not flood and therefore do not leak.”

“Scrooge McDuck kinda wealth right here.”

He huffs in amusement, and I think that’s a step in the right direction. I slide my hands up the stupidly rich fabric of his suit jacket and wrap my arms around his neck. He lets me slide into him, readily taking me in for a hug. I hope he knows the hug isn’t for me.

I hold him until he pulls away, hoping he takes some comfort from it. “What do you need?” I ask.

Jalon looks at me. His expression is blank. Not the same kind of empty as Loren’s, but Jalon’s version of blank. As if he’s just absorbing. This man has the ability to control his emotions implicitly. I watch his eyes. They trail slowly over every inch of my face. As if he’s memorizing all the lines, all the shapes, all the different tones and textures.

“How’s your ass feel?” he asks.

I laugh, eyes closing. The way he can take me by surprise with the things he says never fails to make me laugh. “Fine. You want to fuck. Should have guessed.”

He presses a soft kiss to my mouth. It makes my heart jerk. “I want to take all my frustrations out on you. Think you’re up for that?”

Jalon was never an excessively gentle man with me. He’s not aggressive or unyielding. He knows what he likes, and he takes what he likes while also making sure I get off at least once and always first.

“Whatever you want,” I answer, meaning it.

Over the next forty minutes, Jalon is an animal. He’s never fucked me so hard, so rough. I’ve never felt the mixture of pain and pleasure quite like this in the past. I’ve had sex with Jalon enough times now to know that *this* side of Jalon is something he never lets out. He’s all about control. He has control over everything. Every aspect of his person.

This is unhinged. Filled with frustration and anger, and resentment. I can feel his stress and tension. It vibrates through him. Each harsh thrust is Jalon releasing it all, a little at a time.

He’s always said he likes it when I struggle, and that’s what I do the entire time. Struggle against the severe fucking but also starving for more because his dick hits the right spot with every. Single. Driving. Thrust.

That doesn’t mean I don’t get off. In fact, I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I get off twice before he pulls out and paints my chest.

I haven’t been this out of breath in… fucked if I know. Holy shit. Minutes tick by as my body burns with overuse. Brutally delicious pain that leaves my limbs tingling with the remnants of pleasure he forced into my body.

Jalon wipes me up and then lies at my side. At least he’s panting, too.

Minutes pass, and I feel him roll onto his side and hover over me. He doesn’t speak, so I keep my eyes closed. Except I can *feel* him staring, so I squint my left eye open.

The corner of his mouth lifts in the hint of a crooked smile. “You okay?”

“You have a lot of secrets in that strictly disciplined façade you give to the world that extends far beyond the dick decorations.”

Jalon laughs quietly, and I feel like that’s a big accomplishment. He continues to stare at me, though. I open my eyes fully to take him in. Is *he* okay? Did that help?

“Come here,” I say quietly.

He doesn’t move. He doesn’t even blink. His eyes remain locked on my face.

So I reach for him, and he lets me guide him down to my chest, where he tucks his forehead against my chin and rests on my chest. His arms wrap around my torso. For a long time, I hold him. He doesn't move. He doesn't do anything more than breathe. His heartbeat is steady. His breathing even.

"If it'll help, you can talk. I'll just listen."

Jalon doesn't respond. Minutes tick by, and my eyes close as my fingers move slowly through his short hair. Hmm. I think he got a haircut. My eyes open when he speaks.

"When I was a kid, when it was just me, I would have said my parents were good parents. They were happy and kind and spent a lot of time with me, taking me on trips and showing up for every event. If I said I wanted to try something, they made it happen. If I wanted to go somewhere, they took me. They *were* good parents. To *me*. When it was *only* me."

He pauses for a second, as if he's collecting his thoughts.

"I don't remember the exact moment they changed. I knew something was different before I knew they were expecting another kid. At first, they were still good parents when it was just Arath and me. But as soon as they were pregnant with Oxley, things changed. Little things at first. Things that I didn't necessarily mind initially. Watch Arath while we make up the new nursery. While we go to the store. While we interview a new nanny—they never hired the nannies.

"With each new pregnancy and each new brother, their parenting skills just… left. Vacated. They became my problem. My responsibility. Before I was even a legal adult, I somehow acquired four offspring that weren't mine.

"At first, I rebelled in quiet ways. I'd spend their money on stupid shit, like an $800 jacket that I'd never wear because we live in Arizona. A $20,000 electric bike that I'm not sure I rode even once. Stupid shit."

"Stabbing your dick seven times," I add.

He chuckles.

“The day I came home from visiting my first newborn son to them screaming at Noaz demanding that they cut their hair and be a fucking boy, I lost my shit. I picked up my baby brother and just… The chaos that happened at dinner tonight. That was me. Thirty years ago, that was me. That’s exactly what I did, which is why I sat back and let them yell. I remember how much I needed it, and I imagine Noaz has been hanging onto their anger for a very long time.

“That’s the only time I enlisted Arath—then six—to take care of our baby brothers. I handed Noaz to him and told him to go to the playroom until I got them for dinner. He did, and once they were shut inside, I continued to unload *everything* I’d kept in since Oxley’s pregnancy. Things came out of my mouth, and I said something along the lines of they were going to hand me everything—my brothers, the Estate, the company, all of it—and they would leave. Period. I was a little shocked that they agreed, but they did.

“I drew up a seventy-nine-page contract that they have proven over the last two failed dinners that they haven’t actually read. They didn’t realize that they truly did hand me 100% ownership of everything. Every asset. Every debt. Every obligation. I only awarded them their personal accounts and 1% profit from *existing* companies under the Van Doren Enterprises name until they die. They signed it immediately, and within hours of doing so, they were packed and had vanished.

“It was overwhelming. The sheer number of things that were now solely mine to control. To build. To run into the ground. To ruin or save. The first thing I did was create Van Doren Technologies and absorb Van Doren Enterprises until the company was dissolved entirely.

“Over the first decade or so, I expected my parents to show up out of the blue. Maybe with the birth of each of my children. When I started making Fortune 500 lists. Fortune 50 lists. When I began breaking ground in different industries all over the world. When it was clear that the only limit to my success was my own tenacity.

“They didn’t. Years passed, and I rarely heard from them. I don’t know why they’re here, but I don’t believe for a second that it has anything to do with the birth of Emmy or Axl. They’ve proven that they have no idea what little they’re entitled to, so they can’t even be here to try to take back control of

something or have a slice of anything. There's something else. I need to know what it is."

Jalon has always presented to the world as someone larger than life. Someone untouchable and unbothered. In this quiet confession, he just became far more human. Like such a vast majority of the population, he's been hurt by the people who were supposed to love him. I don't think the hurt began the day they signed the contract that granted Jalon his throne. It came from their complete lack of interest in his children. In his accomplishments and life in general.

I hug him tighter to me. I don't know how to get rid of this feeling. I don't know how to offer him more comfort than this.

Jalon rolls us so I'm splayed across his chest. He coaxes me to sit up and reaches between us to notch his dick at my hole, a clear question in his eyes.

God, my body hurts.

"I don't think I can handle another round like that just yet," I confess.

He shakes his head. "No. I don't need that again."

I nod because I'm not sure I ever want to tell him no. He's careful and gentle when he re-lubes me and slow as he enters my body again. This evening is a night of firsts for us. The most brutal fuck I've ever experienced followed by the gentlest, most attentive fuck.

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15

JALON



"THIS ONE LOOKS GOOD," Crestley says as he slides me his tablet. There's an application up, and I read through it.

"For preschool?" I ask.

"Both preschool and the social group. She has really great experience in both. Her education is specifically for preschool age."

I nod. "Okay. Schedule her for an interview."

Crestley nods and pulls his tablet back. "I think the last thing on my agenda is Sven needing to schedule some time off. Medical leave. He needs minor surgery."

Sven is Crestley's personal assistant. Yes, my assistant has his own assistant. I tried to tell him the job title should be Assistant's Assistant, but he wasn't impressed with my suggestion.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yep. Adenoids and tonsils. He's had strep six times in the past three months, and I've kept him remote for a lot of that since Voss brings Axl to the office."

“Did I know about this?”

“I promise, he hasn’t been here unless he was cleared by Doc Mark every time. It’s actually Doc Mark who suggested the surgery since he can’t seem to shake it and the infection keeps returning.”

I incline my head. “Alright. Approve whatever you need to. He has enough sick time, or does he need more?”

Crestley smiles. “He has plenty. We have a very aggressive accumulation of sick time at this company.”

“I believe in fully healing and not having to worry about your job or being able to pay your bills.” I shrug.

His smile remains. “That’s all I have, boss.”

“Good. You’re very needy these days.”

“Right. Enjoy your coffee.” He glances down at my mug with an amused smirk as he gets to his feet.

“It’s not coffee,” I call after him, which he knows. I don’t generally drink coffee. Unless it’s a mocha or a java or something.

As soon as he’s out of my office, I pick up my phone receiver and dial. Levis answers after two rings. “This is Levis.”

I smirk. “This is Jalon,” I respond. He snorts. “When you have a minute, I’d like to see you in my office.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Without another word, I hang up the receiver and scroll through my email until I find the one I’m looking for. Then I sit back and wait.

Levis arrives three minutes later. He meets my eye and enters my office to sit on the seat across from me.

“We’re going to put you on break until this meeting is over,” I tell him.

Levis raises an eyebrow and lowers his head so he’s looking up at me slightly. “Okay, Jalon.”

“I’d like to hire you to design a pavilion for me on the south side of the lake, closer to the lake than the house but slightly east.” I turn my computer screen to him, which has a zoomed-in cut-out of the map of my property to show him where I want it. Then I hand him my own tablet that’s open to a Pinster board, which he finds funny. “Here are some ideas that are more about vibe than anything else.”

“You have a Pinster?” he asks.

“I like to slum it with the basic bitches,” I say, and Levis laughs. I watch as he scrolls a little, and I continue to tell him what I’m looking for. “Big enough for three or four dozen people, but I don’t want it to be gaudy big.”

Levis raises his gaze, and I can see the bemusement in his eyes. “Says the man with a house bigger than that of the President of the United States. It’s warring with old European castles in size and grandeur. And a personal bedroom suite that is larger than half the apartments in Manhattan. But this is where you draw the line at gaudy.”

“My bedroom and house are not gaudy,” I argue. “They’re beautiful and immaculately decorated.”

He snorts.

“What would you change about my house?” I ask and lean back in my chair.

Levis shakes his head. “Nothing that wouldn’t look out of place.”

“We’ll finish this conversation another time. We’re here for personal business. Four dozen people comfortably. Something that works with the rest of the Estate and doesn’t stand out as an afterthought or new construction.”

“What do you plan to use it for?” he asks.

“Children’s birthday parties.”

He smirks but doesn’t look away from where he’s scrolling on my tablet. “Okay.”

My phone rings, and I glance at the ID. Tanner. He's the top-floor receptionist. "Excuse me," I tell Levis and answer the phone. "Yes?"

I can hear the weariness in his voice. "Your parents are here and upset that their fobs do not allow them access to you."

My shoulders tense before I can stop them. Son of a bitch. And I was having a good morning. "Thank you, Tanner. I'll have someone bring them back."

"Thanks."

I hang up the phone and close my eyes for a second to get my irritation under control.

"Everything okay?" Levis asks.

"Will you come back here? Sit in this chair." I gesture to the second office chair I have behind my desk, but pushed off to the side.

"This one is where you put your feet up, isn't it?" he asks as he moves and I turn my monitor around.

I slide the chair close so it's clear that we were having a meeting and looking at my screen. Levis pulls the chair away and sits, so I slide it close again and meet his eyes. "Stay."

His eyes narrow, but I don't miss the way he shivers.

Once I'm sure he's not going to slide away again, I release the chair and pick up my phone again. This time, I call my triplets.

"Dad," all three voices greet me in unison from the speakerphone.

"I need a favor."

"Sure," Imry says. "What's up?"

"Your grandparents are harassing Tanner. Will you escort them to my office and conveniently hang around until they leave so you can escort them out again?"

"Yes!" Ellory says, and I'm a little worried about his level of excitement.

“We’ll bring them.”

“Thank you.” I hang up the phone and wait.

“You want me to leave?”

“No. I want you right here.”

“Am I your new stress toy?”

I meet his eyes and am rewarded by the pink tinge on his cheeks. I don’t have a chance to answer before my parents enter my office without invitation. Something that my boys don’t miss.

“It’s rude to walk into anyone’s office without being invited,” Avory says.

“Jalon is my son,” my dad says haughtily.

“And yet, *your son* has far more manners than you. Wonder where he got them.” My boys back away and disappear down the hall, though I’m sure they’re close enough that they’ll know when my parents leave.

Dad pulls Mom’s chair out for her to sit and then sits at her side. Their attention turns to Levis.

“Why is your assistant in here?” my father demands.

“Levis is not my assistant, and you will not address him with anything other than respect, or I will have you immediately removed from this building. Am I clear?”

I wonder where my parents have been for the past thirty years. Clearly not anywhere populated with people who commanded respect.

“Why have you throttled our access to the Estate?” Dad demands.

“This isn’t your home,” I reply.

“It is!” Mom insists.

“Once again, I suggest you read the contract you signed three decades ago. This is *my* home. *You* are guests, and you’ve already reached strike two. I suggest you don’t push my patience.” I pick up my mug and take a sip.

Both of my parents' eyes turn to my mug, and my mother's eyebrows knit together. "Booghee?"

From the corner of my eye, I see Levis press his lips together to contain his amusement. The mug I'm drinking out of is one of the very few that don't have some rendition of the VDT logo on it. This one reads, '*Bougie AF*.' An anonymous gift.

"Why are you interrupting my day?" I ask without bothering to address my mother's observation.

"You've restricted our access everywhere," Dad complains.

I set my mug down again and fold my fingers together. "Guests aren't permitted access everywhere. I repeat: this is *my* home. Not yours. If you don't have anything legitimate to speak to me about, please see yourselves out. I have a lot of work."

"What's on the other side of the construction fence? We were barred from purchasing that land for years," Dad demands.

"It's a reserve, which I think you already know."

"There's construction going on. We're informed that we own it now. How did you convince them to sell, and what are you building?"

"*I* own the property. Not *we*. I own it. What's being built isn't your concern."

The infuriated expression on my father's face at not getting the information he wants is almost comical.

"You've locked down this entire piece of property to access with only this confounded keychain. We don't have access to the basement."

"You don't," I agree.

A beat passes. "I need access to the basement."

"No."

Interesting. Is there something in the basement that brought them home? Admittedly, I haven't spent a lot of time in the basement. There isn't a lot of

need. It’s primarily storage.

“Our belongings are in the basement!” my father sputters.

“Again, I encourage you to read the contract you signed. If you had, you’d find that it states that anything you’ve left behind without an express plan for its removal and storage after thirty days is forfeit and considered abandoned.”

“You can’t do that.”

“You signed it. It’s not my fault that you were in such a hurry to abandon your children that you didn’t bother to read the terms of that agreement.”

“We didn’t abandon—”

“You left November 18, 1990, and returned November 6, 2022. Almost exactly thirty-two years to the day. You haven’t once shown an interest in any of your five children’s well-being in those thirty-two years. That, by definition, is abandonment.”

My mother looks stricken. I’m a little confounded about what she considered their extended leave of absence to be, during which time she had zero contact with her kids. Vacation? Rekindling the romance without the kids’ presence? Were they lost and only now managed to find their way back?

My parents are silent for several seconds as they stare at me. Frustrated and angry, my father gets to his feet and offers his hand to my mother. “Give us access to the basement.”

“No.”

“Jalon. I’m not playing.”

“Unfortunately for you, you have no power here. You have access to where I allow you access. If you keep irritating me, the *only* place you’ll have access to is the house in which you’re currently residing.”

“Jalon—”

“You’ve interrupted enough of my day. See yourself out unless you’re actually going to tell me why you returned to the Estate after thirty years of silence.”

My father stares at me, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head. I’m sure he’s romanticized the moment in which I demanded custody of my brothers and complete ownership and control of every single asset of the Van Doren name. He likely saw the quiet, unruffled persona that the rest of the world sees and thought, *I’ll just walk in and take over again.*

He didn’t expect opposition. He didn’t expect the hostility he met when insulting his grandsons or his youngest son.

Are they really so ignorant as to think that we hold them in any kind of positive light at all?

They leave my office, and I see my triplets meet them before they’ve taken more than half a dozen steps down the hall. I’m pretty confident that I catch a glimpse of a knife in Ellory’s hand. He’s taking notes from Loren. That’s never a good thing.

As soon as I see my boys walk back to their office, I get up and shut the door, flipping the lock. Somewhere inside me, I thought that I might love my parents, but whatever affection I have for them is overshadowed by my resentment. That resentment only grows with every interaction. Whatever affection I once had is for the parents they were when I was an only child. The people they became after that are shitty humans.

I turn to look at Levis. He’s right where I left him behind my desk, but he’s set the tablet down. He holds my eyes for a second and then slides down from his chair until he’s on his knees and pushing my chair out of the way.

My cock fattens immediately. I’m across the room in the next breath, undoing my trousers as I near. He’s waiting, mouth already ajar. I nearly lose my load when he licks his lips as I take out my dick.

He pulls my pants down and takes my dick in his mouth. With one hand on the back of his head, I pull my shirt and jacket up with the other so I don’t make a mess on them. Then I’m fucking his throat roughly. He hasn’t learned how not to gag and choke. He struggles when I hold him in place

for too long. He constantly reflexively tries to swallow and clear the foreign object from his esophagus.

I stare at his face, the way his mouth stretches wide around my dick. His eyes, filled with tears as he stares up at me, are locked. I earn myself more tears with each rough thrust. With each hold that lasts longer than two seconds.

Spit drips down his chin, mixed with my juices as I fuck into him. I love the way his nails dig into my skin, how he tries to push me away when he needs breath, but he never taps out. He's beautiful. Gorgeous. Perfection wrapped around my cock.

I'm staring into his eyes when I force him to swallow my load. He chokes, his face turning a deep shade of red. I hold him in place just long enough that his push against me becomes insistent. Then I allow him three solid breaths as he coughs.

Since I'm not finished, he doesn't get to catch his breath. I fuck his throat until he swallows every last drop, and then I let him go. Levis leans to the side, resting his forearm across the chair and his head on his forearm as he struggles to breathe and cough at the same time.

I wish Imry could paint him like this. I'd never look away from that painting.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I say. "Stay there. I'll bring you a cloth."

He's still catching his breath as I walk away, so he doesn't see me open the side panel into a small apartment. Much smaller than my bedroom in the big house, but there's a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchenette.

I wash myself, put myself back together, and then return to find Levis sitting in the chair he vacated to suck me. Once his face is clean, I toss the cloth aside and pull him to his feet. He's not expecting me to sit him on my desk, and he watches me cautiously as I take my seat again.

With my eyes still locked with his, I reach for his pants and begin to pull him out.

"Too bougie to kneel, are you?"

“These pants are expensive,” I answer.

He chuckles, but I make him forget his amusement as soon as my mouth is around his dick.

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16

LEVIS



I ALWAYS KNOW when Jalon has had an encounter with his parents. There's a different intensity when we fuck. I can feel his frustration and anger just under the surface. It feels as if he's using me to work his tension out. As per usual, it doesn't truly matter where we are. It doesn't matter what hole he's using. I'm left raw, sore, and sated.

Jalon has never been incredibly slow or gentle. Ever. Something I've always found a little contradictory to his exterior. You don't really look at this man and think *he likes to manhandle his lover*.

Yet, there's not a damn thing we've done that I've been put off by. I'm not surprised by his control. I'm little more than a doll for him, as he moves me around and does what he wants with me. He's not a selfish lover by any means. He *always* gets me off first. Always. Sometimes, he gets me off multiple times.

Besides the whole butthole thing, he's awakened sexy aspects that I would never have guessed I liked. I might have always led my friends to believe that maybe I had a kinky side, but since sleeping with Jalon, I am aware of just how vanilla I had been in the past. Calling my girlfriend a '*good girl*'

and slapping her ass while we fucked sometimes sure as hell didn't make me kinky.

I'm not sure what Jalon and I do is kinky either. You can say I'm far more adventurous in *where* I have sex now since Jalon is a horny fucker for someone in his fifties. Not complaining, just stating. Anywhere and everywhere is within limits.

The one thing I'm not sure I'm into is the whole Daddy thing. I'm *not* a little boy. I don't think I'm even a good boy, for that matter. However, my friends pegged Jalon correctly. He *is* Daddy vibes all day long. Let's not pretend I haven't gotten hard like he has my dick on puppet strings every time he pulls that Daddy tone with me.

Just over two weeks into November, I arrive at work to find my office empty. I nearly had a fucking heart attack, thinking that Jalon fired me. He wouldn't fire me, would he? For what reason? Did HR demand he fire me because he's fucked me in my office and choked me on his dick in his office—numerous times now?

Maybe I sent something that offended him in my morning Zon mail.

As it turned out, he'd moved my office. He claimed the company needed my old office for someone else. It's a complete lie, but no one argues with the president/CEO/king of the company. When he says he needs an office that's occupied, he gets that office.

The office I was moved into points in the direction of the farm in the back. I can see the highland cows now, which is hilarious since they're constantly escaping their paddock and being chased by the farmhands. I think I've wasted a lot of time watching the cows.

After lunch the first day I moved into my new office, I found the reason Jalon actually moved me. There is a secret door in my built-in bookshelves that leads into his *apartment* and through to his office. Yes, this fucker has a goddamn apartment in the office building! The shit I give him has now leveled up. This is beyond bougie. I haven't found a word yet, but I'll get there.

Now we have far more surfaces to fuck on, which I think is something Jalon enjoys a lot.

The man called Cheddar opens the back door for me, and I thank him with a smile. Jalon's mentioned him once or twice. He's an important man among the staff.

With my hands full, I make my way to my friends in the backyard. They're sitting practically where Jalon wants the new pavilion built. I've come up with a couple designs that Jalon is literally cutting and pasting together. He reminds me of a five-year-old during arts and crafts. It's secretly really cute.

Honey Bee and Briar meet me to help take some of the items in my arms. I have my hands full of food containers I gathered from the kitchen for our picnic dinner. Brek, Oakley, and Haze are currently wrestling with umbrellas. I think there's more laughter going on than actual setup.

"They forgot the stands, so now they're trying to prove that they don't need them," Briar says as we stand off to the side and watch them struggle.

Honey Bee sighs. "I'm just going to get a fucking stand. I'm hungry, and they're making me cranky." She places the containers she took from me back in my hands.

"Honeyyyyy," Brek calls. "Are you moody?"

"Don't think I won't slap you," Honey Bee snaps. "If you're insinuating that I'm looking fat, I'm going to kick you in the nuts."

Brek's eyes get comically wide. "No!! You're stunning. Always."

Honey Bee brushes her hair over her shoulder as she turns around and marches back to the deck. Briar hands me back the ones he took as well to help Honey Bee.

"You're in trouble now," Oakley says and follows.

"Where are you going?" Brek calls after him.

"To help them. I'm going to get back on Honey Bee's good side!"

“No,” Brek calls and lets the umbrella fall to race after him. “I need those points. They’re mine.”

Oakley takes off running as Brek closes in on him. I find that I’m smiling. This is what I love about my friends. Everything.

“I think I’ve been transported back to when we were eight,” Haze muses.

I chuckle. “I was just thinking that.”

It takes an additional twenty minutes to get the umbrellas up and arranged and the blankets down. As we vie for position in the best shade, I muse on how useful the pavilion will be.

We take turns spooning food onto our plates and taking the first few bites before conversation begins.

“I’m looking forward to Thanksgiving next week,” Honey Bee says. “I imagine it’s going to be… entertaining with Jalon’s parents here.”

Entertaining. I tuck my head as I frown. What it’s going to be is stressful for Jalon.

“Yes, but I think it’s going to change the entire atmosphere,” Briar says. “At least for those who are direct descendants of Weston and Vanessa. It’s clear that there’s no love lost here.”

Honey Bee sighs. “Myro is constantly throwing out random guesses as to why they’re here.”

Haze nods. “Imry too.”

Briar agrees, though he doesn’t offer that Noaz is as well.

“Voss?” Honey Bee asks.

Brek shrugs. “I don’t think he really cares as long as they don’t go near Axl. He says he has more important things to think about than the sudden appearance of his deadbeat grandparents.”

“To save you from asking, Loren is more or less oblivious to their presence *unless* they’re around. Then he suddenly has a knife in his hand,” Oakley says, with a crooked smile on his face.

“You know I’m weary of Loren, but I have to say, the way the grandparents give him a wide berth is something worth seeing,” Brek says. “I feel like he’s the only one whose message is actually received, you know?”

“They respond to threats,” I muse.

“He’s been *loaning* his knives to Daddy Jalon,” Oakley says, amused. “I don’t even know where he’s getting all the knives. I suspect the kitchen is going to run low at some point.”

That explains the plethora of knives now sitting in the top bowl of the fountain in Jalon’s room. I laugh under my breath. Wow.

“You’re not going home this year?” Haze asks. I look up to see that he’s addressing Honey Bee.

She shakes her head and shrugs. “No. I have finals to study for, so most of this break is going to be sans Honey Bee.” She meets my eyes. “*And then* I’m taking the spring semester and the following summer off to give my brain a break.”

The gazes of our friends look between us as we share a smile.

“Is that what you’re doing? Taking some semesters off while you recharge your brain?” Briar asks me.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t feel the desire to continue. I don’t *need* the degree to do what I’m doing now. If an opportunity that interests me presents itself where furthering my education would be beneficial, then I’ll think about it, but right now, I’m happy.”

“You look happy,” Oakley says, smiling.

I return his smile. “I am. Living with the Van Dorens for two years, working on the same floor as them, I recognize how they *never* leave work at work. It always carries over. Have you noticed that Jalon doesn’t own anything other than suits? Probably because he works from the minute he gets out of bed until he climbs back in. There’s zero balance in so many of their lives. I don’t want to live like that.”

“You’re right,” Honey Bee says. “He does look like he’s always working. Always waiting to be called away.”

“He *is* called away often,” Briar reminds us. “I’d say at least half the time.”

“That’s a level of stress that I don’t want. I want to know what it means to relax and enjoy life,” I say.

“I take it you’re not going home either,” Honey Bee says.

I smile lightly and shake my head. “You know we don’t celebrate the hypocrisy of the holiday anyway, but no. I’m not. Five days of listening to how concerned my parents and sister are that I’ve abandoned my life’s dreams? I’m going to pass.”

“Maybe they’d back down if you told them you’re living a new dream,” Haze suggests.

“Or tell them that you’re happy,” Oakley says.

I nod absently. I’m not sure why I don’t do either of those things. I *am* happy. Far happier than I had been as I chugged continuously toward the dream I’d focused on for fourteen years—my *entire* childhood and through college. I feel far more comfortable in the life I live now than I did as I struggled to find a girlfriend who didn’t get jealous of my friendships, who wanted the same things I wanted, who was independent but chose a partnership because it made them happy.

“So, Honey Bee can’t take five days off from studying. I don’t want to be harassed by my family, who mean well but can’t see that their constant concern is frustrating. Haze? You staying here?”

He nods. “I think my brother and his boyfriend will come out for Christmas again. They’re traveling on the East Coast with Adak’s team over Thanksgiving, though, so it doesn’t make sense to try getting together in a hotel.”

Our attention turns to Briar.

He gives us a half smile around his chewing. He answers after he swallows. “I have no desire to go anywhere else. My spouse and kid want to be here,

and with them is the only place I want to be."

"Seriously, how are we *all* not in love with you?" Honey Bee says with a huff.

I laugh, as do my friends, but on some level, I think she's right.

Briar rolls his eyes, but he's smiling. "I've heard from both my parents and my siblings. I've grown up enough now to know that my mother's passive-aggressive comments targeting my dad as the villain of our family are bullshit. As a father, I look at Emmy and think, *how can you deliberately talk badly about the father of your kid when you* know *that nothing they're doing that might hurt you is done deliberately*? I've talked to my dad. Several times. About our childhood and Mom specifically. The picture Mom painted is… just… ugly and a lie."

"You trust that your dad isn't lying?"

"I don't think my dad knows how to lie," he says. "Remember when Noaz and I visited with Emmy last summer? The campus was practically empty, but there were still people there. Students. Faculty. *Everyone* gushed about my dad. They rambled about all the things he's done for the school and the students. Their enthusiasm… It's not something that's faked. Not to that extreme. I believe them. I believe him."

"But you still don't want to go there for Thanksgiving," I say.

He shakes his head. "I think it'll take a while to build a relationship with my father enough that I might consider spending holidays with him. You are my family. This is my home. My husband and child are here."

"You called Noaz your husband," Oakley says, grinning.

"Is that a big deal? They don't care if I call them my husband or wife," Briar states.

"No," Oakley answers, shaking his head, but his big smile remains. "You're always gender neutral, and I know you do that for Noaz, but sometimes, I think you do that for you too. Being with Noaz is kind of a loophole in gender attraction, right? Gender fluid. That means you don't really have to

consider your sexuality when being with Uncle Noaz. This is the first time you've assigned a gender to your spouse, and I kind of love that it's male."

Briar studies Oakley for a minute, and then his eyes flicker around to the rest of us. He opens his mouth and closes it. "I don't really know how to answer that," he says after a minute.

Oakley laughs. "You don't need to. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I just really love it. That's all."

Briar continues to stare at Oakley for a minute before saying, "And you? You're staying here for Thanksgiving?"

Oakley rolls his eyes and sighs in exasperation. "My parents are traveling. Shocking. I invited Dylan here, but he said no." He shrugs.

That leaves Brek. As a group, we turn our attention to him. He's quietly munching on dinner. I have a feeling he's intentionally been quiet to avoid the inevitable question.

"No," he says before anyone can prompt him. "I have zero desire to go to my parents' and listen to how much of a failure I am."

"I'd like to punch them in the throat," Honey Bee growls.

Brek shrugs. "Whatever."

I scoot closer to him and wrap my arm around his shoulders. He leans his head on mine and smiles.

"Family is who you choose them to be," Haze says. "It took me a long time to accept that family isn't defined by who you share blood with. I used to think how shitty my lot in life was to get stuck with my father, Frankie, and Dane for my family. But then I realized that there are very few people more fortunate than I am because I have you—my real family. And there is no better group of people a person can have by their side when dealing with the shitty hands we're dealt by birth than those you surround yourself with by choice."

My head falls on Brek's again, and I hug him a little closer to my side.

"Well said," Briar comments.

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17

JALON



THANKSGIVING BROUGHT A VERY interesting wave of change in the environment on the Van Doren Estate. It was the first holiday celebration my parents have attended since they lived here. I'm not sure they were prepared for the size of the gathering. Nor for the number of faces they didn't recognize.

I watched them closely while still keeping my distance. My job during the holidays is to host, not referee. Not judge. Not police. I'm the host, and I can't make everyone welcome if I'm gritting my teeth around my parents.

However, kicking them out of my seat at the meal was probably the highlight of the entire ordeal. While I *think* I managed to keep a cool, neutral expression, the resounding clapping that followed my insistence that they find more appropriate seating still echoes in my mind a week later.

That loud, resounding support from my entire family acknowledges that I am the head of this household. *I* am the head of the Van Doren family. *Not* my parents, who showed up out of the blue after a thirty-year absence.

Of course, this memory is at the very top of my happy place when thinking about the holiday. It's followed closely by the memory of Jessica telling my parents how uncouth and uncivilized their behavior toward their

grandchildren's partners is. I've always known Jessica was strong and sassy, but seeing her lose her temper with my parents? I may have been frozen as I watched in awe with the rest of the party.

I can still see her hand on her hip and her other pointing at their chests as she laid into them. She had some things to say—about their abandonment of their sons, turning their backs on their family for three decades, and the hate they spew with the shit that comes out of their mouths concerning their kids and grandkids.

Perhaps that's not all that stood out. It's that half of the things she said while telling them off were about me. They should be thanking me for pulling VDT from where they left it with one foot in the grave when I took over. I made a family of the broken pieces they'd walked out on. I built an empire from the rubble that they thought was something to be proud of. I have more compassion, more love, and more loyalty to those I hold close than they could even offer a definition of from any of the words she used to describe me. I evoke more love and loyalty from everyone around me with the kindness and compassion I possess in my pinky toe than anyone else in the world. It puts their selfishness to shame.

From there, Jessica went into statistics about how my family has prospered over the last thirty years. How my company has exploded and expanded exponentially. How the turnover of my staff is non-existent.

I was pretty sure it was at this point that Jessica was going to slap them both across the face. There's a chance Myro thought so as well because he scooped her petite body into his arms and walked away while she continued to tell them off in a rather diplomatic and data-driven argument.

To say I was touched is an understatement. To know Jessica thinks *that* highly of me? It's humbling.

Also, I will do whatever it takes to keep that woman on my side. I have zero desire to oppose her anywhere. Hopefully, when she's passed the bar, I can hire her at Van Doren Law and save my poor employees from ever having to face her in court.

Next up on my happiest memories might be something rather petty. The sound of my mother screaming in response to seeing Rhodes' pack walking

down the hall. She demanded a wild game hunter to get rid of them.

This, of course, set Rhodes *off*. Because Rhodes lost his cool, his pack was definitely pissed and made their displeasure known.

Since these wolf dogs are genetically more wolf than dog—and they're somehow a huge anomaly—and are the size of the extinct breed of dire wolves, they're not something to scoff at. Their animosity only terrified my mother further.

Meanwhile, an audience had gathered to see what all the commotion was. Rhodes was telling my mother off and promising that the only reason he didn't sic his deadly pack on *her* was that we'd have to get the blood out of the antique carpets and furniture. The dogs were growling threateningly.

Perhaps most disconcerting was Rhodes' partner Bennett—who normally smiles with the light of a thousand suns—stood in the center of the pack with Rhodes, arms folded over his chest, and glaring with malice at my parents.

Honestly, he might have been the most threatening presence there. It took my cousin Auden, Rhodes' father, to convince Bennett that he was the only one who could temper the confrontation. It was clear that Bennett had no intention of doing so, but finally, he rolled his eyes, rested a hand on Rhodes' arm, and then *cooed* to the wolves as if they truly were the *sweetest puppy doodles* he referred to them as.

His ability to calm the situation in less than a minute was as impressive as Jessica putting my parents in their place in front of our entire family.

My parents had the audacity to demand that I remove the pack from the building, if not the Estate entirely. I said no. They said they wouldn't step foot back in the house as long as the animals were inside. Ellory not so quietly whispered, "Rhodes should just move in permanently."

This has set the tone for the past week. My parents haven't been inside the big house since Thanksgiving. My brothers—the ones who don't live here full time—who had returned for the holiday are still here in residence with their partners, with the exception of Arath's partner, who had to return to Philly for hockey.

Likewise, Rhodes *is* still here with his pack and his own personal sun. His father remains, too.

Truthfully, if I were expecting a confrontation of any kind, I'd have predicted it to be Kairo confronting our parents. Most of my family has a rather even disposition. Kairo is a ball of anger and hostility on a good day. If someone were going to lay into them, Kairo has all the reasons in the world.

Secretly, I'd have liked it to happen. Kairo has always kept his cards close. I've thought about the events of the last thirty years too many times to count, and somewhere along the line, I failed my brother. I allowed him to become this angry person without challenge, and I don't know where to go with that. I don't know how to fix it. Maybe if he told our parents off, the truth would come out, and I'd know how to help mend the broken relationships we all have with Kairo.

It didn't happen.

Usually, I really enjoy my quiet life. Despite having six sons who all live on the Estate, plus their partners, my brother and his partner, and two babies, my life *is* peaceful. With the addition of three more brothers, my cousin and his son, two partners, and seven enormous dogs with equally large personalities of their own, dinners together are now chaotic.

I love sitting back and listening to them banter and tease each other. I love their laughter. I love to catch Levis' eyes and share a smile that no one else seems to notice. I love the *sweet baby doodles* mouthing off to anyone who will listen.

I love my life. Despite my parents disrupting the peace of the Estate, right now, my life is absolutely perfect.

The room hushing slightly is the only warning that someone has stepped up to the door. Linus is one of our door attendants. Meaning he greets and attends to any random people who show up at the door. He coordinates parking cars for visitors and having them retrieved.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Van Doren," Linus says as he bows his head.

I shake my head and offer him a smile. "Not at all. What do you need?"

“Jeannette is at the door. I didn’t bring her in since… she hasn’t been here in a while, and I wasn’t sure…” He trails off.

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The room falls silent. The dogs. The babies. It’s so quiet that I can hear the way my blood whooshes in my ears as his words sink in.

“Jeannette,” I repeat. That name means something. Something that means I have… fucked up.

“Your fiancée?” Myro reminds me. I look at him, his words making me flinch internally as if they pierced my skin. He looks at Linus. “That Jeannette, correct?”

Linus nods. “Yes, sir.”

Oh. Oh no. I have to address this. I don’t know how to address this. A minute passes before I push my chair back and force myself to my feet, draping the cloth napkin across the arm. “Please excuse me,” I tell my family. “I’ll be right back.”

I follow Linus out of the room and down the hall toward the front door. He looks at me nervously. “I’m sorry, sir. I wasn’t sure if I should interrupt you.”

“It’s okay, Linus. Thank you for calling on me. You did the right thing.”

He nods, but he isn’t convinced. I’m not sure what he sees on my face, but I need to school my features before I reach the entrance.

Jeannette is beautiful with long golden-brown hair and pretty brown eyes. She’s tall, with long legs, a slender body, and a killer smile. She’s a shark in boardrooms, but she has the perfect strong feminine energy that makes her a force in the corporate world. She’s been climbing charts as she quietly

makes her brand, purchasing companies from failing white male supremacist groups, gutting them and replacing their rhetoric of hatred with balance, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and increasing their success by, on average, 800% based on profit margins alone.

Her quiet voice with a loud message is what attracted me to her. I knew she was *exactly* the kind of woman that I wanted by my side. I loved her message. Her independence. She and I were going to be a loud power to exemplify the exact opposite of what the loudest hate-fueled politicians and their cult following spew as truth, and we'd do so by example.

Something happened along the way. Something that has shame and horror filling my chest.

Jeannette smiles and greets me with a kiss on my cheek. Hopefully she misses the way my shoulders tense. Levis immediately flashes in my mind's eye, and I have momentary clarity as I inwardly demand, *where was the opposite reminder that I was fucking engaged while I had my dick down his throat?!*

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Jalon," Jeannette says.

Oh, fuck my life!

"I'm sorry," I state, but don't expand. The list of things I'm apologizing for is very, *very* long.

Her smile softens, and I think I see pity there. She knows. Of course, she knows. She's a very intelligent woman. That's why I propositioned her to be my wife.

"This isn't working. Is it?" she asks.

My shoulders sag in a rare moment of allowing someone to see the truth of how I'm feeling in the moment. Words don't come to me. They're lodged in my throat.

Jeannette nods. As if I'm in a trance, I watch as she removes the ring from her finger and places it in my palm, closing my hand around it with both of hers. "I knew when you stopped calling months ago that something was up. As time continued without contact at all, I reminded myself that I'd had my

doubts from the beginning. You have no interest in a wife, Jalon. You've not truly let me into your life with your family since we met. You've always kept me distant and separate, while bringing me just to the outside so I can look in."

I flinch. Maybe the scowl I'm feeling comes out too because Jeannette chuckles. She pats my cheek gently and rests her hand over my heart. "It's okay. Let's go our separate ways, and when you recover from this moment, call me. I agreed to be your wife for the same reasons you asked me. Our mission and voices belong on the same side of the fight, and we'll be louder together."

She kisses my cheek again and then turns to the door. Linus is waiting there, determinedly *not* looking in our direction. He opens the door quickly and sees her out.

My feet remain rooted to the spot. I forgot about Jeannette. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I return to the dining room without seeing the path I take. The room is silent. Without a word, I take my seat. The cold weight of the ring in my hand feels like it pinches my skin, so I drop it onto the table. There's a collective intake of breath. When I pull my hand away, the light from the chandeliers glints off it, pricking my eyes as a reminder that I'm a shitty person.

There's no movement around me. I look up, try to offer my family a reassuring smile as I take them all in. Levis' chair is empty, and a cold pit of dread settles in my stomach. Cold sweat breaks out on my palms as I turn my attention to my plate and shuffle through the millions of words flooding my head right now.

After a moment, I get to my feet again. The thought of eating is unpleasant. "Excuse me. Please eat." I don't meet anyone's eyes as I leave the dining room.

My footsteps remain even as I walk toward the nearest set of stairs. By the time I reach them, I'm trying to keep up with the race my heart has taken off in until I'm standing in front of Levis' door. He might not want to see me. I don't think he remembered that I'm engaged either.

Was. That I *was* engaged.

Levis is a good person. I'm sure without a doubt that realizing he's been fooling around with a practically married man is not something that sits easily with him. I knock on the door and wait, wondering if he will even open the door.

He will. Levis isn't the kind of person to rudely ignore someone knocking. Even if he doesn't want to see them.

Thankfully, the door opens, and he meets my eyes. The world around me shifts under my feet as I make one very loud and important realization. I don't care what comes of tonight except this—I need to keep Levis Li. For the first time in my entire life, I want someone for myself. For entirely selfish reasons.

I just need to convince him that I'm worthy of a second chance.

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18

LEVIS



THE WAY my stomach twists and turns, threatening to reject everything I'd just put in it over dinner, has me struggling to catch my breath. I might have faked choking on my beverage, but the feeling of being unable to breathe was genuine.

How the hell was I the other guy for almost three months *and didn't even realize it?* Is this the man Jalon Van Doren is? My brain has a hard time accepting that, but I also can't ignore the evidence I see with my own eyes either.

He has been engaged for… six months? Eight? Hell, I don't even know. One day, Jeannette went from being his girlfriend to his fiancée. I didn't take note of the date because it didn't matter. It wasn't relevant. Like his kids, I kind of dismissed her.

I do the only logical thing once Jalon leaves the table to greet his fiancée. I run away. In my room, I bury my face in a sink of icy water and let the cold penetrate the tightness in my chest.

I refuse to look at my reflection. The reflection of a person who has been having an affair with an engaged man. This isn't who I am. I don't do this.

The knock on my bedroom door barely reaches me in the bathroom. I know who it is, and I don't think I want to face him. My feet are traitorous and force me in that direction anyway. He's here to break it off. I don't know why I feel sick over it. You can't break up with someone you're not with.

After a deep breath and pretending that I'm fine, I open the door. It's exactly who I expected.

Jalon doesn't appear any different. Still in his suit. Still completely put together. The façade that the world sees doesn't show a crack.

"Will you let me explain?" he asks.

I appreciate that he's giving me a choice right now. A loud voice in my head wants to deny his request, and yet somehow, I'm taking a step back to let him inside.

As soon as my door is closed, we're plunged into darkness. I hadn't bothered to turn on any lights.

"It's probably going to be a long explanation," Jalon says quietly. "All relevant, but I think to understand why this happened, there are some key points in my life that you need to be aware of."

I nod with a single bob of my head. That's the only indication he's going to get that he can continue.

"Can we sit?"

He feels like a stranger right now. A stranger in my space, seeking permission for each step they take. Like he hasn't fucked my throat raw on my bed. Like he hasn't folded my towels in a weird memory of domesticity.

I didn't even have to refold the towels.

There are a few seating areas throughout my suite. I choose one close to the window. A couple of solitary chairs. He can't get too close this way.

Jalon doesn't appear to like this choice. He watches me for a moment. Instead of taking the other chair, he pulls a hassock over so he's sitting directly in front of me. He rests his elbows on his knees and then drops his head into his hands.

My fingers itch to reach for him. He's not indifferent. That mask is a defense. I know that. I've seen that firsthand. I've witnessed his humor and enjoyed his laughter. He's a good person.

"I think I need to…" He trails off. A moment passes, and he lifts his head to meet my eyes. "You've said that you always had a vision for the future, and your entire life, you worked toward that goal."

I nod.

"I was the same. I knew what I wanted, and everything I did in my late teens and early twenties was to make that happen. I met a lot of unplanned obstacles when my parents turned to shit, and I suddenly had the entire world in my two hands." Jalon shakes his head. "I digress. My goal was to have a large family. I wanted a large family. Which meant I needed a wife whose life goals, lifestyle, and morals matched my own. The proposition I made was that I would provide everything—a house, financial stability, material needs and wants—all she needed to do was carry and raise my kids with love. My goal wasn't to find someone and convince her to be this. I wanted to find someone who legitimately wanted the same things I wanted. This was never about '*my way is the only way*'. It was always about this is what I want, and I need to find someone who wants the same life."

I incline my head so he knows I understand. I can tell he's trying to emphasize this point, but I don't need him to. Not for my benefit, anyway.

"That's how I propositioned Martha. On paper and when we spoke, she was exactly the person I was looking for. In hindsight…" He stares at nothing for a moment before shaking his head again. "The mistakes I made with Martha, my misplaced trust in that woman, and the despair I felt in learning what my kids went through prevented me from looking for another partner again for the past decade.

"However, my kids are older now. They don't need a mother. Despite the shitshow I forced them into for most of their childhoods, my kids are grown, happy, and healthy. So when I decided that there was a position in my life that should be filled, I had a new set of parameters that needed to be met. Very specific views and personality to fit into my life in exactly the right configuration."

“This sounds like a business interview,” I say.

The corner of his mouth rises a little. “That’s exactly what it was. For both Martha and Jeannette. In business, you make dud hires. You learn from them. That’s what I did. I…” He shakes his head as if trying to find the right potency of a word to convey what he feels. “I was too hands-off. I *trusted* without seeing that she was worthy of my trust. Martha has shaped my view of people in more ways than anyone else because of the deep scars she’s left on my kids.”

“And you.”

Jalon nods, though he doesn’t agree verbally. “Months ago, I asked my kids what they thought of Jeannette. I’m sure you know that Loren isn’t always on the same page as those around him. Five of my sons gave me the answer they knew I wanted to hear. Loren wasn’t paying attention to his brothers’ social cues and told me he thought Jeannette was boring and bland and that I obviously didn’t love her. To which he went into length explaining that he grew up understanding that he wasn’t capable of love and he still shows far more affection to Oakley than I ever did Jeanette.”

I nod along because, yeah, I’ve noted that in the past too.

“This led to the explanation that I just gave you. This is one of two times I’ve ever explained my selection process. I pointed out that love wasn’t part of the equation. It was about our lifestyles aligning. That’s what made for a better, more logical partnership. My kids told me I should research what it meant to be aromantic, so I did.”

Jalon licks his lips, and though he’s looking at me, he’s not seeing me at all. A minute passes.

“It was probably the first time in my entire life that I realized that how I was choosing *romantic* partners was wholly unlike how most other people did. Most people take into account how they feel about someone. Love is a big, if not the biggest, factor in marriage—for better or worse. Love never crossed my mind.”

Jalon’s gaze focuses on me again. “Do you know how many times I took a trip with Martha?” I shake my head.

“Once. Our honeymoon, where we conceived Myro. I *love* spending time with my kids. I always have, even though I was a bit of an absent father. My goal was to build them a world that would support them and their kids and their grandkids for the rest of time. That took *my* time, but I trusted I had someone who was picking up the pieces I dropped and loving my kids as I did.” He pauses and huffs.

“Sorry. I’m probably going to go on a mini tangent about Martha periodically. My point is, I didn’t plan memories with her. I didn’t plan events where we would make memories together. I planned a lot with my kids. I took my kids on holidays and trips. Martha wasn’t a part of that. I didn’t care about seeing her except to create my kids.

“This was part of the arrangement. We wanted to be parents. It wasn’t about a relationship *together*. Jeannette was the same. It was never about a relationship. It was about shared interests. Shared life goals. I never cared to… be with either of them, though I made a bigger effort to know Jeannette personally because I’d determined that was where I failed with Martha. You can’t see someone’s flaws if you never observe them in real time.

“Anyway. The more I researched aromanticism, the more I saw myself in those words. In the experiences people were posting online. I love my kids. More than anything. I would do absolutely anything for them. And my brothers, though I think you understand why I usually include them when I say, ‘*my kids*’.”

I nod. They *are* his kids. No argument from me.

“I’ve never loved someone else. I’m not sure I know how to fall in love. My desire for a future was never with love in mind. It was never about a romantic partner at all. A partner is for a very specific role—one that we talk about at length, and if our wants and needs don’t match, I deem the partnership incompatible and try again.

“Learning this about myself let me take a breath for the first time because…” He shakes his head minutely as he searches for words. I watch him in the dim illumination of my dark room, but the truth is, I’m not sure any of this puts me at ease. It doesn’t make me feel better. I keep waiting,

but I realize that my heart might be putting hope somewhere that there are no nutrients for it to grow. It's not even going to take root.

Jalon sighs. "I'm not sure if this is an insult or a compliment, but it wasn't you who made me forget about Jeannette. As soon as I read what it meant to be aromantic and aspects about myself began settling into place, *that's* when I forgot about Jeannette. You, of course, furthered that disregard along because you're consuming, Levis. But this is on me. I'm a shitty fucking person. I *forgot* my fiancée even existed. Who does that?"

"You're not a shitty person," I say quietly and give in to my need to touch him. Leaning forward, I brush my fingers against the back of his hand.

"I just stood there," he says quietly. "As she talked. I just stood there and didn't say anything at all."

His emotion is so incredibly evident in his voice, which is usual. It squeezes my heart.

"Tomorrow, you can call her and apologize," I assure him.

He exhales heavily. Then he leans forward as I am and takes both of my hands, cupping them in his, and brings them to his mouth. "This is the part that I need you to listen to, Levis, and I hope I explained enough that you understand what I'm telling you. *You* are the first person I've ever met on a personal level that I *want* to spend time with every day—all of this is excluding my kids."

I nod, even as I try to focus on what he's saying. That pesky hope is catching in my chest, though, and making it difficult to concentrate.

"I look forward to our banter and the way you make me laugh. I love to see your smile. I love your work ethic, your loyalty, and your love for your friends. The way you've embraced my sons as your family. I want to see you every single day. I constantly look at my phone, waiting for a text message from you, even when I'm not expecting one. You are the first person I want for *myself*. For entirely selfish reasons. Not because I have some role for you to fill. Not because I need a partner for events. I want you for me, Levis."

I haven’t taken a breath since he started talking again. But it’s not for the reasons I expected. This is exactly what I was hoping for, and yet… sadness grips my chest because this has to end anyway.

I find I’m shaking my head.

“Levis—”

I stop him from talking. “It’s my turn now. Just listen.”

Jalon doesn’t like this at all. His gaze is intense as he stares.

“You already acknowledged that I’ve had a vision for the future. Not to get all metaphorical on you, but I laid down those tracks and steamed ahead right up until last summer, when I jumped off the train entirely and watched it speed along without me. Until just now, the dream I had for the future had become erased and foggy because… everything was proving that maybe I shouldn’t plan my life based on a six-year-old’s dream.”

The corner of his mouth lifts a little.

“The thing is, there’s a part of that future that just became clear again, and I don’t think our paths come together. I want to get married. I want kids. I… I’m not willing to negotiate on either of these. I *want* that life.”

“I have six kids,” he reminds me.

I huff and roll my eyes. “I mean it, Jalon. I really want kids that aren’t all older than me.”

I’m startled when he tugs my hands roughly. My ass comes out of the chair, and I land in his arms. Laughter bursts out of me but dies on my lips when his hands frame my face. “I will absolutely marry you—because I *want* to. Maybe I didn’t make it clear enough, but I want a future with you in a capacity that I’ve never been interested in with another person. That includes marriage. And kids. I’m cool with kids.”

Nope. Not letting that fucking hope ignite again.

“Jalon, you can’t just—”

“Are you trying to tell me you know what I want better than I do?” he challenges.

“I wouldn’t *dream* of that, but you’re fifty-two.”

“I assure you, my swimmers are fine, though I find that’s probably not much of a concern since you aren’t carrying my child.”

“Why am I automatically the one in this impossible scenario who would carry the child if it were an option?”

Jalon raises one aristocratic eyebrow, and I find that I’m laughing again because, yeah, if someone is being bred in this relationship, it’s me.

Not that there’s a relationship here… is there? No. No!

“I need you to listen to my words and not the fear you’re fighting against,” Jalon says and presses a soft kiss to my mouth. “I want you. I want you in my life forever. I want to wake up to you, go to sleep to you, feel you struggle with my dick inside you wherever I decide to put it.”

My eyes narrow, to which he acknowledges with an amused smile, though it doesn’t interrupt his statement.

“I want to marry you because *I want you for me*, Levis. Do you hear me? I need you to hear the weight in the words I’m telling you. Maybe I’m demiromantic and not just… aromantic. I needed to allow myself to get close to the right person. Let me prove to you that you have my heart. Let me give you everything you desire.”

My voice is far more breathless than I intend it to be when I retort, “I don’t intend to become a bougie bitch, Jalon Van Doren.”

He laughs, and my heart jumps. His mouth covers mine, and despite my best efforts, I sink into him. “Just say yes,” he murmurs. “I can and will be, and am, everything you want.”

I search his eyes, and while my heart demands my agreement, I still ask, “You’re not going to change your mind later and tell me you don’t want another kid, are you?”

Jalon brushes his lips across my cheek. “No. I would never manipulate you like that.”

“I just… a kid isn’t something you compromise on. I need my partner to be enthusiastically on board with parenthood. Even if it’s again for my partner.”

“I need a partner who is going to love and support my existing and future children and grandchildren just as they are and *never* tell them they’re fucked up or disgusting,” he counters, and my heart fucking stops in my chest.

“What?” The horror in my tone is loud. It makes my voice higher in pitch.

“I know I’ve been asking for your understanding, but know that I understand what your hesitations are too.”

“I—” I shake my head. “Never. What the fuck?”

“Indeed.” He kisses me lightly again. “So?”

“I… yes. Yes, that’s what I want.”

“Good answer.”

I expect him to fuck me to within an inch of my life in response. Instead, he tucks me into his arms, and we wrap around each other, where we stay for more than an hour. Sex will come later. I think maybe we both simply need to *be* in each other’s company right now.

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JALON



I ALWAYS KNOW when something is up with my kids long before someone tells me what's happening. There's a very distinct shift in the atmosphere at home when I walk in. I can't tell what it is or where it's coming from.

Levis comes in behind me and stops at my side. He looks around, trying to figure out what I'm waiting for. After a minute passes and I don't move, he asks, "What's wrong?"

Merrie, my head of housekeeping, though she has a far more professional title, walks by and smiles, greeting me with a "Good afternoon, Mr. Van Doren." She's watering plants and checking on the freshness of the flowers.

I've told her many times that she's to call me by name. She argues that Van Doren is my name, and therefore she's abiding by my request.

I study her face for a long time, looking for any indication that she's aware of something that I'm not. She doesn't appear to be.

"Hello, Mrs. Planz," I return.

Her smile turns teasing because she *knows* that I prefer the more familiar names. Yes, they're my employees, but they're also my extended family.

Merrie specifically has been here since I was a young child. I remember her very clearly as I ran down the hall.

It looked very different then, of course. This house was maybe a tenth of what it currently is. That might be generous.

Merrie inclines her head to Levis, who offers her a smile in return. Then she continues down the hall with her task.

“I don’t know,” I answer. “Maybe nothing.”

He raises an eyebrow at me, and I can see the amusement on his face.

I walk the same path that Merrie is taking, and Levis remains at my side. “When you’re older and wiser, maybe you’ll be aware of the shifts in the air.”

Levis snorts. “Right.”

Passing Merrie, we stop at the door of the purple den when I hear a yip. Rhodes and Bennett are there with their pack. Bennett is wrestling with two of the massive beasts as if they’re the size of Jack Russell terriers, while Rhodes looks on with clear fondness that I’m only seeing because he doesn’t realize he’s being observed.

The wolves all know we’re there. Besides the two wrestling with Bennett, five sets of eerily intelligent eyes are trained on me and Levis. We watch for a few moments and then take our leave, Rhodes none the wiser that we were there.

I’ve never seen him so riveted on someone before. It’s… heartwarming.

We climb the stairs to the fourth-floor mezzanine. The place my kids have begun calling the loggia because Levis and his friends refer to it as the loggia often. I suppose there’s an argument for either.

It’s empty, which is unusual for this time of day when everyone is getting off work and returning from school.

“I’m going to change,” Levis says. His hand grips mine briefly, and I meet his eyes. I feel a smile tugging at my lips. “I suppose you’re just going to change into a house suit.”

I tug him close and give him a slow kiss. “Go change.”

When he releases my hand, I slap his ass hard enough that he jumps and then glares at me as he walks away. Fuck. I could *live off* that glare.

However, once he disappears inside his bedroom door, my attention turns back to the mezzanine. Axl’s shirt is tossed over the back of the couch. The bag Voss carries around with him, which has things he may need for Axl, is sitting beside the couch. A tablet has been left on the coffee table. When I pick it up and turn the lock screen on, I identify it as Voss’.

The feeling that niggled at the back of my mind that something is off moves into my chest. Maybe he needed something in Axl’s nursery.

I set the tablet back where I found it and walk down the hall to the nursery. Mary Sue is there with Axl. Axl is asleep in his bassinet, which is fine. Except that Axl is rarely away from Voss and left with a nanny.

Mary Sue looks up and meets my eye. She smiles.

“Everything okay?”

She nods, glancing at Axl. “Yes, sir.”

“Where did Voss go?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. He said he needed to go, and no one is to take him.”

The tension in my chest drops to my gut as I incline my head. “Thank you.”

Mary Sue smiles. She doesn’t appear concerned. With perhaps the exception of Loren, my sons are all very fond of our employees, and the feeling is genuinely returned. This suggests that if Voss were in a state of upset, Mary Sue should reflect that.

I turn away and then pause. Maybe not, though. Mary Sue has only been with my family since Axl’s birth. That loyalty and affection haven’t had time to grow. Knowing this only further angers the pit in my gut.

Levis meets me in the hall and looks me over. “Did you just put on a different suit that’s identical to the one you wore all day?”

“I don’t know why you put clothes on. I’m going to take them off again here in a minute.”

Laughter shines in his eyes, but he follows me to my bedroom. This morning was the first morning that we woke up beside each other after intentionally spending the night together. Usually, one of us will return to their own room in the early hours of the morning.

I’ve spent the last few days musing over the reasons we might have chosen to hide what we’re doing. For me, maybe I subconsciously realized I was cheating on my fiancée, and I wanted to… avoid judgment?

No. Not one of my sons was a fan of my marrying Jeannette. I can’t imagine that they’d have something negative to say about it. I’m not sure they’d have even brought her up. Just as no one had in the past several months that I’d *forgotten* about her entirely.

Yes, I feel like the lowest scum of the earth. And yes, I apologized profusely the following day when I called her. She didn’t sound horribly upset. She promised she had forgiven me and that there were no hard feelings. She reiterated that she would still like to make the plans we talked about come to fruition—a partnership, though without anything outside of friendship between us.

“As it should have been all along, Jalon,” she’d said.

She’s right, of course.

Because I need a distraction, I pull Levis into the closet with me and, making sure his eyes are on me, I push open the back panel that conceals a door and a room beyond. A second closet, this one filled with *actual* casual clothes.

Levis stands in the doorway and stares as I remove the suit that I wore today. I can only see his profile, but he’s standing there with his jaw literally hanging open. When he looks at me, he says, “I don’t know if I should be more flabbergasted by the contents of this closet or that you have hidden rooms like a goddamn villain.”

I laugh. God, I love how this man makes me laugh. Coming up behind him, I wrap my arms around him and rest my chin on his shoulder. Together, we

look into my closet that's never used but kept clean and tidy by Victor, the man who tends to my room daily.

Yes, daily. Levis isn't entirely wrong. I *am* a bougie bitch.

"Is the hidden door bio scanned? Do I need your fingerprint to open it?"

"No," I answer, amused. "They're just clothes."

"But you must have a safe in this room that's bio-scanned." He twists his head to look at me.

"Are you revealing your true colors, Levis? Are you a gold digger after my fortune?"

He snorts. "Hardly. I will always pay my own way."

"And send me snarky gifts every morning," I muse.

"I need to spend the rent money that my landlord won't accept on something. In a way, he's still getting my rent money."

"I don't need your money," I repeat, for far from the first time. "I promise you, my coffers are full."

"It's a good way to teach people financial responsibility," he argues.

I hum, not disagreeing. "Okay. I understand that. However, I like that I have the means to allow Jessica to focus solely on her studies and not have to worry about financial responsibilities as well. I appreciate that Haze can find something he takes an interest in that might pay less because he doesn't have a huge lease hanging over his head. I'm happy that Brek has found comfort with my family surrounding him and doesn't feel like he's paying his way to be here. I like that *you* love your job and aren't concerned with the amount of your paycheck because *you* don't have a lease to answer to. When I can help bring my family security, and they can focus on what's important to them without having to worry about money, I'm going to."

"That's not the reality of the world," he says quietly.

"It's the reality of the world you're a part of right now. Not to be prying, but you have a healthy bank account, don't you?"

He nods.

“I’d be willing to bet that your friends do too. None of you is keen to drop enormous amounts of money on frivolous shit just because you can. You’re all frugal for your own reasons. So, *if* any of you decide to leave, you’re going into the ugly world with little security to help you get your footing.”

Levis turns in my hold, wrapping his arms around my neck. His eyes meet mine, and I don’t miss the soft smile on his luscious mouth. “You’re a really great man. You know that?”

I hum, not agreeing or disagreeing. Over the years, I’ve found that my opinion of myself rarely lines up with those around me. Most people fall into one of two categories—they either think *far* too much of themselves or they’re incredibly critical of themselves. It’s a fine line between them that few people walk well.

I don’t tread that line well.

Levis goes through my closet for a while. There honestly isn’t anything exciting in there, but he takes a particular interest in all the Van Doren logo shirts. Almost all of them can be bought online or in the office store, which I tell him. Some are old designs and are no longer produced, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t available somewhere. Everyone wants to make a quick buck off the Van Doren name. He still enjoys going through them.

After a while, Levis heads into the backyard with his wakizashi to practice, and while I’d really love to watch him, I go in search of my kid. Especially when I find that Axl is still with Mary Sue and Voss hasn’t returned.

Voss’ tablet and Axl’s items are still in the mezzanine when I walk through. Now, Haze is there with his legs tucked up under him. He meets my eye with a small smile as I walk through.

Voss’ truck is gone.

By the time we eat dinner, Levis and his friends are feeling the odd energy in the air. For them, it’s because Brek and Jessica are MIA. Jessica has answered their texts, though they sound a little cryptic. Brek has not answered or read them.

As soon as this information floats about, I know why the heavy pit in my stomach is there. If something's up with Brek, that's why Voss has taken off too. Jessica…? I'm not sure exactly how she fits into that.

Levis, Haze, Oakley, and Briar remain together with my triplets and Loren in the mezzanine until eleven and then meander toward their separate homes. Levis is uneasy as he lies in bed. I don't want to minimize how he feels, and while I appreciate distractions of the sexy kind when my brain won't quiet, I have a feeling Levis isn't into it right now. So I let him stare out the window while my mind wanders.

It's been several hours since Voss left. I haven't asked much of Mary Sue, but I did return to her and ask what time Voss left. Sounds like maybe around four. It's been seven hours. He hasn't checked in.

Reminding myself that he's an adult and I can't demand to know his whereabouts all the time anymore, I force myself not to call him. When he's ready, he'll tell us what's going on.

My phone is silent when it rings. I only know I'm getting a call because my watch vibrates and both electronics light up the room. Levis is asleep, so I roll out of bed and take my phone to the closet to answer.

"Myro," I greet.

"Brek has been abducted," he greets in return. "Voss' office. Jessica is there."

In a strange way, knowing what's going on allows a veil of calm to settle over me. Okay. I know what's wrong now. We can work with this.

"I'm on my way."

That's the entirety of the phone call. I dress once more—yes, in another suit because that's what I'm comfortable in. Putting on a suit is like a directive. I know everything about the man who wears these suits. I know how he behaves, how he speaks, how he expresses himself. He *doesn't* lose his composure. The man who wears this suit has a set protocol for everything, which is why I immediately schedule an email to Crestley to be delivered tomorrow at six in the morning, telling him he takes the reins of my office until further notice.

Levis is asleep when I step back into the room. I debate waking him up to tell him what's going on. Instead, I decide he needs to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a very long day.

I leave him a note and stick it to his cell phone. Hopefully, he won't be angry with me for not waking him.

Call me immediately when you wake up.

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LEVIS



THE GRAY PARLOR has become our home base. More often than not, we're all camped out lounging over the furniture, spread out on the floor, or staring out the window. I'm not sure I've eaten in days.

Voss, Azlan, and Azlan's two male partners left the Estate two mornings ago, and this plan is set in motion. It's not just the four men, though. All of Voss' brothers are now mobilized, each with a set time at which they move out and close in from all directions. All of Voss' uncles, too. Including Uncle Kairo, which, honestly, I'm surprised about. There was no twisting his arm, either. He volunteered.

Also, Uncle Auden, their cousin Rhodes, along with his partner and pack of massive wolf dogs. They're all on their way, closing in on this wild game preserve, and will move in once Voss and Azlan give the signal to do so.

It means we wait. For an undisclosed number of days.

My friends are spread out on the floor right now. Briar is asleep with Emerson's head on his stomach. Jessica is curled up in a ball, tucked into Haze's side. Oakley is sleeping in a chair, though he's half hanging over the arm.

I’m not sure what woke me, but as I look around the room, I can’t stand to sit here anymore. The pile of laptops that we used to search the horrors of the dark web is stacked on a table like a tower of flat pavers. The only reason we’re not comparing notes on the shit we found and can never unsee is that our heads are far too full of crippling anxiety for Brek.

Jalon isn’t in here. With a deep breath, I push myself to my feet and silently leave the room. I know where Jalon is. Tonight is the first time I step foot into his bedroom and don’t see the opulent extravagance of the place. Nothing shines right now. Every texture is dull. The lights feel dim, as if the dark is sucking all the illumination away.

Very symbolic of the energy in this house right now.

I find Jalon sitting on the edge of his bed. No shirt. Pants halfway down his thighs. Elbows on his knees and head in his hand. There’s a tablet propped on his nightstand, screen on as if he’s streaming a movie.

He picks his head up as I approach. He doesn’t smile. I appreciate that he doesn’t feel the need to wear that strong armor when we’re alone, like he does with everyone else. They know he’s afraid, just as we are.

Jalon reaches for me when I’m close enough. His hands grip my hips, and he presses his forehead to my stomach. My fingers tangle in his hair, which I think is being generous because his hair is never long enough to grip.

“Everyone in my entire family for two generations is in those woods right now,” he murmurs, and I feel the weight he’s carrying. The fear.

We’re scared for everyone, of course. But I can’t imagine being Jalon right now. All four brothers. All six sons. His cousin and nephew. Everyone in two generations following two branches of his family tree is walking into hell, where they hunt humans like animals.

Everyone except him.

I don’t think it’s fear alone that’s hanging heavily on his shoulders right now. I imagine he’s feeling cowardly and embarrassed to be the only one home right now.

“You need to be here,” I say quietly.

His fingers dig into my hips, and he inhales deeply. “Logically, I know that. That’s why I’m still here.”

“Doesn’t make it any less difficult,” I agree.

He nods.

“We’re here too,” I remind him. “Not seeing or knowing how Brek is and how the others are. He doesn’t have a tracking chip in him.”

Jalon’s arms slide around my waist, and he hugs me close. “None of you are trained for this kind of situation.”

“That’s why we didn’t argue when we were told we needed to stay behind.”

“I trained all ten of them,” he says quietly. “Personally. When my knowledge ran out, I was beside them with the tutors I brought in, learning the same techniques they did.”

“You still need to be *here*, Jalon. This is where you’re needed most.”

Jalon inhales again and turns his face into my stomach. “Get undressed. Please.”

I take a step back, and he releases me. As I pull my shirt over my head, Jalon finishes undressing too. Once we’re both naked, we climb into bed together. Jalon coaxes me onto my back and climbs on top of me. He slides down my body so he can rest his head on my chest and tuck his arms under me. I hug him tightly.

His heart races wildly, even as he lies perfectly still on me.

“I’m scared,” I admit.

Jalon nods subtly. “Me too,” he responds.

“What do we do if—”

“No. No what-ifs. We will not put that kind of energy into the world. They will find Brek alive and bring him home. *Everyone* will come home alive.”

I want to ask if he truly believes that, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Not only because it feels like a what-if question. I also don’t think I want to

know the answer.

We never lack conversation. I'm not sure we need conversation right now, but my brain keeps sliding down the slippery slope of what-ifs. Each one worse than the previous. I blame the things I found on the dark web. I'm not sure my brain was this dark before. I know for certain I could never conjure up these horrors all on my own. That's not the way my brain works.

With a deep inhale and slow exhale, Jalon pushes himself up onto his arms. He doesn't speak as he studies my face for a few minutes. I don't necessarily feel like he's looking for something. Maybe it's comfort he finds in me. In the very short number of days since we've declared that we're together in all senses of the word, I've found that I take a lot of comfort in just looking at him. Knowing what we share. Knowing that our future waits for us, and I'm *excited* for it.

I touch his cheek, and he leans his head sideways into my touch.

"I don't know how you deal with stress, but I like to try to distract myself and release it for a while. It helps me concentrate on the situation more clearly when I return to it," Jalon says.

"What do you have in mind?" I ask, but the way the right corner of his mouth ticks up, I think I already know. It takes just this vague suggestion to enlist my dick to get involved.

"I want to ride your dick," Jalon says, and I think both of my eyebrows shoot into my hairline. Jalon chuckles at my expression. "Why are you surprised?"

I blink a few times and then shake my head. "I'm about to stereotype you big time. You're not allowed to hold it against me."

He huffs quietly.

"You're entirely top Daddy energy."

His smile climbs in such a way that most people never see. This smile is all mine. "Yes, that's a stereotype. Penetrating and being penetrated are not indicative of dominance and submission."

“What I’m hearing is that you *are* Daddy energy,” I tease.

I love that smile. I’ll never get tired of seeing it.

“I don’t…” Jalon trails off for a minute. “I can’t say that I’ve ever actually considered any aspect of a BDSM lifestyle or kink. Some things are natural, and I lean into them when the relationship is comfortable enough to do so. Which means, I think you’ve seen more of them than anyone else in my life.”

I don’t even bother pretending that I don’t love everything about that.

“I haven’t been penetrated before,” he says. “I don’t know if I’ll like it. Maybe I won’t. Maybe I’ll become a begging mess while you rail me.” Jalon shrugs.

I laugh and shake my head, but the idea that he *might* beg is a little intoxicating. But something about his words catches my attention, and I think about them as I look for what’s sticking out at me. “There’s something in the wording you chose,” I say, feeling my way through this.

Jalon sits up and adjusts so he’s sitting on my pelvis. His dick is hard, the shining barbell ladder glittering in the dim bedside lamp light. The dragon around his cock is nothing but a dark ring right now, and I get the strange impression that it’s creating a bull’s-eye for me.

“I wondered how long it would be before you asked.”

“Oh?”

“You want to know if you’re the first guy I’ve been with.”

“Yes!” I say a little more enthusiastically than I mean to. Jalon laughs.

“You are *largely*. There was a guy I used to mutually jerk off with in high school. You know—watching porn together and what would begin as jerking ourselves together ended with us helping each other out. I imagine you used to do that with your friends.”

I scrunch my face and then shrug. “Not really. We have Honey Bee, so there are some lines that would be weird to cross between us.”

Jalon tilts his head as he leans to the side to grab the lube. He pauses long enough to stare at the tablet screen and then comes back. “I feel like we’re getting off topic here, but I’m following my curiosity. Are you telling me that none of you hooked up with each other?”

This time, when I scrunch my face, I feel it all the way to my gut. “No. We haven’t.”

“I find that stupidly improbable.”

I’m distracted by the way his hand reaches behind him, fingers covered in lube. I shift to see, but I can’t from this angle. Licking my lips, I look up into his face, looking for some indication about how he feels, stretching himself on his fingers.

“Well…” I say, finding it difficult to engage in this conversation right now. “Haze and Oakley are gay, so naturally, they’re not interested in Honey Bee. Brek is asexual, though none of us realized that until recently. Then, there’s the fact that me, Briar, and Brek are…”

I blink out of my thoughts and stare at Jalon’s face. He looks incredibly amused.

“You’re straight, are you?”

“That’s what I was going to say,” I admit, laughing. “I guess… Maybe…” I don’t actually have words to follow this thought. “I don’t know. Maybe we’ve never allowed ourselves to cross a line we weren’t convinced we could recover from if there was fallout. We didn’t all come from difficult home situations, but I think early on, we knew that we all needed the family we offered each other more than anything else. It might have been that alone that kept us friends and only friends.”

“Now that you’re here and all a little gay…” he says.

“You seduced me,” I accuse, though I do so halfheartedly as he spreads his legs a little wider on top of me. Fuck, that’s hot. I wriggle under him, anxious and excited.

Jalon chuckles. “Is that what happened? Noaz seduced Briar? Voss seduced Brek?”

I chew the inside of my lip and stare into his eyes. “Brek is pansexual, so… he’s discounted from this conversation.”

“Mmm.” Jalon gathers more lube and wraps his hand around my dick.

I grunt, eyes fluttering closed.

“You know what I think?” Jalon asks. I shake my head. He should know I’m not thinking at all when he’s stroking me like that. “I think that you all feel safe here. There’s no pressure to be what the world wants you to be. So you’ve all let down your walls and have embraced the freedom to explore aspects of your identity and sexuality, knowing that no one here is judging you. You won’t be met with cruelty. No matter what you tell anyone around you, all you’ll know is love and support. It allows you the freedom to be who you are and not what the world demands you be.”

I’m not sure if my heavy breathing is because of his words or his hand stroking my cock. “You think I’ve always been a little gay, do you?”

“You can call it that if you want. You can also say that maybe you’re bisexual but haven’t felt like you were in a comfortable place to explore that until now.”

My brain slowly shuts down as his hand gets quicker over my dick. “If you want to talk, you need to stop doing that,” I grunt, hips jerking up. “Equally, if you want to ride my dick, you need to stop doing that.”

Jalon chuckles. He leans forward and kisses me before he removes his hand. Somehow, he produces a towel from somewhere and wipes his hand off. Then he shifts, and I’m hypnotized by his hand on my dick as he positions me at his hole.

I’m holding my breath before he even begins lowering himself onto me. I stare at where my cockhead disappears inside him, punching out a sharp exhale in response. Holy fuck, that’s hot.

My eyes flicker to his face and then get stuck there. Jalon has a habit of retaining a sense of composure at all times, even when we’re fucking. Yes, it slides away eventually, but it usually takes some time to strip it from him so he can just enjoy the moment.

It’s already fallen away, though. His eyes are transfixed on my face, though I’m not sure he’s looking directly at me. His lips are parted, chest stuttering as he breathes.

As I watch his face while he slides a little further down my dick, his eyes flutter closed, and he groans. His face twitches, but I’m not sure if it’s discomfort or pleasure.

He doesn’t last long sitting up. I’m not close to being fully inside him when he leans forward and rests on my torso. His breath comes out rushed into my neck.

“Fuck me, Levis,” he murmurs.

Oh god. This is going to be quick if I’m left to my own devices. Not because I’m selfish, but because… this is Jalon. I’m obsessed with Jalon.

I wrap my arms around him and *slowly* rock my hips upward in a measured pattern that brings me inside his body little by little. I tell myself it’s for his comfort. But it’s for my sanity.

We went off on a side conversation before I think we fully finished his gay sexcapades reveal, so I’m not entirely sure where it ends. Didn’t he say he’s never been penetrated? It’s difficult to recall when I’m *inside Jalon Motherfucking Van Doren*! My brain is completely scrambled.

He moans, and my thoughts, what little sense they were making at this point, flutter away. I become far more attuned to his body on top of me. The way his fingers press firmly into my ribs, slightly under me. His face is turned into my neck now, and I can feel the way he breathes heavily with hot, moist puffs of breath that aren’t entirely even at all.

Maybe more hypnotizing than anything is the way his body rocks with mine at the opposite time, so his ass meets my thrust. Nothing about this is quick or hard. I’m not sure it’s even deep.

This is intimacy at its core. A moment out of time, offering the barest bright spot in the darkness currently gripping our lives. For so many reasons, these days will haunt me, but I’ll also remember this for the rest of my life.

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JALON



WHEN I STEP into my office, there's a Zon box sitting on my desk. Amusement immediately brings the corner of my mouth upward.

"Here you go, sweetheart," I tell Axl as I gently set him into the seat by the window. There's a strip of sunlight moving through my office, which will allow him to get some vitamin D for a bit while he naps soundly. "Let's see what that man sent me today."

I set his backpack on the floor in the corner and pull the box knife from my drawer. It's a recent addition to my office. Never in my thirty years as the president of Van Doren Technologies have I had to have my own box knife. Three months of sleeping with Levis and now I own two.

This is the biggest box I've received to date. A foot cubed, I think. A gift note on the top, and I pull the square up. There's just a bunch of laughing emojis. Oh no.

A glance at my open door, and I think maybe I should have shut it.

The box is stuffed with something wrapped in plastic that sucks the air out of it. Fabric. A pillow of some sort. A pillow can't be alarming.

I struggle to get it out and try to guess what it is. It's rolled in such a way that it's impossible to tell. Careful not to cut the fabric itself, I slice through the plastic, and immediately the bag expands. Now it's a struggle to get the obvious pillow out of the constricting space.

It *is* clearly a pillow of some sort, but it's shaped strangely. Long, like you'd lie across a bed for decoration. Or maybe a body pillow? By the time I manage to tear the plastic away and free it, I'm laughing because I have an idea of what he found.

It's a dick-shaped pillow. Roughly three feet in length. Not a regular dick though. It's obviously an imaginative monster dick, and it's covered in piercings. A Jacob's ladder. An alarmingly large Prince Albert. And the little ring hanging from the ball sac, which I forget what it's called.

I cover my mouth to contain my laughter as I hold it out in front of me. What the fuck am I going to do with this? I'm still shaking with silent laughter when there's a knock at my door. I look up, meeting Crestley's eyes as I hurriedly stuff the pillow into the now-too-small box for the fully inflated appendage.

Oh god, I made an internal pun, and Levis isn't even here to enjoy it.

Crestley raises an eyebrow as he watches me struggle. "What are you sending yourself now?"

He's seen the contents of multiple of my mysterious mailers. Nothing quite like this one, though. I look down and stop stuffing the monster sausage into the too-small, square space when something else catches my attention. A book. Shifting the pillow a little, I read the cover. *Decorated Cocks*.

I snort out loud before I can keep the sound in.

Giving up on containing the dick pillow, I pull the box from my desk and conceal it behind the large piece of furniture. "Come in," I tell Crestley as I take my seat and glance at Axl to make sure he's still peacefully asleep.

"Do I even want to know what you have going on with your strange daily deliveries?" he asks.

"No. Let's just call it mail wars." Levis' efforts are about to be returned.

He shakes his head. He glances at Axl, too, and then meets my eye with concern. Today is my first day back in the office since Brek was recovered. My entire family hasn't quite returned yet. Noaz and Oxley are home. Most of my sons, with the exception of two/thirds of my triplets. Auden is home, but Rhodes is still hunting in the woods with Azlan and his partners.

Brek fought through some dark days as he struggled with the injuries and infection that Doc Mark was treating. He's still home and recovering. Voss hasn't left his side. Neither have his friends.

I came into work today to give Voss a break from balancing his attention between his son and boyfriend. Right now, Brek needs him. Physically, he's going to be okay, but he's going to struggle mentally for quite some time.

I left Levis in bed this morning, thinking he was asleep. Either he had this order placed the night before, or I wasn't as quiet as I thought I was.

Crestley shakes his head and looks at his tablet. "Are you officially back in the office?"

"No. I'll probably be here for a couple of hours and then go home."

He inclines his head and meets my eyes. "Everything okay?"

I hadn't relayed the reason I was off. I haven't even checked my email, which is one of the reasons I came into the office today. I'm afraid of what I'll find waiting for me. Crestley confirmed receipt of my email via text. After making sure Levis took a leave from work, I haven't thought about VDT.

This is probably the first time that I've taken such a long break. While Noaz was on the hunt for Emerson's birth mother, who was abducted while carrying Emmy, I was in the office. It was the best place to be because Voss was monitoring via his computer lab.

Voss on a long-term trip in NYC to deal with the mafia meant I was in the office, which was still the best place to monitor. As was when three of my sons went to the megachurch cult island. If I hadn't been so terrified for my family, all walking into a hellish situation, I would have been in the office to distract myself from my stress this time too.

That simply wasn’t possible this time. Not with the magnitude that my family was involved.

Which means I had no idea how this company would run without a Van Doren in-house. I simply put my trust in Crestley and didn’t think about it until this morning, when I told Voss I was taking Axl on a field trip to the office.

The building is still standing. Everyone seems to be moving around as if it’s just a normal day, completely unaware of the level of trauma that just took place in my house.

“Everything is okay now,” I answer. “Not over, but okay.”

Crestley presses his lips together, clearly struggling not to ask, but wanting to. I’ve always been careful about who has access to what information. Very few people who don’t carry my last name know the true nature of the dark side of the business I run.

I don’t launder money. I pay my taxes—all of them. I don’t so much as have an outstanding parking ticket. There are no criminal charges against me for anything at all. By all appearances, I live a boring life on paper. It’s amusing when politicians and government officials look for literally anything that they can use to point their fingers at me and come up empty-handed.

This one thing will always be our darkest, most secure secret. The fewer people who know the details, the safer it remains.

I trust Crestley, but I still don’t bring him into the dark inner workings. However, I’ll offer him the same version we’ll make public. “One of my son’s partners was abducted and tortured for several days. He was recently rescued.”

Crestley’s eyes widen. His mouth opens and closes a couple times before saying, “What the fuck?”

“Yes,” I agree, nodding. “It’s worse than it sounds. Right now, everyone is healing.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but is that why there are multiple absences in various departments throughout the company right now?”

“If you’re asking about my sons and Levis, yes. Brek has been one of Levis’ best friends since childhood. Naturally, he’s devastated.”

Crestley inclines his head. “And your sons are close with Brek, of course. Fuck. I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“Just what you’re doing. I need increased support while I tend to the well-being of my family.”

“And yourself,” he adds.

I smile and agree. “Yes. And myself. So give me the notes from the margins. Anything I need to attend to that shouldn’t wait?”

He looks down at his tablet again and frowns. I watch him as he taps along and find that I’m smiling at the way he looks a little less put-together than usual.

“Fielding my absence isn’t for the faint of heart, is it? You’re looking a little frazzled, Crestley.”

Crestley sighs. “Honestly, I’m okay being *your* interference. It’s nothing that I don’t normally handle, though on a larger, broader scale right now. Interestingly, I’m shit at managing myself.”

“Where’s Sven?”

He shakes his head. “Poor guy has strep again. Every time he’s booked for surgery, he comes down with an infection so bad that they don’t dare open him up when he’s more susceptible to catching something worse from the hospital, like MRSA. I’ve kept him out of the office entirely because Axl and Emerson come in and I don’t want them exposed to anything like that.”

“I appreciate that concern.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Doc Mark is going to be here for a while. If Sven is up for it, we can set him up with an appointment and see if Mark can get him healthy long

enough to get through surgery."

"I think Sven would like that. He's exhausted and frustrated from constantly being sick. It's not good for his overall health and is certainly taking a toll on his mental health right now, too."

I incline my head. "I'll speak to Mark when I get back to the house."

"Thank you. I think the only thing I have upcoming is Porter's interview." He looks up from his tablet. "He's one of the teachers we were looking at for the school. Three o'clock on Thursday. I can reschedule if need be. I'm assuming you want to be a part of it."

"Absolutely. I will be involved in the hiring and acceptance of every single person who steps foot into that school," I reiterate, to which Crestley smiles because he's heard me say it more than a dozen times at this point. "Would you mind sending him an email as a courtesy to say that we aren't canceling the interview but there's a chance it may need to be postponed due to… what word am I looking for? I don't want it to sound frivolous. Convey that it's urgent or whatever, and we don't cancel interviews lightly."

"I will."

"That's all? Gone for a week, and that's all you have for me?"

He grins. "I dare say you could retire."

I huff. "Right." I think about my kids and wonder how to keep this company running without someone from my family to take over when I retire. I won't let VDT move outside the family. I've seen so many companies turn into businesses that would mortify the people who made them as they deviate from their vision and practices in favor of the almighty dollar.

A knock on the door has us both turning our attention. My cousin Auden. Crestley gets to his feet and takes his leave.

"I don't mean to interrupt," Auden says as he watches Crestley vacate my office.

Axl whimpers in the corner, so I turn my attention away from Auden to look at my grandson while waving my cousin inside. “It’s fine. He has the company running smoothly without me.”

“Nothing like not being needed, huh?”

I hum as I roll my chair closer to Axl and rub his tummy until he settles again. “My concern has never been whether I’m needed to keep this company running smoothly. Everyone is so thoroughly trained and cross-trained that I’m sure it would remain sustainable well into the future. But companies need to continue to grow and remain relevant as the world around them advances.”

“Or regresses,” Auden mutters.

I nod. How unfortunate that’s true. “My concern has always been keeping my company running the way it’s meant to run. With my vision. With respect to my employees. Where the dollar isn’t the most valuable asset, but the people who run it. I need a successor to take the mantle with the same code of ethics. History and current events prove that’s not how life works.”

“You aren’t going to live forever.”

Again, I nod and sit back. “I know. I’m not sure what to do,” I admit.

“Isn’t Myro training to take over?”

I meet Auden’s eyes. “I know that everyone who looks at my son—all my sons—can see the terror of having to step in behind me. Myro will keep his brothers from having to do so, even if it means he’s miserable as he tries to live up to some larger-than-life vision he has of me.”

“Please don’t take this offensively, but I don’t think you see this situation from their point of view, Jalon. Look around you. You’ve touched every single surface everywhere on this Estate. You built this company from the ground up because, let’s be honest, we both know that your parents had been running VDE into the ground. They didn’t know what the fuck they were doing—which wasn’t necessarily their fault, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t responsible for the collapse that was happening when you inherited the problem. You did what needed to be done—shredded VDE and began again with what little you could salvage from the disaster.”

I nod along because it was definitely ugly.

“Think about the VDT stock. Look at the turnover. Consider the loyalty you evoke in every person you employ. Look beyond that to the bigger picture. This company has exploded because of *you*. Your leadership. Your guidance. Your willingness to get involved and do it correctly. To take chances but not be reckless. Trust without becoming blind. Wealthy but intelligent. Educated, but always ready to learn and be better. It might be difficult to see as the person sitting in the center of the empire you created around you, but it’s a fucking intimidating crown to wear after you, Jalon. The possibility of not continuing the exponential trajectory you’ve maintained for twenty-five years when the successes truly began to roll out; the threat of failing, of seeing this company fall from the monument you created? Jalon, it’s scary for *me*, and I’m not even the one facing the wall that your sons do.”

I stare at Auden as I let his words sink in. It’s not that I haven’t thought about this. To some extent, I understand. But when he puts it like that… hell, even I’m intimidated.

“I’ve never let the thought of failure become an option,” I say absently. “When you take away that option, fear goes with it and you just… keep going. Keep going because you have to. You have to protect your family. You have to provide for the ten kids you have because no one else will if you don’t. I *couldn’t* fail. My parents already failed my brothers, and I was never going to let that happen again.”

Auden is smiling at me. “You have no idea the kind of role model you are. And you never will. You’re always going to see the mistakes you made first and foremost. But I want you to think about what you *just* said. The only option you gave yourself was success. And cousin, you do *nothing* by halves.”

I watch my grandson sleep for a minute. There needs to be an alternative route for my succession. Or I need to teach one of my kids how to dismiss the possibility of failure. I’m not sure which of those tasks is more difficult, but Auden is right. Even now, failure isn’t an option.

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22

LEVIS



LESS THAN A WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS, and a new group chat is created. One message appears as more than a dozen little circles drop down to read it.

JALON VAN DOREN

Good morning, family. We will have a meeting in conference room eight at the office. Arrive by one this afternoon. See you then.

A whole bunch of little thumbs up attach to it, acknowledging without commenting. I wait, just to see if someone is going to respond via text, but one doesn't appear. I add my thumbs up to the rest.

"This sounds like a business email," Honey Bee says.

"Definitely sounds mandatory," Oakley agrees.

They're not wrong, though I haven't received an email from Jalon at work before. I don't work with him or directly for him. The project for the pavilion is private. He hired me freelance as Daddy Jalon, not through VDT as King Jalon. There's a difference. One wears a crown and one holds a leash.

“I imagine it’s going to be about Brek’s… ordeal,” Oakley says.

It’s been just over two weeks since he came home, and yeah, we all have questions. Not about what Brek went through. We know enough. We see the evidence. If he wants to tell us someday, he can, and we’ll all listen. But we will never force him to relive the horror.

We spend the morning into the afternoon speculating about the meeting and talking about whatever. Loren comes and goes. Haze and Imry come and go. We don’t see Voss or Brek or the two/thirds.

As twelve thirty rolls around and Myro comes out of Honey Bee’s bedroom, where he was apparently working all morning, Oakley laughs and points at Honey Bee, telling her she can never give Loren side-eye for sticking close.

Honey Bee rolls her eyes and doesn’t comment. I think we all know that whatever reason Myro was hanging around in her bedroom wasn’t anywhere near the same reason Loren hangs around.

We climb into Myro’s truck, and he drives us to the office. The majority of VDT shuts down for just over fourteen days every December to January. It’s *not* a Christmas break. It’s a holiday break. For everyone. And everyone is paid.

So I’m not surprised to step into the office building to find it’s deserted. The silence is eerie in a place that’s always filled with people, conversation, and noise.

We’re not the first to arrive in the conference room. Jalon is already there, of course. So are the triplets and Haze. Uncles Auden and Arath. Jalon meets my eyes briefly, and I think I see the hint of a smile as he holds my gaze.

I wonder if he’s planning to announce to the family about… us. Here? No. This must be about Brek and the days leading up to his rescue. The black web. There are a ton of questions left unanswered. Hell, we haven’t even asked since we’re so damn relieved that Brek is home and alive.

Over the next twenty minutes, the rest of the family trickles in. Even Kairo, which surprises me. Voss and Brek arrive with Axl. I watch them, trying not to stare at Brek like everyone else is. Voss sits Axl in a seat and then slides

his seat toward Kairo, silently giving Kairo permission to interact with his son.

Kairo meets Voss' eyes. If I'm expecting a friendly smile in silent understanding, I'm disappointed, but Kairo smiles at Axl as he shifts his seat so he's facing his nephew instead of the rest of the room.

As they're getting settled, Briar, Uncle Noaz, and Emerson enter the room. Emmy reaches for Jalon, and Briar stops long enough to hand him over. My stomach flips and dances as I stare at Jalon with Emerson. The feeling in my gut of '*I want that*' sparks to life after being dormant for almost two years now.

He meets my eye, and once again, he gives me the smallest, sexiest little smile. Fuck.

Last to enter are Rhodes, Bennett, and the pack of massive wolf dogs. Rhodes tells them to say hi, and they immediately become domesticated and search for someone who is going to dote on them for the duration of this meeting.

"We're all here," Jalon says. I'm not the only one who notes that Jalon's parents are absent. "Good. Let's begin with what happened at the reserve. Voss?"

All eyes turn to Jalon's second-oldest son. He's all business as he leans forward to answer his father.

"I found the man who runs it. He's a billionaire who's been known to donate heavily to political candidates in favor of the death penalty, forceful removal of immigrants—legal or not—and would like to '*bring back*' the cruelty with which the LGBTQIA+ population has been treated in the past. He has a private island off the Florida Keys, which is why his IP was bouncing off there, though he's from Oklahoma," Voss says.

"Noted. Where is he now?" Jalon asks.

Voss looks at the triplets. Everyone else turns their direction there too. "I gave him to Ellory to play with."

Play with. I mouth the words. The first thing that comes to mind is a playdate, like someone might set up for Emerson.

Ellory grins. “I’m tag-teaming with Malcolm and Azlan. It’s Azlan’s turn.”

Jalon inclines his head. “Anyone else involved besides this single man?”

Voss shakes his head. “Not that I can find. We haven’t shut down the website, though. I’m monitoring those who are booking and researching those who have booked in the past. I’m disgusted to tell you that this operation has been live for five years. That’s based solely on the identification numbers they brand their prisoners with. There’s a lot to unpack here.”

“Very good. Rhodes?”

“We played out the rest of the scheduled hunts, and the world is now safe from at least twenty-three nasty people. I’ve set up trail cams all over the place, particularly around the barracks, lodges, and branding shed. They’re Voss’ cams, so they’ll transmit what they find via satellite every twenty-four hours, and they hide far better into the surroundings than your typical trail cam, so we’ll see even if law enforcement begins poking around long before they realize the cameras are in place.”

“The guards?” Jalon asks.

A whole wave of frowns circles the room at the question—all the Van Dorens.

“They’re in our custody.” Rhodes meets Voss’ eye. “It’s like you said. They’re clearly guilty, but they haven’t actually hurt anyone. They enabled the situation, which makes them guilty of a lot of crimes, but… yeah, I don’t know. They freely answer everything. They’re helpful when we want information. Strangely, Malcolm seems to be fond of a couple.” Rhodes shakes his head. “I don’t know. This can’t be my choice. If anything, it needs to be Malcolm’s or Brek’s. They lived through that shit; I didn’t.”

Our attention turns to Brek, and he immediately tenses at the sudden mass of attention on him.

Jalon inclines his head. “No need to think about it right now.” He smiles reassuringly at me. “Let’s talk about Malcolm. Seems to me like he’s not ready to go back to his life.”

“I think he’s too damaged from this.” Rhodes shakes his head. He glances around the table, particularly at my friends and me, before continuing. “I think he’d make a good employee in the contract department. He’s already missing from the world, and his eyes have been opened to the darkness that lurks right under our noses.”

“Thank you for your recommendation. I’ve had the same from Wade and Voss. Once Malcolm makes his way here, we’ll have a conversation.” Jalon looks around the table. “Now, the reason I’ve asked everyone here. In our rush to find Brek, we asked you to help us by using a very sensitive tool, and I’m sure you’re left with a lot of questions considering we haven’t discussed anything since we located Brek.”

I nod in agreement and notice that Honey Bee is too.

“This conference room in particular is isolated and insulated. We’re in complete privacy. There are a handful of rooms like this within my office building and at the big house. What I’m going to tell you is in complete confidence. I need your agreement on this.”

I glance around at my friends and make a very distinct observation—Haze, Briar, and Oakley look relatively unconcerned. Unsurprised. They already know what’s about to be shared.

“Yes,” Honey Bee says. “I agree.”

The rest of my friends agree, and when everyone looks at Brek last, he nods his agreement.

“I don’t know how much you’re aware of the circumstances surrounding me taking my sons away from their mother, but the situation at home reached a point where Loren felt the need to protect his brothers from their mother by brandishing a butcher knife and becoming a barrier between them and her. This is the scene I came home to. I admit that I’d wanted to believe my wife throughout the years we were married when she assured me she loved all our sons the same and that she was treating them well. At

that moment, with my youngest son protecting his older brothers with a knife, I realized how wrong I'd been. I took my boys away from there and brought them here.

"You're also aware Loren is a sociopath. I'm sure that in learning this, you've done your research on what that means. One of the character traits of a sociopath is that they're prone to violence. While Loren had never hurt anyone up to that moment I walked in on, I also knew it had likely been a catalyst for more of those moments, and as he got older, he'd likely be less able to control himself in holding back."

Loren appears to be listening as he leans back in his seat and absently plays with Oakley's hair, staring in the direction of his father.

"I needed a safe and constructive outlet for Loren. Which is why I created the contract department. The contract department is a leg of our business that is entirely illegal and conducted on the dark web. All my sons are involved in one way or another. My brothers are involved. Many of my cousins. This is a branch of our family business that has always existed. I simply organized it because I needed to control the environment for Loren to keep him out of jail.

"As you know, the world is filled with ugly people. I'm not going to pretend that we're vigilantes or superheroes and target the evil that falls through the cracks in the justice system. We work off contracts. Contracts that others take out on other people."

"You're no different from the people who took Brek?" Honey Bee asks, horrified.

"Jess," Myro says, gripping her hand. She's tense. Eyes filled with angry tears.

Breathless and a little numb, I look at Jalon. His eyes are already on me.

"In a way, no," Jalon agrees.

"That's a lie," Imry says. "We kill bad people. Verifiably bad people."

"Imry's right," Ellory says, leaning forward. "We have a website on the dark web, just like the one for the services that Brek was caught up in,

where people can take out a contract to kill someone. The difference is that we don't accept all contracts. We don't kill someone because they promoted someone else over the person taking out the contract. We don't kill someone because their neighbor's dog shits in their yard. We accept contracts from victims. Like the stalker who went after Oakley. Like the cult that had William and thousands of other people. Like the mafia family that abducted Lorissa when she was pregnant with Axl. We go through all the contracts." He looks at Avory and Imry. "And when we see one that appears legit, we send it to Voss to verify. If it's legit and the target in the contract is in fact an evil human being who has hurt others unspeakably, Voss gives the go-ahead, and those who do the killing—like Loren—hunt the target. We are not like the place that took Brek. We don't kill indiscriminately. We don't take contracts simply for monetary gain. We kill people who have raped, tortured, murdered, assaulted, and otherwise tormented others."

Silence settles around us, and I close my eyes to absorb all the new, ugly, and frightening information. My stomach churns, and yet… I'm not as upset as I maybe should be.

"Welcome to the dark side of the Van Dorens," Uncle Noaz says quietly.

"I don't care," Brek says, voice strong for the first time in weeks. I open my eyes to look at him. "As someone who was nearly brutally murdered in a way that no one deserves to die, I'm glad there's someone out there who's serving karma on those people. I'll never unsee the kid I watched being killed horribly. I'll never scrub my eyes of the mutilated body I almost fell over. The person who made that place deserves a really long, painful death. The people who pay to hunt other humans deserve the same treatment."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Briar nodding before he speaks. "Countless infants were literally ripped from their mothers' bodies, and who the fuck knows what happened to them, but those women were fed to fucking pigs," he says. I catch my breath. "Yeah, the people involved deserve a death the likes of those they condoned. And before you say anything, we all know that if they were legally convicted of their crimes, the worst they'd do is serve time in prison. That's not enough."

"I could have lost my son before he was born," Voss says quietly. Everyone in the room looks at Axl asleep in his little chair with Kairo's finger gently

rubbing his tiny, fisted hand.

My chest feels tight as warring feelings of right and wrong battle for dominance.

“Oakley was nearly dead when I found him being dragged by a rope around his neck through an alley,” Loren says.

Brek’s sharp inhale echoes mine. Tears immediately fall down Honey Bee’s cheeks.

“We’re different, but we’re the same,” Jalon says after a moment passes. “Yes, we kill people illegally. Brutally. But we do so only to those who arguably deserve death. This is the secret that we’ve hidden for more than a decade. And now that secret is yours to keep as well.”

I’m not sure what to say. The ugliness you read about on social media—you never imagine it touching your life. Right before my eyes, two of my best friends were almost lost to it, and I didn’t even know the truth about Oakley’s situation. Both of these little babies almost didn’t exist because of it.

“Thanks for being my villain,” Brek says, and I look in his direction. He’s smiling at Voss, and Voss returns it.

“Always.”

“You built this…”—Honey Bee waves her hand, unsure what to call it —“for Loren. Because he’s dangerous?”

“He’s not dangerous!” Oakley snaps, and Honey Bee shakes her head.

“Yes,” Jalon answers before they can argue. “And no. As I said, it already existed. I shut it down for a while until I saw the shift in Loren. He was left in an environment that pushed and pushed, and finally, when he was pushed too far, he decided that his only choice to defend the brothers he loves, the brothers who always protected and defended him in turn, was violence against the threat.

“I will protect my kids no matter what they need, Jessica. Given my options and knowing that you cannot change an antisocial disorder any more than

you can someone's sexuality, my choice was simple. I had to give him the tools he needed to control himself."

Honey Bee stares at Loren. Loren stares back, emotionless. As if she's nothing more than a stone wall. She looks at Myro. "You've always told me that you work in contracts with Loren."

"I do," he says.

"Are you…"

"No," Myro says. "I'm not a sociopath. I don't have an antisocial disorder, but they are genetic."

She looks around the room at the rest of the Van Dorens, as if determining who else. No one would have looked at the triplets except that, as soon as Honey Bee's gaze moved in that direction, two of the triplets tried to divert attention away from the third.

The third being Ellory. I appreciate Avory's new mountain man appearance and that Imry's proximity isn't nearly as close to one of them as they are to each other. I feel like I can finally tell them apart.

Ellory gives Honey Bee a smile, but there's something behind it. Something almost… sad.

"Probably," Avory admits. "We've said for a long time that El probably has an antisocial disorder, but it wasn't as… obvious as Loren's, and our mother's ire toward El was for a different reason. But yes, probably."

Honey Bee looks between Ellory and Loren. Actually, so do I. They seem so unalike.

"We're actually more alike than you think," Ellory says as if I spoke out loud. Maybe I did. "Not in the ways you can see, but in the ways you can't."

Honey Bee's attention turns to Kairo. Kairo snorts. "I'm not a psycho. I'm an asshole. Probably still genetic, but not the same thing."

Arath snorts.

The hostility of his words is lost since he’s now holding Axl in his arms.

I look at Jalon. He’s watching everyone at the table as he lets Emerson play with his phone. His eyes meet mine, but that smile isn’t there this time. There’s a question.

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JALON



As fiercely as Jessica loves her friends, I'm not in the least bit surprised that she's the one who's struggling with this the most. The only time I become concerned is during the discussion about antisocial disorders being genetic. She turned to Myro with horror in her eyes and asked, "If we have kids, there's a chance they'll become sociopaths?"

I'm not the only one who tensed at her words. I'm pretty sure the entire table did, including her friends.

Myro frowns. "Sociopaths are created by their environment, so no. Our children will *never* be in an environment where their genetic predisposition to an antisocial disorder will come to fruition. However, that doesn't mean they won't have an antisocial disorder on some scale. It *is* genetic. Our family is filled with evidence of our ancestors having it."

Jessica frowns.

"And you're going to love them no matter what," Briar snaps, making the entire table jump at his tone. Including me.

Briar is one of the most relaxed people I've ever met. I've never heard that tone before, and based on the expressions of his friends, I'm not sure they

have either.

“I understand that you’re struggling right now with a lot of information, but so fucking help me, Jessica, you *will never* have a kid that you do not love unconditionally. We’ve seen what that does to someone firsthand. We fought to make sure they knew love for fifteen years because of asshole parents. You *will not* become one of those parents. Do you understand me?” Briar hisses.

Tears were already falling down Jessica’s face. Her hands come up to cover her face as she gets herself back together. My attention flickers to the faces of her friends. I’m guessing he’s referring to Brek and Haze, but perhaps there are others who suffered ugliness at the hands of their parents as well.

“Of course,” she says quietly. “Of course, I will. This is a lot, and I think my brain needs a break since it keeps grasping at the things that frighten me instead of the good things we’ve discussed.”

Are there good things that were said today?

For the rest of the meeting, I sit back and listen to them talk. My brothers primarily keep quiet as well, choosing to observe as opposed to participating. My kids answer questions, which mainly revolve around the incidents concerning Oakley, Emerson, and Axl. They shift to William and the horrors of the megachurch cult. They avoid Brek, though I imagine they have a lot of questions there as well.

By the time we break for dinner—yes, they talked that long—I’m feeling a little drained. I’ve never let that many people in on our dark operations at once like that. Granted, it was three of the six, since Haze, Briar, and Oakley already knew the truth. To some extent, I think Brek had guessed it since then.

The only two who were entirely in the dark were Levis and Jessica. Only as I follow the group out do I wonder if maybe I should have had this conversation in private with Levis first. That’s what a partner does, right?

Dinner is quiet. We eat as a family. Kairo doesn’t join us. I’m guessing he’s had too much family time at this point. After dinner, the group disperses. I talk to Auden and Arath for a while and then go off in search of Levis.

I don’t find him in his room. At first, I don’t think he’s in mine either until I catch a glimpse of a set of French doors barely ajar. He’s on the balcony, staring in the direction of the lake.

Before joining him, I pour us a tumbler each of bourbon. I imagine this is a revelation that should be accompanied by something stronger than tea.

Levis meets my eyes as I enter his peripheral vision. He smiles, which loosens the knot in my chest. I hand him the glass of bourbon, and he sets it on the arm of the chair, his hand clasped around it.

“I’m sorry I entered your room without your permission,” he says quietly.

I huff quietly as I take a sip of the burning amber liquid. This is the good stuff. “At some point, we’re going to share a room. Aren’t we?”

Levis smiles again and gives me a single nod.

“As you’ve pointed out, I’m bougie, and, quite frankly, I’ve grown accustomed to my bougie lifestyle, so the chances of me moving into your tiny room are slim. We’d always be on top of each other.”

“Tiny,” he snorts and then levels me with a look. “You act as if you don’t enjoy being on top of me, Jalon.”

A grin stretches my face. “Oh, I do!”

Levis rolls his eyes and brings his glass to his lips. He winces and makes a face at the bourbon, making me laugh.

“Forgot what you had in your hand, did you?”

He nods, trying not to sputter around his cough. I’m not the least bit surprised to know that this man doesn’t drink regularly.

When he stops coughing, he leans forward to set the drink on a small table. He can’t make that mistake again if it’s not in his hand.

“You know.” He looks at me. “There’s another primary bedroom. Just like this, but more feminine. There’s an attached door between my room and that one.”

Levis rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“The configuration of this house is based on a lifestyle long past, where the man and woman had their own spaces. Their own private rooms and only visited to copulate.” His amusement climbs. “I had the vision of my great-grandfather and his parents before him on paper. I stuck true to their vision as much as I could, while also making this place grand. Giving it a life of its own.”

“You’re telling me they had a four-story monstrosity already drawn out, and you brought it to life?”

I chuckle. “No.” I take another sip of my bourbon and think about his question. “While they weren’t awful to the staff, my parents were also concerned with money. It was always about money with them. Which, in hindsight, knowing the financial disaster they had created in collapsing Van Doren Enterprises, I understand why they were so stingy in paying their staff. They were running out of money.”

“The viability of the company was that bad when you took over?”

I stare at the lake and nod. “It was. The company lawyers had already drawn up the papers to file for bankruptcy.”

In the corner of my eye, Levis cringes.

“To be honest, I thought we were going to lose everything. I didn’t think there was a way to salvage what my parents had destroyed. I’m not in the practice of cutting my parents slack, but I don’t think it’s their fault. I think my grandparents died and my parents inherited the company, but before that point, they’d never been taught how to operate it. They didn’t know what they were doing. I think they actually *tried*. The evidence that they tried is there. But they just didn’t know how to keep it afloat. I think the reason they took my offer so readily and practically vanished in the night was to get away from their looming failure.”

“Failure all around,” he says quietly.

I nod. “I can tell you, with all humbleness aside, I don’t know how I managed to dig it out of the dirt. Van Doren Enterprises was done. I knew that. I knew I needed to liquidate what I could and somehow salvage the

few viable financial avenues there. I created Van Doren Technologies in an attempt to… start over, I guess. We talked about this recently."

"We did," he says.

"I'm not a believing man, but something bigger than me must have taken some pity and shined a light in my direction. I made some smart investments. I made some lucky decisions. For a short time, everything I touched turned to gold, and I took advantage of that and put my fingers in every fucking industry I could find, simply to prevent this company from failing if some of the avenues dried up. While the money flowed, I built the Estate with my ancestors in mind. I was so desperate to *never* hand anyone else in my family the same drowning enterprise that I took on. This company, the Estate, can run itself with zero input. It won't fail. Without someone truly poking holes everywhere, it will continue to thrive and prosper long after I'm gone."

"That's really impressive, Jalon."

I'm quiet for a minute as I stare at the lake. "I got off on a tangent." He grins. "My intent was to explain the size of the house. I'm sure you've figured out that there are *a lot* of employees who work right here. To me, it made the most sense that they don't have to find somewhere else to live unless they choose to. There were only a handful of household employees left by that point. Cheddar and Merrie among them. With their input, we decided that the best way I could support my staff was to offer them affordable housing. Naturally, I didn't want massive apartment complexes on the property, but there wasn't any reason they couldn't just live in the big house with us. So what began as a three-story project became a four-story one, and they have an entire floor all to themselves."

"Do you know what I love most about that?" Levis asks.

I look at him. He's smiling, but it's soft. "What?"

"You could have built them an apartment complex and stuck it in the trees where you would never have to see it. You could have bought one in town, so they weren't here all the time. You could have given them the bare basics while you lived in luxury. Instead, you chose to invite them to live right alongside you, in your house, offering the same amenities and lifestyle that

you live. You *are* a humble man and refuse to see the good you've actually done since you never allow yourself to move beyond the mistakes you've made, but Jalon, you're an incredible person, and I'd challenge you to find a current or past employee who disagrees."

"The mistakes I've made aren't small."

"See? You just proved my point."

I turn my attention back to the lake. "Can I tell you a secret that no one knows?"

"Yes."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't repeat it."

"You're my partner. Your secrets are mine to keep."

My stomach flutters. Who would have guessed that I'd want that? "I murdered Martha."

Levis inhales and stares at my profile.

"Once I learned the depth to which she abused my boys, when I learned how fucking long it went on…" My words trail off as the familiar fury rises in my chest. "I wasn't going to let her live. I trusted her with my kids. She promised me she loved them all, and they were her only priority. She would do anything to give them the best life possible while I fixed the mess my parents left me.

"She lied. The only kid of mine she treated well was Myro because Myro was '*perfect*.' Voss has ADHD. My triplets didn't want to be separated as they got older. Loren is a sociopath. Almost every one of her kids was '*flawed*,' and she was desperate to have perfect children."

Levis' hand covers mine, and I grip his fingers.

"At the time, I was expanding the fallout shelter, and the little pond needed to be reconfigured and lined with clay to hold the water. While the ground was dug up, I wrapped her in cloth, tied her in ropes, and dropped her into a hole while she screamed. I'd never driven one of those big construction

machines in my life, but you bet your fine, tight ass I figured out how to move dirt and bury her eight feet under."

"They don't know she's there," he says quietly.

"No. They only halfheartedly look for her. I think they know that if they ever locate their mother, Loren will disappear in the night and come back with a bloody knife. Except they'll never find her body. Ironically, I never intended for Martha to set foot on the Van Doren Estate. Ever. Now she'll be here until humans destroy the Earth."

"Why don't you tell them?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I think they live in peace knowing that she can never hurt them again, and unless they outright ask me about her, I let them speculate as they choose. Which isn't often. At least, not in my presence."

"Nobody knows she's there?"

"Nobody but the two of us." I meet his eyes. "I kind of blindsided you today. I'm sorry. I should have talked to you before I called the whole family together. I'm not used to having a partner actually involved in my personal life, so I dropped the ball. I'm sorry."

Levis laughs and bows his head. I gently tug his hand, and he takes the hint to get closer. These chairs aren't made for two people, but I bring him onto my lap, straddling me, so I can look into his face.

"This conversation has gone off the rails several times at this point, but I don't want you to be in the madam's room. I want you to share my room. When you're ready to move in."

He smiles. "The madam's room?"

"They were labeled as Master and Mistress rooms, but the wording is old and problematic, so I've gone with primary suite—mine—and madam's room. Considering it's never been used, I've never had to say it out loud."

"Never been used, huh?"

“My intent was never to let Martha on this land. Jeannette would maintain her life in Boston, and we’d spend… time together. Primarily off the Estate, though I did make an effort to include her in family time on occasions. On the fringes.”

Levis is incredibly amused. “Where did she sleep when she was here?”

I sigh heavily. “Would you believe that I have a third ‘*primary*’ bedroom that I’ve claimed for just that purpose?”

“Oh my god, Jalon,” he says, laughing. “You’re ridiculous.”

I grip his chin and bring his attention to mine. “Don’t pretend you don’t love knowing that you’re the only other person who has *ever* been in this room with me.”

His smile splits his face. “Actually, that hadn’t crossed my mind. Now that it has… That’s fucking hot.”

Chuckling, I press my mouth to his, letting our kiss linger. He still tastes like his single sip of bourbon. The taste clings to his lips.

Levis sits back and looks at me with narrowed eyes. “You know. Haze mentioned a fallout shelter once, but I kind of thought he was exaggerating. You actually have one?”

I grin. “Come on, now. All wealthy families have their eccentric relatives. There was a metal room barely big enough for a bunk bed when I found it. I’ve always said, if you’re going to do something, do it right.”

“It’s really cute that you think *you’re* not the eccentric relative, Jalon.”

I laugh and crush his mouth to mine again.

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LEVIS



I WAKE on Christmas Eve in Jalon's bedroom. I'm not ready to call it my bedroom yet, even though I've moved in a lot of my belongings. My clothes are all hidden in the secret closet with Jalon's richy-rich casual clothes. He told me we could move around his suits, but honestly, I kind of like the hidden room. It's fun.

Jalon isn't in bed when I wake up, which isn't a surprise in the least. This man *does not* sleep in. Not on the weekend. Not when his house is full of family for the holidays.

What I am surprised about is the Christmas tree set up in the sitting room. There are presents piled all around it, and I have a sneaking suspicion they aren't props. That's okay. It's not like I don't have half a dozen for Jalon hidden in the closet. Since he's out, I drag them all out and stuff them under the tree.

That's when I see the two stockings hanging on the fireplace mantle, one with my name on it. I don't know why, but seeing them leaves me filled with emotion. Jalon may forget to tell me about the family skeletons *before* he conducts a family meeting, but these little integrations into his personal

life mean a whole lot more. Especially since I've observed, and he's told me, how very little he's ever wanted someone to share his personal space.

I touch the stocking, and for just a moment, I let the warmth fill my chest enough that my vision gets watery. My fingers trace the five letters of my name.

There's a chance I could stay right here and stare at this one thing for the entire day, but I know someone will come looking for me, so I push myself to my feet and take a shower in the spa. The Van Doren family has a tradition of pajamas during the holidays, so I dig out a pair of flannel pants and poke through all the shirts hanging in the closet. I find a jersey style that has a Van Doren logo on the back that I don't recognize. There are a ton of VDT logos. When I first moved here, every week I'd see a new one. It's less common now that I find one I don't recognize, but this one is classic.

It looks really comfortable, so I try it on. Yep, this is what I'm wearing today.

I don't necessarily hide coming and going from Jalon's room anymore. To date, I haven't met any of my friends or Van Dorens in the hall when I leave or enter his room. There have been staff around, so I'm sure that the news has spread to some extent.

We haven't talked about when or where we want to tell our family. Maybe, on some level, we're enjoying keeping this to ourselves. This is a brand-new kind of relationship for Jalon, and I constantly see the little things that he feels self-conscious about forgetting. He doesn't need everyone to watch him as he works through it and becomes comfortable with what we're building together.

For me, I won't say that a relationship is *new*. I've been in many. There's something distinctly different this time, though. There's a permanency to it that feels big but also freeing. In my previous relationships, there was always an element of trial by fire. I think it came to a point where I *knew* it wasn't going to work because people are conditioned to drop their lives in favor of making their partner their entire identity.

I was never willing to do that. My friends are as much my family as my family is. In some ways, more so. I was never going to stop being a '*friend*',

and my friendships were never something that I was willing to share with someone else. I'm allowed to have my own things. My own hobbies. My own friends.

Whoever decided that jealousy is *normal* has lived a very sad life. It's not normal, and it's not flattering. It's a gross insecurity that says more about that person than it does about someone unwilling to give up their friendships.

That's a long thought process to go through as I make my way downstairs, thinking about when we're going to tell our family. During the holidays?

I don't make it to my friends before Jalon stops me in the hall and practically shoves me into the library. Laughing, I stumble before catching myself. Getting my feet under me, I watch as Jalon locks all the doors. Yes, there are multiple. Then he turns on me, and a thrill rushes down my spine at the look in his eyes.

Licking my lips, I wait for him to approach. He looks remarkably like a predator. I'm the rabbit in the lion's sights right now. A lion that didn't get the memo that he's supposed to be wearing pajamas.

"You sleep in that last night?" I ask, hearing how breathless I am before his hands even land on me. They grip my hips and jerk me against him.

"I never understood the appeal of a lover wearing my clothes, but I'm suddenly feeling a little wild and possessive at the sight of you in my shirt."

Okay, that thrill turns into buzzing electricity that rolls throughout my entire body. "I'm still working through the idea that I don't need to ask your permission to wear your shirts, which is funny since you never wear them."

"I wear them."

"Yeah? In 1987?"

Jalon pinches my ass, and I jerk, laughing. His mouth covers mine, swallowing my laughter. His kiss is hungry, and I know we're not going to get out of here without an orgasm. Knowing this makes my dick hard. Ready. For whatever he has in mind.

What he has in mind is stepping away and pulling off his jacket to drape over the side of a chair. My gaze is trained on his hands as he unbuckles his belt, unbuttons his button, and pulls down his zipper, letting his pants fall.

I groan. He's not wearing *anything* under his damn pants. Good fucking lord, that's hot.

His fingers touch under my chin, pulling my eyes up to his. "Look up here, darling. My eyes are up here."

"Yes, but your pretty dick is down there," I counter and wrap my hand around his metal-studded cock.

Jalon chuckles. He shoves me gently. I step backward until the backs of my thighs hit the low table. Jalon prowls closer but won't let me back up. I'm not surprised when he crowds me until I'm forced to sit on the table and then further laid out on my back.

I swear, I'm always breathless with Jalon. Like right now, as he rests his foot on the edge of the table to prep himself, and I only get a teasing view, is one of the times that taking a full breath is impossible.

Since the first time he bottomed for me, we trade off pretty regularly. I'm not sure either of us has a preference at this point. There's no mistaking who's in charge, regardless of the position we're in, though. King Jalon. Daddy Jalon. Jalon is always calling the shots.

If asked if this would bother me before getting together with Jalon, I might have said yes. Not because I'm misogynistic, but because I've never considered myself submissive. I'm not sure if Jalon has proven me wrong or if some part of me *wants* to be submissive for him alone.

My gaze is locked on him as he climbs onto my lap. He doesn't get on his knees on the table, though. He sits like he's straddling a bench, feet planted flatly on the floor. Because I'm a gentleman, I hold my slicked dick up for him to sink down on.

We both groan as soon as his body begins accepting me inside him. He's extra tight right now with his glutes fully engaged. Jalon leans forward, hands resting over my pecs. I laugh through a grunt as he squeezes them.

His face is so fucking mesmerizing when the mask of Jalon Van Doren falls away, and I'm left with who he is behind the façade. When emotion is a fully formed resident. When arousal darkens his beautifully striking blue eyes. The way his lips remain parted, and harsh breaths puff out.

The way he lets himself go with me is probably the biggest turn-on I've ever felt with anyone. The show of his trust. The way he lets me into his life to witness his emotions. To care for his mistakes and the way he struggles with them. To love him through his moments of vulnerability. To keep his secrets as if they're my own.

I push my hands up his arms, and his eyes meet mine. Our gazes lock as he rides my cock, moans mingling and rising in volume throughout the expansive library.

This is it. This is real. This is the start of the future I've waited so long for. The confusion and sense of loss I felt when that singular lifelong goal became blurry and unappealing are gone. Something inside me knew that what I'd sworn I wanted since I was a small child wasn't exactly what I needed.

Jalon is what I needed. He's the only person with enough depth, complexity, and confidence to spark a flame inside me. I've always known what I wanted, but I've never met someone who actually fits the quiet edges inside me.

There's a reason I was never upset when I had to break off a relationship for whatever reason. None of those people were Jalon. He's the only one for me.

"Ride me," I whisper. "Get off on my dick."

He grunts and hangs his head. Jalon remains slow and languid at first before gradually picking up his rhythm and the force with which he plunges his body onto mine. Our skin slaps. The intersection of our bodies squelches. The way he squeezes my cock has me moaning loudly.

I'm getting close because I'm always *right there* with Jalon. I'm not ready for him to stop, though. He's never come on my dick because I always need to come first. I hate interrupting his pleasure.

“Jalon,” I warn and grip his wrists tightly.

“Say my name again,” he demands.

I do. Over and over. I’m surprised when he shoves my shirt up and comes on my stomach. Fortunately, we get off often enough that there’s very little spurting at this point. It’s contained in a puddle just under my diaphragm.

However, I’m shocked that he came first as I stare at his face. Jalon continues to work himself through his orgasm on my cock as I watch the pleasure morph and spread. Holy fuck.

His sharp eyes rise to mine as he pants.

“You came first,” I say, shocked.

Jalon laughs breathlessly. He leans forward and presses his mouth to mine. “Fuck me until you’re ready.”

“I’m not sure I can like this.” My legs are bent at the knees, with my feet flat on the floor. I try to adjust so I can find leverage on the table to fuck into him.

In the end, Jalon climbs off me and jerks me while sucking on my nipples until my load joins his.

He kisses me soundly before getting to his feet. From where I remain draped on the table, I watch as he cleans me up, himself, and dresses again. When he’s put back together and not looking like he just had my dick up his ass—fucker—he stands over me with an amused smile.

“That where you’re staying today?” he asks, eyes dropping to my mostly soft cock resting on my stomach. “May I suggest at least pulling up your pants?”

I huff. Jalon offers me his hands, and I pull myself up with his help. I probably look like I was just fucked. Someone is going to call me out on this.

“So, I have hosting responsibilities to tend to today. Tomorrow. Until the family vacates.”

“Yes. You don’t actually get to enjoy the holiday.”

He hums and presses his mouth to mine. “I enjoy the holidays. Maybe I don’t relax and enjoy them like everyone else, but I still enjoy them.”

“Someday, we’re going to need to change how this works.”

“Oh?”

“When we have a kid, I’m going to demand a different holiday protocol, so you’re spending time with us, Jalon.” Talking about that future always makes my stomach flutter. I think a part of me is waiting for him to say, *‘Yeah, about that. I’m not sure I actually want another kid.’*

He doesn’t say that—this time. Jalon smiles and presses his lips to mine. “I agree. However, my point in saying so for today is this: I *will* be busy today and probably only be able to catch glimpses of you—like this. Tonight, we’ll celebrate together. Tomorrow morning, before we join the family, we’ll celebrate together. You and me. Okay?”

There’s a very good chance I might melt a little. “That’s the compromise, huh?”

“Not good enough?” he asks, and I think I detect a little unease in his tone. As if he’s expecting me to be upset.

I wrap my arms around him and hug Jalon tightly. “We’ll build up to *better*, but this is good, Jalon. Thank you for thinking of me and making time for us.”

He kisses me under my ear. “I’m always thinking of you, Lev. You literally never leave my mind.”

The grin those words elicit remains glued to my face the entire day.

Jalon didn’t exaggerate. I don’t see him for more than brief moments at a time. He stops into the room where I take up residence with his sons, my friends, and Rhodes with Bennett and his pack. The uncles poke their heads in throughout the day. Even Uncle Kairo, though I think that’s to see the kids more than anything else.

It’s late when I turn in for the night. I try to wait around for Jalon, which means I’m the last to leave the room. It’s very late when I fall into his bed and almost immediately fall asleep. I don’t even turn the lamp on the bedside table off.

Jalon wakes me when he comes in. The clock reads two in the morning.

“Too late,” I murmur as I roll to face him. He’s crouching at the side of the bed.

“I know,” he answers, pressing soft kisses to my face. “I’m sorry. I meant to come up sooner. Levis, wake up. Look at me.”

It takes a lot to peel my eyelids open to stare at him.

“Sit for a minute? Please?”

Obediently, because I’m tired and still half asleep, I force myself to sit. Jalon turns me so my feet hang off the side of the bed. He’s still crouching in front of me.

“Technically, it’s Christmas Day,” he says, and I smile tiredly as he takes my hands. “Despite being engaged twice, I’ve never done this before, so… pretend I’m suave when you tell this story.”

I blame the fact that I’m not really awake for not being sure what he’s on about.

“I cannot tell you how much I look forward to every aspect of my life with you. There aren’t words to articulate it because I have nothing to compare this feeling to, and it leaves me speechless. You’re my first in so many things, and I want to keep those firsts shining brightly between us as we grow old together.”

My smile climbs, but I don’t say the teasing words on my lips.

Jalon might be a magician because something small and hard appears in his hand. It’s curious enough that I drop my gaze and find that he’s holding a ring. I feel foolish for not realizing what he’s doing right now.

Needless to say, I’m suddenly wide awake.

“Jalon,” I whisper.

“Marry me?” he says, and fuck, I never imagined what it might feel like on the receiving end of a proposal. “I know you want to point out that I’m already an old man, so I don’t need to remind you that I’m at a position in my life where I’m not interested in prolonging a future we’ve already said we want. Just so it’s clear, this *isn’t* a business proposal. Everything about this is still entirely selfish. I want you for me and me alone. I don’t want to share you with my kids. I don’t want to share you with the world at conferences and ceremonies. I want you for myself, and I want you for the rest of my life. Marry me, Levis.”

His image swims before me as I nod. I don’t think I can even say yes out loud. He barely gets the ring on my finger when I fall out of the bed and into his arms, my mouth locked with his. This isn’t the best way to catch my breath, but I don’t care.

I get to spend the rest of my life with Jalon.

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JALON



Interesting Facts and Statistics to Think About So You Last Longer in Bed. I stare at the book in my hand, trying very hard not to laugh.

Without looking away from the cover, I pick up my phone and hit RECALL #69. Ringing meets my ears as I bring the receiver up.

“This is Levis,” Levis answers, probably without looking at his phone.

“You have jokes,” I deadpan.

His laughter is low and beautiful. I can practically feel the way it bubbles up from his stomach, as if he’s been holding it in for hours.

“One time, Levis. I go first one time and you every other time.”

His laughter is the last thing I hear as he hangs up. Little fucking shit. I’ll show him who goes first.

I mean to get the book off my desk, but instead, I open it to a random page.

There are rogue planets drifting freely throughout the Milky Way without orbiting a star. They may outnumber planets that orbit stars.

In Medieval Europe, animals were put on trial for crimes like crop destruction and murder. People believed animals could sin and feel guilt.

No number before ‘one thousand’ *contains the letter* ‘a’ *in English.*

Huh. I flip the page to read *Cookie Monster’s name is Sidney, confirmed by the character himself on social media.*

I’m not sure if that’s a fact, but I’ll hand it to Levis. This *is* kind of interesting.

A knock on my door has me looking up. I’m sure it’s not at all suspicious that I open the front drawer of my desk and slide the book inside, all while keeping my attention on Crestley. He raises an amused eyebrow.

“What are you bringing into the office that you don’t want me to see, Jalon?” he asks as he crosses the room to sit in the chair opposite me. He sets a plate down with half a bagel and what looks like a schmear of cream cheese, spinach, tomato, and an egg.

“This is a strange breakfast. Am I on a diet?”

Crestley snorts. “Just eat it. I promise, it’s good.”

Reluctantly, I pick it up and take a bite. He’s not wrong, of course. Crestley always feeds me random shit that turns out to be incredibly delicious.

“Fine. You get a pass.”

He smirks, eyes glancing down at my desktop as if he can see where I shoved that confounded book. With a flair of dramatics, I toss the paper mailer it came in into the trash can and say, “Just more mail wars contraband.”

“Looks like your opponent is sending you dirty things.”

“Not dirty. The title is a little suggestive and absolutely inaccurately implies something, so I will not be sharing it. What’s on the agenda today?”

Crestley’s amusement shines brightly in his eyes. “Not a lot. You’re leaving at one today, correct?”

I incline my head and take another bite of my breakfast. “My children and I have a meeting at home.” I’m at the point in planning for the school that I’d like to know if my children want to be involved. They all have jobs, of course. But I wonder if I offer them positions in the school, if they’ll admit they’d rather do something other than take over VDT.

By they, I mean Myro. I’m forming a plan for succession where Myro doesn’t have to be as involved as I am. As I recently told Levis, VDT *can* run itself for quite some time without input. It should even continue to grow all on its own.

As long as someone is there to kill the greed that’ll inevitably surface over time and try to take over, VDT will be sustainable long after I’m gone.

Anyway. What did Crestley ask me?

“Okay, good. The only thing I want to make you aware of is that Apple, our contracts department receptionist and all-around go-to girl, is out for a while. She was riding a dirt bike last night and hit a wall or something. She needs some major surgery to put the shattered bones back together in her right arm.”

I wince. “Ouch. How is she? Does she need anything?”

Crestley shakes his head. “She’s going to be undergoing surgeries for a bit, so she’ll likely be out for quite some time. A month or more.”

“Let’s make sure she knows she has our support. Once she’s up for some company, let me know. She has a young child, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Does she have support? What does she need?”

He fights a smile when he answers. “Apple is very close to her mother and brother. Ziva is fine. Worried about their mother, of course, but taken care of.”

Ziva. Don’t I have a third or eighth cousin by that name? Is Apple my cousin? Hmm. I’ll look into that later.

“Noted. Let’s make sure she continues to have support. Please check in often and keep me updated.”

“Of course.”

“Speaking of procedures. How is Sven?”

Crestley smiles. “Doc Mark prescribed him a few rounds of antibiotics to kill any bacterial infection in his system. Sven says Doc suspects that the infection that keeps triggering his strep hasn’t left his body. The typical antibiotics settle the flare, but he reaches the end of them before they actually kill the infection. Doc is going to keep him on antibiotics for a while and then schedule him for surgery.”

“Good. I’m glad he has some answers and is on a trajectory to healing.”

Crestley nods. “I am too. This has been stressful for him, not just because he’s always sick but because I think he’s frustrated with constantly having to go back to the doctor for the same thing. There comes a point when you begin to lose confidence in your physician because they can’t or don’t put effort into actually taking care of an issue.”

“That’s why I employ a single man for my entire family.”

“Yes, well. Not everyone has that option.” He narrows his eyes. “We do appreciate that you’re willing to share Doc Mark when something like this comes up.”

“I’m going to need a school nurse,” I muse out loud. “Perhaps we should just open a clinic.”

“You’re at capacity for structures allowed on the preserve,” Crestley reminds me.

I frown. “See if my neighbor to the east is willing to sell us some of his land. Or at least have a conversation with me.”

Crestley nods.

A shadow moves in front of my door, and I look up to find my youngest son at the door. Crestley gets to his feet. “I’ll see you tomorrow, boss.” He smiles at Loren. “Good morning, Loren.”

Loren watches him approach and steps aside so he can leave my office. As he steps out, Loren says, “Hello, Crestley.”

I take another bite of my breakfast. It’s growing on me. It was just okay for the first bite or two, but I’m to the point where it’s graduated to being very good.

Loren watches me place my open bagel sandwich on its plate as he sits in the chair Crestley vacated. “That’s a weird breakfast,” he comments.

“You’re right, but as it turns out, it’s delicious. Want some?”

He stares at it for a minute and then shrugs. “Yes.”

I offer him the plate and watch as he takes a couple bites of it. He ends up eating the rest of it. He realizes mid-chew and meets my eyes. I chuckle and sit back in my chair. It’s not like I haven’t already eaten this morning. It’s been several hours already, but nonetheless.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“We’re going to have babies. Three,” he says. “A Van Doren with the needed anatomy will give us their eggs, and we’ll use Oakley’s sperm to fertilize them. The ovens will be here on the property while they grow our babies. I’m not taking any chances that someone will steal them like they attempted to with both of my nephews.”

I’m not even sure where to begin with every problematic sentence. “Where’s Oakley?”

“Making cookies with Imry. Why? What’s wrong?”

I can practically see the obsessive protectiveness grow inside him. “Easy, Loren.” I raise my hand. “Because he should be a part of this conversation. That’s why I’m asking.”

“He has been. We’ve decided.”

“Okay, let’s back up a little. Who have you asked to donate their eggs?”

“I haven’t, but I’ll tell Solana, I think.”

“No, you’ll *ask* Solana. You’re going to explain, with Oakley present, why, and then you’ll *ask* her if she’d be willing to donate some eggs to you. Do you understand?”

Loren tilts his head. “Yes. Okay.”

“Good. Let’s move to the next most pressing thing in that statement. Have you begun your application to a selected organization that helps facilitate locating willing surrogates?”

He frowns. “No.”

“I suggest you do that now. This likely won’t be a quick process, so you need to begin some research on identifying appropriate organizations. *Before* you contact them, give the names of the companies to Voss to look into.”

“And then what?”

“Loren, this isn’t going to happen overnight. It’ll take a while.”

“A month,” he says.

“Maybe a year. Maybe longer.”

His frown deepens. “That’s not what we agreed on. We said we’re ready now.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m asking about you. Not Oakley. Are *you* ready? You understand that one baby is going to take a lot of attention, correct? Three babies are going to take three times as much. That means the majority of Oakley’s attention will be on the babies when they arrive. Are you ready for that?”

I study my son’s face as he considers my words. There’s no movement. Loren has always been primarily expressionless. His brothers and I assured him that he never needed to assimilate into society, which meant he didn’t need to reflect emotions he didn’t feel in his facial features. Other people’s comfort isn’t his responsibility.

There are moments, like right now, when I'd love a little insight. I don't push him, though. I wait until he's ready to answer me.

"I want to give Oakley whatever he wants. He wants babies," Loren says eventually. "I don't know if I care one way or the other, but I don't like the idea that so much of his attention will be on someone else."

"While you look into surrogate companies, you need to have this conversation with Oakley."

"We talk about it all the time."

"I have a feeling that you're complying with what he wants more than expressing how you feel. Aren't you?"

"I want him to have everything he wants."

"I understand, but you need to take yourself into consideration. For *many* years, those kids are going to need you to be their voice, their protection, their constant caregiver because they won't be able to provide anything for themselves. Think about how *you* are going to handle that. You know yourself now, Loren. There are a lot of situations that are challenging for you. This is going to be one of them. The difference between this one and every other is that your children will never go away. Ever. You have them for life. You can't just quit when it gets hard."

"That's what your parents did."

"They did," I agree and nod minutely. "You didn't meet your grandparents until you were ten, and that was via video."

Loren's frown deepens. "We'll talk about it."

"Good. You have three tasks to concentrate on. And then we'll talk about the rest. Next time we talk, Oakley should be present."

Loren nods. I don't think he meant to leave Oakley out of the conversation. As he's stated more than once during this single visit, he wants to give Oakley what Oakley wants. It sounds as if Oakley is ready for kids. Loren's single focus is to make that happen because that's what his husband wants.

In some ways, Loren is the poster child for a perfect husband. He's attentive, kind, indulgent, and loving, even if he doesn't see that in himself. There are very few partners more devoted than Loren is to Oakley. I can learn a lot from him.

At ten of one, I leave my office for the day after sending Levis a text to meet me at the elevator. We're going home. My family meeting is at one thirty. My six children and Levis will be present. Now that I consider this, I think maybe I should ask Levis' friends to join us. They are family now.

I should make sure Noaz is present as well. I know they don't want to clean up New York City anymore in favor of focusing on their family, but this might offer them something else that allows them as much satisfaction in life. If I'm including Noaz, I should extend the invite to the rest of my brothers as well.

Maybe that's why I limited it to my sons. Including *everyone* becomes a very long list of people.

"You're deep in thought," Levis says, and I turn my attention to him as the elevator doors open.

My eyes drop to his pants because they're snug as fuck. Heat flares in my core. When I manage to drag my eyes up to his, there's a smirk on his lips.

"I found these in a hidden closet, and I'm *positive* they don't fit you. They barely fit me."

"Barely," I repeat and turn my attention to our reflections in the back of the doors.

Silence surrounds us for the rest of the elevator ride. It lingers longer as we walk across the field toward the big house. With each step, the heat in my core grows. My dick grows in time with the heat.

By the time we step inside the big house, I'm ready to shove him against the wall and remind him who regularly gets off first. I manage to wait until we're in the conference room before I shove him onto the table and *peel* those damn pants down.

Beneath them is a sexy jockstrap that I bought him for Christmas. There are a lot of sexy straps ringing his pelvis while still leaving his ass wide open for me.

I blame those damn pants and the fucking jockstrap for bending him in half and burying my face between his ass cheeks. Since I didn't pull his pants off and they're serving as a great handle to keep him bent in half, Levis' hands struggle to reach me as he moans loudly.

Loudly. Those loud fucking sounds sink through my entire body, making me thrum in pleasure as I feast. When he begins chanting my name, I pull back and lube us both up. With my hand gripping the back of his neck, folding him in such a way that I can reach his mouth with his knees pressed to his shoulders, I slide inside his tight, slick body.

He struggles. The strangled sounds I elicit from him have me gripping him tighter so he can't squirm out of the position. "Fuck, I love when you struggle," I grunt.

Levis gasps and drops his head back, letting out a long whine. I bear down on him, watching the face I get to stare at for the rest of my life, as I fuck the '*you came first*' jokes right out of him with vigor and stamina that far outdoes my young lover's.

I'll have to remind him of that. *After* he comes on my dick.

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26

LEVIS



I'M NOT ENTIRELY sure if I'm just really into butt stuff or if it's the energy Jalon brings to the table—pun intended?—but I've never been consumed with lust or turned on to the point where I think I can orgasm through my damn eyes as I am with Jalon. Everything in me feels like it's being touched with a live wire. It's so intense, every single thrust of his cock is a new injection of arousal that I can't remain still for him.

My entire body jerks and spasms, trying to relieve the pressure. The intensity. The concentration of pleasure that he forces into me.

Jalon isn't gentle, of course. He never is. He fucks me like a man who's been starved for decades. The clapping of our bodies together is loud in my ears. The only louder sound is everything he rips from my mouth.

As I'm getting close to losing the battle to hold my orgasm in, the door opens, and Jalon's sons pour in. They freeze and stare. Comically, Voss covers Axl's eyes with his hand. I think the kid is asleep.

Jalon, the fucker, does not stop fucking me. He just slows his thrusts as he looks at his kids. Silence stretches between us as I turn red as a lobster. This is *not* a position I want his children—my future sons-in-law—to see me in!

“Did you forget about our meeting?” Myro asks.

Jalon glances up at the clock and then back at his kids as he slides his dick deep inside me. I gasp and squeeze my eyes closed. Fucking asshole. I suppose pulling out and giving them a complete view of us isn’t better.

“Meeting delayed for an hour,” Jalon says calmly, as if he hasn’t just been railing me for the past twenty minutes.

They remain in the doorway, staring.

“Unless you want a lesson in how to fuck a younger man so he *always* comes first, I suggest you leave,” Jalon says.

I snort and then gasp again as he shoves his cock in deeper yet.

Ellory cackles madly. I know it’s Ellory. He’s always the one who laughs with his entire being.

The boys back away. All except Loren, who watches us blankly. Myro grabs his arm and drags him out, the door shutting after them.

If I expected Jalon to stop and give us time to put ourselves back together, I’m sorely mistaken. He continues to fuck me as if we weren’t just interrupted. Because I’m mortified, I try to resist the pleasure but fail. I come undone less than five minutes later.

Jalon takes his time. He fucks me with the same fervor that he would if we weren’t on a schedule and doesn’t stop until he’s ready to stop. The only difference between this time and every other is that he catches his release in his hand instead of painting me with it.

How considerate of him.

Jalon’s mouth covers mine. He kisses me until the tension in my body begins to release. “I might have, subconsciously, wanted them to know,” he admits against his mouth. “I’ve never fucked up a meeting like this in my entire life. I’m sorry.”

“You could have told me your plans,” I grumble. “At the very least.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t intentionally make the decision. I’m going to blame your pants.”

“*But what were you wearing?* Are you really going to be one of *those* men? Blaming your behavior and inability to control your urges on someone else?”

He winces and scowls at me as he stands up. I nearly roll right off the table, but Jalon catches me, chuckling. “No,” he says as I get to my feet, pants still at my knees. I reach to pull them up, but he stops me. “You don’t want to clean up first?”

“I’m not going into the hall like this.”

His amusement lights his face, and I sigh. Why wouldn’t there be a bathroom attached to the conference room? “If I didn’t think you’d leak a trail of lube, I’d carry you so you don’t have to hop along.”

“How considerate,” I deadpan.

Behind a hidden panel—because I’m learning that every single room in this enormous house has a hidden door somewhere—is a bathroom. Not a little closet but a full-blown bathroom with a toilet, bidet, huge shower, soaking tub, and three sinks.

“For a conference room?” I ask.

He smirks. “The conference room was the original primary bedroom. When I moved it to the fourth floor, I kept the bathroom.”

I shake my head and wait for him to finish cleaning himself and leave the bathroom. I get it. He’s seen all of me. Fuck, he’s had his mouth on my asshole! Still. Cleaning myself back there is hella awkward in front of someone.

Jalon returns with wet towels that he tosses in a hamper as I adjust myself in my pants. I came in my jock, shockingly, so that’s going to be super comfortable. Jalon pulls me against him, and I level him with an annoyed glare.

“I own my behavior. I’m sorry. Yes, you’re far beyond tempting in these goddamn pants, but I *can* control myself. I chose not to. I think I was ready to tell my kids and…” He shakes his head.

“And made sure they walked in on us fucking?”

“That wasn’t intentional. I promise. I consider my relationship with my kids close, but we do not need to share private moments like that. I’m sorry, Levis. I didn’t mean to put you in this position.”

I circle his waist with my arms and sigh with exaggeration. “I know. You’re right. It’s time we stopped hiding. I’m not even sure why we are.”

Jalon shakes his head. My eyes flutter closed when his hand touches my face. The callous on his thumb rubs against my cheek. “I think maybe we’re still working this out. It’s new, and all new things have a fragile foundation that hasn’t quite set yet. That doesn’t mean we’re unsure. It means we don’t need to let everyone in on what we’re doing until we feel sure on our feet.”

“I don’t think we can *not* talk about it now.”

“No. I took that choice away. I *am* sorry, Levis.”

I kiss him. “I know. Stop apologizing.”

“Are you ready?”

It doesn’t matter if I’m ready. “I think I should call my friends to join us.”

Jalon gives me an amused look before kissing me lightly. “Cute that you think that the conference room won’t be full when we step out of the bathroom.”

He’s right. He gave them an hour after all.

True to his assumption, all my friends and his family who live on the Estate —except his parents—are sitting around the table, watching the open bathroom door expectantly. I’m not one to blush easily, but I can feel the way my skin burns.

Jalon pulls a chair around so it’s close to his and holds it for me to sit. I take the seat, ignoring the way half the table grins. Regal and unruffled as

always, Jalon takes the seat beside me.

I look around the table. All eyes, even Emerson's, are on us. Looking between the two of us.

"So," Jalon says, steepling his fingers in front of him. "I'd like to talk about the school."

"Oh, no," Ellory says. "Good try, Dad, but I don't think so. Let's talk about you destroying Levis on the conference room table when you *knew* we would be here at one."

I huff, and my eyes catch on a little plastic tent on the table. Right where we'd been fucking and where *no one* is sitting. I shift a little and grimace when I figure out what I'm looking at—a miniature wet floor sign, except under the little caution symbol, it reads '*we fucked here*'.

"Seriously?" I mutter.

"You gave us an hour. Plenty of time to print that," Voss says, grinning.

Jalon doesn't do well to hide his smirk. "Alright. Levis and I are together. Any questions?"

The room erupts in questions. I'm a little startled by the onslaught of voices talking over each other, demanding to be heard first. The only one not speaking is Loren. Like me, he's looking around the table, slightly surprised himself.

The chaos continues for several minutes until Jalon lifts a hand and the room falls silent for a beat. Brek leans forward and stares at me. "He was the guy at work you were talking about?"

"Wait," Honey Bee says and slaps both of her palms onto the table. The sound is loud enough that Emerson startles. "You told Brek and not the rest of us?"

Now my friends begin arguing over each other, and I ping-pong my attention between them. When I need a break or risk a headache, I nudge Jalon with my elbow. *Stop this.*

Once again, Jalon raises his hand, and my friends fall silent. “We’ve been seeing each other since… shortly after Axl’s birth.”

“Wait a minute,” Imry says, eyes narrowed. “What about—?”

“I forgot I was engaged,” Jalon says, the amusement he’d held onto sliding away. “I can give you a long explanation as to why I think that happened, but it’s something I’m dealing with. I messed up.” He looks at me, and I smile softly in encouragement. “I’m… this is new.”

“Can I just…” Myro says, and there’s a struggle going on. “Months ago, you told us how you choose your partners and, with all due respect, Dad, and not to minimize the importance of any of your previous partners, but Levis is important to us.”

His words fill my chest with warmth, and I bow my head to conceal the emotion that fills me. This is what family is. This is why they’re so over the top with loyalty to each other.

“Levis is mine for selfish reasons,” Jalon says.

I glance up, and five of his sons are grinning, though my friends look confused by their pleasure in response to Jalon’s statement.

“I didn’t… choose Levis. It happened.” He looks at Brek and smiles lightly. “I think that sometimes it takes letting your walls down and allowing people to get close to find the love you never knew you were missing from your life.”

Brek smiles, dipping his head to bury his face in Axl’s hair. It’s the first time I’ve seen him hold Axl. For a minute, I’m grinning like a fool because he’s holding Axl! That’s a big deal.

“Is this serious, then?” Honey Bee asks. “You’re not just”—her gaze flickers to the ‘*we fucked here’* sign—“messing around?”

“It’s serious,” Jalon says, and reaches for my hand. I’m on his right, so he takes my left hand in his. The hand that has my ring.

Everyone’s eyes immediately home in on it. A beat of silence fills the room briefly, and then another round of chaos breaks out. I sigh heavily and glare

at Jalon out of the corner of my eye. I think he's enjoying triggering madness.

The noise dies down naturally this time. When the only one making noise is Emerson, who slaps the table and points at us, Jalon smiles and says, "It's serious."

"Go get Granddad," Noaz says and sets Emerson on the table.

We all watch as Emerson race-crawls down the length of the conference room table until he reaches Jalon. Jalon scoops him up and hugs him tightly. My stomach flips with excited nerves. He'll hold our kid like that one day. He meets my eyes and smiles. Do his eyes glisten? Is he thinking the same thing I am?

"We've somehow overlooked those googly eyes, haven't we?" Ellory asks, bemused.

"I think we have," Haze muses.

"I haven't," Loren says, and the room looks at him. He shrugs. "I didn't know it meant they were fucking."

Oakley laughs and rests his head on Loren's shoulder.

"What did you think it meant?" Honey Bee asks.

"Usually they look at each other like that when there's a lot of noise going on. Dad and Levis are almost always the quietest in the room. I thought it meant they were silently commiserating about the noise level."

"To be in your mind," Myro comments, smiling fondly.

Loren shrugs the shoulder Oakley's head isn't resting on. "I didn't think it was important enough to point out."

"Why did you keep it a secret?" Imry asks.

"We didn't intentionally. At first, I think it was natural to keep it a secret. We were fooling around. There really isn't any reason to announce that," Jalon says. He looks at me for a minute. "I don't know when it changed, but something shifted when we didn't notice. Jeannette's sudden appearance

forced a conversation that we didn’t know we needed. That’s when we consciously decided to be in a relationship.”

“When did you get engaged?” Honey Bee demands.

“Christmas morning,” I answer, smiling at Jalon. “Two in the morning.”

Despite Honey Bee being hurt that we didn’t share this, she smiles because it *is* sweet and romantic and special. All things that Honey Bee loves, though she pretends she’s indifferent to. I hope Myro is taking notes.

“When are you getting married?” Ellory asks. “Will it be here? Will it be big? Will there be elephants?”

Everyone’s attention turns from us to Ellory.

Ellory shrugs. “I think it would be cool to have elephants at their wedding.”

“Uh…” Jalon says, eyes flickering to me. “No elephants, but we haven’t discussed details yet. It’s only been ten days.”

“I think it’s really great,” Briar says, and I meet his eye. He smiles. “Just what you’ve always been looking for.”

I nod. “Weird how that happens with the person you least expect.”

Briar grins. He brings Noaz’s hand up from where they’d been clasped in his lap to kiss the back of it. “I know. But I can say from experience, there’s no better love than the one you weren’t expecting.”

Jalon and I share a smile.

“I feel like I need to ask for all of our protection,” Voss says and looks pointedly at the little sign he 3D printed. “How many more of those do I need to print?”

I press my lips together and glare. The room stares at us. I’m not answering that question.

“I think you should just keep printing them,” Jalon says eventually. He glances at the door, an amused, confident, small smile on his face when he faces everyone again. I’m already horrified by what’s going to come out of his mouth next. “I’ve lost track of the rooms we’ve enjoyed each other in.”

“Oh my god,” I mutter and cover my face with a hand.

Once again, Ellory cackles loudly.

This time, his laughter is joined by a delighted squeal from Emerson, who claps his hands in excitement.

I don’t manage to fully contain my smile.

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27

JALON



On Monday morning, after opening my mail war package—a cock ring that vibrates accompanied by a sassy note—a knock on my door has me stuffing the contents away in my drawer before Crestley can see it.

It's not Crestley, though. It's Haze. He looks hesitant, so I smile and invite him in.

"Are you busy?" he asks, hovering in the doorway.

"Not at all. Come in."

He still falters, unsure. I don't push him, choosing to wait for him to decide if he wants to come in. After another minute, he does. There's a small folder in his hand that he keeps in his lap when he sits.

"Everything okay?"

Haze nods. "Can I ask… your mom's name is Vanessa. Right?"

I nod. "You've had the pleasure of meeting her."

He gives me a dry look. Honestly, we've been spared from my parents' presence in large part thanks to Rhodes' pack. However, they left the day

before the conference room incident. My parents have let themselves into the big house since then.

“She was born in 1952?”

I incline my head again. “Yes.”

Haze nods, chewing his bottom lip. “I don’t know if you want to see this, but… I think you should see it as opposed to someone else stumbling upon it.” He sets the envelope on the desk and slides it toward me.

It’s a hard manila folder. The kind you set into hanging files in a cabinet. Except that it’s been cut down to half the size. I flip it open like I’m looking at a book. The first page is the birth certificate of my father, Weston Emile Van Doren, born in 1950.

I flip it as if turning a page, and the next is for my mother, Vanessa Lilianna Maurice, born in 1955… Not ‘52. I stare at the document for a moment before turning the page to reveal the next.

My aunt Joann Sarah Maurice, born in… 1952?

The next piece of paper is the death certificate of Aunt Joann, August 22, 1970. Two days after I was born. Something uncomfortable forms in my gut.

The next page is a marriage certificate… for my aunt Joann and my dad. November 5, 1969. I anticipate what I’m going to find next. Sure enough, it’s my birth certificate, but there’s something distinctly different about this one than the one I have in my safe at home.

My birth date is the same. My name. My father’s name. But my mother’s name is listed as Joann Van Doren.

Not Vanessa.

I stare for a long time at the piece of paper before turning it over and finding a single black-and-white picture of a small family in the hospital. It’s easy to recognize my father. He’s sitting on the side of the bed with the woman I’ve always known as my aunt Joann. Who is in the bed. Holding a brand-new baby. On the opposite side of the bed is my mother, Vanessa.

Turning the picture over, I find familiar handwriting. The looping, leaning letters of my grandmother, Poppy. It lists who's in the photo.

Dad—Weston, age 20
Mom—Joann, age 18
Newest Van Doren—Jalon Drew, age 4 hours
Aunt—Vanessa, age 15
August 20, 1970

My stomach twists as I turn the photo over and stare at the picture again. What the fuck is this?

"The envelope was tucked inside a box of newspapers," Haze says quietly. "Like someone intentionally hid it away so it would be safe."

The world around me dims for a minute. I hold my breath to force my body to regulate, so when I look at Haze, he sees the person he's expecting to. I meet his eye, and he's concerned. I smile and incline my head.

"Thank you for bringing these to me."

"I haven't and won't tell anyone about them," he says. "That's yours to tell. Not mine."

I close my eyes and take a slow breath. "I appreciate that."

He nods. "That's all I wanted. I just thought… it was best if you got your hands on them before someone else did."

Before my parents did. Is this why they wanted access to the basement? Could they know that I've moved the archives into the basement? I suppose if they've looked throughout the four floors above ground and didn't find what they were looking for, process of elimination says that what they want is in the basement.

Haze takes his leave, and I stare at the documents in turn once more. They're original documents. Stamped with a notary stamp. Not copies.

Getting to my feet, I take my new information to the copy room to make copies. The originals stay with me. For the time being, they get tucked into the safe in my office. Right now, it's time to visit my parents and demand some answers.

I stop in Levis' office. He's leaning on his standing station, staring at something on the computer. After a minute, he looks up and smiles when he sees me. Whatever he sees in my face makes the smile fall away.

"What's wrong?"

"Can you take a break?"

He nods and locks his computer without looking at it again.

"Come with me?"

Levis nods again and doesn't ask where we're going. He follows me to the elevator, and I push the button. "Did you drive to work?"

"No. I always walk."

Shit. "Hold on."

Down the hall, I pause in Voss' office. He's closest to the elevator. He looks up and smiles. "Hey."

"Can I borrow your car?"

Concern immediately replaces his smile. "Yeah. What's wrong?"

I shake my head. "Just don't want to walk the whole distance."

"Keys are in Axl's bag. Side pocket." He nods in the direction of the door where the electronics room is.

Keys in hand, I thank him and join Levis at the elevator. He's holding it open.

I don't touch him. Besides the activities we engage in behind closed doors, we haven't announced our relationship at work. We don't exactly have rules against forming relationships with colleagues. Quite frankly, I don't care about the relationships you engage in with your peers as long as they don't

interfere with your work. Obviously, there are workplace conduct rules that need to be abided by.

I'm the big boss, though. I don't want anyone to think that Levis has received special treatment. He hasn't. I'm very aware of him enjoying his job, and I don't want to fuck that up for him.

We park in my parents' driveway as I'm thinking about our relationship in the workplace. It *will* need to be announced at some point. It was also an easy distraction to concentrate on, so I didn't have to dwell on the growing knot in my stomach. Thinking about Levis is always welcome.

Levis stands at my side at the door. I don't knock right away. Something rolls with nerves inside me and I'm waiting for it to settle. It's not going to settle.

"What do you need?" Levis asks.

I shake my head. Honestly? No fucking idea. "Just your presence."

He grips my hand briefly. We also haven't told my parents about our engagement. I'm not ready for that fight because I will kick them off my property if they have one fucking comment about it that is anything other than supportive.

After another deep breath, I knock. My mother answers. She smiles when she sees me, but then her attention flickers to Levis and she's confused about our presence.

"Were we expecting you?" she asks as she opens the door.

"No. We need to talk. Where's Dad?"

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

She lets us in, and I don’t wait for a further invitation as I lead Levis into the dining room. My parents join me a minute later. Dad looks between Levis and me but doesn’t comment as he takes a seat across from us.

“I’m going to ask this one time and give you the opportunity to come clean about any secrets you’ve kept,” I say quietly and turn my attention to my *mother.* “What year were you born?”

Mom knows. Her hesitation in answering tells me everything. She doesn’t answer. Dad does.

“You know your mother’s birthday, Jalon.”

I nod. “I do now.” Setting the folder on the table, I flip through until I pull out her birth certificate and slide it toward them both.

The color drains from Mom’s face. One by one, I pull out the documents that contradict everything I know about my parents. Dad remains quiet as he stares. Especially at the photocopy of the picture that I hand them last.

“Where is the original?” Dad asks as he picks up the picture. I’ve made sure to copy the front and the back so they have the depth of the information I now possess.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to be asking questions.” Dad meets my eyes. “Explain the lies.”

Mom gets up from the table and leaves the room. I hear a door open somewhere. Something scrapes. And then she’s back with a medium-sized plastic tote. She sets it on the table and opens it. From inside, she pulls out a photo album and slides it toward me.

I’m not sure I want to open it.

“My sister was my best friend,” Mom says. “We did everything together, even though three years separated us in age. I was so excited when she got married and when she got pregnant. I moved to the Estate at her insistence because she wanted me to be here with you from the moment you were born.”

Tears glisten in her eyes, and I look down at the picture on the front of the album. It's a photo of who I assume is my mom and… my birth mother.

"She died suddenly after you were born. It was the 1970s, and medicine wasn't what it is now. She couldn't be saved, but the doctors tried. Long after it was clear she wasn't going to come back to us because I was hysterical."

Mom wipes her eyes.

"I moved in with Weston to help with you. Babies need their mothers, and I was the closest you had. We didn't mean to fall in love, but we did. When we spoke to your grandparents about marrying and being a family, they were adamantly against it. It turned into a very big fight in which they wrote up documents that if we went against their wishes, then Weston would be cut off from the Van Doren name entirely. The business. The Estate. Everything. He'd essentially be disowned, and you along with him."

Something doesn't sit right with this. Something doesn't add up. But I don't question it as she continues.

"We consented to their terms as long as they would acknowledge that I am your mother. I'm raising you as my son. They agreed and even helped us make it appear that you've always been mine. As soon as both of your grandparents died, we married and grew our family as we always wanted to."

I shake my head. "Then abandoned them," I comment and meet my father's eyes. "Why bother?"

"We didn't—"

"We've been over this," I interrupt. Without opening the album, I shove it back across the table and lean forward. "Why. Are. You. Here?"

They exchange a heavy look before Dad says, "I have cancer, and I wanted to live out the rest of my life with my family."

"Bullshit."

“I can show you my test results. Doc Mark has been managing my treatment since I returned.”

I’m about to call bullshit on that too, but even Doc Mark is bound by privacy laws. He *can’t* tell me.

“Is this what was so important to find in the basement?” I demand, voice still calm, but I can hear the pinched tone getting louder.

“No. I didn’t know…” Dad looks at the picture again. “I didn’t know these existed.”

“And you were both going to take this to your grave.”

“Jalon, I am your mother,” Mom pleads. “I raised you. I loved you. I never once thought of you as anything other than mine once my sister died. Please believe me.”

That might be the only thing I believe in this conversation.

“What’s in the basement?”

Dad sighs. “I wanted to know what *you’re* hiding in the basement that you won’t give us access to.”

I’m not going to get straight answers from my parents. Without another word, I get to my feet. I pull Levis’ chair out as he stands. He follows me out the front door and to the car while my mother calls after me.

I don’t drive back to the office. Instead, I drive into the trees, beyond Noaz’s house. Beyond Kairo’s. Deep into the trees, where the family cemetery is.

Levis walks with me until I locate Joann’s grave. Her married name is missing. Her birth year has been swapped with her sister’s. They erased who she actually was.

“They’re not telling the truth,” I say, and rest my hand on the stone.

“You don’t believe them?” Levis asks.

“Not entirely. I think there are elements of truth. My grandfather died three years before Arath was born. My grandmother died eighteen months before

Arath. If their timeline is to be believed, *that* adds up. What doesn't is everything that came after Joann's death and the appearance of my brothers fourteen years later."

"Because…?"

"Why would my grandparents be so adamant about them not marrying or having kids and yet erase my father's marriage as if it didn't exist? Why would they assist in making her appear as if she's been my mother, and therefore my father's wife, but not allow it to truly be?" I look at Levis. "Does that sound logical to you?"

Levis frowns. "No."

I stare at Joann's grave for a minute longer. With a heavy sigh, I pull Levis to my chest and press my face into his neck for a reprieve from the lies that have been shattered around me.

It's not lost on me that this is the first time I've ever allowed myself to be vulnerable with another person present. No one has ever been with me as I worked through something difficult or challenging. I've never wanted someone around.

This feels… almost as overwhelming as the shit that my parents just admitted to. I hold him tighter and feel his embrace strengthen as mine does. There's a chance that letting Levis into the deep corners of my life might be the most frightening thing I've ever done. A part of me wants to close down. Protect myself. Keep that strong façade tightly in place because that's where I'm safe.

But I'm safe here too. I never want Levis to be anywhere but right here.

"Thanks for coming with me," I say quietly.

He hugs me ever tighter. "I'll go anywhere you need me to be without question," he answers. "All you have to do is ask."

"Asking isn't as easy as it sounds."

I feel the vibration of his laughter in his chest. "For anyone else, I'd agree. For you, I'm just impressed that you acknowledge that and asked me to

come with you anyway. You're used to relying only on yourself. It's a big deal that you asked me to come with you today."

Leaning back so I can look at him, I study his handsome face. "I'm probably not going to be good at asking for your presence when I need it all the time. I've spent most of my life knowing that the only person who will do what I need them to without question is myself."

"Why did you ask me to come with you today?"

I study his face, searching for the answer. "I didn't even think about it." A smile curls my lips.

He smiles in return. "Good. I like that answer."

Closing my eyes, I press my forehead to him and breathe in the air around me. In my mind, I think, *Hi, Mom. I'm sorry I never visited. Want to meet my fiancé?*

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28

LEVIS



THE DRIVER GETS OUT of the car and looks up at the house behind me. Up and up and up. His neck is bent so far back that his head is practically at ninety degrees from his body. I try to control my amusement, especially as he looks at me with comically huge eyes.

“I’ve been dying to deliver takeout here, man. You work here?”

Of course, I get asked if I work here. I bet Oakley or Brek wouldn’t have received that question. My amusement fades, and I reach for the delivery bag.

“No. I’m engaged to Jalon.” Just to see him gawk, I raise my hand to show him my ring.

I’m *not* someone to ‘*stick it in your face*’, but when you look at me and immediately think I’m someone the Van Dorens employ? Yeah, we’re no longer the same.

It’s clear that this man isn’t sure whether to believe me. If I cared enough to prove myself to this stranger, I’d let him see the ‘*Van Doren*’ engraved on the inside of the ring. I found that the other day when I took it off to wash my hands without jewelry. That’s going to take some getting used to.

“Whoa,” he says, and takes a step back. “That’s… he’s gay?”

Okay, this guy is losing his tip. “Thanks for the delivery. I trust you can get yourself back to the road?”

He’s oblivious to my clipped tone as he stares at the house again. Even as I turn and walk up the stairs.

“Goodbye,” I call to him, and that seems to snap him out of the moment.

He flashes me a wide smile and waves before getting into his car. “Later, Mr. Van Doren-to-be!”

My stomach flutters at those words, and despite the irritation I felt a minute ago, a grin spreads. Yeah, fine. He gets a big tip.

The big house has a massive porch that runs the length of the house. There are equally enormous pillars that reach the roof. Because anything other than colossal lanterns hanging overhead would look silly, every dozen feet or so, huge lanterns hang down on thick chains. Imry once told us that they’re actually as tall as we are.

Six-foot-tall lanterns? He laughed at our skepticism and told us to look up how big traffic lights actually are. They may look a few feet tall when they’re hanging overhead, but they’re actually far taller than humans think they are.

I choose a table at random and take a seat. Admittedly, there isn’t a whole lot to look at from the front of the house. It makes the porch feel relatively pointless. You can’t watch people drive by or the neighbors playing.

There *is* beautiful landscaping and a tranquil, four-tiered water fountain on the teardrop island that breaks up the horseshoe driveway. I suppose that’s something.

“There you are,” Honey Bee says as I’m pulling out the bento box lunch I ordered from my favorite Japanese restaurant in town. They make the best food that reminds me of my Mom’s cooking.

She takes a seat across from me and sets her tray down. I smile in amusement. “You stop in the cafeteria?”

Honey Bee snorts. “This came from the kitchen,” she says, laughing. “I told them I wanted to eat outside, and they produced a lunch tray from the pantry.”

“This place has everything. What’s for lunch?”

“A complete roast pork dinner. Can’t get that from a school cafeteria.”

I’ve taken my first bite of sushi when Oakley and Briar join us. By the time I’m finished chewing my first bite, Haze and Brek are gathered around the table with me.

“This is why you wanted me to use a location-sharing app,” I muse as I use my chopsticks for a second piece of sushi. Absently, I wonder if the kitchen can prepare sushi.

“That, and we didn’t want to walk into a room where you’re getting railed,” Oakley says.

I grin around my bite and note the meals they’re eating. Briar has a sandwich and a salad. Brek has a salad. Haze has a large piece of grilled meat, a container of grilled corn, and… cornbread?

When he sees me looking at his food, he laughs. “The triplets have started using the grill at Avory and Ellory’s house. Not to be confused with any of them cooking. Someone from the big house cooks for them on their grill.”

I’m not the only one shaking my head.

When Oakley pours milk into a bowl of cereal, we all stop bringing food to our mouths or chewing whatever. He looks up and rolls his eyes. “What? I love cereal.”

“Oakley never left his childhood,” Honey Bee muses, ruffling his messy hair fondly.

Oakley takes a bite as he glares at her.

“Where’s Daddy Jalon?” Brek asks.

My gaze catches on his hand, but I can’t see the burned numbers. He has a fingerless glove that matches his skin tone covering it. Instead of meeting

his eye after, so he'd catch me looking, I drop my eyes to my lunch and choose my next adventure.

"Visiting Apple in the hospital."

"Apple?" Haze asks.

I look up as I nod. "She's the receptionist for the contracts department, I think. She completely shattered her arm in a dirt bike accident and has to have a bunch of surgeries to put it back together. Yesterday was surgery number two."

"Ouch," Honey Bee says.

I nod as I chew. A minute passes as we concentrate on eating.

"So… we haven't had a chance to catch up since the brothers walked in on you and Daddy Jalon fucking on the conference room table," Haze says. "Let's talk about that."

"Or," I say, "we can talk about the little '*we fucked here*' tents littered all over the house."

All five of my friends laugh.

"Are they in the wrong places?" Brek asks.

"Some of them are," I say as nonchalantly as I can and stuff more food into my mouth.

"Wow. You really do fuck everywhere," Haze says. "That's where Imry gets it from."

Everyone's attention turns to him, and Haze shrugs. "Let's not pretend that the other brothers are any different."

"We do not fuck everywhere," Briar says.

"Okay, so you're vanilla," Brek says and looks at Honey Bee, waiting for her to tell us about their sexcapades.

Briar rolls his eyes. "We can only go so far. We have a kid."

“Brek, does having a kid stop you and Voss from fucking everywhere?” Oakley asks.

Brek shakes his head and shrugs. “No, but admittedly, we tend to be in one of our bedrooms. Not necessarily missionary or even on the bed, but staying close to Axl is always a thought.”

“Exactly,” Briar says. “And I swear, this isn’t a jab or judgment, but we don’t have nannies.”

“This is the life we have to look forward to when we have kids,” Oakley muses.

“Are you going to have nannies?” I ask.

He nods and then shrugs. “I think it’s probably wisest to have a third set of hands if we’re having three at once, right? Honestly, I don’t know. Loren has been wanting to talk about it more recently, which I find kind of strange since he’s *always* been indifferent to this subject, but nannies haven’t come up.”

“You’re still having a kid, aren’t you?” Honey Bee asks me. “You said that, right?”

“I don’t remember if we talked about that,” I answer. “The meeting was a bit of a blur. But yes. No timeline yet, but I made it clear that I want a kid that’s not older than me.”

Once again, my group of friends’ laughter surrounds me.

“Lev, that’s hilarious,” Briar says.

I hum noncommittally, but can’t stop the smile entirely.

“Alright,” Oakley says, leaning forward. “I have to ask. Loren said that he was pretty sure his dad’s dick is pierced—which has opened up a conversation on whether I want him to be pierced, mind you. But is it true?”

Everyone’s eyes train on me. Normally, I’d have no reservations about having this conversation. Or any conversation, regardless of the topic at hand. But this situation is a little different.

“I don’t know that it’s appropriate to talk about Jalon’s dick,” I say.

Immediately, I’m met with complaints, and I laugh.

“He’s your father-in-law,” I emphasize to Oakley. “And not to put pressure on the rest of you, but he’s as good as yours too. There’s a strange line that’s really kind of murky here, and I think talking about his cock is crossing it.”

“It’s strange thinking of him as my father-in-law,” Haze says, making a face. This might be the first time I metaphorically pushed his relationship with Imry forward and a momentary look of panic *didn’t* flash across his face.

A warmth settles in my chest in response. I think that means Haze is finally feeling comfortable in his life.

“It is,” Honey Bee says, frowning. “He’s just… Jalon. I acknowledge that he’s Myro’s father, but there’s something so… I want to say enchanting, but that’s giving it a different connotation than I mean. But like, he’s… otherworldly?”

“I get that. Not alien but a higher being,” Brek says, nodding.

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on someone,” I counter. “Talking about him like that adds a bigger burden to his shoulders. It’s further to fall if he stumbles. It’s no wonder he clings to the mistakes he’s made like they’re tangible wounds he can’t get rid of.”

“Now that you say that, I bet that’s why his sons are so intimidated to take his place at VDT,” Briar says with a frown. “It’s not just us, but the world looks at him in the same way we’ve been talking about him. How terrifying it must be for Myro to have to live up to someone the world thinks is divine when he’s nothing but a mere mortal.”

My friends’ mood dampens.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Honey Bee says, but I can see the shine in her eyes. “I hadn’t thought of it like that, either. Poor Myro.”

The vibe around the table turns quiet and gloomy for a minute. I hadn’t meant to change the atmosphere quite so much. I was just as guilty as they

are talking about and referencing Jalon in the same way they just did. It was somewhat recently, and quite a few weeks after we started fucking around, that he truly became human to me.

I never imagined the weight he carried around with him. The more he opens up, the more I realize just how many expectations he's had to live up to with so little support. Not because no one would support him, but because Jalon trained himself early on that he had to rely on himself and no one else.

That's changed now but it's going to take Jalon a long time to remember he and I are a team. I can help him carry some burdens. Just as he allowed me to do when he took me to confront his parents.

"So… have you told your parents?" Honey Bee asks.

I shake my head as I chew. When I swallow, I shrug. "I think outside of you and his kids and brothers, we haven't told anyone. There's no need to announce it."

"Of course, there is. Jalon is a public figure. That news is loud," Brek says.

I hum and shrug again. "I think it's going to be somewhat delicate with the company because, technically, I work for Jalon."

"Did this begin at work?" Oakley asks, eyebrows knit.

"No. Not at all."

"That doesn't mean you haven't fucked around at work, though, does it?" Haze asks, giving me a knowing smirk.

A smile spreads across my face, but I don't answer to confirm or deny.

"Wow. Look at you and all your scandals!" Honey Bee says.

"That's neither here nor there, though," I say. "Regardless of the fact that Jalon has no involvement in my work or the position I hold within the firm, there's almost always going to be someone who complains that I'm getting unfair treatment. Jalon has created a world outside the shit that takes place off the Estate, but I think it's still unrealistic that *no one* will point fingers, you know?"

“No offense, but you’re still at entry level. What favors could he have truly pulled in exchange for some dick sucking?” Oakley asks.

Briar smacks him playfully, and Oakley laughs.

“When someone wants to take offense, logic has no place in their minds,” I answer.

“Are you going to keep working there?” Briar asks.

My chewing slows as I look at him. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“How do we put this delicately?” Honey Bee muses, and I instantly wish I had something to throw at her. “You’re going to be the arm piece of the richest man in the world. You don’t *have to* work at all.”

“*Or* you could become more of a partner and work with him in all his many, many, *many* companies as the go-to,” Brek suggests.

I think about what Jalon told me regarding the reason he was going to marry Jeannette. While ‘*arm piece*’ is probably not in his bougie-ass vocabulary, that’s pretty much what Jeannette was meant to be. It was about business and public image.

“No,” I answer. “Our relationship is entirely outside of work. It has no place in the office.”

“Except for the occasional hookup,” Oakley says.

“Daily,” Haze says in the middle of a cough. “Sorry. Excuse me.”

I roll my eyes as Brek and Oakley snicker.

“I admit there’s a lot we haven’t talked about,” I confess. “So I can’t actually offer you answers to those questions. But whatever we do, the outside world and the company aren’t considerations. I don’t know how we’ll handle the announcement and the company knowing. We’re concentrating on this new thing between us and not worrying about outside opinions right now.”

“That’s good,” Briar says. “Your relationship is more important than outside pressure.”

“Speaking of relationships,” Honey Bee says, and I anticipate she’s going to try to push for details again. “Let’s talk wedding.”

I laugh and pop my last bite of sushi into my mouth. Her gaze remains trained on me expectantly.

“This is going to shock you, but we haven’t talked about it,” I say eventually.

“Ugh,” Honey Bee says, throwing her hands up. “What do you guys do all day?”

Our four remaining friends exchange looks. Sharing smirks. I know what’s coming and answer when they do.

“*Fuck*,” Haze, Briar, Oakley, Brek, and I say together. Then we laugh.

Honey Bee rolls her eyes.

I don’t bother to correct the declaration one way or another. We *do* fuck often. Location doesn’t matter. I think that man has a bottle of lube on him at all times now.

Our relationship is slowly becoming far deeper, though. I have a feeling we’re going to be extra horny for quite some time, but our conversations are becoming more frequent. The depth of topic, the confiding of truths that we’ve only kept to ourselves, is more common now.

This relationship has all the aspects of complexity, trust, intellectual conversation, and exploration that I think have always been missing in the past. That’s why I didn’t ask my ex to join me when I moved to the Estate. Everything there was surface. It was a pretty picture. There was nothing real.

Jalon is everything my heart and head craved.

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JALON



It's ten to four on Thursday when I stop by Levis' office door. He's deeply focused on whatever he's working on right now since he doesn't look up or address me. Usually, he at least comments on my staring like a bougie creep. Do I now have a tee that says '*bougie creep*'? Maybe. Another anonymous gift from the mail war.

I lean against the doorframe and push my hands into my slacks. The movement has Levis looking in my direction. He's no longer startled by my sudden presence. He's come to expect it now.

Levis raises an eyebrow, but I don't miss the smile that's playing on his lips. "Yes?"

"You're in the middle of something," I guess.

His shoulders rise. "I *do* work, Jalon."

"Think you can sign out early?"

"You're going to need to talk to my boss about the increase in breaks and leaving early all the time," he says. "I'm going to get written up."

I've thought about this. I need to speak to his direct supervisor and make sure they know that Levis isn't slacking. I'm interrupting and calling him away. I *have* emailed him a couple of times to let him know that I have asked Levis to work on a few projects for me in the past to explain his increased absence.

It might be time for a more direct conversation. "Noted. Is that a yes or no?"

Levis' eyelids drop so he's looking at me through hooded eyes before he shuts down his computer. "It's a good thing you're hot," he mutters as he approaches.

I chuckle, and together, not touching, we head for the elevator. We're nearing the end of January. I've never considered myself someone who might be into PDA, but I'm very conscious of the fact that I shouldn't touch him until we're at least inside the big house. Even then, I've been considerate of the eyes on us.

The people I employ at the big house are hired by the Trust I have set up. Yes, I'm the primary custodian of the trust, and yes, the trust is part of the overall umbrella of Van Doren Technologies, but everyone outside of the actual office building often refers to themselves as personal hires. They *are* part of VDT, but they also aren't.

Interestingly, it seems that they hold a sense of pride surrounding this.

We walk across the grass in silence. One of the things I love the most about Levis is that he doesn't need to fill the silence. It makes his presence all the more enjoyable. Martha and Jeannette were both constantly compelled to talk when conversation lulled. Levis understands the comfort that quiet can offer.

Once we're inside, I steer us toward the stairs but not the stairs that lead up. The stairs to the basement are, shockingly, hidden behind a panel in the wall. Something that Levis finds incredibly amusing and also unsurprising at this point. I half suspect I'm going to find him pressing against every panel of every wall one day. Just to see if there's a hidden door there.

"We're heading to the basement," Levis says unnecessarily.

“Yes.”

“More family secrets?”

I smirk. Now that we’re alone, I grip his hand in mine as we make our way downstairs. “Yes, but also no.”

“Why did you lock your parents out of the basement?”

“If they knew where this door was, they’d have known that they had access to the basement. Very few people actually know it’s here, though.” I kiss the back of his hand as we reach the bottom of the stairs. The temperature has dropped considerably. “But to answer your question, it wasn’t so much to restrict their access to what’s in the basement. It was to monitor where they go and where they’re trying to access.”

“Ah. Voss is watching the fob action.”

“He is. He was more so before Axl was born, so I am too.”

“Anywhere else they’ve tried to get into?”

“Their biggest disadvantage is their complete abandonment when they left. They don’t actually know how many buildings are unseen from the big house, so their snooping has been concentrated on the house and the office, both of which they have been granted little better than guest access.”

Levis laughs. I push the door open to the archives room and look around. The light is on, which suggests that Haze is here, and that’s why I wanted to leave the office early today—so I was sure to catch him when he’s still down here.

There’s a desk against the wall to the right and three large tables set up like a public library. The rest of the room is rows of bookshelves and deeper storage shelves that hold boxes and totes.

Levis looks around with interest.

“This is the Van Doren Archives. The room is heat and moisture controlled as well as completely sealed, so it won’t flood or burn.”

“In case of bombs raining down, we go to the archives,” he muses.

“No. We go to the doomsday shelter.”

He turns bemused eyes on me. “I forgot about that.”

“That’ll be the next backyard field trip.”

“Oh, good.”

Grinning, I call into the room, “Haze?”

Quiet movement from the back of the room preludes Haze walking out from between shelves. He smiles when he sees us. “Hey,” he greets as he approaches.

“Find anything else life-changing?” I ask.

Haze bows his head. “No.”

“That story will stay out of your book,” I say unnecessarily.

“Of course. I would never—”

“I know, Haze,” I say, and grip his shoulder with assurance. “I was teasing.”

“He needs to work on his delivery,” Levis tells Haze.

I squeeze his hand, earning me a bemused smile.

“Actually, I’ve come to give you access to something else,” I tell Haze. “You know our darkest secrets now. You’ve discovered something that was meant to be erased. I always knew you’d find skeletons in our deepest, darkest closet, and I was curious to see what stories you’d stumble across.”

“I’ve found a lot of interesting stories,” he says with a smile.

“You have, and I’ve really enjoyed reading the emails. I’m looking forward to you putting the first volume together. However, I have something else in mind that I’d like to show you. I suspect you’ll find the same kinds of stories that you’ve been finding, but I think you’ll also find things much like what you discovered about my parents as well as more heinous things that I’d like to know about but also kept confidential.”

Haze inclines his head. “Of course.”

“Your fob?” I ask.

He pulls it from his pocket and hands it to me. I lead them through the rows of shelves until we reach the back wall that’s lined with shelves. I point to the unmarked rail and touch his fob to it. A quiet but audible *click* lets me know the lock has been released.

“Of course there’s a secret door,” Levis says with exasperation.

Haze isn’t listening as I pull the section of bookshelf forward to reveal a room behind it. The lights automatically turn on, illuminating an entire room much like the one behind us, but less organized. Far messier. A room that has clearly had things thrown inside and locked away.

“I’m not promising everything you pick up is going to be shocking, but a good part of what you’ll find in here is unflattering. Illegal. Ugly. Or simply scandalous. I’d like you to go through everything, let me know what you find, and make some sense of this room as you do. This is a side project, so keep track of your hours, and I’ll pay your wages for this part. You will probably find history that you *can* use. As we’ve discussed, there’s a fine line between humanizing this family and revealing just how much we’ve ignored the law since we first stepped foot on this land.”

I’m sure Haze is listening, but his wide eyes are busy taking it all in. This might not be the career he imagined himself in growing up, but he *is* enjoying going through the Van Doren archives. He might find it less interesting if he wasn’t a part of my family, but right now, he’s having a good time.

“Haze?” Levis asks, poking his arm.

Haze blinks out of his reverie and turns his attention to us. I chuckle under my breath. “I didn’t know there’d be more. I was beginning to think that the whispers about your ancestors were just glorified rumors.”

“Not at all. For obvious reasons, we don’t go about sharing all the gory details we keep regarding our family.”

Another beat of silence follows my words. Levis watches Haze with amusement now. “We’ll just leave you to your fun, then,” he says.

Haze nods while he continues to scan the room. Trying to figure out where to begin?

“Let me know if you need something. Shelves. Boxes. Whatever.” I look at what might be a statue covered in a furniture sheet. “Glass cases.”

He nods again, and Levis pulls me away. “You might have just made his day,” he says quietly. “Haze has always been uninterested in his studies and what they mean for his future. This is the first thing he’s done that he’s actually enjoying.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

As we leave the archives, shutting the door behind us, Levis looks over his shoulder down the hall in the opposite direction of the stairs. “You know, I think we were all kind of like that.”

The line of his jaw has me licking my lips. I’ve never considered myself an excessively horny man, but being in Levis’ presence is like revisiting the maturing sex drive that I ignored in favor of building a solid future for my family. I’m making up for those lost years when I could have been a ho like my cousin.

“Like what?” I ask absently.

“None of us were enthusiastic about what we were working toward. Except maybe Honey Bee, but I don’t think it’s excitement that drives her on. She’s passionate about protecting the people in this country who need protecting. But I don’t think any of us have ever been excited about the careers we were working toward.”

I pause in the dim stairwell and turn Levis toward me. He smiles as I walk him backward until his back hits the wall. “None of you? I think Brek enjoys his job.”

“He does, but his family is shitty, so he is always chasing an achievement that’s good enough to impress them. Look at Oakley and Briar. They were both overwhelmed by the pressure life put on them and underwhelmed by what’s actually out there.”

His words cut off when my mouth begins moving along his neck. “And you?”

“We’ve talked about me.”

I hum and suck on his pulse. He grunts, hips jerking against mine.

“You really don’t like privacy, do you?” he asks, breathless.

“There’s no one here,” I tell him. My fingers slip into the waistline of his pants. “What’re you wearing under here, Levis?”

His shiver is delicious. Addicting. “What you like me in. You’re pretty narrowly focused on what kind of underwear you prefer I wear. My drawers are suddenly devoid of my usual boxer briefs.”

“They must get lost in the wash,” I muse.

Levis snorts. “I’m sure.”

Despite his aversion to being caught again, he doesn’t resist when I undo his pants. Nor when I force them off his legs, discarding his shoes along the way. His hands dig into my hair as I sink to my knees and toy with his cock through his jock with my mouth as I lube up his pretty hole.

It’s not lost on me how abruptly my opinions of certain body parts have shifted in my mind. Not that I thought about them often. Or ever. But six months ago, I would *not* have thought that an asshole could be pretty.

The way his moans echo throughout the stairwell is mesmerizing. I’m pretty sure I can feel the sound reverberate through the air and into my body. Touching me everywhere.

I shrug out of my jacket and drop my pants on my way back to my feet. Lube is messy, but since I’m such a considerate lover, most of the lube that’s going to make this smooth is inside Levis. It means I don’t need to be drowning in it.

Besides, based on the last few times that he climbed on me, I think he enjoys stretching himself on my dick the rest of the way.

My mouth captures his again as I return his back to the wall. His arms wrap around my neck, and he raises his legs at the same time I bring my hands under his thighs to pick him up. I'm glad we're on the same page.

As I sink into his burning body, our groans mingle together. I've never been so in sync with someone. I've never cared to be. It's never mattered. I had no idea that I'd enjoy taking on the world with someone at my side.

My thrusts are slow. Our mouths are open, heavy breaths mingling. His eyes are open, but his eyelids are lowered. He groans deeply, ass squeezing my cock.

Interestingly, despite having six kids, sex has never been intimate. I've heard people call it transactional, but to me, it was a momentary escape. Up until I started fooling around with Levis, I would have called it enjoyable.

Looking back, it was so boring. The pleasure was mediocre.

Levis and I don't need to be fucking like animals. We don't need to be in any crazy positions, and despite my disregard for location, it doesn't matter where we are. Everything between us feels heightened. As if there were layers of myself locked inside me that he's reached and slowly began bringing to life, I learn more about myself every time I speak to this man. Every time we touch. Every kiss. Every quiet exchange in the dark.

I close my eyes and bury my face in his neck as I move inside him. Levis' ankles lock behind me. His arms wrap around my head, holding me to him. It feels intimate. Private. Something profound that expands with each breath we share.

Levis Li has changed me. I don't know who that man was six months ago. Even four months ago. Whoever Jalon had been for fifty years, I'm not that person. That person was nothing but a mirage. He kept his family, his life, everything about himself close and never let anyone near enough to see the truth.

I'd be remiss to think that I knew who I was. To imagine myself as a fully dynamic person. I was who I needed to be at the cost of consideration for myself. Yet, it never occurred to me to be anything else. My life was for my

kids. For the generations that would follow. To build something so big, so important, so untouchable that my family *would never* struggle.

For the first time in my entire life, I think that maybe my own needs and wants are important. They're worth exploring and satisfying. That realization is all because of Levis.

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LEVIS



THE BED SHIFTING WAKES ME, and I squint my eyes into the dark. The clock beside the bed says it's just after four in the morning. I *love* not leaving Jalon's bed in the early morning hours. However, his hours leave something to be desired.

I'm surprised when Jalon comes back to bed. He slides in behind me and wraps around me. Everything inside me relaxes. The feeling is bone deep. Soul deep. I had no idea that I'd enjoy being the little spoon. Hell, I don't think it ever crossed my mind to want to be the little spoon since I'm usually bigger than my partners.

Jalon's legs tangle with mine, and I slide my fingers to twine with his. He presses a soft kiss to the back of my shoulder and sighs. The sound makes me smile. I love the way he relaxes with me. This man might not know what relaxation is, but there's a very distinct difference between Jalon lying with me for a while three months ago and the way he truly settles now.

"I should get up," he says.

"Or, and hear me out, you can stay in bed with me."

The soft vibration in his chest suggests he finds me funny. I twist in his arms, and we further entangle together. He presses into me, and I end up at an angle so he's slightly on top. His weight becomes heavier and heavier.

It's one of the things I love the most about being with this man. A sign of abandon and comfort. Trust. Letting down his guard and dropping all the masks he usually wears. With me, Jalon is learning to just *be.*

"But I'm awake," he says quietly. "I'm likely not going to fall back asleep."

"That means you have to be on the go, does it?"

He hums quietly before eventually answering, "No."

"Do you have somewhere to be right now?"

"No," he answers.

"A meeting to prepare for?"

"No."

"A breakfast date?"

"No."

"A secret morning exercise routine where you wear actual gym clothes and work out when there's no one there to see you?"

Jalon laughs. "No."

"I fail to hear a legitimate reason that you should get out of bed."

He doesn't answer. His hand slides up into my hair, and I tuck myself further into him. Jalon's answering sigh makes me smile, and I begin to doze.

The next time I open my eyes because Jalon is moving, the sun is out. At least there's that. He presses soft kisses to my face. All over. I smile and think *I could get used to waking up like this.*

He continues to shower me with kisses until he eventually pulls himself from the bed and disappears into the bathroom. The bed dipping for a third

time jostles me from a light sleep, and Jalon kisses me again.

“I’ll see you at the office,” he says.

“I’m proud of you for staying in bed,” I murmur. “Even if you were answering emails while I slept.”

His grin says he finds me funny, but he also doesn’t deny doing so. Another kiss, and he gets to his feet. I watch through sleep-fuzzy eyes as the sexiest man I’ve ever seen walks away and disappears around the corner.

I fall back asleep with a smile and wake for the fourth time at my alarm with one too. This time, I get up, shower in the spa bathroom, and then start meandering through the massive closet.

My underwear drawer has certainly become almost anything other than my usual. Jalon was thorough when removing my underwear, too, and grabbed them all from my room. I’m not sure where he hid them. I’m positive he didn’t throw them away. If it actually bothered me, he’d give them back. I know he would.

Also, I’d like to note that I don’t think I’ve worn the same pair twice. Jalon might not send me morning Zon deliveries like I do him most days, but there are other signs that our delivery feud is strong. Such as my underwear selection. I think he swaps out what he wants me to wear based on his horniness level. Today’s options are all strappy with a skimpy pouch in the front.

Not real jocks. Sexy jocks, I guess.

I choose a pair at random and try to work out how all the straps go. It comes to the point where I almost toss them back in the drawer when I finally figure them out. Admittedly, I like the way my work pants fit when I wear a jock. Removing that little bit of extra fabric smooths them out and defines my ass.

Instead of wearing one of my own shirts, I flip through the wall of Van-Doren-logoed shirts until I find one that’s both retro and modern. Yet another design I’m unfamiliar with. I like the sleek elegance of this one. Maybe it was the first rendition of VDT when Jalon rebranded.

Jalon and I are about the same size in shirts, which means this one fits nicely. I can't say the same for his suits. I've tried. Just out of curiosity. I could play dress up for days in this closet.

The day is uneventful. I receive a morning call from Jalon as he gives me shit about his daily mail delivery. Just a fancy pen that when you write with it, a penis pops out from the end. I thought it was funny.

By the time five o'clock rolls around, I'm expecting his call. He rarely lets me work until I clock out. Today's summons comes at twenty to five. I roll my eyes, but I was already wrapping up in anticipation. Because I've learned Jalon's habits, I've been making a point to come into work earlier so I'm not missing hours.

Jalon smiles as I step through his door. That smile that's just for me. I can feel it everywhere.

"You just can't wait until my hours are over, can you?" I muse.

He shrugs one shoulder. "As the boss, I think I'm allowed to request your presence when I want it."

"Uh-huh." I enter the office. As I cross the floor, he sits back in his chair, sliding it away from his desk, and motions for me to come around.

Maybe I should have shut the door.

I lean my ass against his desk and face him, arms crossed over my chest. He tugs my hand down and examines my shirt with amusement.

"This is a cool design," I say, shrugging. "You should bring it back."

His amusement grows. "You've worn this all day," he states, and I just stare at him. As if I went home to change in the middle of the day or something! "I suppose that cat's out of the bag now."

Confusion makes my eyebrows pinch. "What?"

"This is the only shirt like it. There are no others in existence. The logo isn't an official logo but something *whimsical* that my staff put together. I was gifted this shirt when my office threw me a surprise party for my forty-fifth birthday."

My shoulders sag. “I just announced something, didn’t I?”

“You announced that you have access to my closet,” he says with a smirk.

Oh, fuck. How many people saw me in this shirt? How many people still work here from seven years ago? Who am I kidding? Turnaround is practically non-existent at VDT!

“Oops?”

Jalon laughs. He drops his hand to my thigh, eyes locked with mine. His smile makes me all warm and gooey inside. Has anyone ever looked at me like that?

“Guess I’ll have to determine the best way to address this.”

“Sorry,” I say and cringe. “I didn’t mean to do that. Guess I should ask to wear your clothes after all.”

“No. Never. Wear what you want. Some beastly possessive side of me really loves to see you in my clothes.”

“My friends think people already know. You have called me away from work a lot over the last few months.”

Jalon hums. Our attention turns away from the conversation when there’s a knock on the door. I twist to look at Jalon’s assistant. He looks between us, and I can’t help but think he pointedly looks at the shirt I’m wearing.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Crestley says. “I’m heading out and wanted to make sure you don’t need anything before I go.”

“Actually,” Jalon says. “Come in for a minute.”

Crestley’s eyes land on me briefly as he does what’s asked of him. He sits in the chair across from Jalon. I try to get up because it feels rude sitting like this with my back to him, but Jalon’s hand remains on my leg, keeping me there.

“Have you met Levis?” Jalon asks.

I roll my eyes. Crestley is amused. “Of course.”

“He’s my fiancé,” Jalon says, and the amusement is replaced with surprise. My breath freezes in my chest.

Crestley looks between us, eyebrows climbing into his hairline. “I, uh…”

“We’re off the clock, Crestley. We’re talking as friends right now,” Jalon says.

Crestley’s shoulders relax. “Okay. What happened to Jeannette?”

“A series of bad decisions and unfortunate events that all led to our engagement ending.”

“Yes,” he says slowly, as if he’s trying to piece together the puzzle Jalon just gave him. “I’m a little surprised, so I can’t find a PR way to ask this—and please don’t think poorly of me, Levis. We don’t know each other yet.” His eyes turn back to Jalon. “You end one engagement but need a spouse, so you immediately find another?”

“Crude,” Jalon deadpans. “No. I cheated on Jeannette. That ended. But this is where I want to be.”

Crestley’s expression smooths out and a smile forms. “Yeah?”

I have a feeling that they *are* actually friends. I hadn’t known that.

“Yes,” Jalon answers. “For obvious reasons, we haven’t shared our relationship with anyone. However,” he looks at the shirt I’m wearing, “circumstances have suggested that the cat might be out of the bag and our employees have an inkling that something is going on.”

Crestley laughs. “I’ve been dying to ask how he got his hands on that shirt.”

I huff. “I didn’t know it was an announcement! He has, like, a hundred Van Doren shirts.”

Another knock on the door has us all turning. I recognize this woman, but I can’t place her. Crestley gets to his feet. “I’ll think about it and talk to you tomorrow.”

Jalon inclines his head. “Thank you.”

Crestley smiles, inclines his head toward me, and turns for the door. He gives the woman a polite greeting as well.

Jalon gets to his feet and rounds the desk to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Did I know you were coming?”

She shakes her head and offers me a smile. “Loren left me a weird-as-hell voice mail, and since I was in the area, I decided to stop in.”

“Ah.” Jalon turns to me. “Do you know Levis?”

She inclines her head in my direction. “We met in passing during the holidays.”

Oh, that makes more sense. She’s a Van Doren.

“This is my cousin to some degree, Solana, though her age is closer to my kids, so I often refer to her as my niece.”

Solana’s smile climbs. “Hi.”

I greet her with the same.

“So… Loren asked me for my eggs,” Solana says as she shuts the door. “My voicemail was exactly that. *Solana, this is Loren. I’d like some of your eggs. Please. Will you? I’m asking.*” She laughs.

Jalon closes his eyes and chuckles. “That boy.”

“Yep. I don’t have chickens, so needless to say, I was a little confused. My gut said I needed to see him in person to understand, which was wise because Oakley filled in the gaps that Loren didn’t think needed to be said outside of his head.”

Talking to Loren can be a trip. I can only imagine how that conversation went.

“Anyway, I agreed. I’m going to donate some eggs to Loren and Oakley.”

My heart jumps. I’m excited and also a little nervous for my best friend.

“That’s incredibly generous of you. Thank you,” Jalon says.

Solana grins. Her eyes slide to me before looking back at Jalon. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but your new relationship has been trickling through the Van Doren grapevine. Especially since Voss’ new family app has been introduced. Did you know there’s a gossip tab? Voss wanted to make sure gossip had a place and stayed out of the family announcement feed.”

I love Voss’ new app. He manually and personally approves everyone who has access to it. It’s like a social media app, but just for the expansive Van Doren clan. I think he was getting overwhelmed with the number of texts he’d been receiving from relatives asking for baby updates, so he created something secure where he feels comfortable sharing Axl with the family.

“Of course there is,” Jalon says.

“I actually have an ulterior motive for dropping in on you after I left Loren and Oakley,” Solana says. “Oakley might have made an absent comment about his kids being besties with your kids one day. Not just yours, of course, but your whole friend group. This is solely for you, though. Once I donate some eggs to Loren and Oakley, if you *are* talking about kids and would like a Van Doren surrogate, I’m volunteering.”

Once again, my breath catches as I stare at her.

“Solana,” Jalon says.

“Yes,” I answer before he can say anything else. “Yes, please.”

Jalon looks at me and then back at Solana.

Solana smiles. “Great. This will take some time, of course. I told Loren I’d be in touch with Doc Mark, and we’d go from there. So… you guys talk, and I’ll contact you once the egg-laying is finished.”

I snort. The image that pushes into my head has me cringing.

She hugs Jalon again and gently touches my arm as she lets herself out of Jalon’s office, quietly shutting the door behind her. Jalon looks at me. Silence settles between us as I wait for him to say that he doesn’t really want a kid. He changed his mind.

He returns to where I'm standing behind the desk still and frames my face with his hands. "This is what you want?"

"I already told you that a kid was non-negotiable," I say, voice breathless with emotion. Fuck, please don't make this go south.

His lips brush mine. "I know. I'm asking about Solana carrying our kid. You're a smart man, so I know you know that it would need to be your sperm."

I roll my eyes. "That's perfect. Van Doren genetics *and* mine."

Jalon's expression turns soft. "That's what you want."

"Of course, it is. You don't?"

His hands drop, and he wraps his arms around me. I close my eyes when his mouth presses to mine in a possessive kiss. "I want your kid," he murmurs. "I know you keep waiting for me to change my mind. I'm not. Solana's offer is sudden, and besides our agreement that this is what we want in the future, we haven't talked about it, so I'm checking in. I'm *not* changing my mind."

I wrap my arms around his neck, my forearms pressing to the back of his head where I can brush his hair with my fingertips. "Our age difference means that we're in very different places in our lives," I say carefully, "so I think I'm always going to be a little nervous about that."

"I am too. Maybe it's time we start talking about what the future is going to look like. We share, and I love how much we share, but so much of what we're sharing is about the past or present."

"How do *you* feel about Solana carrying our baby?"

He smiles, and it's beautiful. "I love everything about it."

I sink into his arms and kiss him soundly. Fuck, I want to both extend this very minute and every minute after, but I *can't wait* for all the things we're going to share.

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JALON



I CAN COUNT on one hand the number of times I've slept in over the last thirty-five years. Sleeping in was reserved for days I was ill. Even then, I was usually out of bed by sunrise.

There's no alarm worse than the internal one. I haven't set an actual alarm in decades. My brain has a difficult time shutting down, which is why I wander around the house late at night and am out of bed by the time the sun is touching the horizon.

Then Levis entered my life. When I open my eyes this morning, there's sunlight streaming across the floor. The first few times I woke like this, it was startling. The internal panic that I was going to miss deadlines and meetings had me nearly sprinting out of bed.

Levis' calm, slightly amused presence in bed called me out of that heightened emotional state and pulled me into his warm embrace. Letting my body relax into his hold is probably one of my favorite parts of every day. That simple affection I've never enjoyed before. I'm not sure I've ever experienced it.

These are the thoughts I wake up to a few days prior to Valentine's Day. I'm lying in such a position that the sun is striped across my face. We always

tend to slide away from each other in the night, so when I roll onto my back and reach for Levis, I'm not surprised that I don't find him.

Somehow, he remains close to the edge of the bed. Maybe it's the exaggerated size of my bed, but I end up rolling toward the middle while I sleep. As if I'm subconsciously afraid of falling off the bed.

Now that I'm awake, I slide my way back to Levis and pull him into my arms. He's facing me this morning, so he tucks himself into my chest, arms and legs wrapping me up securely. He barely wakes up anymore. Even in his sleep, he holds me close, and I smile into his hair as I hug him just as tightly.

Despite the sun being up, my eyelids become heavy again, and I doze for quite some time. It's unusual for me to feel so at peace and like the world can wait. This is that mysterious event called *relaxing* that Levis spoke of.

My internal humor makes me grin. That's the sign that I'm not going back to sleep. I give Levis a gentle squeeze before gently extracting myself from him. After a shower and my morning routine, I stand at the side of the bed to admire him.

My fiancé.

Most mornings, I stand here and stare. Waiting for him to open his eyes. In the mornings, he doesn't wake to me watching him. At least, not from outside the bed. I always debate whether to kiss him goodbye and disturb his sleep or not kiss him and then have him question why.

This is why I risk wrinkling my slacks every morning and climb back onto the bed to kiss Levis. Bed movement is what it takes to make him crack his eyes open. I press a soft kiss to his cheek and then to his temple. I'm rewarded with a beautiful, if not sleepy, smile.

"I'll see you at work," I say quietly.

He hums in answer, eyes closing again.

Not to become all cliché and gross, but my heart feels full. How weird to think that as packed to bursting as my life has always been, one man can make me feel like I've been missing him for my entire life.

I stop in the kitchen for my morning beverage. Mario Legasse, my long-time chef, hands me a drink as soon as I walk through the door. It's still hot, letting me know that he must have bells to announce my departure from my bedroom somewhere.

"Thank you, Chef," I comment and take a small sip. Hot, but not burn-your-tongue hot. I taste cinnamon and chocolate. This is the only way I like coffee—some kind of espresso and chocolate mixture.

"Breakfast outside?" he asks.

"I think I'm going to admire the wildflowers this morning."

Mario inclines his head. "I'll find you, sir."

We've been over what we are to call each other often over the years, but since he insists on calling me sir or Mr. Van Doren, I stick with Chef. Sometimes, I'll call him Master Chef, just to see him give me a deadpan look. He's a good guy and an even better chef.

Drink in hand, I make my way to the doors and sit at the west side of the back patio to look over the field of wildflowers. In the northwest corner of the estate is the expansive garden, and beyond, the farm animals. Primarily, we keep the animals for fun. We *do not* eat our animals.

Except for the chickens. We consume their eggs and raise chickens and turkeys for slaughter. Otherwise, our protein comes from the local butcher.

The morning is beautiful. There's a gentle breeze, and the sun is just getting hot. Hmm. Getting up after the sun means I'm more likely to get sweaty sitting outside in the morning as I admire the Estate. A worthwhile trade-off if it means that I get to enjoy a morning cuddle with Levis, but worth noting all the same.

After I've eaten and just before I truly break into a sweat, I drop my dishes off inside and wander my way to the office. As soon as I step inside, Murial greets me with a wide smile. I hired her to monitor everyone who walks into the building and see to it that their needs are met, they get where they need to go, and they have *only* the necessary access. She's turned herself into someone that we all depend on for a whole lot. She keeps the first floor a happy, sunny place.

“Good morning, Mr. Van Doren,” she greets with a bright smile.

“You live here, Murial.”

Her smile widens. “I do!”

I chuckle because she *does* actually live on the Estate. On the second floor, that’s reserved for my staff. She jumped at the opportunity to move in as soon as a room opened up.

Sometimes, I think I should have made a fifth floor. There’s now a waiting list for a room on the second. Perhaps I need to reconsider the use of the third floor. I use the space twice a year for holidays when the Van Doren masses converge on the Estate, but that means the rooms go unused for most of the year.

I’m always in need of more space. How is that even possible?

I make my way up to the top floor and my office, where I spend a few minutes looking over the lake. There’s a float in the middle of the lake. At first, I think someone left it out, and maybe it was blown into the water, but as I’m watching, I see William move on it. He’s out early. I wonder if Avory and Ellory know he’s out there.

The floor is quiet for quite some time. I spend the morning going through my emails and studying the new applications that Crestley sent me for teacher positions. We’re looking to hire two for every grade right away, pre-K through sixth, to begin with. That way, there are multiple viewpoints on what the teachers and students need as we’re building. Then there are many different ideas on how to build a worthwhile curriculum that isn’t built on lying by omission, which they’ll work on while the campus goes up.

I want my kids and everyone who comes through my doors to leave this campus with an actual, well-rounded education, real-life skills, and the ability to think critically for themselves. The skills to know how to find the truth. The courage to ask questions and the confidence to challenge blatant lies that authorities try to spin on the public.

HR is already putting feelers out for highly qualified educational professionals. Actual teachers with advanced education. I know I won’t

attract experts to a new school right away. In time, I hope to hire the best of the best. For now, I'll settle for nothing short of excellent.

As I'm looking at the latest sketches that Levis sent me for the pavilion I want, Crestley stands in my office, his shadow reaching across my floor. A smile is already on my face when I look up, but it drops when I see his expression.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Before he can answer, Finlay Manner, my HR manager, joins Crestley. For just a second, it feels as if the world stops. Everything glitches and freezes.

My first thought is Levis but no. If something happened to Levis, I can think of a whole lot of people who would know before Crestley and Finlay. Me, for starters. I'd hear from his friends. My sons. Someone close to us both.

"Apple is dead," Crestley says quietly.

Chills break out over my skin. "What?" I ask dumbly.

"She died around three this morning. Abruptly and… without cause," Finlay says quietly. "Her mother just called."

"I just saw her two days ago," I argue.

Crestley and Finlay nod.

Neither of them—none of *us*—worked with her closely. But we knew her. We had lunch with her. We kept up with what was going on in each other's lives. That's the family we have in this company. Especially on each floor.

I incline my head. "Thank you for letting me know. Does her mother need anything? Her brother? Her baby?"

"Not right now," Finlay answers, voice solemn. "I think they're in shock, unsure what to do right now."

"She was only twenty-seven," Crestley says quietly.

"Let's make sure our staff have someone to talk to. Give Doc Mark a call and let him know. See if he'll phone a counselor friend to be on call for our

staff.”

“Yes, sir,” Finlay says. His shoulders sag a little as he leaves.

Crestley stares at me, eyes a little glassy, and then follows Finlay away. I stare after them, wondering when the last time was that I’d even attended a funeral. Death hasn’t touched my family in a long time. Yes, it’s tried. It’s come close on multiple *recent* occasions. But it hasn’t succeeded.

Maybe my work family is a loophole.

I must sit there, staring at nothing for quite some time. Levis stepping into my doorway, where Crestley and Finlay had been, jerks me from my thoughts. He’s already been told. I can tell by the look on his face.

Without a word, he comes into my office and pulls the extra desk chair so he’s sitting beside me. I swivel mine, and together, we stare out the windows at the lake. A minute passes, and then he takes my hand.

True to Levis’ form, he doesn’t try to fill the silence. He lets his presence be enough until I request something different or more. It’s comforting.

“It’s a very strange feeling to know that I just saw her two days ago. I held her hand. The world moves on without her in it. How can the space we take up vanish so suddenly?” I ask quietly.

His hand squeezes mine.

I’m not sure why, but I think about my parents as I watch the tiny figure of William floating on the lake. I haven’t spoken to them since my confrontation of the lies they kept from me for my entire life. I haven’t tried to figure out what they aren’t saying—the pieces of the puzzle that don’t line up.

In reality, I haven’t allowed myself to think about it. But when death finally finds a way into your life, there’s a new series of questions and emotions that you’re not prepared to deal with.

My parents have spent my entire life lying. Can I believe my father has cancer, and that’s why he returned to the Estate? I’m angry with my parents.

I’m furious about the way they’ve treated my family recently. Livid about how they abandoned me and my brothers.

But if he dies? If he dies and I haven’t forgiven him, will I regret that? The question doesn’t come from some quasi-religious theology. I need to know for my own peace of mind. Is there something I should have said to Apple before she died? If my father dies tomorrow, will I regret not saying something to him when I had the chance?

Levis slides his chair against mine, pressing his shoulder against my arm.

For a long time, we remain in silence. Eventually, I kiss him and let him know I’m okay. He can go back to work. He interprets that as me needing some solitude, so he respects my request.

Throughout the rest of the day, my staff stops in. Checking in on me, on each other. My kids—especially my triplets who worked with Apple—are upset. I think Ellory is emotionally charged and needs to feel someone pay for her unnecessary death.

Around four, I finally leave my office to check in on my staff in return. Today is a very unproductive day as my office mourns the loss of one of our own.

I get to Crestley’s office, and he’s staring at nothing, his face pale. Tear stains tracking down his cheeks. He doesn’t see me step into his office until I’m standing beside him. He looks up at me, and the grief in his eyes has my lungs seizing.

“He’s dead,” Crestley whispers. I don’t follow his words. ‘*He*’ means Crestley isn’t talking about Apple.

I don’t think he’s seeing me as he stares up. “Who?” I ask gently.

“Sven,” he chokes, and my breath releases in an audible *whoosh*. “He died an hour ago. I just talked to him at lunch, and besides his voice being scratchy and sore, he was fine. He was going to be discharged this afternoon. He’s dead. For no reason, he’s dead!”

The numbness I began to feel earlier bleeds more thoroughly through me. I reach for Crestley and pull him into a hug, his head against my stomach as I

hold him. The shock he was feeling breaks, and his body wracks with sobs.

We might not have worked with Apple every day, but Crestley worked very closely with Sven. He was a little brother. An adopted child. A very close friend.

My breath gets stuck in my chest as I try to process how this can even happen. Two of my employees within twelve hours of each other? That doesn't… They'd already cleared their hurdles. They shouldn't have died!

As those four words settle into my head, a memory pokes at me. As it forms, I remain right where I am, trying to offer Crestley my comfort as much as I can. His devastation would be mine had it been him. I adored Sven, but he wasn't *my* person. We weren't as close as I am with Crestley.

I look up as the memories all click together. Something is happening at the hospital.

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LEVIS



At four thirty, I leave my office to see if Jalon's ready to go. He's not there, though. I wait for ten minutes, and when he still hasn't returned, I poke around the office to look for him. I know he's here. He would never leave without me.

I find him in his assistant's office, hugging Crestley, while Crestley sobs. Not to minimize Apple's death at all, but I hadn't known they were that close. The way he cries grips my gut. It's the kind of crying that comes from deep heartache and loss.

Everyone is upset about Apple's passing. I think I've only spoken to her five times since I began working here, and it feels as if I have just lost a cousin. I would not have guessed that it would affect me as much as it does. She *is* little more than a stranger to me.

But I saw her every day. She smiled and waved every time we passed each other. She, like everyone else, would have helped me with anything I had asked.

I have to remind myself that Crestley has worked with her longer. Everyone here has worked with her longer. I'm the newest employee on this floor.

Standing in Crestley's office doorway while he sobs feels intrusive, so I back away and wander down the hall until I come to Voss' office. He's there with Axl. Sweet baby Axl is already five months old, which seems ludicrous to me.

He looks up as soon as I knock on his ajar door. Unlike everyone else, his door is no longer wide open. He's conscious of keeping Axl's noises contained so they don't disrupt everyone else. Axl isn't a loud baby, though. I think that's why Voss leaves his door open a smidge.

"Hi," he greets as I step inside.

"Are you busy?" I ask.

He gives me a bemused look. "Always, but that's alright. What's up?"

I think about Crestley and shake my head. "Nothing. I'm waiting on Jalon, and he's comforting Crestley right now, so I don't want either of them to feel like I'm rushing them."

Voss' eyebrows pinch together, and he frowns. "Comforting Crestley," he echoes.

"Everyone is being comforted," I comment.

"No. I know. Apple was a delight, and we're all deeply heartbroken, but…"

I nod when his words trail off. At least I'm not the only one who finds the devastation that Crestley is experiencing at Apple's passing as confusing as I do. I'm certainly not minimizing the grief anyone is feeling. Maybe they were closer than I realized.

Voss nods toward the rest of his office. "Come in. Axl needs to wake up to eat soon, so feel free to harass him."

Smiling, I stop in his attached bathroom to wash my hands before crossing the room to sit on one of Voss' death trap chairs beside Axl's portable sleeper. He's freaking cute and still looks startlingly like Loren. It makes me grin a little wider every time I think about it.

I've only barely begun brushing my hand over Axl's hair when there's a knock at the door. I meet Jalon's eyes as he enters the office. My heart

rattles around at the redness rimming his eyes.

“Dad,” Voss says, getting to his feet. He hugs Jalon, and the door clicks shut behind them. I stare as Jalon closes his eyes and embraces his son.

I underestimated everyone’s emotional attachment to each other. Apparently, I have never made myself open to forming close friendships in the office.

“Sven died,” Jalon says.

Oh. Oh! That’s why Crestley was so broken up. Not that Apple’s loss means less than Sven’s, but Crestley was much closer to Sven than Apple.

“How? Why?”

Jalon nods as he takes a step back. Reflexively, he straightens his jacket. “A few months ago, you mentioned that there had been some questionable deaths at the hospital. Remember?”

Voss nods and returns to his desk as he says, “Nine unexpected, unexplained deaths in four months after routine procedures from which they were recovering well.”

I tilt my head to the side. Jalon joins me, and I get to my feet, careful not to send the unstable chair toppling over with the weight shift. One death among his work family was hard enough. I imagine this second one hits even deeper.

He allows me to wrap my arms around him. I’ve never tried to embrace him or show any real kind of affection between us when anyone else has been around. Including his sons, even though they all know about our relationship.

I’m relieved when my embrace is returned.

Voss’ keyboard clicking is the only sound in the room for several minutes. Then he sits back. “I think we spoke about it in November. Right? That’s when your parents returned.”

Jalon nods. “Correct.”

“Nine deaths in four months have jumped up to seventeen, including Apple and Sven, which I don’t believe are reflected in these reports.”

“Seventeen in seven months,” Jalon repeats.

“One of these might have an actual medical reason for having passed. The number of seemingly unnatural deaths is starting to gather attention, though. There are three articles about it from the past sixty days.”

“Would you look into it, please?”

“Yes.” Voss twists in his chair. “I think you should ask Doc Mark to see what he can find out from within the hospital. Maybe he can take a look at their medical charts and autopsies.”

Jalon inclines his head. “Yes. I’ll do that.”

“In the meantime, go home,” Voss instructs, turning his back on us again. Immediately, the sound of his keyboard fills the room. “I’ll figure out what’s going on.”

“Yes, boss,” Jalon mutters.

I catch Voss’ smirk.

As he did with his son, Jalon takes a step back from our embrace and reflexively straightens his suit jacket. Then his hand slips into mine, and he leads me to the door. It’s such a little thing, so why does it make my heart race?

“Keep me apprised of what you find,” Jalon says.

“Of course.”

“Would you like me to bring Axl home?”

Voss glances at Axl asleep in his portable sleeper and then at his computer. Maybe looking at the time. “Thanks, but it’s fine. Brek will be here soon.”

That brings a smile to my face. I wouldn’t have guessed Brek might embrace Voss and Axl quite so thoroughly as he has this last month or so. He’s had such a negative experience with what it means to be family that I think the entire idea of family put him off wanting one for himself.

As someone who was brought up surrounded by toxicity, I'm sure the only examples of family that stuck out to him were those equally or more horrific, like Haze's. Briar's wasn't abusive, but it was negative—something that I don't think any of us were truly attuned to until college. Honey Bee's house was chaotic since she has four siblings, none of whom she's super close with. Then there's me and my sister, and again, we're not ridiculously close.

The only household that we had a really great view of what a family could and should be was Oakley's. He and his brother *were* close. His brother always looked out for him. Even recruited the high school football team to look out for him. Oakley kind of became adopted by the team, which we all loved.

So yeah. Seeing Brek settling into a family of his own is just… heartwarming. There's nothing that feels more settled than the feeling of him finding happiness. Of the six of us childhood friends, his struggle has always been the biggest, most difficult that any of us have dealt with.

Jalon doesn't release my hand as we walk to the elevator. It's past five now. There are very few people left. Even when someone joins us in the elevator from a different floor, he doesn't let go of my hand.

I received the same email that everyone in the entire company did. Shortly after the incident of my wearing the single Van Doren shirt that would announce that there's something going on between the big boss man and me, Jalon decided it was best to announce our engagement personally instead of letting rumors and gossip spread through the grapevine.

The email contained a video in which Jalon told everyone that he and I were engaged. He assured his company and employees that I would not receive special treatment or pay. This man even teased that I could choose to be a trophy husband if I wanted, and that's the only way that I'd have access to more privilege than my position in the company affords me.

Listening to my coworkers giggle and laugh as they watched Jalon's email video made me smile.

The announcement went on to assure everyone that he doesn't get involved with the architectural firm and never truly has. That's not where his

education or expertise lie. Any advancement I received would be on my own merit and accomplishments.

It was an eleven-minute video filled with assurances, humor, and Jalon being Jalon. It was a side of him I haven't seen much of. Now that I'm watching, this is the Jalon that his company knows. It proves that he's human. It makes him approachable. His concern for everyone, making good on his promises that he will always put his employees at the top of his priorities—and *does*—is what commands loyalty.

I have an inkling that if he wanted to create an army, he already has one. The people he has working for him know that this is the kind of man you would follow into battle because he hires people who would ensure our victory *and* little to no loss of life on our side.

All the same, I've been waiting for someone to complain. If they have, Jalon hasn't said.

The sun is bright as we cross the field. Jalon stops at the southern border of the lake and looks around. "Is this spot the best for a pavilion?" he asks, almost absently. "I like that it'll have a picturesque view of the lake, but is it interrupting the view from the house?"

"Where you put it between here and the house is going to change the view, but it's going to be beautiful, so whatever you decide, I think the view will still be stunning."

"We," he says, and I look at him in confusion.

"What?"

"What we decide."

"I don't think the architect truly tells you where you put the building you're paying for."

His amusement shines in his eyes. "Fool," he mutters and kisses me in the wide open for the whole world to see. "We, as romantic partners, decide. I want your opinion, Levis. Not as the architect drawing me ideas, but as my to-be husband."

Jesus. The way *everything* inside me jumps and dances at those words!

“You like that, do you?” Jalon asks, his lips against mine. I feel the way his mouth curls into a smile.

“What’s strange is that I was always going to be a husband, right? Because I identify as a guy. Yet, it sounds so different when you say it.”

“It’s the register of my voice, isn’t it?”

I grin. “Probably.”

“Now answer my question. What do you think about the pavilion’s placement?”

I shiver and back away from him. It’s far too hot to be shivering. “I think further to the southeast corner of the lake. There’s still plenty of grassy area to utilize the entire space for gatherings, but it’s not cutting off much of the lake view from the house. And there are no buildings in that direction on this side of the trees whose view it’d be impeding. But really, Jalon, it’s going to be beautiful, so no matter where you put it, it’s going to add to the view. Not detract from it.”

He hums thoughtfully as he looks around. Taking in all the points I mentioned. Without another comment, he takes my hand firmly in his and leads me back to the house. I laugh at the speed at which we’re moving.

“Suddenly in a hurry, are you?”

“It’s been a long, difficult day,” he answers. “My heart is heavy, and to be honest, I need a distraction.”

He pushes the door open and waits for me to pass him through it before following me. I’m not in the least bit surprised when he pushes me from heading for the stairs and drags me into the first room we come upon instead.

Jalon shuts and locks the door as I examine our surroundings. I don’t think I’ve ever set foot in this room, never mind looked in it. How many rooms are in this house that I haven’t actually seen?

“Is this a fancy sitting room?” I ask.

“Parlor,” he counters. “Which, I think, by definition, *is* a fancy word for a sitting room.”

I chuckle, but my humor cuts off when his hands land on my hips, his lips tease at the shell of my ear. “You feel up to distracting me?” he asks.

“I’m not sure I’m ever *not* up for it.”

“Mmm,” he answers, his teeth scraping at my ear. It sends tingling shivers down my spine that deposit in my balls. “I have a confession,” he says, hand coming around to grip my junk through my pants.

His hand is big and warm, even through the layers of fabric. I’m so damn addicted to his touch. As soon as he has me in his grasp, I let my head fall back onto his shoulder and absently ask, “What’s that?”

“Hearing you give me a thoughtful opinion on how to better our home is a fucking turn-on. Yes, I need a break from the sorrow of today, but you just being you, *my partner*, is intoxicating. I have a sudden urge to be inside you until you’re screaming my name.”

I grin because I enjoy screaming his name. Even if the other points of his reasoning are far heavier than the teasing. “How do you want me?”

“All the ways, Levis. I want you in all the ways.”

In answer to his immediate need, Jalon pulls at my pants until they’re around my ankles. Unsurprisingly, I’m in a jock. I still haven’t found my usual underwear. Hearing him moan as his fingers trail along the elastic around my ass, I think it’s worth it. Jalon *loves* to see me in a jock and only finds me amusing when I point out that jockstraps weren’t designed to be sexy. They have a purpose.

Apparently, that purpose is to turn him on.

He bends me over the side of the couch, which makes everything about this angle awkward. My face is pressed into the crack between two cushions. The couch is at a height where it’s a little awkward trying to keep my feet on the ground.

Which might be why Jalon chose this particular position. He lubes me thoroughly but is half-hearted in stretching me. As soon as he begins sliding inside and I struggle to ground myself, I know for certain why he bent me over right here.

He loves it when I struggle, and this position ensures that I will struggle the entire time.

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JALON



TWO DAYS after Apple's and Sven's deaths, my family gathers in a conference room to talk about what Voss and Doc Mark found out. This is the first time that anyone other than my sons is attending this kind of meeting.

All of my kids are here. Even Loren, though I don't think Loren knew either Sven or Apple. His brothers did, and he's been watching his brothers mourn for two days. No doubt he's feeling a little restless because it's not something he can fix for them.

I've learned that my youngest is far more bonded to his brothers than he even realizes. Their emotions affect him far more than his own. His irritation rises considerably when they're upset.

Besides my sons, Levis and Jessica are here. So is Doc Mark.

Jessica stares at the little '*we fucked here*' 3D-printed tent that's currently sitting on a chair. No doubt wondering if it was just removed from the table or if we actually fucked in the chair.

We fucked in the chair. I moved it there to see Levis flush and wasn't disappointed. His cheeks are still a bit rosy, and I'm *here* for it.

“Go ahead, Voss,” I say.

The enormous monitor along the short wall comes to life, and seventeen faces are on the screen. Among them are Apple and Sven, which tells me these are the patients who died unexpectedly at the hospital.

“Since July, the hospital has seen a spike in patient deaths that, by all accounts, shouldn’t have happened. According to research”—he glances at Doc Mark—“it doesn’t appear as if there’s any true indication of why they died. Their procedures have all been uneventful. They were well on their way to recovery, in good spirits, conversing normally. No infection. No complications.”

“What caused their deaths?” Ellory asks, frowning.

“That’s a good question,” Doc Mark says. “There is no noted cause of death. Their records state some variation of ‘*complication to procedure*’, which is an easy enough scapegoat since they were there for a medical procedure.”

“All of them?” Myro asks.

Doc Mark nods. “Correct. One was there for a broken wrist.”

“No toxicology reports,” Voss notes.

“No,” Doc Mark agrees.

“The reason I wanted this meeting isn’t the mysterious deaths but what they all have in common,” Voss says. The array of deceased patients at the hospital splits apart, and a new face takes up a large portion of the wall. A medical professional.

“This is Dr. Teddy Blanche. He’s been on shift during each of these mysterious deaths,” Voss says.

I sit back to study his picture while my son continues to talk.

“What’s interesting about this man is that he has a criminal history of poisoning his colleagues with arsenic in food and beverages he’d brought in to share with them. The police found a mini laboratory in his home stocked with arsenic, rat poison, and handwritten recipes for ricin, botulism, and

concentrated cyanide. He served two years of a five-year prison sentence after being charged with aggravated battery. Upon release, he was able to reenter the medical field."

"What the fuck?" Imry says, horrified.

Voss nodes. "He's worked at a number of university and state hospitals, where his colleagues have experienced violent illnesses and his recovering or otherwise stable patients suddenly die. Here, in Arizona, the nurse he was working with two weeks ago had to take a medical leave of absence when she wouldn't stop violently vomiting every time she came into work."

"Because she's being poisoned," Loren says flatly.

Doc Mark and Voss incline their heads in agreement.

"We need to bring this guy in for our own brand of punishment for killing our friends," Ellory says angrily.

"I'm baffled and horrified that he is still able to practice medicine despite what was found in his home," Myro says.

"I agree. Can there be any question why people hold no confidence in our medical system?" Doc Mark says.

"Clearly, no one has caught on to his activities," I note. "Which means we need to catch him in the act."

"How do you propose we do that?" Voss asks.

"I think we just pick him up at his house. I'm sure there's evidence there already," Ellory says in irritation.

I consider both of their comments. "With Mark's help, I'll pose as a patient during one of Blanche's shifts."

"No," Levis and all my sons say at the same time.

"Not a real patient," I assure them.

I'm met with resistance all around.

"You're *not* doing that," Levis says, eyes narrowed as he stares at me.

“You don’t think I’m capable of assuring my safety?”

“I don’t particularly care if you’re capable. You belong here,” Levis insists.

I sigh.

“While I agree with Levis, I think your idea is our best bet to catch him in the act,” Voss says. The images on the screen rearrange. “Blanche worked as an EMT for a while, during which all his coworkers fell ill after he brought them donuts. They set out a pitcher of iced tea as bait, and after Blanche had passed through the room, they had it tested and found traces of arsenic. I believe, under the right circumstances, we’ll catch him administering a lethal dose to a patient we plant, but it can’t be you.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you can’t die,” Loren answers matter-of-factly.

“I won’t be in danger unless he outright stabs me, but his preferred method of murder is poisoning,” I state.

“No,” Levis and several of my sons demand again.

“I’ll do it,” Levis volunteers.

The fear that grips my stomach has me staring at him. Maybe in horror, since the rest of the room remains silent. I shake my head, little lights bursting at the edge of my vision. “No,” I answer, voice quiet. “I can’t risk you.”

“Welcome to how we feel,” he says, and then leans forward. “But yes. I’m the most logical bet. My name isn’t Van Doren.”

“Yet,” Imry coughs.

“No one is going to give me fanfare. No one will pay attention to me at all. I’m just another face. A patient number. YOU will have a lot of people paying attention. I don’t think Blanche will get near your room. He’ll be watched too closely. It *can’t* be you, logically, even if we discount all the other reasons that it can’t be you.”

“I’m going to be selfish and insist that you can’t do this either,” I say. I know my kids are here. Watching. Listening. So are Mark and Jessica. That doesn’t stop me from leaning forward and gripping his chin so he can’t look anywhere else. “You.” I pause, trying to put words to the terror inside me. “You just showed me what my life can be with you in it. I won’t lose you now. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he answers, voice quiet. A soft smile touches his lips. Despite our audience, he gently places his fingers on my jaw. “I will never leave you. Not while I’m living and never before you in death. I promise.”

The pit of dread grows heavier in my stomach. Somehow, I know he’s going to do this. I desperately want to force him not to. I want to insist on *anyone else but him*, even knowing that’s not true.

For some reason, this feels too dangerous. More dangerous than sending two entire generations of my family into a wild game reserve. More dangerous than sending three of my sons, unarmed, to a remote island full of insane cultists.

“Levis…”

“I promise,” he repeats.

I stare into his eyes, trying to convince myself that this is a different set of circumstances and I can’t lock him away like I threatened to do to Voss. Voss was deliriously desperate and exhausted from lack of sleep. He was a danger to himself and risking orphaning his brand-new baby.

Levis’ judgment isn’t compromised.

For a timeless minute, I’m hovering over us, looking down, in awe that this feeling of possessive love I’ve only ever felt for my kids and brothers has extended to someone else entirely. Someone who isn’t my family. Someone who, by all accounts, should be no one because that’s what my partners are to me; little more than business partners.

Worse. I have always had much stronger and deeper relationships with the people I work with than I ever did with Martha or Jeannette.

My need to keep Levis safe is consuming. To keep him with me all the time because I know he'll be alive and happy with no threat at all able to touch him. It's suffocating, this desperation and helplessness I feel in equal measure.

I've personally trained my kids to kill. To protect themselves.

Yet, even after spending countless hours over the last two years watching Levis with his wakizashi and practicing Aikido, he is far too precious to me to risk. He can likely render us all motionless on the ground before him, but I'm still scared of losing him.

"You understand why I don't let Oakley out of my sight now," Loren says.

I huff and let my gaze fall from Levis'. A silent minute passes as I try to put my walls back in place. I've never allowed anyone to see my weaknesses. Levis recently, but not even my children. This is far more of them than I've ever wanted them to see.

"I'm not agreeing to this," I say eventually before shifting to face the table again. I meet Mark's eyes. "What can you make happen? How can we catch him poisoning a patient without putting a patient at risk?"

"As long as there are empty beds at the hospital, I've never run into opposition to scheduling a room there. The details of how to get him in and *not* into surgery are going to take a little longer to consider. However, I'm guessing that his method of injecting poison is through an IV. Likely from nearer the bag than the arm. This would allow him time to leave the room and busy himself elsewhere before the patient flatlines. Which means I think this is rather simple. The line I put into Levis will be false. The tube will disappear into the blankets. The tube from the IV drip will also disappear into the blankets but end in a different bag. The two won't connect."

"And if he tries to inject the patient directly?" I counter.

"Unfortunately for Blanche, Levis is highly skilled in hand-to-hand combat, and I have confidence that he'll be able to prevent that from happening."

"Where will you be?"

“Nurse’s station or somewhere very, very close,” Mark says. “We’ll also make sure he has a camera on him so you can watch. Maybe in glasses?” He looks at Voss.

Voss nods. “Easy.”

“I’m not agreeing that Levis is our fake patient,” I press.

The room remains silent. I look at Jessica. Her eyes are glassy and her lip trembles, but she doesn’t argue my point with me. This probably took a turn she wasn’t prepared for, either.

“Can we talk about something else real quick?” Ellory asks, and I’m thankful for the break as I turn my attention back to him. “I want to do something for Apple and Sven. Something that everyone can share in, but…” He shakes his head. His hands come up as if he’s looking for something.

“What about a memorial garden?” Jessica offers. “Plant a tree for each of them. Some benches. Flowers or foliage of some kind. We can ask the people who knew them best to make suggestions, and then someone—Levis, maybe—can design it.”

“Between the office and the lake,” Ellory says, nodding. “Yes. I want to do that. Dad?”

As much as I want to give this part of the conversation my attention, I’m not sure I’m fully focused. My stomach churns violently at the idea that Levis is going to be in the same hospital as this Dr. Death. He’ll purposefully be bait in an attempt to prove that this man is murdering patients.

I’m not sure if I’m in love with this man. I don’t know what it feels like to fall in love. I suspect that I skip all the fanfare and just *love*. Like a switch. He had been in my life so long that my walls were already lowered when I approached him in the kitchen that night. He was not on my radar at all, so I never thought of keeping him emotionally at a distance.

Was it intentional in my prior relationships? No. I never felt particularly affectionate or fond toward anyone except my siblings growing up. No men or women. Relationships felt arbitrary. My parents might have been shitty

parents as soon as they began having multiple kids, but their love for each other was always apparent.

It's not like I can claim that I've had shitty role models when it comes to romantic relationships. This is truly a me thing. There was never a desire for… that. I needed someone to fulfill a role, and that's all that mattered. That's all I wanted. I never longed for or dreamed of anything beyond that.

Why is Levis so different?

"Dad?"

I blink out of my thoughts and turn my attention to Voss, who just said my name. All my kids are watching me with concern.

"I'm sorry. What did you ask?"

"You know. Sometimes it takes a particular set of circumstances to learn the truth about who you really are. It's not a decision to suddenly change. It's a discovery of something that's been dormant for your entire life up until now," Voss says. "That's why labels that didn't exist fifty or a hundred years ago are popping up. Not because people with your same experiences didn't exist. We just didn't have the vocabulary for them."

"Did I say something out loud?" I ask.

He grins. "No. It's just the way you've been looking at Levis. Confused and scared and loved. I've seen all those expressions over the past few months as Brek works through his own growth."

I sigh and look at my fiancé again. He's watching me. When I look at him, he smiles lightly.

"Also," Ellory says. "I'm just going to throw this out there. Being demiromantic is still aromantic. Nothing has changed at all. You've just found someone who made those dormant parts wake up. Levis doesn't invalidate everything that came before him. If anything, he gives further credence to your past relationships."

"All this time, I thought I was a mysterious man," I mutter.

“You are,” Loren says. “You confuse the hell out of us. But you’ve become more expressive lately. It’s made studying you a full-time job. Like I’m learning who you are all over again. It’s a little frustrating.”

His brothers laugh. Imry shoves him playfully.

“Thank you for the insight. I’m sorry for spacing out.” I glance at Levis again. “I’m not agreeing to Levis being our bait patient, but I like the plan that Mark suggested. Let’s go into further detail. And yes, a memorial garden is a wonderful way to honor the loss of our loved ones. Tomorrow, I’ll send an email to our staff to give us suggestions on how they’d like it to be expressed.”

“You heard us after all,” Avory says, amused.

“I’m a man of multiple talents,” I answer.

The room pointedly looks at the little ‘*we fucked here*’ sign on the chair. Levis ducks his head, covering his face with his hands.

“Indeed,” Mark says.

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LEVIS



THIS MAY SOUND A LITTLE ARROGANT, but I've lived my entire life not feeling true fear.

I feared for Haze because of the situation he was in. In a way, I feared far more for Brek. Haze was successfully flying under the radar at his house. Brek was the sole focus of his emotionally and mentally abusive parents. Every day, I waited for Brek to just… break. I didn't know what that meant, but I was afraid it'd be too late by the time the opportunity presented itself for us to get far away from his parents.

Thankfully, my fears for both of my friends were unfounded. We got Brek away. While we weren't able to get Haze away before bombs literally exploded, he was also relatively unharmed. The internal damage that they both carry remains. I see it flicker in their eyes constantly.

But fear for myself? For my life? That's a foreign feeling.

It's been six days since Apple and Sven died. Four days since the meeting with Jalon, his sons, Doc Mark, and Honey Bee. I have no idea how we managed to convince Jalon that I was the best choice for patient bait, but I'm currently in the car with Doc Mark as he drives us to the hospital where a potentially murdering doctor is currently on duty.

My phone buzzes, and I glance down to find a text from Jalon. Just seeing his name pop up on my sleep screen makes me smile.

JALON VAN DOREN

I expect a text every ten minutes to tell me you're unharmed.

His overbearingness is cute.

ME

You're being a little suffocating.

JALON VAN DOREN

I mean it. I will drive down there.

ME

Yes <Daddy>

JALON VAN DOREN

I'm going to show you Daddy when you get home.

Chuckling, I press the button to turn my screen off. Even though I know his obsessive demands are coming from a place of fear, the banter allows me to relax a bit. It doesn't last long as Doc Mark pulls up to the parking lot of the hospital and I'm staring at the large brick building looming before us.

No one enjoys going to the hospital. I've never felt this kind of dread before. I'm not a fan of all the new feelings that today's introducing.

"You alright?" Doc Mark asks.

I nod. "Yep. Fine."

"I will never be far from you. Even if and when he enters your room," he promises.

"I know."

He grips my arm in a supporting squeeze before pushing his door open. I follow, feeling a bit numb. I can't believe I'm doing this. I'm not a hero. I'd much rather slash an invisible opponent in two with my wakizashi than face actual people.

This should only last a few hours. I can't remember the procedure that I'm having done, but it's local anesthesia only—though not really—and it'll just

be Doc Mark for the procedure. No assistance needed.

To be completely honest, I'm not sure how he pulled this off. It sounds as if it's not entirely uncommon for Doc Mark to reserve some space in the local hospital when he needs it for a member of the family or whatever. I've never known him to do so, but then again, I have never paid much attention to what he does either. It's never affected me before.

"No need to offer explanations," he says as we walk across the parking lot. "I'll take care of everything. Just be the patient and hold your side a little like it's tender."

Right. I'm a patient in pain. With my left hand, I hold my right side. Kidney? Maybe that's what I'm doing. Truthfully, once everyone was convinced that I was the patient bait in this plan, I kind of stopped listening as they talked. It became really fucking real.

I wonder if, subconsciously, I felt the need to prove to Jalon that I can be as strong and selfless as he and his sons are. Okay, yes, they murder people. But they murder bad people. People who never face justice or who get off with light sentences. People who manage to convince a jury that they didn't know what they were doing, or the jury went light on them because they're white men.

The list of reasons victims aren't vindicated increases with every passing day. The Van Dorens might have reasons that aren't altruistic for becoming the end of the line for these rapists, abusers, pedophiles, murderers, etc. But they also don't kill indiscriminately.

Maybe I need to prove that I can be a part of what they do. Will that make me worthy of becoming a member of their family?

"Hello, Dr. Markanich," a woman at the front reception greets when we step inside. She looks at me with a friendly smile, but her attention turns back to Doc Mark. "I saw the note that you'd be borrowing space. Is this Mr. Li?"

I incline my head, but allow Doc Mark to answer. "It is. We should only be a few hours at most. It's only a precaution. I'd rather have access to an entire team, resources, and supplies and not need them than need something and not have it."

“I completely understand. You should be all set.” She hands Doc Mark a plastic key card and smiles at me again. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I return. Why does that feel so dooming?

Doc Mark waves as we head down the hall toward the elevators. He’s greeted often, by name, and always returns the greeting with a friendly one in return. It isn’t until the third time someone calls him Doctor Markanich that I realize the name I’ve been using isn’t the one everyone else uses.

We take the elevator to the third floor. The doors open, facing the circular nurse’s station in the middle. I locate Dr. Teddy Blanche right away. As soon as we approach and the nurses begin greeting Doc Mark, Blanche looks up. He watches Mark first, and then his eyes are on me.

It’s some sick fascination inside me as I look at this killer that keeps my attention glued to him, even as he stares right back. I’m not sure why, but somehow, I think he just decided that I was going to die. It’s in the way his gaze remains locked on mine.

I miss the conversation between Mark, the nurses, and another doctor. The trap I was caught in with Dr. Death is broken when Mark pulls me into a patient room and shuts the door.

“Good?” he asks.

A shiver races along my spine. No, I don’t know that I am. I think I was just looking death in the eye.

“Yep,” I answer. To distract myself, I ask, “Your name is actually Markanich?”

Mark smiles and gestures to the bed. I sit on the edge and watch as he begins opening sterile instruments from their sealed packages. “Yes. George Markanich. My family has served the Van Dorens as their family doctor for a few generations. My father was Doc Vinny. My grandfather was Doc Gin. For some reason, instead of Doc George, I ended up with a shortened version of our surname. I’m not entirely sure when it started.”

“I thought it was your first name.”

He chuckles. “Most people do.”

Mark hands me a packet of papers and tells me to look them over as he gets ready to get the IV lines in place. I kick off my shoes and settle back on the bed.

“These are insurance forms,” I say, frowning. “I don’t want to be charged with fraud.”

He smiles. “Your insurance isn’t going to be charged for anything. They’re not even going to see a bill. That’s my office.”

“Your office is going to be billed?”

“Yes.” He meets my eyes. “You don’t remember this conversation.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I glance at the clock. It’s been eleven minutes. I’m already smiling as I shake my head in answer to Mark’s statement and struggle to get my phone out.

JALON VAN DOREN

You’re trying to meet Daddy, aren’t you?

I snort and type out a text back.

ME

I’m in my room. Learning Doc Mark’s actual name isn’t Mark. I feel lied to.

Looking for another novel?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and start browsing.

My comment receives a laughing emoji.

With my phone tucked under my thigh, I turn my attention back to Mark. He’s currently hanging the IV bag. Fuck. This is getting more real. Maybe I need an actual IV. I’m feeling a little dizzy.

“You’re right-handed, correct?” Mark asks.

I nod but don’t answer verbally. My mouth tastes sour.

“We’ll keep the IV in your left, then.”

That leaves me with full use and range of my dominant arm for self-defense. No needles digging into my body and no tubes to get tangled in.

I watch as Mark connects the tube from the hanging IV bag to one propped behind me. When he has the bed pulled away from the wall, I can’t see him, but I think he’s making sure that the IV is connected somewhere and is actually dripping, so the liquid is clearly going somewhere. More believable.

The IV in me is connected to a third bag that is, in fact, giving me liquid. Saline or whatever it is that’s given to patients to hydrate them. That bag is also hidden out of sight. Then it’s a matter of hiding the tubes convincingly. Where the tube from the hanging bag disappears, the tube from my actual bag reappears, as if there’s a loop just hidden out of sight.

“Okay,” Mark says. Before he can continue, there’s a knock on the door. He twists in his chair to look at the door. When it doesn’t open, he gets to his feet. Hand on the handle, he looks at me, studying my setup, and then opens the door. It’s a nurse that I recognize from the nurses’ station.

“Vicky,” he greets.

“Hi, Dr. Markanich.” She smiles widely, and I think her eyelashes flutter excessively. “I wanted to check in and make sure you didn’t need anything. You’re doing this procedure solo?”

“I am. Being at the hospital is about proximity *in case*, more than need or necessity. Nothing will go wrong.”

“But better safe than to regret it,” she agrees and looks in my direction. She smiles, but her attention is all for Mark.

While he continues to assure her that he doesn’t need assistance, I text Jalon. It’s just about ten minutes later anyway.

ME

There’s a cute nurse here flirting with my doctor. I think she’s trying to distract him with her long eyelashes. Is he going to take the bait?

JALON VAN DOREN

😂 Not a chance.

Everything going well?

ME

My IV lines are all set up. I think my procedure will be in a couple minutes, and then he’ll let me recover for a bit.

Leaving me alone in my room unattended. A new wave of fear sends chills across my skin, and gooseflesh rises on my arms. It’s fine. I’m going to be fine.

Mark manages to get rid of the nurse and returns to my side. He looks at the monitor. My heart rate is a little elevated, but otherwise, everything looks normal. I think. I haven’t taken any medical courses. Not even out of curiosity.

“You’re feeling a little nervous,” Mark notes.

“That thing is a tattletale,” I mutter.

He chuckles. “It’s okay. Ideally, I’d like to see it normal because the nurses see your monitor on their board.”

“Great.” I let my head fall back and close my eyes to concentrate on my breathing.

“Let’s talk.” He begins telling me about how his family met the Van Dorens. Doc Gin treated Jalon’s grandmother, Poppy, for pregnancy complications with her twin pregnancy. The twins, Bowie and Elilah, made it through the pregnancy, even though they were born six weeks early. Elilah was healthier than Bowie. Bowie continued to have complications throughout his life that he carried from birth. While Mark was just a kid when Bowie died, he thinks that’s what ultimately led to Bowie’s early death.

But Poppy Van Doren was so relieved and so grateful for Doc Gin's skills and ability to save her pregnancy that she demanded he be her sole doctor. The doctor for her entire family. All her kids. All her eventual grandkids. Eventually, Poppy hired his grandfather as the family doctor.

Her kid, Weston—Jalon's father—pretty much ran the coffers dry, according to Doc Vinny, Mark's father. The Van Doren doctor before Mark. He said there were days when his father wasn't sure he was going to get paid that month. The writing was on the wall.

Fortunately, Vinny was also on the payroll of many of Weston's siblings. Mark is currently on several of their payrolls as well. Vinny regained confidence shortly after Jalon took over the Estate and company. Mark took over for Vinny just over fifteen years ago.

His conversation about the relationship between the Van Dorens and Markaniches does exactly what he hoped it would do. I'm entirely calm by the time he gets up. My '*procedure*' has been a success.

Mark gets to his feet and grips my leg gently. I text Jalon to tell him the good news concerning my procedure when Mark leaves the room. He's only been gone ten minutes to do '*paperwork*' while I recover when Dr. Death enters.

I'm not sure if he expects me to be awake, but I meet his eye as soon as he enters. Teddy Blanche pauses just inside the door as he looks at me. As if he needs to reset and think about what he's going to do.

He smiles. "Hello, Mr. Li. I'm Dr. Teddy Blanche. Dr. Markanich asked me to check on you while he finishes working on your report. How are you feeling?"

"Really great," I answer. "A little tired. A little sore. But already so much better."

"That's good to hear. I can give you something for the pain. It should help you relax as well."

He approaches, and honestly, I'm impressed that my heart rate remains steady. I watch through my glasses, where there are cameras in the lenses sending a live feed right to Voss. He pulls a small vial from his jacket

pocket and picks up a syringe. The liquid is clear as he pulls a small dosage into the syringe.

I'm relieved he doesn't try to put it directly into the line in the back of my hand. He chose the little drip chamber closer to the IV bag to inject the contents of the syringe. He takes all the proper precautions, like cleaning the lines with an alcohol wipe before and after. He caps the needle off, but instead of disposing of it in the sharps container, he drops it back into his pocket with the small vial.

Then he looks at the monitor, makes notes on his tablet, and adjusts the drip rate before turning a smile on me. "There you go, Mr. Li. Lie back and relax."

"Thank you," I force myself to say. Do I keep my voice pleasant? Convincingly trusting?

Since he doesn't give me a second look before vacating the room, I must. Mark is there three minutes later and disconnects everything. He carefully packs everything up, making sure to contain the tube with the contents Blanche injected into it intact and not leaking.

Twenty minutes later, I'm '*discharged*'. Blanche watches me walk out of the room and past the nurse's station. Blank-faced, eyes narrowed. I can't stop myself from smiling and waving. It's time that Dr. Death meets Van Doren karma.

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JALON



THERE ARE NOW two very clear moments in my life when I've experienced fear like I never imagined. Sending almost two entire generations of my family—the people I love most in this world—into the hunting grounds of a wild game preserve where the animals being hunted are human. If someone had asked if anything could top that level of fear, I'd have laughed.

Letting Levis go to the hospital as live bait to lure a murdering doctor? Something inside me had snapped. The calm I'd felt with my family might have come from the knowledge that they were armed. They were prepared. They were trained. They were together and had each other's backs.

Levis was here with me.

The remnants of the bone-deep terror I felt that this psycho doctor would inject his poison directly into Levis and skip the lines entirely wouldn't leave. Levis has been home, unharmed, for almost a week now, with Blanche tucked away in one of our underground meeting rooms for… questioning… and that feeling still won't go away entirely.

I was never close to losing Levis. He and Mark had everything under control. There was never a moment when it *almost* went wrong. Seeing it

with my own eyes as we watched Voss' screen play back the live feed from the cameras Levis wore in his glasses didn't do anything to assuage my fear.

Loving someone with your whole being isn't for the faint of heart.

As soon as they returned to the Estate, Mark tested the contents of the IV tube Blanche had injected. Sure enough, there was a lethal dose of a substance largely created from rat poison. Later that night, my triplets and Loren paid the doctor a visit. Yes, Loren volunteered to go.

Since then, Voss has leaked several hints and trails for authorities to follow, leading them to exhume the bodies of several of the patients who died at the hospital while Blanche was working and performing toxicology reports.

Not just in Arizona. Hospitals across the country have been doing the same. Four deaths are laid on his head right now, but there are upwards of sixty victims who might have been attributed to Blanche's Dr. Death routine.

Over the last forty-eight hours, several of Blanche's colleagues over the years have come forward with stories and claims that they believe Blanche poisoned them. Some have toxicology evidence from food or beverages. Others only have his presence to attribute to the timely illnesses.

Teddy Blanche is a wanted man.

Unfortunately for the world, his body will never be found.

Every night since bringing Blanche into our custody, I've paid him a visit while my family sleeps. With Levis tucked away safely in our bed. He's already whimpering when I flick the lights on in the meeting room.

Dr. Death is strapped down to a hospital bed with multiple IVs coming from his arms. He's secured so thoroughly that he can't even thrash his head. We keep him alive with the fluids we give him. After all, he has sixty murders to answer for. Two of which are personal. One attempted murder is really fucking personal.

It took three nights before fear began to light his eyes as soon as he saw me. It's a flavor of fear I'm unused to staring down.

People fear the powerful because our reach is vast. What we can do, what our money can buy, means that there is very little that can challenge us. That's especially true for the victims of the powerful. They will almost never see justice served on their behalf.

I'm not someone whom the middle and lower classes need to fear. But that's the equivalent of defending oneself by offensively stating '*not all men*' when women call attention to rape culture. Just as all women should mistrust men until it's proven that they can be trusted, all people should fear the powerful until that trust is earned.

That's the fear I'm used to seeing.

The fear lighting Blanche's eyes is new and admittedly addicting. I've never said anything to this man. He knows why he's here. My sons make sure he knows all the things we know about his activities. They make sure he knows that he fucked up big time by not researching his victims. He stole two of our people from us. Two people whom we loved very much.

It's his own arrogance that landed him in this position.

My sons promised him they weren't going to kill him right away. Oh no. They're going to torture the fuck out of him until he begs for death. That begging is going to go unanswered, of course. Blanche has offended the most twisted members of my family by taking the lives of people who belong to them.

That's truly the most dangerous thing you can do: upset someone with an antisocial disorder. You're on the wrong end of powerful then.

Blanche's whimpering is new. He watches me hang up my jacket and then press the button on his bed that moves him into a vertical position. I roll up my sleeves as he slowly shifts into the position I want him in.

The straps that hold him in place are so secure that gravity barely moves him an inch by the time he's at a ninety-degree angle from the floor. I flex my hands as I cross the floor while keeping my eyes fixed on his.

My first punch is hard, straight into his neck. The next is in his gut. He gasps with each brutal hit. Tears sting his eyes when I strike him in the

chest, right over the heart. He struggles to catch his breath. I don't give him a chance to do so.

Every night for the past week, I've spent an hour with this scum, beating the shit out of him, until I've released some of the pain in my chest from losing two members of my work family. Until the terror of this man trying to murder Levis slips away. Then he watches me clean my hands, unroll my sleeves, and slip back into my suit jacket.

I don't lie him back down. While I've toyed with leaving the lights on so he doesn't have a moment's peace in this room, I always plunge him into darkness. There are demons in the dark, and hopefully, they creep out of the unseen corners to torment this fucker.

As with all our conference rooms, there's a camera in the corner of this one. It can switch between night vision and daylight. I know my sons watch the night's activities, especially when I leave Blanche in a different position from the one they left him in.

That's okay. Let them see that their father holds a lot of rage and emotion that he doesn't generally let the world see. I have flaws too. I'm not the perfect figurehead that everyone believes me to be.

The moonlight illuminates my path back to the house. It's quiet. I don't meet anyone as I take the stairs to the fourth floor. Levis is still sound asleep in our room. Unwilling to get into bed with even a hint of Blanche's bodily fluids on me, I take a shower before climbing back into bed with my fiancé.

He remains sound asleep right up until the bed shifts close enough that he feels it. "Jalon?" he murmurs as I take him into my arms. My thumb absently traces the place on his arm where Mark had the IV. The bump is gone now. Muscle memory knows where it was.

After a minute, Levis pulls my hand away and twines our fingers together. "Sorry," I whisper.

He doesn't answer. There's a chance he did it in his sleep. Minutes pass. He lets my hand go and twists in my arms. Somehow, where I'd just been holding him, he's now holding me. As a man, I admittedly never imagined

myself like this. I'm supposed to be the one doing the holding. I'm supposed to provide comfort and protection. It's not masculine to be the partner in my relationship who receives.

Sometimes, you really don't see how thoroughly you've been trained to meet society's expectations until they begin to unravel around you. Here I thought I was progressive in the way I lived my life and raised my family. Yet, on some innate level, I'm still just a product of this country's indoctrination.

Right now, I'm letting that brainwashing fall away as I sink into Levis' comforting hold. It *is* meant as comfort. I know he knows how much his being targeted for murder has shaken me.

As if he's proving my point, Levis murmurs, "I'm never leaving you, Jalon. Not while I live, and not in death. I promise."

Three nights ago, he said something similar, and I responded with, "I'm that transparent, am I?"

I stopped brushing off his comments, though. Because I need that assurance. Everything in me needs to hear it.

"I know," I answer.

"Why are you awake?"

I'm not going to pretend that he doesn't know about my late-night field trips to our guest. I'm sure he's been told that I beat the fuck out of that man while my family sleeps safe and soundly in their beds.

"Fear," I respond.

His arms tighten. "He can't kill anyone else now."

"Fear that he could have."

"Living in past *what-ifs* will ensure you miss out on the present."

I smile, turning my face into his neck. He's right, of course.

"Want to talk about something else for a while?" Levis asks.

“Yes.”

“I’ll have you know that Honey Bee has taken to harassing me at least three times a day about when we’re getting married.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. Today she promised that if I don’t have a conversation with you, then she’s going to. You’re to make an honest bride of me or some shit.”

I laugh and press a soft kiss to his collarbone. “Are you going to be my boywife?”

“Boywife?”

“It’s a word. I’ve heard Ellory using it to describe himself and Oakley, though he also follows it up with the fact that they both suck at being boywives, so I’m not entirely sure *exactly* what the term means.”

This time, Levis laughs. “Wow. Do you think it’s just a gender-bender term? Because the uneducated think that there has to be a *girl* in the relationship?”

I hum as I think about the context I’ve heard Ellory use it in. “No. I don’t think so. There’s something to do with gender roles, I think, but I don’t think it’s a gender assignment, if that makes sense.”

“Okay, well. No, I don’t think I’m going to be a boywife.”

“You’re going to be the husband.”

“I think that’s most appropriate.”

My smile hasn’t lessened since we began this conversation. This is exactly what I needed. “Actually, let’s put the conversation about our wedding on hold for a minute. I want to talk about the company.”

“What about it?”

“Do you want to keep working?”

“Oh, no! You’re not serious about that boywife thing, are you?”

I laugh loudly this time. “No. No, not what I meant. I mean—I will support whatever you want to do, of course. I *will* stay completely out of your career and let you do your thing. You will always have my unwavering support in any way.”

“I know, Jalon.”

“Okay. Good. I just meant…” I pause as I think about what I’m actually trying to say. “You know that my sons struggle with succeeding me.”

“Please don’t tell me you want me to succeed you. Is that why you want a husband less than half your age, Jalon Van Doren? Are you going to groom me to take over your terrifying empire?”

“Oh, god no. I want a husband less than half my age because everyone is going to look at me and think, *well, fuck, that dude has swagger. What’s in his pants that pulled in such a young hottie?*”

Levis snorts. “You’re wrong. They’re going to look at *me* and think, *what a fucking gold digger*.”

I chuckle. “They’re going to look at you and think, *wow, that guy is fucking hot. No wonder the king made him his queen.*”

He smacks me on the back of my shoulder, and I laugh again. Fuck, laughing is so freeing. I’ve never laughed as often as I do with Levis.

Still chuckling, I pull us back on track. “Actually, I would love for you to be involved with VDT as a whole. On a larger scale.”

“Is that what your plan was with Jeannette?”

I shake my head. “Never. She was entirely separate. I had a whole prenup written for Jeannette that excluded her from accessing any part of VDT, including postmortem. My company is largely held in trust, actually. It keeps it safe from the government and from gold diggers.”

“But you want me to be a part of it?”

“Yes. Believe me, I’m just as shocked as you are.”

He snorts.

“I trust you in a way I’ve never trusted anyone. In the same way, I respect you more than—wow, I just heard the words I was going to say. Never mind. I would like you to continue to respect *me*, so ignore that last part, please.”

Levis laughs quietly.

“I think you can contribute to VDT and make it even better. More successful. I think your involvement will take the pressure off my kids a little and allow them to gain some confidence in themselves. Again, I *trust* you in a way I haven’t the others, so this was never even the tiniest whisper of a thought until recently. Over the last few days, I’ve been thinking about it, and the more I think about it, the more I’d like to have you as my partner in all senses of the word. In all aspects of my life.”

He’s quiet for several heartbeats. Then he pulls away to look at me, eyebrows tightly knit together. “You want to make me a partner in VDT?”

I lick my lips. The weight of this moment is huge. And yet, as I nod in answer, that weight feels a little lighter because I *do* trust this man in a way I trust so few people outside of my family. I trust Mark with our lives and our health. I trust Crestley to keep VDT running in the short term in an emergency. I trust Cheddar with this entire house.

I trust Levis with everything. Every secret. Every piece of my company. Every piece of me.

“Yes. I hope that our kid will want to take over one day. We won’t pressure them, of course, but I don’t want my kids to fail because they feel this is too big for them, and I think that’s the road Myro is traveling down. He’s setting himself up for failure because he has me on such a high pedestal that he can’t even see where my feet connect to it. With you at my side and knowing that you *will* succeed me in death, it’ll relieve Myro of some of the pressure. Knowing that there’s one more sibling we’re bringing into the world who might feel differently about succeeding me will allow him to thrive in the company.”

His heart is racing. I can feel it against my chest, beating like the drums of war.

“No pressure, Levis. I don’t need an answer now. Just think about it. Please know that our kid will also never feel any pressure. I will always support whatever *you* want. Whatever our baby wants. Just think about it.”

His stare remains for a long time. Eventually, he pulls me back to his chest without a word, and there we fall asleep without another word spoken between us.

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LEVIS



I CAN HEAR the noise of the kitchen beyond the closed door, even as I struggle to hear anything over my own slurping, gagging, grunting, and choking as Jalon fucks my throat in the enormous butler's pantry.

I'm kneeling awkwardly on my knees, off balance because he has both of my hands above my head, pressed to the wall behind me. Which brings my shoulders back and my pelvis slightly forward because of the position I'm in. Jalon's free hand grips the back of my head to make sure he can fuck my throat exactly how he wants to.

He's always going to be insatiable. We've been fooling around for almost ten months now. We've been officially together for eight months. Engaged for seven months. At least three times a week, Jalon accosts me in a random place, and we fuck. Any position. Doesn't matter. I'm not even sure the point is to get off as much as it is to feed a hunger he's never experienced before.

If I'm honest, I've never felt this level of want for anyone either. That's something Jalon and I have in common. We'd both thought that the boring, missionary sex we'd had before was as good as it gets. Passion and obsessive fucking were reserved for romance novels. Not for reality.

I feel confident in saying I've never read anything so hot as how I feel in my life.

It doesn't matter how often he fucks my throat. Those barbells give another level of roughness that never lessens. No matter the position, I strain and choke. Whether he's hungrily harsh, or softer, I never stop struggling when he blocks my airway. Even if it's for a second. I struggle for one second just as much as I do for five or six seconds.

At this point, I think Jalon is training me to hold my breath for him. When I ask, he just smiles. I'll never admit it, but I fucking love it. I love that he's training my breathing longer and longer until we reach some unnamed goal.

This position is going to leave me raw. A combination of the angle and the way he's handling me today. The slamming of his cockhead into the back of my throat forces the need to cough, but then he slides down my throat without allowing my cough out, and tears sting my eyes.

I'm covered in tears as I struggle against his hold. Jalon watches me with dark, hungry eyes. I can barely see him through the tears. They trail down my face. Spit and precum dribble down my chin and onto my shirt. This is going to be mortifying.

Even more so is coming in my pants and having to deal with it until I can escape to change. I'm just about there. I can never decide if I'm mortified that I get off to the severe way he fucks my throat. Part of me feels like I should be. But it's so good.

Naturally, I come before he does. I come, untouched, in my fucking jock. His dick in my throat as I struggle through my orgasm in this position makes Jalon louder and harsher as my throat constricts around him.

He's practically holding me up by the time he empties down my throat. His load spilling down my esophagus has me thrashing a little more determinedly on reflex. I can't cough around the viscous liquid dripping inside me any more than I can around his dick. My sounds are beyond the usual squelch and gagging now. They're reflexively trying to tell him I need to breathe.

Not that I’m actually trying to get him to stop. Never. Not at all. I *like* this. I don’t even want to know what that says about me.

Only when he’s completely finished his orgasm does Jalon slowly pull away. I cough through gasps, trying to get oxygen back into my lungs. Jesus fuck, my throat hurts now.

I try to wipe my face, but Jalon pushes my hands away. He crouches in front of me and gently cleans me up while I pant through my hacking. Eventually, I get myself together. More or less. When I look up into his face, his smile is both smug and soft.

“Open your mouth,” Jalon instructs.

I do without challenge because I feel wrecked. He pops in a honey cough drop, and that smug expression expands a little. Fucker.

“Up, sweetheart,” he murmurs and guides me to my feet. His hands deftly undo my pants, but I grip his wrist before he pulls them down.

“I know you don’t need your ego stroked more than it already is, but I don’t need to get off.”

His smile spreads in a way that so few people see. I usually really love it. But right now, it’s bordering on haughty.

“I know, Levis. I have clean underwear for you. Unless you’d like to walk around with dried cum in your pants for the rest of the day.”

Pressing my lips together, I release his hand. I both love and hate that he comes prepared for my hands-free orgasms most of the time. As if he already knows what he’s going to do to me and what he’s expecting from me.

To be fair, I’m not always the one coming in my pants. Jalon is all about switching up what we’re doing, who goes where, and who bends for whom. My favorite times are the ones when things don’t go exactly as he predicted. Those rare moments when he’s the one who needs a change of underwear and ends up in the skimpy jock he brought for me.

There’s something to his obsession with me in a jock. When he dropped his pants the first night after he ended up in a jock and I was staring at him in nothing but that little piece of fabric that covered so damn little, I was ready to jump him right then and there.

That was a long, fulfilling, and exhausting night.

Because I’m still feeling a bit boneless, I don’t push Jalon away as he helps me out of the messy jock, wipes me up while fondling me, and then helps me into a clean jock and readjusts my pants. I watch as the dirty jock gets balled up to contain the mess and stuffed into Jalon’s inside jacket pocket.

No, my cheeks don’t flush knowing that he’s keeping my orgasm with him today.

The thing I can’t quite master is walking into a room of people after we’ve fucked and not showing our activities all over my face. Not because I’m still a mess, but because *I know* they just heard that. Jalon is as cool and debonair as ever. He could probably convince them that we were having a discussion and nothing more. He’d make believers of them, even after having heard exactly what was going on.

Me? I’m the proof that his words are a lie.

I manage to keep my head up when we re-enter the kitchen. Only about half the staff look in our direction. The others carry on as if this isn’t their first time witnessing us disappearing for a fuck in their pantry.

My cheeks burn. Jalon grips my hand and leads me from the kitchen after asking for tea to be delivered to the mahogany conference room. Yeah.

The meeting room is on the other side of the big house. Today is a big day. We have a lot of announcements to make, and I’m fucking nervous. Talk about the wrong day to have a scratchy throat.

Jalon presses a kiss to my temple just before he opens the door. I meet his eyes and he smiles. Not the smug smile that I met in the pantry. A smile that I’ve only ever seen for me. It’s genuine. Much larger than the hint of a smile that we usually see. It’s happy. It’s affectionate.

I kiss him, letting my lips linger on his.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks.

“Yes,” I lie.

He chuckles.

Most of his family is already waiting. My friends are here. His brothers who aren’t physically present are in boxes on the big screen. Even the littles are waiting for us.

As is the tea Jalon ordered. How the hell it arrived before we did without having passed us in the hall tells me that this house has a whole lot of secrets I’ve yet to find out.

Jalon pulls my chair out for me, and I take my seat. Then he pours me a cup of tea. No, I don’t flush. I do, however, glare at him. We have the entire attention of everyone in the room.

Once Jalon takes his seat, Emerson is clamoring out of Briar’s arms to crawl across the table toward Jalon. We all wait for his arrival and to get settled in Jalon’s lap, the awkwardness of my tea delivery forgotten in favor of Emerson being the cutest fucking eighteen-month-old to ever exist.

As Jalon opens his mouth to speak, there’s a knock on the door. I’m not the only one looking around the room, taking stock of everyone present. As if we overlooked someone. Myro pushes his chair back to answer, but Jalon shakes his head.

“Here. Go see Levis for a minute,” he tells Emerson, who willfully nose-dives into my arms. He giggles as we right him.

Jalon opens the door to find Cheddar on the other side. “I’m sorry,” Cheddar says, and his tone says he’s annoyed. “Your parents are here and are insisting that they need to speak to all of you immediately.”

“How do they know we’re all here?” Jalon asks.

“That’s my fault,” a new voice says. Maybe I shift in my chair to get a better look. I don’t recognize her. “They were wandering around, and I asked if I could help them find something. They asked where you were, and I thought by telling them you were in a meeting, they’d come back later.”

“That *is* the logical, expected outcome of that statement,” Cheddar deadpans.

“I thought so,” the woman says. “When they still insisted, I asked Cheddar to get involved. I’m sorry. I thought they’d leave if you were in a meeting.”

“They’re like flies on a wall with that news,” Imry mutters.

Jalon exhales slowly. I watch as his shoulders rise and gradually return to normal. “Kindly escort them in. Hang around so you can escort them out again, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Cheddar says.

Jalon retakes his seat beside me, and Emerson reaches for him. We once more swap baby seats as we wait for his parents. The room is silent; no doubt everyone is preparing for the inevitable conversation.

“I didn’t bring my knife to this meeting,” Loren says with a frown.

“Here,” Ellory offers. He shifts so he can reach into his pocket and pull out a small metal object to slide across the table. “You can borrow this one.”

Loren catches it and opens the blade on the pocketknife. “Whatever do you use this for? It’s too small to be effective?”

Ellory gives him a sly smile. “I’ll tell you later.”

Many sets of eyes shift to Avory with that answer. Avory remains with his usual fond smile for Ellory and offers nothing else.

We all watch as Loren plays with the knife until there’s another knock on the door. This time, Jalon doesn’t get out of his seat to answer it. Cheddar opens it, gives us all an apologetic smile, and backs away to let Weston and Vanessa into the room.

As far as I know, no one has spoken to them much over the last six months or so. Maybe since Christmas. I haven’t seen them since the day Jalon asked me to accompany him while he confronted them regarding the lifelong lie of parenthood.

Cheddar shuts the door quietly behind them. A beat of silence fills the room as they stand just inside the door.

Under different circumstances, I think almost anyone in the room would have brought them chairs. That was before they were such a hostile force.

“You’re having a family meeting without us,” Weston says.

“I have no patience for you today,” Jalon says, voice terse. “If you insult my family one more time, I will have you removed from the Estate, and you will not be returning. Am I clear?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Vanessa says. She moves to the side of the room to slide a chair over and guides Weston to sit. Once more, silence. I think I hear my heartbeat. Even Emerson is staring at them.

“A year ago, Weston was diagnosed with non-small cell adenocarcinoma. Lung cancer. For about five months, he underwent all the suggested and prescribed treatments. I’m sure you’re aware that they’re miserable. It might have been targeting his cancer, but it made him sick, weak, and absolutely miserable. In November, after a long conversation, Weston decided that he didn’t want to continue with the treatment. Instead, he’d like to live out his last days with our family. So we came home,” Vanessa explains.

“You came home to make the rest of us miserable with you?” Myro asks.

Weston sighs. “No. I’m sorry about my behavior.” He looks around the room, and I think he’s taking in all the faces that aren’t Van Doren by blood. Debating whether he’s willing to tell us the truth. In the end, I think he’s just tired, so he decides he doesn’t care. “Quite frankly, I’m angry, and I’m scared. I don’t want to die. While we all know death is inevitable, no one wants to die before it’s our time. I’m not going to argue theology and who decides when our time to go is, but *I don’t believe* it’s my time. So I’m angry and, not to be a walking, talking cliché, but misery loves company. I’m sorry for my previous behavior.”

I glance at the rest of the room. Even Emerson seems to be looking around, trying to figure out what this is about. No doubt, he feels the tension and awkwardness and isn’t sure what to do with that.

“I don’t understand why you came back at all,” Arath says. “You walked out on us more than thirty years ago. You missed an entire generation of your grandkids growing up with no interest in them. And suddenly, you show up with a chip on your shoulder, attacking *all of them* right out of the gate.”

“And Noaz,” Kairo adds. “Can’t forget that their favorite target was always Noaz. Time doesn’t seem to have changed that, from what I understand.”

Vanessa bows her head. “We’re sorry. I swear to you, it isn’t what you think.” She shifts her shirt a little until she can show us her little rainbow pin. I’m not kidding when I say she smiles at us all proudly. “It was a surprise that all my sons and grandsons are gay. Or, uhm…” She looks around. “Is there a better word I should use?”

“Wild,” Ellory murmurs.

“Gay is fine,” Imry says.

“No. Wearing a pin *doesn’t* erase the shit you said,” Arath insists. “As Kairo pointed out, it *especially* doesn’t erase the shit you’ve always said to Noaz. Not to minimize your hateful bullshit, but this does not answer why you came back at all. *You* have proven over three decades that we matter so fucking little to you, and suddenly, you’re dying, so you decide to become a family man?”

“Don’t forget the snooping around the house,” Honey Bee says quietly.

Arath gestures on the screen. Likely as he would if he were in the room, and it’s directed toward Honey Bee as if to say, ‘*that, too.*’

Vanessa rests her hands on Weston’s shoulders. She looks sad. She looks old.

“You’re right,” Weston says after a minute has passed. “The truth is, my parents left us in a pickle, and we didn’t handle it well. Maybe it was by design. Maybe it was my fault. Maybe they tried to teach me how to run the business, and I wasn’t paying attention. Whatever it was, almost as soon as my mother died, Van Doren Enterprises began failing. I *can’t* believe she intended that, so it was on me. It was my fault. And I didn’t know how to reverse the downward spiral. By the time Noaz was here, we were barely

keeping our heads above water. Frustration, failure, fear… they made us awful parents. It made us even worse business owners, if you can believe that. So when Jalon demanded we hand everything over, I'm ashamed to say that we jumped on it. It was the most cowardly thing we could do, but we did it anyway."

"We always said we'd come back in a year. Then a year turned into two. Three. We began seeing Jalon's success in the news. The awe with which the world began to take note of what he was doing. We were in awe too, but so, so proud," Vanessa says and looks at Jalon with that same proud look, but this time, there are tears in her eyes. "We told ourselves, if we returned, we'd get in your way, and while we were using it as a scapegoat excuse, I think it's also correct. It might be the only thing we've done right since bringing Arath into the world."

"We are proud of you, Jalon. I know better than anyone what we dumped on you, and look what you've done! I won't say that I ever believed you'd fail, but I'd be remiss to say that I thought you'd soar as you have. We *did* come here to be with you. With our family. This is where I want to spend my last days, though I don't know how many I have left. I'm sorry that I let my anger at my situation control everything about me," Weston says.

"You've made us irrelevant," Vanessa says. "It's our fault, of course. But it doesn't hurt any less."

"I've still yet to hear an apology to Noaz," Kairo says.

Vanessa and Weston turn their attention to Noaz. They're sitting at the opposite end of the table in a really sexy shirt, one side of the neck hanging off a shoulder, showing their elegant neck. Their hair is beautifully styled. Dazzling eye makeup that commands your attention.

"We're sorry," Weston says. "I'm sorry. I didn't know how to handle you as you were. I still don't."

"That was the weakest apology I've heard yet." Ellory scowls.

"I don't want an apology," Noaz says before Weston or Vanessa can speak again. "This is all well and good, but you don't have a place in my life. I'm sorry to hear that you're dying, but that doesn't give you a blank slate. I'm

not speaking for anyone else, nor will I ever hold it against them for whatever they choose concerning their feelings or relationship with you, but for me, Jalon is the only parent I've ever had and the only one my kids will know as their grandfather. I understand a lot of your logic, but you know, a phone call would have gone a long way."

Arath, Oxley, and Kairo are all nodding.

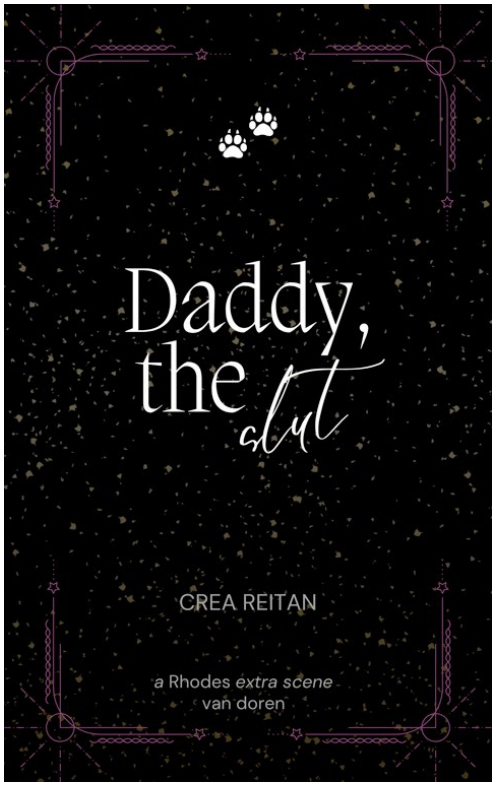
"You've given us a backward gift," Oxley says. "You've shown us exactly what not to do as parents. You've also shown us what it means to be family. We might have our differences, and we might not like each other sometimes, but no matter what the situation is, we show up for each other. For the good and the bad."

Vanessa wipes a few stray tears from under her eye and nods. "I understand. I hope you'll allow us a second chance, but I can't say I don't understand."

It's clear that the conversation is finished. Vanessa and Weston leave without anything further. I look at Jalon and wonder if he's ever going to tell them the information they didn't offer. He meets my eyes, and I think the answer to that question is no.

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WANT MORE LEVIS AND JALON?



Thank you for reading Levis and Jalon's story. If you're not ready to be done with them, you can sign up for my newsletter where you'll have access to another scene in *You Know He's Older Than You, Right?* when my next newsletter is sent. Access to this story will be granted once my newsletter goes out once a month so please be patient. There will also be an extra scene in my patreon, where you'll find a whole lot of other goodies, including N/SFW art from this story soon!

Are there other characters that piqued your interest as you read this book? You can read more about them in my other books or those to come!

For every planned book in this series, you've met the main characters! Yes, all of Oakley's friends are with Loren's relatives. Can you guess the pairings? You'll see many more characters that have passed through these pages in more books to come! You will also get to meet some of Daddy Van Doren's brothers in various books/short stories so stay tuned for them.

There are also characters that you'll see in other series, too. This world just gets bigger and bigger with each book I write and each character that waves at me from the pages. Sometimes those flags are white and other times they're red. We totally met a red-flagged character in this book! Maybe two…

Make sure you take a peek in the pages that follow for a glimpse into what you can expect within the books I've mentioned (and the next one to come in the **Van Doren** series)!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I CAN'T BELIEVE this series has come to an end! Two full years of Van Dorens - six full length books, seven novellas. That's almost 900,000 words in this one series filled with a little bit of crazy, a little bit of dark, and all kinds of happily ever afters. It's certainly bittersweet.

Psst… did you know there are 70,000+ words of Van Doren bonus content on my patreon?

Jalon has been swimming in my head since I wrote ***Loren***. He was *always* going to have a book and it was always going to be the last, and yes, it was always going to be Levis. We hit a bit of a road bump when the two/thirds told me they absolutely *were not* accepting someone else into their relationship so my planned five books turned into six.

Can you believe that not a single novella was planned?? Those were all due to reader demand for the brothers and needing anthology shorts. But they were necessary. I don't think we'd have a full picture of this family without the novellas.

I hope you enjoyed Jalon and Levis' story. Some of those scenes have lingered in my mind for literally two years and I'm so relieved to finally get them on paper. Jalon represents all those people who we look at on the screen and follow their careers and think *wow, they're larger than life*.

The truth is, everyone has skeletons. Everyone struggles with guilt, or depression, or heavy expectations placed on them. Even when we can't see it, sometimes *especially* when we can't see it, those are the people who carry the heaviest burden. Just because what we see looks all rosy and rich, doesn't mean that there aren't open wounds that we simply can't see through the dressings.

If you get anything from this book and series, I hope its the following -

• It's okay not to know what you want to do with your life/career/college degree. It's never too late to change your mind and start something new. Life is too long (and short) to remain miserable for the long hours and five decades that you dedicate to work.

• Friendship isn't something you should ever abandon when you have a relationship. I have no idea why the mindset of making your significant other your entire identity and forgetting everyone else is a thing but it's sad and empty. Friends are significant. They are always there.

• Give yourself permission to be selfish sometimes. I'm not talking about selfishness at the expense of others but selfishness opposed to always self-sacrificing to make others happy. You're allowed to be happy, too.

• Stand up, be loud, and protect the people and causes you believe in. Be on the right side of history. Do not bend or take a knee because that's easier. It might not be affecting you today, but it will. You *are not* immune.

• Likewise, question everything. If you hear something, do some research. Form your own opinion. Have your own thoughts. Don't become a blind, mindless sheep. Be like the Van Dorens and become a movement for good.

• Life is diverse no matter how many people want to white wash it out. Genders, sexualities, colors - no two people are the same. That's what makes us beautiful. For the love of all things that you hold dear, please just let people live their fucking lives and mind your damn business.

• I cannot stress this enough but in the end, this is all about family and the different ways it looks. The healthiest environments aren't necessarily with birth parents. The love of family isn't necessarily provided by those who share your DNA. You're allowed and encouraged to cut out toxicity from

your life. Even if the most toxic people are related to you. That doesn't give them a free pass. It gives them a failure on what it means to be family. Love *is not* conditional and anyone who loves you *despite* something about you does not love you at all. Remember that always.

Don't worry. This isn't the last we'll see of the Van Dorens. There are twenty-three members of the next generation, after all.

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BOOKS BY CREA REITAN

MM NOVELS/SERIES

For Puck's Sake Hockey

Shiver

Lucky Shot

The Crease

Wingman Score

Coach Stare Down

Final Breakaway

Red Lined

Excessive Force

Buffalo Skidmoss Hockey

Starting Line

Just Winging It

LA Golden Tides Hockey

Stick Lessons

Neutral Zone Trap

Winnipeg Avalanche Hockey

The Defending Goal

Total Assist

Penalty Shot

Sudden Shootout (2026)

For Your Love

For Your Time

For Your Heart

For Your Mind

For Your Forever

Van Doren

Loren

Noaz

Imry

Avory & Ellory

Oxley

Malin

Voss

Mr. Van Doren (Auden)

Arath

Kairo

Rhodes

Jalon (2026)

Myro (2026)

Legacy of Deth

Dead Nights

Vile Acts

Grave Insanity (2026)

Isle of Kala

The Way You Lie

Picture Perfect

One Breath

Rainbow Dorset University

Collide

Volley

Doink

Cadence

Longwood U

Rumor Has It

Wicked Confessions

Project: FU

Dirty Wrong Love

Just for Christmas

Graduation No Face

Hush Anonymous

Silent World

Eriva

For I Have Sinned

The Room I Paid For

Contractually Yours

Breedable

POLY TITLES

Harem Project Novels

House of Daemon

House of Aves

House of Wyn

House of Igarashi, 1

House of Igarashi, 2

House of Agni

House of Malak

House of Darkyn

House of Savage

Related to Harem Project Novels

House of Nereus

House of Kallan

House of Nash

Sweet Omegaverse

Alpha Hunted

Knot Interested

Omegas of Chaingate

Get Pucking Knotty

Knot My Pack

Knot Alone

INFECTED FAIRY TALES

Wonderland: Chronicles of Blood

Toxic Wonderland

Magical Wonderland

Dying Wonderland

Bloody Wonderland

Wonderland: Chronicles of Madness

The Search for Nonsense

The Queen Trials

Veins of Shade

Finding Time

Neverland: Chronicles of Red

Neverwith

Nevershade

Neverblood

Nevermore

Hellish Ones Novels

Blood of the Devil

House of the Devil

Brothers of Eschat

Unsolicited

Equipoise

Paranormal Holiday Novel

12 Days

Satan's Touch Academy

A Lick of Magic

A Touch of Seduction

A Touch of Darkness

Fae Lords

Karou

Immortal Stream: Children of the Gods

Mortal Souls

The God of Perfect Radiance

The Hidden God

The God Who Controls Death

Gods of the Dead

Gods of Blood

Gods of Idols

Gods of Fire

Gods of Enoch

Gods of Stone

Standalones

Wrecked

Hell View Manor

Stroking Pride (A Sons of Satan Novel)

A Tale of Steam & Cinders

Terror

Haidee (A Ladies of MC Novel)

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FOR PUCK'S SAKE HOCKEY LEAGUE

Within the For Puck's Sake hockey league, get ready to immerse yourself into a better environment than what the world sees today - with true inclusivity and not a professional sports league just riding the high of a popular TV series while remaining misogynistic and bigoted. This is a world of standalone MM(+) hockey stories with content not suitable for those under 18 years of age due to graphic scenes. These stories have character cameos but it is not required to read them in order. They are completely independent from each other. These books are part of the greater Creaverse - where all the series are connected and you never know who will show up on the next page!

Winnipeg Avalanche

The Defending Goal: Teammates to lovers, loaning to friends, power exchange, bi-awakening

Total Assist: Forbidden coach x player, Dom/sub, age gap, dick lash, secret relationship

Penalty Shot: Baby mama's brother, sudden single dad, sexy socks and nerdy glasses, grief/loss/guilt

UP NEXT (and last in Winnipeg) Sudden Shootout: Friends to lovers, MMM

Buffalo Skidmoss

Starting Line: MMM, obedience, caregiver, sensation play, best friends to lovers

Just Winging It: All-Star Games, forced proximity, one bed, rival players to lovers, virgin MC

LA Golden Tides

Stick Lessons: Hypersexual, feminization, surprise identity, nerd/jock, fast burn, summer romance

Neutral Zone Trap: Player x mascot, bi-awakening, himbo jock, secret pining, social anxiety, brief amnesia

For Puck's Sake

Shiver: Nerd/jock with a twist, hurt/comfort, bi-awakening, cruel games we play

Lucky Shot: Gaming, dollyfication, demisexual, SLOW burn, collars, see me; don't look at me

The Crease: Hurt/comfort, spanking, brat, chaos hiding a broken boy

Wingman Score: Rags to riches, light sex toys, insta-infatuation, serendipity

Coach Stare Down: asexual MC, age gap, low spice/slow burn (see Ace rep), touch starved, awful family

Final Breakaway: Teammates to lovers, marriage of circumstance, awkward first times, oblivious but obvious to everyone else

Red Lined: mail order spouse, asexual MC, toys over touch, a wee bit miscommunication

Excessive Force: psychopath hockey player, stalking, sex room (patreon exclusive)

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LEGACY OF DETH
NEW TRILOGY BEGINNING AND ENDING IN 2026

This is a trilogy of MM standalones with content not suitable for those under 18 years of age due to graphic scenes. These stories will be best enjoyed read in order though there is no overarching plot so it's not required!

Dead Nights available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Poly MMMM
- Hookup to lovers
- Remote island castle
- Secret society
- DP
- Haunted, figuratively and literally
- Check TW!

Vile Acts will be available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Friends to lovers
- Traumatized by past sibling death
- CHECK TW!!

Grave Insanity will be available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Psychopath x2
- Buried alive
- Holiday romance

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VAN DOREN

This is a series of MM standalones with content not suitable for those under 18 years of age due to graphic scenes. These stories will be best enjoyed read in order though there is no overarching plot so it's not required!

Loren available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Stalker
- Sociopath
- Touch aversion
- Contract killer
- Insta-fascination
- Obsession
- Touch him and die

Noaz available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Gender fluid MC
- Bi-awakening
- Age gap
- Sweet
- Bloody
- Sudden family

Imry available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Second chance
- Rope play
- Choking
- Chasing
- Artist but he’s not starving
- Poor hockey innuendos
- Babysitting Oakley
- Falling in love

Avory/Ellory is NOT be available on Amazon! Click here.

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- TABOO
- Blood play
- Possessive Imry
- Unhinged Ellory
- Megachurch cult
- Nothing can happen to you!

Oxley is here!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Neurospicy
- Age gap
- One bed
- Insta-love
- Shot
- Check TW

Malin is available now!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Pseudo taboo
- Glimpse into next gen Van Dorens
- Haunted
- Murder
- Trauma
- Megachurch cult survivor
- Check TW

Voss is available now!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Demisexual, demiromantic

- Bi-awakening
- Human big game hunting
- Check TW

Auden/Mister Van Doren is available now!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- MCs in their mid-life
- Stalking
- CNC
- Primal play
- Check TW

Arath available now!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Wrong place, wrong time
- Gang violence
- One bed
- Somno

Kairo available now!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Broken boy to baby girl

- Forced proximity

Rhodes will be available soon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Fake boyfriend
- Pack of wolves
- High school bullies (reunion)

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LONGWOOD U

This is a series of MM standalones with content not suitable for those under 18 years of age due to graphic scenes. These stories have character crossover but it is not required to read them in order.

Rumor Has It available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Next gen
- Sex games
- Bi-awakening
- College
- Friends with benefits

Wicked Confessions available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Next gen

- Sex games
- Frat boys
- Second chance
- Single father
- !!Suicidal ideation

Project:FU is available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Next gen x OG gen
- Frat boy x hockey coach
- Age gap
- Ex-girlfriend's father

Dirty Wrong Love is NOT be available on Amazon. Click here!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- TABOO
- MMMM
- Road trip
- Forced Proximity
- Age gap

Just For Christmas available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Roommates to lovers

- Fake Relationship
- Holiday romance
- Glory hole
- Secret pining

Graduation No Face is available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Boatclub
- Remote island castle
- Secret society
- Life or death
- Also... a bit of love and spice

Hush Anonymous will be available on Amazon!

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Anonymous key parties
- Psychopath
- Expressive shirts
- Protective siblings

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WHERE TO FIND ME

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crea lives in upstate New York with her dog and husband. She has been writing since grade school, when her second grade teacher had her class keep writing journals. She has a habit of creating secondary, and often time tertiary, characters that take over her stories. When she can't fall asleep at night, she thinks up new scenes for her characters to act out. This, of course, is how most of her meant-to-be-thrown-away characters tend to end up front and center - and utterly swoon-worthy! Don't ask her how many book boyfriends she has…

When not writing, Crea is an avid reader. Her TBR pile is several hundred books high (don't even look at her kindle wish list or the unread books on her tablet). Sometimes, she enjoys crafting; sometimes, exploring nature; sometimes, traveling. Mostly, she enjoys putting her characters on paper and breathing life into them. Oh, and sleeping. Crea *loves* to sleep!

Note - Crea is an Amazon exclusive author. If you're reading this ebook anywhere other than through Amazon, it is a pirated copy and has been stolen! Please don't add to that.

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THANK YOU

We might be saying goodbye to the OG Van Dorens but you know what that means, right? Time to meet their kids! You don't have to wait, either. One of Loren's quads already has a book - Have you read ***Hush Anonymous***?

Would you be so kind as to take a moment and leave a review? Reviews play a big role in a book's success and you can help with just a few sentences.

Thank you!!

Crea Reitan

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